

## ***Living at the St. Thomas Seaplane Base***

### ***Aboard MARA***

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After returning from a training flight with Dave, my husband, and a new pilot, Pepe Martin, we joined a group of AAB employees having an after-work drink at the Goose Grill. Following introductions, Pepe asked for suggestions about finding housing on St. Thomas. Some of the most practical replies dealt with considering the commute to work, where he would be driving on the left on often narrow, steep, rough roads with “rush hour” (top speed on the island being 35mph) traffic. He would also need to check the capacity of the cistern used to collect rainwater, since that would be his only source of water. Others talked about having a good view or convenience to schools and stores.

Dan Morrison, another St. Thomas pilot, had the best deal in the expensive housing market of the Virgin Islands. Dan, his wife and two daughters, lived in a beautiful home overlooking Magen’s Bay. They lived there for free in exchange for looking after the home for the wealthy owner, who used it for his winter vacation one month of the year. When he came, the Morrison family moved aboard their sailboat, which they chartered the rest of the time.



Molly Morris, who worked at the ticket counter, lived in an old but quaint home in nearby Frenchtown. Always accompanied by her dog, Elvin, she could walk to work as well as numerous stores and restaurants. She did not own a car.

Dave, undeniably, had the shortest commute to work. He had permission to keep MARA (a 29’ Tripp-Lentsch sloop built in Amsterdam) on a mooring behind the maintenance hangar. The large maintenance building gave us complete privacy from the traffic and noise of Veteran’s Drive, plus a view of beautiful Charlotte Amalie Harbor. We could cast off and go sailing whether he had one day or a month to explore the islands. The only disadvantage (for me) was the Rube-Goldberg type gangway we used to go from ship to shore: it was a single board that literally required “walking the plank.”



Returning from the grocery store one afternoon, I carefully crossed the gangplank with my grocery bags. When I put the bags down on the cockpit seat, I saw an extremely large and ugly iguana sunning itself on the bow. I quietly reached for a bag of black beans to throw at

it. Bingo! It was a direct hit. Only instead of going overboard into the water, it went down the forward hatch onto our bunk below.

I yelled in dismay and Mike and Steve, two of the mechanics, set a speed limit crossing the gangplank to come to my aid. When I explained what had happened, Steve returned to the maintenance building to find a broom to scare the iguana off the boat. I retreated to the dock to watch the action.



Even after a thorough search, they couldn't find it. Leaving my groceries on the cockpit seat, I took refuge at the Goose Grill. When Dave returned from flying, he searched the boat, but found no sign of it. I got back aboard but kept a close watch for the unwelcome visitor. I didn't sleep all night.

My only other scare aboard MARA at the dock was one afternoon when I was reading in the cockpit. I heard the deafening roar of Pratt and Whitney engines, and looked up to see a Goose coming full speed toward MARA. I was ready to jump overboard when the pilot managed to turn the plane back toward the water. It was George Ruddell (aka "Speedy") who forgot to put the landing gear down before starting up the ramp. No wonder he had that nickname!

Our days started early when we got our wake-up call from the mechanics. They were the first ones at work and when they started the Pratt and Whitney engines, we joked that it was the "alarm clock" for all of Charlotte Amalie.

Depending on our plans for the day, I liked to go jogging from 0600-0700. Dave would come with me when he could. It was wonderful to get out ahead of the traffic (and exhaust fumes). I loved running along the waterfront where native schooners and Tortola sloops were usually tied to the seawall, getting ready to sell their produce or whatever else they had for cargo. The cruise ships were just arriving at the Havensight dock. Passengers who got up early to watch their arrival in St. Thomas would always wave to me. On the return trip I continued through French Town to the Villa Olga and back to get in an hour.

One morning when Dave was running with me a "LAC II" yacht was at the seawall. It was equipped with two speed boats and a helicopter on the stern. When we returned to the seaplane base, we were intercepted by Malcolm and Claxton, two ramp agents. Malcolm asked, "Why didn't you come to the party last night, Captain Howard? We had a great time and thought you would stop by."

Dave replied, "I didn't know there was a party last night. Where was it?" Malcolm said, "Oh, it was an impromptu affair we had on the boat. So many people turned up that I had to tell Claxton to go move the helicopter."



The large maintenance building had stairs at the back leading up to offices facing the water. Ron Gilles had a large office where he and his assistant, Jan Baranski, worked. I loved the way they had “personalized” their office. Ron had a line strung over the window above his desk where he used clothes pins to

hang his tea bags up to dry. Jan Baranski kept a colorful J&B Scotch whiskey box on the shelf above her

typewriter. Dave had a small office next to them with a large desk, telephone, and typewriter to use for his job as Chief Pilot of American Inter-Island, a subsidiary of AAB. Linda Turner occupied another small office. They were wonderful friends as well as neighbors. At the other end of the hallway was a large room used for storage. Dave managed to clear the clutter from one table to set up his amateur radio station. Some evenings we would chat with other hams who lived all over the world. One time we flew the Goose to San Juan to have lunch with the radio operator of a large ship that was in port. We had visited with him so often on the ham radio that we felt like we already knew him.



Peaceful evenings were spent in Mara’s cockpit just reading or stargazing. Dave was teaching me the navigational stars used for Celestial Navigation. On a voyage we made from California to Hawaii Dave used just his sextant for navigation and I was determined to learn this intricate magic. The high point of our day was when Dave took a noon sight, and we would mark our position on the chart. We were surprised and pleased when YACHTING Magazine used a photo I had taken of Dave using his sextant on the cover. They paid me more for that photo than for my manuscript!

I was also impressed when I read how Charles Blair made his record-breaking solo flight over the North Pole in a P-51 navigating with only a sextant to take noon sights. Hooray for the RED BALL IN THE SKY!

I find it interesting that both the U. S. Air Force and the U. S. Navy continued to teach Celestial Navigation to military aviators until 1997. I’m sure Dave had that instruction when he attended the U. S. Coast Guard Academy.

Our big “night out” every week was when we heard the sound of Caribbean steel pan music in front of the hangar. One of the maintenance men from down island gave free lessons to a

dedicated group of young people. We had front row seats (on the ground) for these practice sessions. Their big performance was in the Carnival parade. We cheered enthusiastically when their float passed by.



Dave took me along on his flights whenever possible. Sometimes he had a two-hour lunch break in St. Croix and I would take a flight over so we could try various restaurants in Christiansted. One day he said he would take me to a new place on Kings Alley. As we passed the Gold Shop, he suggested we stop to say hello to Anne, the wife of St. Croix pilot Nick Castruccio. She seemed to be expecting us. I was



surprised and thrilled when she handed me a beautiful gold Goose on a gold chain that Dave had bought for me. I don't wear it much now, but it remains my favorite piece of jewelry.

One afternoon I was talking to Jan Baranski outside the hangar when Dave rushed over and told us to hurry and climb aboard a waiting Goose. After take-off Dave told us we were going on a rescue mission. Chuck Billman's plane was down in Road Town Harbor, Tortola, BVI, and they were using a Boston Whaler to take the passengers to the AAB terminal. We were going to pick up Chuck and his passengers and fly them to their next destination.

My favorite flights with Dave were the training or test flights when no passengers were aboard, and we didn't fly the scheduled routes. Passengers could not go on these flights, but the FAA allowed a second pilot to go along to ride shotgun. One day after an engine change on 8777A, we flew to Virgin Gorda and Dave let me practice landing the Goose in Gorda Sound. It was also a favorite destination on MARA.

Captain Blair always invited me along on Sandringham training flights with Dave, as well as other occasions. In 1976 he asked us to come to St. Croix for a meeting he had with a representative from American Airlines. Following the crash of an American Airlines 727 at the St. Thomas airport on April 27 of that year, American had to suspend flights into STT until the runway was extended (6 years later). Captain Estridge, the AA representative, contacted Captain Blair to discuss the possibility of Antilles Air Boats organizing a subsidiary (American Inter-Island) to shuttle their passengers between St. Croix and St. Thomas. They were considering using Convair 440s and wanted to talk to Dave about being the Chief Pilot because of his military experience with the Convair 440.

Following their discussion, Captain Blair took us to lunch at the restaurant in the nearby Holger Danske restaurant. Captain Estridge shared our enthusiasm for old aircraft. He owned a P-51 Mustang which he flew with the Confederate Air Force in air shows. When Charlie mentioned



the Grumman Albatross he had at the St. Croix airport, Estridge was eager to see it, so we all piled into Charlie's car and drove out to see it. We barely got back to the seaplane ramp in time to take the last flight to St. Thomas!

Dave was enthusiastic about the new project, but I had mixed feelings. When Dave and Captain Blair discussed the feasibility of switching from the Grumman Goose to the newer, larger Grumman Mallard, Blair brought up the problem of hiring First Officers because of the increased passenger load. Dave mentioned that I had the requirements to fly as First Officer and asked Blair if we could fly together as a crew. Captain Blair agreed to the idea, but I feared the new job organizing American Inter-Island ended my chance of being hired as Mallard co-pilot.



An unexpected opportunity gave me hope. St. Croix pilot Bill ("Iggie") Mable came to the boat one day to tell me that a Mallard he had flown to St. Thomas the prior afternoon had to be left overnight because the engine wouldn't start. He invited me to fly the Mallard back to St. Croix when the engine repairs were finished.

It was my first flight on a Mallard! When we got aboard, the St. Croix mechanic already had his seatbelt fastened and was sound asleep. I was thrilled when Iggie had me fly the entire trip with his expert instruction. Mid-route he told me to practice doing stalls. A loud expletive came from the mechanic behind us. I don't know if I scared him or simply startled him from his nap!

I had lunch with Iggie and his wife Lorna before catching a Goose flight back to St. Thomas with Dave. Every day was a new adventure. I never knew what fate had in store.

I first met Captain Blair and his wife, Maureen O'Hara, in California when I was writing a magazine article about the Sikorsky flying boat. Thanks to my association with them, I did several subsequent articles about Antilles Air Boats and spent a lot of time in Captain Blair's home office taking notes. So, when he invited me for lunch, I assumed he had another story in mind for me.

Over lunch they told me about taking the Sandringham flying boat to Ireland to do excursion flights. I didn't know if I should be taking notes or eating my lunch. It would have made a great story, but the purpose of the lunch was to ask if I thought Dave would quit his job at American Inter-Island so we could go to Ireland with them the following summer. I knew the answer without asking Dave.

He was ecstatic when I told him about our conversation. It was a golden opportunity for both of us. Whenever they went on training flights with the Sandringham I went along. Maureen,

who spent summers at her home in Ireland, had me dreaming about all we would see and do. I was already writing the manuscript in my mind.

Tragically, our dream trip to spend that summer in Ireland with the Sandringham never became a reality. Dave died while flying passengers on a Goose from St. John to St. Croix on April 5, 1978. Just months later, Captain Blair lost his life on a Goose flight from St. Croix to St. Thomas. How could this happen to the two best pilots and best friends I knew?

Now, many years later, I just have memories of those happy and exciting days at Antilles Air Boats.



*Have you ever heard of the land of beyond  
That dreams at the gates of the day?  
Alluring it lies at the skirts of the skies  
And ever so far away.*