

“Thank You for Flying Antilles Air Boats”

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One of the interesting things about flying for Antilles Air Boats was the interaction we had with our passengers. If I had free time between flights, I was frequently approached by passengers asking if I could recommend a good restaurant (or where they could see Maureen D’Hara). One young boy startled me by asking if I had flown that plane in the war. I think I disappointed him when I answered that I was too young then, but I felt close to that plane because it was built in 1939, the same year I was born.



Once when I was flying with Captain Blair, I told him I was impressed that he remembered the names of so many passengers. He replied, “Antilles Air Boats wouldn’t exist without our passengers!” Although with Charlie it wasn’t just public relations but a genuine interest in people.

Our “frequent flyers” included the seven senators from St. Croix, commuting to the Virgin Islands Legislature Building on St. Thomas. They really stood out in the lineup of passengers waiting to board their plane dressed in dark suits, crisp white shirts, and neckties. They reminded me of the seven dwarfs in Snow White marching off to work singing “Heigh Ho, Heigh Ho, it’s off to work we go...”



The governor’s office was on St. Croix, but he often flew to St. Thomas on business. I have fond memories of Melvin Evans, the first elected governor of the USVI. After I told him that my maiden name was “Evans” he always called me “cousin.”

Charles Turnbull, the commissioner of the Territorial Department of Education, would arrive at the seaplane base in an expensive chauffeur driven car. He was very aloof, and I don't think working for him would be very pleasant.



Another passenger easily recognized by his uniform was the park ranger who was the dual superintendent of the Virgin Islands National Park on St. John and Buck Island on St. Croix. One time he told me how grateful he was to have Antilles Air Boats to commute to work. Before, he had to take a taxi to the St. Croix airport to fly to St. Thomas, then a taxi across the island to Red Hook to take the ferry to St. John. He said it was a lengthy and expensive trip that he dreaded.

One day I was flying with George Ruddell from St. Croix to St. Thomas. When George saw the park ranger sitting in the back, he flew to St. John. After landing, I went back to open the door, but no one moved. I asked the park ranger if he wasn't getting off, and he said "Oh, no! I'm going to St. Thomas today." With a red face I announced that we would now continue to St. Thomas. No one complained, in fact, I think they were happy to get the extra flight to St. John!

Alfred Marshall lived on St. Thomas but flew often to St. Croix. I knew he owned Marshall Department stores, but at that time I thought it was a local store. I was shocked a few years later when I learned it was a nationwide department store.



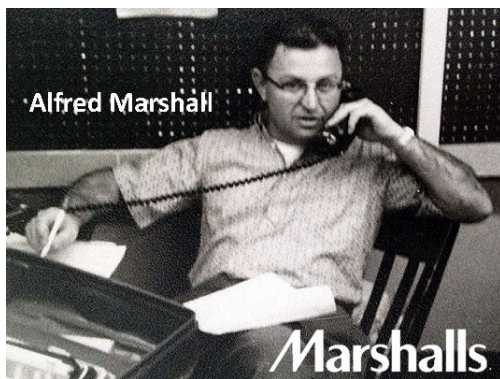
A very pleasant lady who lived on St. Croix flew to St. Thomas every weekday where she was the president of a St. Thomas bank. On one occasion my fifteen-year-old son, Sean, was sitting next to her on a late afternoon flight to St. Croix. When she asked Sean where he was going, he said "My mom is the pilot and I'm just tagging along with her on her last flight. I'm spending the summer with her on her sailboat."

The following morning the bank president gave me her business card and asked me to call her on my next day off. I couldn't imagine why she wanted to see me. Curious, I called and made an appointment. When I went to see her, she expressed her concern about the safety of my son and me living aboard a sailboat. She offered to help me get a mortgage to buy a house to live in.

Since I am not financially savvy, I was skeptical about accepting her offer. But she was very smart, and I trusted her. She recommended a real estate agent. Sean and I were soon touring homes for sale. We fell in love with a house on Upper John Dunko that looked down on Water Island and Gregerie Channel where the seaplanes landed. Okay, that is why it was love at first sight! Every single room had a view of St. Thomas harbor and the ocean. On a clear day I could see all the way to Puerto Rico.

Like most homes on St. Thomas, it was built on a steep hillside and had an apartment downstairs with its own entrance. The lady who was renting the apartment wanted to stay there and her rent covered my mortgage payments. I loved the house, and when I sold it, I made a large profit. It was the best financial investment I have ever made.

I didn't know Alfred Marshall, except to greet him when he flew with us. I was surprised when he



stopped by my boat at Avery's marina one morning with his wife, Marirose. They said they loved to sail and wanted a boat to explore the Virgin Islands. Dick Avery, the owner of the boatyard, suggested they talk to me. The following day Marshall came by and made an offer on my sailboat MARA and was ready to pay me in cash. Since I now had a home ashore, I accepted. All the way from the marina to the bank I was wishing I had a security guard to escort me!

Interesting enough, some of our passengers became longtime friends after taking AAB on a special occasion. A couple from Tortola flew to St. Thomas to celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary. They told me they lived aboard a sailboat in the British Virgin Islands and asked me about places they could see within walking distance to explore and have lunch.

The following week one of our pilots returning from Tortola handed me a large coffee can, saying it was special delivery from a lady in Road Town. I wondered who would send me a can of coffee, but discovered it was a cookie jar in disguise with a nice note from Opal Kerr, the passenger who was celebrating her wedding anniversary with her husband.

I got to know Opal well following her husband's death when she moved their sailboat to Avery's Boathouse in St. Thomas. Early every morning she would take a walk along the waterfront, and if I wasn't scheduled to fly, I would sometimes join her, and then we'd have breakfast at the Quarterdeck next to Avery's marina.

Also celebrating their wedding anniversary, Chuck and Betty Miller took the seaplane from San Juan to St. Thomas for a weekend stay at Bluebeard's Castle. They told me they were both pilots

and asked me questions about flying the seaplanes. I didn't have time between flights to chat with them, so they invited me to have lunch with them at Bluebeard's Castle the next day. I had been there to take photos of the beautiful stone tower, which was built in the 1600s by the pirate Bluebeard for his lover. I was excited at this opportunity to actually have lunch inside the upscale resort.

The open-air restaurant was on a hilltop overlooking the harbor and town of Charlotte Amalie. I instantly felt at ease with Chuck and Betty as I answered their questions about what I loved about flying for Antilles Air Boats. I also told them how I dreaded going to work on the days I was scheduled to fly with the two chauvinist captains who felt that women shouldn't be pilots.

They gave me the encouragement I so badly needed. They had owned and operated a flight school in Santa Monica, California for years. Betty had been flying since 1952. After Chuck went to work for the FAA, they sold their flight school and Betty worked as a flight instructor wherever Chuck was assigned to work. She was a longtime member of the Ninety-Nines (a women's pilot association founded by Amelia Earhart).

I told Betty there was no 99's chapter in the Virgin Islands or Puerto Rico because combined we couldn't find the ten licensed women pilots required to form a new chapter. Betty laughed when I told her I still belonged to the Aloha Chapter in Hawaii. She suggested we plan to alternate our own "meetings" in St. Thomas and Puerto Rico. She could use a plane from the flight school where she worked as an instructor to fly to St. Thomas, and I could take a free hop on AAB or Aero Virgin Islands to San Juan.

My exchange visits with Betty did a lot to boost my morale. I was chatting with Ron Gilles in his office above the maintenance building one day when I looked at my watch and said, "Oh, I have to pick up Betty Miller at the airport."

Ron exclaimed, "BETTY MILLER! You're meeting Betty Miller the pilot for lunch?" Surprised I said, "Yes. Do you know Betty Miller?"

Ron responded "No, but I was at the airport in Brisbane, Australia waiting for her arrival on her flight from Oakland, CA. She was the first woman to complete a solo flight across the Pacific." Ron jumped up and said, "I'll buy lunch if you will take me along."

I took Ron with me although I didn't think he knew the same Betty Miller who was my friend. Embarrassed, when we met Betty, I explained why Ron Gilles was with me. With a sly smile she said to Ron, "That was a long time ago. What were you doing in Brisbane?"

"I was there to welcome you!" Ron answered, "only the crowd was so huge that I just saw your plane come in for a landing and only saw you later in photos in newspapers and magazines. When Betty landed in Brisbane, Australia on May 13, 1963, an Associated Press photographer captured the moment she climbed out of the plane, wearing a cotton dress and high heels. That Photo was the first to be transmitted by a new wire-photo process and Betty was featured on the covers of magazines and newspapers. Later photos showed Betty as she received high aviation honors from Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson.



JFK, Betty Miller and "Dammit"

Ron took us to lunch at the Beachcomber on Lindberg Bay near the airport. I'm glad Ron was buying lunch because he asked Betty so many questions about her flight that she hardly had time to eat. Betty told him that she wasn't trying to set a record as much as deliver a new Piper Apache to the buyer in Brisbane. It was one of many long-distance aircraft deliveries she had made. She was pilot, navigator and mechanic, accompanied only by her Troll doll, "Dammit". Fascinated, we listened to her describe stormy weather, equipment failure and other problems she experienced on that long 7,400 miles Pacific flight.

The following month I spent the weekend with Betty and Chuck at their home in San Juan. When I was ready to leave, Betty handed me an envelope and asked if I would give it to Ron Gilles.

Inside was the photo of her getting out of the plane in Brisbane and one of her receiving an award from President Kennedy, both with a personal message to Ron. She said she wished it hadn't taken so long for them to meet.