

an Antilles Airboat story.....Living large in the Caribbean in the 70s
as remembered by *Tom Rose* 50 years later

Having Grumman on your Rudder Pedals is like having Sterling on your Silver

As General Manager of my companies' Caribbean operations, I was headquartered in San Juan, PR. We had numerous customers in the U.S.V.I. and an office in Christiansted, St. Croix. I visited monthly to call on customers and work with employees. Antilles Airboats was a convenient, efficient, and economical way to travel to and from the VI. Particularly compared to the alternative airlines operating from San Juan International Airport.



Antilles operated from an easily accessed base in the harbor in San Juan and took passengers to within a short walk from the business section of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John. As I recall round trip to St. Croix was about \$25, St. Thomas \$20. Not only that, but it was a whole lot of fun to fly these vintage seaplanes.... great splashes and water spray as the planes took off and landed. Great views of the beautiful Caribbean islands and the blue/green Caribbean Sea. For some 10 years, Antilles Air Boats was my go-to airline for Caribbean travel, business, and pleasure. I greatly looked forward to every trip with Antilles. I could park my car within a few steps of the ramp in San Juan. Customs assigned officers to meet returning flights. You could splash down, clear customs, be in your car and home in 30 minutes. A procedure that would take 2 hours coming through San Juan International. In the Virgin Islands I could be off the plane and in a customer's office in 10 minutes.

The majority of the Antilles fleet was made up of the Grumman Goose.... there were some other planes but all that I ever flew was the Goose. They seated about 10 in the passenger section plus pilot and co-pilot up front. However, there was no co-pilot, so I always grabbed the seat next to the pilot. The takeoff was spectacular, the twin engines roaring to get the plane up and out of the water. The water splashed up on the cockpit windows and then lift off and smooth sailing. On one trip the pilot had trouble with his radio. He pulled the jack on his earphones and I saw it was corroded from the salt water.... I took my pocketknife and scraped off the corrosion and his radio contact was restored. The landings were equally spectacular, a smooth high-speed plane on the surface, the big salt spray and splash, and then settling into the water. Always exciting. I never got tired or board with those flights. While living in San Juan we had numerous visitors from the States. We always included an Antilles flight to the VI in our entertainment of visiting friends and family. One such visitor was unique in that Leckey was an Executive Assistant working for the CEO of the Grumman facility in Stuart, FL. We scheduled a Goose trip for her and naturally she took that co-pilot seat up front. She and the pilot talked airplanes and Grumman the entire flight. The Grumman name plate was etched into the

rudder pedals of the Goose. Lecky commented, "Having *Grumman* on your rudder pedals is like having *sterling* on your silver".

Of my 60+ trips aboard the Antilles Airboats Grumman Goose one stands out. On July 12, 1972, I said goodbye to Diana and Ann (my wife and 2-year-old daughter) and climbed aboard the 7am Antilles Airboat Grumman Goose headed for Christiansted, St. Croix. I spent the day visiting with customers and employees in St. Croix. About 5 pm I was tired, and ready to close out my day. Lemuel (my St. Croix manager) dropped me off at the seaplane landing for what was supposed to be a direct 1-hour flight back to San Juan. I would be home by 6:30! But that was not to be. They announced that there was a problem with the plane scheduled for the evening St. Croix to San Juan flight, so our plane would make a stop in St. Thomas to pick up 3 passengers. I was not concerned about the delay. After all it gave me the excitement an extra takeoff and landing. I grabbed that co-pilot seat, and we took off for St. Thomas.

I had landed many times in the harbor at Charlotte Amalie. I knew the routine and the flight path. Our pilot had a heavy British accent. I assumed he was from the Royal Air Force. As we began our approach and decent there was a large container ship crossing our landing path and a small rain squall over the harbor. It appeared the pilot was altering is approach to avoid the ship and the rain squall. A we descended I felt that we were going too fast and too close to the wharf. I thought to myself. "This guy lands here every day, if he's not worried why should I worry?" I looked at the pilot, he was cool and calm. But it did not look right or feel right to me. I was thinking "He should abort, circle around to let the harbor clear and then land". He proceeded with the approach. Every time I glanced at him, he was calm and cool. The "*British way*". As we hit the water, I still felt we were too fast and too close to the wharf. I looked to our pilot and the cool and calm had vanished. He reacted, as we headed for the wharf he cut back on the right engine and powered the left in an effort to turn the airboat away from the wharf. Too little, too late. The left engine slammed into a wooden island schooner, the prop chopping chunks of wood from the ship. A laborer loading cases of carnation milk on the schooner jumped 8 feet into the air and fell into the water. The plane quickly came to rest just sitting in the harbor with rain pouring down. The passengers, the pilot and I were quite shaken but uninjured. The guy on the schooner also uninjured. The pilot ordered us to abandon ship. Several passengers protested. We were just sitting there, floating in the harbor. Why should we jump in the ocean? The pilot said that in a recent air boat accident a plane had sunk with several people trapped and drowned. Before we could obey his orders to abandon ship a 16 ft Boston Whaler arrived, and we all scampered aboard. We were all soaked with rain and salt water. I held tightly to my brief case and box of duty-free liquor.

The Antilles office was a trailer at the waterfront. We were taken inside, and a woman came in with a bottle of rum and some paper cups (no, it wasn't Maureen O'Hara). Most of us had a shot or two. They gave us an addressed envelope and said to send any bills for damaged clothing or equipment. Our cloths were all soaked. They gave us a white pilots shirt and a pair

of khaki pants. We were put on a flight to San Juan which was uneventful. I had my suit cleaned and sent Antilles the bill...which they promptly paid.

Well, instead of getting home at 6, I arrived after 11. As I opened the door came Diana's question, "Just where have you been?" I was wearing the shirt and pants that Antilles gave me. Barefooted because my shoes and socks were soaked. My suit all wet rolled up in a ball. I told the story to Diana, and she did not believe a word of it. She said, "You were drinking in some bar in Charlotte Amalie and missed your flight." The San Juan Star and photographer Raoul C. Robau came to my rescue on that deal. The next morning before I went to work Diana picked up the newspaper. There was my story, documented, right there on the front page of the San Juan Star.



A passenger scurries out of the cabin of an Antilles Airboats plane that hit a cargo vessel Wednesday when landing in St. Thomas harbor, while a Virgin Islands harbor patrol boat speeds to the scene, upper right. The

St. Croix to San Juan flight, which stopped over at St. Thomas, carried three passengers, all of whom live in San Juan. No injuries were reported. (Photo by Raoul C. Robau)