

Clear Air Turbulence

By Marijane Sipple

If you haven't experienced it yourself, I am sure you have heard of it. You are flying along in clear skies and calm air when BAM! There is a violent buffeting of the airplane that can toss you into the overhead if your seatbelts aren't fastened. There are cases where the aircraft is damaged, but more frequently it is the unsuspecting cabin crew and passengers walking around.

Although I hadn't anticipated any problems on my flights to St. Thomas, I didn't think I was going to get through check-in at Honolulu International. I had a large assortment of bags, including an Avon 4-person inflatable life raft neatly folded in a sturdy Avon canister. The American Airlines agent checking my bags looked suspiciously at it, asking what it was. I explained that I was taking a life raft from my boat in Honolulu to use aboard a sailboat in St. Thomas. He laughed and said he hoped I wouldn't need it on my overwater flights! Then he proceeded to check everything all the way through FOR FREE.

It wasn't a direct flight to St. Thomas. I changed planes at Los Angeles (LAX). Then we flew to St. Croix for another connection. Following the crash of an American Airlines Boeing 727-100 in St. Thomas in 1976, the Airline Pilots Association banned all jet flights to the St. Thomas airport until the runway was extended. American's solution to the problem was to meet with Charlie Blair, owner of Antilles Air Boats, to discuss establishing American Inter-Island to shuttle passengers between the St. Croix and St. Thomas airports in 2-engine Convair 440s that could handle the short runway. Charlie persuaded Dave Howard to head the operation since he had a lot of Convair time in the Air Force. Dave always welcomed a challenge!

After my flight landed on St. Croix passengers continuing to St. Thomas were taken to a waiting room while their luggage was transferred to the Convairs. Anticipation turned to apprehension as I sat in the small waiting room. What was I thinking to leave beautiful Hawaii and my good friends there?

Suddenly the doors to the flight line burst open and my soon-to-be husband Dave Howard rushed in and grabbed my hand to lead me to his plane. My anxiety vanished. When we boarded the Convair, Dave introduced me to Alan Nogard, his First Officer, and Peggy Cunningham, the flight attendant. He told Peggy that after she boarded the passengers to bring me to the cockpit to sit in the jump seat. Not First Class, but certainly the best view on the airplane. When I saw the St. Thomas (STT) runway ahead, I thought of all my previous arrivals in St. Thomas and the exciting water landings in the Grumman Goose. Now that was arriving in style!



After landing in STT Dave talked to the baggage handlers. He asked them to put the life raft in the American Airlines storage room for him to pick up the next morning. Relieved to see the life raft had safely made the long trip, I told Dave that was his dowry.

Arriving at the seaplane ramp, Dave parked his car next to the maintenance hangar and we started moving my luggage to his sailboat. A pleasant man with an Australian accent came up and introduced himself as "our neighbor." Ron Gillies had a large office next to Dave's smaller American Inter-Island office upstairs in the maintenance building. Ron's office looked out at the harbor and our sailboat right below.

Dave told me that Ron joined Antilles Air Boats (AAB) in 1970 when Captain Blair bought the first of two Sandringham flying boats from Ansett Airlines in Sydney. Ron and his wife had lots of space for their baggage when he ferried the large flying boat from Sydney to the USVI. Not only did Ron have extensive experience flying the plane, but he also was put in charge of preparing the documents necessary for the Part 121 certification needed to operate the Sandringhams in the USA.

Dave had promised me a life with him of flying and sailing. Actually, it was mostly flying. He frequently took me on flights where I could sit in the cockpit of the wonderful Grumman Goose, the jump seat of the Convair 440, and on training flights with Charlie Blair in the magnificent Sandringham flying boat. I loved it all,

but I missed doing my own flying. Charlie Blair promised me that I could fly as co-pilot when they replaced the Grumman Goose with the larger Grumman Mallard seaplane. I was becoming an expert on bird identification...as long as they were Grummans.



We lived aboard Dave's sailboat, MARA, right next to the seaplane ramp. When Dave had a few days off, we could just toss the lines on the dock and sail to one of the nearby islands. I especially liked to anchor on the beautiful island of St. John where we could go snorkeling, hike one of the many National Park trails, or take the bus to the small town of Cruz Bay to have lunch or hop off at Caneel Bay

Resort (where we spent our honeymoon) for a more extravagant meal. I looked forward to having more time to explore the British Virgin Islands.

We postponed our sail to the BVI for a trip to Hawaii! My dear friend Jane Kelley had invited us to come visit them over the Thanksgiving holiday. I was ecstatic! I got to see all my friends and visit all my favorite places. Dave still got to fly, but this time doing aerobatics with Art Daegling in his Pitts biplane or renting a sailplane to go soaring at the small airport on the north shore. Jane persuaded Dave to interview with Royal Hawaiian Airlines for a job flying in the Hawaiian Islands. Dave was interested in the job, but not the sailing. We had sailed to many of the Hawaiian Islands in my sailboat, and it was rough sailing, nor did the diving compare to the Virgin Islands.

The Virgin Islands and Hawaiian Islands were totally different. Dave persuaded Jane and Richard to bring their family to St. Thomas for Carnival week the end of April. He felt the whole family would enjoy the parades and Carnival Village with its food booths and calypso competition for bands and singers. He promised to take a few days off from flying to sail to St. John for a picnic and snorkeling if they wanted to escape the crowds and noise.

Our time in Hawaii made Dave realize how much pressure and stress he was under working as Chief Pilot at American Inter-Island while still doing test flights and training for both Antilles Air Boats and American Inter-Island. He was also going on his own training flights in the Sandringham Flying Boat with Charlie Blair.

When Charlie invited us to be part of the crew to fly to Foynes, Ireland to do summer excursion flights with the Sandringham, Dave submitted his resignation to American Inter-Island.

Dave took a month off so we could go on his long-promised sail to explore the British Virgin Islands. We had a wonderful time. Dave was happy and relaxed and said he wished we could just keep sailing. On the AAB flights to the BVI I had learned the names of all the islands. It was a dream come true to visit them by boat and have time to explore ashore.

Before we left, I had a call from Jane Kelley to finalize their plans to come see us the end of April. I promised to write her from the British Virgin Islands and use their beautiful postage stamps. Jane said she was going to Casa Grande, AZ to be a judge for the Aerobatic Championships and would send me newspaper articles from there.

When we returned to St. Thomas, the girls in the office told me that I was getting several calls a day from Richard Kelley in Hawaii. I was puzzled. It was always Jane who called me. I immediately went to Dave's office to phone Richard. I was stunned when Richard told me that Jane had become ill while at the aerobatic competition in Casa Grande and was in a Tucson hospital in a coma. He asked if I could come stay with their kids while he went to Tucson.

Dave immediately requested an airline pass for me from St. Thomas to Honolulu. I told Richard I would leave as soon as I got my tickets.

Dave was busy training a retired Marine pilot, Tom Mooney, to fly the Grumman Goose. Not only did Tom have experience as a military pilot, but after retiring he had been flying for the TV show "Baa Baa Black Sheep" about Marine pilot "Pappy" Boyington. I flew with Dave and Tom on their morning training flight on April 5th then went to check on my tickets and pack while they flew the regular afternoon flight schedule.

Dave and I planned to go out to dinner after his last flight, and I sat at the Goose Grill watching for him to return. I kept looking at my watch, wondering why they were so late. Ron Gillies came to get me, saying he needed to talk to me in his office. I thought that Dave's plane must have had a maintenance problem in St. Croix, and he had to spend the night there. Ron was probably going to invite me to stay at their home so I wouldn't be on the boat alone overnight.



When Ron told me Dave's flight from St. John to St. Croix was missing, I was in a panic. We sat in Ron's office with a few of the other pilots until late at night while planes and boats searched for them. Finally, a power boat came in with passengers they found floating in the water. I wanted to go to the hospital to talk to them but was told I needed to stay there. The search continued the next day with no sight of the plane. I called Richard Kelley to tell him the terrible news.

When the submerged wreckage of the plane was found in 110 feet of water near French Cap Key, Tom Mooney's body was still strapped into his seat but there was no sign of Dave's body. The divers brought me items belonging to Dave that they recovered, including his pilot's shirt still buttoned and with shoulder epaulets in place, his flight log and his wallet.

Richard and I exchanged daily updates on Jane and Dave. He found someone to stay with their family temporarily. When the search for Dave's plane ended, I told Richard I would leave for Honolulu on the next flight. When I arrived in HNL Art Daegling and his wife Jackie were waiting for me. I could tell by their faces the news was not good. Richard had called just before they left for the airport to say Jane had passed away. Clear air turbulence can strike anywhere.

I stayed until after Jane's funeral. Richard had the family Outrigger hotel business to run, and he needed to find someone to run the household, supervise the kids, and provide meals. I thought to myself that he needed a Super Woman.

Richard didn't feel it was safe for me to live aboard the boat by myself. I agreed. I decided to return to St. Thomas, sell the boat and dispose of our personal belongings. Without Dave there was no reason to remain in the Virgin Islands.

Richard had graduated from Punahou, a private college preparatory school in Honolulu, in 1951. His children were attending school there and he was on the

board of directors. He learned one of the English teachers was retiring at the end of the school year and suggested I interview for the job. I liked the school, the pay was good, and only teachers get as much vacation time. I took the job. But life would never be the same.

David F. Howard (age 50) d. April 5, 1978



Jane Zeiber Kelley (age 42) d. April 20, 1978



*“They lived on earth a little while
And learned the joy of wings.
The cloudless sky, the boundless blue
A pilot’s secret things.
They lived, they shared
Their joy with us
And then they flew away
To New Horizons, brighter skies
Where earth folk cannot stray.
Each left to us a legacy,
A memory, a prayer,
The dazzling height, the gift of flight
Their dreams and hopes to share.
Remember them and care.”*