

ANTILLES AIRBOATS SPREADS ITS—

WINGS OVER THE WATER

THE STORY OF HOW 'THE GOOSE' CAME TO THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

By Paul Backshall

TO A MAN who has flown solo across the Arctic ocean and the North Pole, set up an unequalled speed record in a piston engined plane and spent many years as a commercial jetliner pilot, a 40 mile stretch of water might not seem much of a problem.

But when **Captain Charles Blair** moved to the U.S.V.I. and built a house on St. Croix some 14 years ago, that stretch of water proved a major headache. It would often take four hours or more to drive to the island's airport, wait for an air taxi flight to St. Thomas and then drive into town from the Harry S. Truman airport.

He could perhaps have bought himself a power boat or a yacht, but Charlie Blair is too much of a pilot for that. Instead he sought out and purchased a World War II vintage Grumman Goose amphibian with a 10-passenger capability and established what was to become the world's largest seaplane service and the third largest commuter airline in the United States, carrying some 260,000 passengers a year.

To most people seaplanes and flying boats are a thing of the past, made obsolete when most countries in the world were paved with concrete airstrips during World War II.

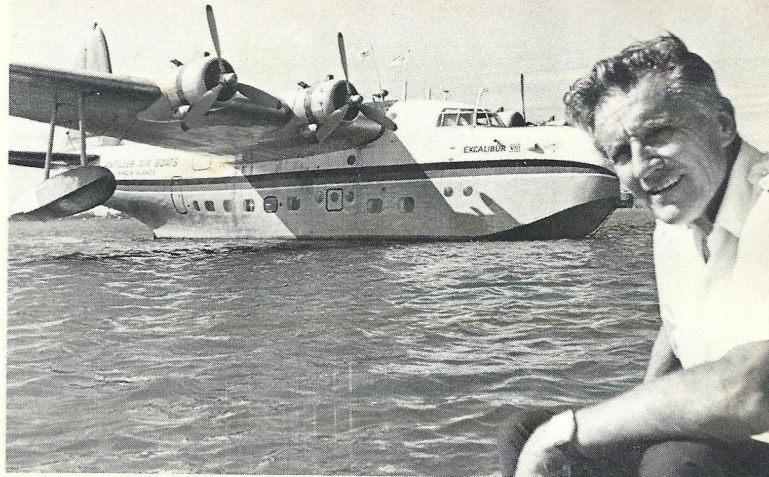
"But airports are getting further and further away from the cities," claims Blair, whose dream is to see flying boats operating between cities like New York and Boston, downtown to downtown. He has already proved the practicability of the idea with his Virgin Islands airline — Antilles Airboats.

No longer is the trip from St. Croix to St. Thomas a tedious and time-consuming project. From Downtown Christiansted it is a 15 minute hop to downtown Charlotte Amalie. From there it is a 20 minute ride to Tortola or a 10 minute hop to St. John and if you want to go further afield to Puerto Rico or the island of St. Martin there are regular scheduled daily flights there too.

Since the first flight between St. Croix and St. Thomas in 1964, the flock of Gooses (not Geese) has grown to 20 plus two 15 passenger Grumman Mallards and the latest additions — two giant Short S-25 Sandringham flying boats which Captain Blair flew out from Australia and hopes to use for group charter travel on island hopping expeditions through the Windward and Leeward islands.

In the early days, Blair ferried his passengers from shore to Goose in Boston Whalers until the first ramp was built behind what is now the Holga Danske Hotel in Christiansted. That ramp was proudly dubbed the smallest airport in the world, measuring only 67 feet wide by 100 feet long.

When Blair first started the operation he was still a senior



Captain Blair and Excalibur VIII.

pilot with Pan American Airways. "I was on vacation when I first decided to buy the Goose. It was principally for my own use but I found people liked to travel that way and before long I was flying five trips a day. When my vacation ended I hired another pilot to take my place and went back to Pan Am."

He used his stopover time to pick up more Gooses to augment his fleet in the Virgins. "We got the second aircraft about 10 months later and they kept coming as the demand for the service increased. I picked them up in various parts of the world while I was flying for Pan Am. I got one in Paraguay, one in Argentina, one in Tahiti another was flying the Amazon with a Catholic priest. I got about eight of them from Alaska and the rest from Florida and other points.

ONLY WAY TO TRAVEL

In 1969 Capt. Blair retired from Pan Am and turned his energies to his own airline, which by now had become the only real way to travel in the islands.

Captain Blair is quite emphatic about the merits of the aircraft he operates. "The Goose is the most versatile airplane and the most rugged amphibian that has ever been built. They are particularly suited for flying around the islands because there is an 'airport' underneath us practically everywhere we go. They are capable of landing in most harbours and even in the open sea if necessary."

Landing in the open sea is of course not recommended and this emergency procedure has only happened once in the airline's history and this was the occasion on which they suffered their only customer casualties. Two Puerto Ricans went down with the plane because they were too terrified of the water to swim with life jackets on to nearby rescue boats.

But the general safety record of the airline is excellent and to this Capt. Blair attributes in no mean measure the expertise of his pilots. Most of them are service veterans with many hours of flying time under their belts.

"The seaplane handling is the most critical part of the operation," explained Capt. Blair. "The pilot has to 'build his own airport' each time he takes off and lands and in some harbours, judgement of the sea conditions is a critical factor in making a safe landing. So we have actually adopted a policy of hiring retired military people with at least 20 years of experience.

"Some of these people come to us without any seaplane time, but we get them checked out on the airplane and then we fly them 200 landings with a check pilot before we take the check pilot out of the airplane and by the time he's had that sort of a shakedown in and out of our various harbours we figure he's in pretty good shape — it's the most extensive

check-out that any airline gives."

For most people their first ride in a Goose is a never-to-be-forgotten experience — a little alarming perhaps, as the pilot wrestles and manhandles the little craft over the choppy water with clouds of spray shooting up on all sides and speed and wind velocity lifting it higher and higher out of the water until it is just skimming the surface. And then comes that moment of release when the air takes over and the water is left behind.

To the regular island-to-island commuter, who forms the backbone of the passenger service, it is as everyday an occurrence as stepping into a bus is to the New Yorker. Former **Governor Melvin Evans** was a regular commuter with Antilles



Photo: Fritz Henle

The first Antilles ramp in St. Croix.

as is the new **Governor Cyril King**, who was born and raised on St. Croix and whose official residence now is in St. Thomas.

Captain Blair has no fears about being able to maintain his fleet of veteran aircraft — the last Goose was made in 1947.

"After the war there was a large surplus of spares. There are only about 40 or 50 operational Gooses left in the world and of those we have 20. What spares we cannot get we have made for us and most of our planes have been completely overhauled and refitted at one time or another so there is no reason why they should not keep flying forever," said the man who has often been called a supreme optimist.

One aircraft he added to his fleet did not work out that way however. That was the four-engine Sikorsky S-44, better known as the Super Goose that carried 47 passengers here for about a year. Now it sits as a monument to Captain Blair's brilliant flying career in a corner of the St. Thomas ramp, the overhaul she needed being just too expensive.

Captain Blair achieved his first notable aviation record, in another Sikorsky S-44 (nicknamed **Excalibur**). He flew passengers and mail nonstop across the North Atlantic for the first time ever.

That was in the 1940s and Captain Blair was then working for American Export Airlines, a subsidiary of a steamship company and the first serious international competition for Pan American.

Later that airline merged with Pan American and Blair went with it. But while working for the airlines Blair always busied himself with side projects of his own. After the war he bought up surplus planes and chartered them out to airlines.

In 1951 Captain Blair climbed aboard **Excalibur III**, his own

personal P-51 fighter with guns removed and hollow wings filled with fuel and took off on a venture that many of his colleagues thought was suicidal. He had calculated that by riding on the crest of the 100-mile-an-hour jet stream winds he could get his tiny single seater plane from New York to London in record time. Blair did it, but nearly came to grief on the way when his oxygen mask leaked and his plane plummeted 4,000 feet while he struggled to maintain consciousness.

That same year Blair set another record in the same plane with an incredible solo flight across the Arctic and the North Pole countending the experts who said it was a navigational impossibility. He later became the only civilian fighter pilot in the U.S. Air Force, undertaking experimental nuclear weapons delivery flights.

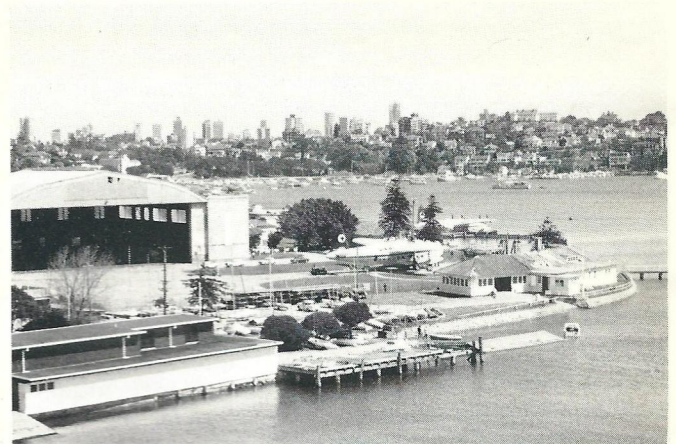
Among the aircraft he used for this were an F-84F swept-jet fighter (dubbed **Excalibur IV**) and a Supersabre [**Excalibur V**] which later became a casualty of the Vietnam war.

But Captain Blair himself never had an accident and all this time he kept on his job flying with Pan Am. In his book "**Red Ball in the Sky**" which describes some of his airborne exploits, Capt. Blair recalls with amusement that shortly after his record New York to London flight a passenger stopped him in the aisle of his Pan Am Stratocruiser and remarked: "Captain I hear a Pan Am pilot just flew across here on one engine — all by himself — you know, solo. Must be crazy."

With typical casualness, Captain Blair replied: "Must be."

Captain Blair still likes to fly as often as possible and is sometimes to be seen at the controls of a scheduled Goose flight between the islands. He is married to red-haired movie star **Maureen O'Hara**, who is Vice President of the airline, but like Chairlie she is reluctant to give up her own career completely.

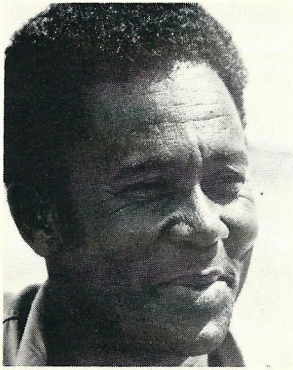
The couple had known one another since the 1940's but each was then otherwise engaged matrimonially. They were married in 1968, and for a while the new Mrs. Blair ac-



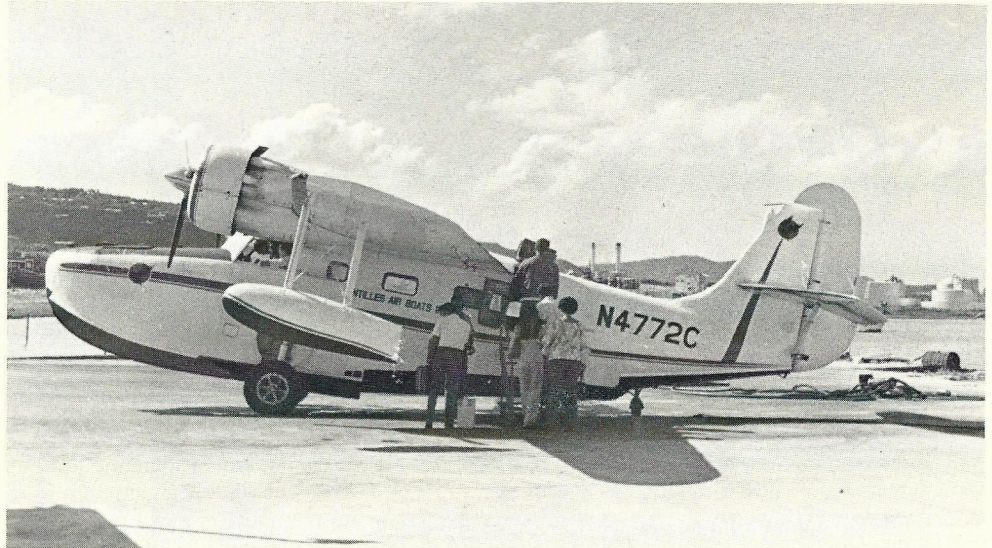
Excalibur VIII and Southern Cross outside the hangar at Sydney.

companied her pilot husband on every Pan Am flight he made, usually occupying the first two seats in the first class section of the aircraft. Capt. Blair visited the set when his wife made a movie but eventually made her promise not to do any more romantic parts. He could never bring himself to watch her old movies on T.V. either.

Now they live in a castle-like house overlooking Christiansted and the harbour from which they can watch their Gooses dash out over the water and wing their way to St. Thomas. They also have a house in the British Virgin Islands



Fred Romney, longest serving member of the Antilles Airboats staff, now working on the St. Thomas ramp.



Passengers board a Goose at St. Croix.

and maintain an apartment in New York. In the hot summer months, Maureen migrates to her native Ireland.

Recently they have found a new project into which they can both sink their respective talents, but this time with Maureen on the other end of the camera.

While on one of their Pan Am "honeymoon" flights, the couple visited Sydney, Australia, and spotted two big flying boats in Rose Bay. "We went over to take a look and they invited us to take a ride. We did and we were so impressed that we decided we should add them to our fleet some day."

The flying boats — both 30-year-old Sandringhams capable of seating 42 passengers — were used to ferry passengers between Sydney and Lord Howe Island (about 500 miles E.N.E. of Sydney). They operated on this route from 1947 until 1973 when an airstrip was laid on Lord Howe Island, and had become one of the sights of Sydney.

Named **Islander** and **Beachcomber** they are both Short Sandringhams, the civil version of the famous wartime Sunderlands, used for coastal patrol and anti-submarine work. **Islander** saw wartime service between Sydney and Auckland when flying boats were used extensively on overseas routes. **Beachcomber** was mothballed by the New Zealand Air Force in 1956 after flying only 1,000 hours.

Antilles Airboats took options on both the big birds and last year Charlie Blair and Maureen (armed with portable movie

camera) flew to Australia to collect **Islander**, but before they took delivery of her, she went into the hangar for a new paint job. She emerged as **Excalibur VIII** following in the tradition of the great Blair machines.

She was launched to begin a remarkable series of hops half way around the globe — but not before hundreds of Sydney residents had gathered to wish her God speed, some even crying into handkerchiefs as though they were losing a relative. Also on hand to say farewell were five of the original wartime crew of the giant seaplane.

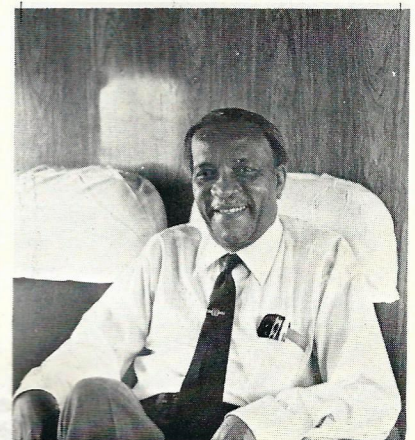
Maureen, who admits to getting terribly bored on long flights, bought stacks of newspapers before leaving and planned to fly back by jet once they got to the first stop, Pago Pago in American Samoa. That first jump was to last 17 hours and cover 2,750 miles, but by the time **Excalibur VIII** arrived, the papers were still unread and Maureen was all set for the next hop to Honolulu. She ended up staying aboard for the entire trip photographing everything from beautiful sunsets to a startled New York city, the residents of which weren't exactly expecting to see a flying boat landing in the harbour.

A few weeks later **Beachcomber**, renamed **Southern Cross**, was on her way to the Virgin Islands to join her sister ship.

That 40 mile stretch of water and the first Goose brought in



Excalibur VIII, on her way to the Virgins, stops at Pago Pago in American Samoa.



B.V.I. Chief Minister Willard Wheatley sits in one of Southern Cross' well-upholstered seats.

to span it led it quite a big little airline in the Virgin Islands. Who knows what two Sandringhams and the entire Caribbean might bring about with a man like Charlie Blair at the controls. ❶