

## **Trials and Tribulations**

By Marijane Sipple

Without the help and support of good friends, I don't know how I could have coped with Dave's death. Teaching English at Punahou high school in Honolulu seemed like a good start for this new chapter in my life. I enjoyed teaching and this was an opportunity to return to Hawaii and my friends there.

Hoping to find a way to settle things in St. Thomas without going there, I phoned Dick Avery who owned a small marina in Frenchtown. We had hauled MARA out there several times as it was a short walk from the seaplane ramp. I thought that if he had a slip open for MARA, he could move the boat there and handle selling it for me.

When I called, Dick's wife, Marianne, answered the phone. I recognized her delightful Swedish accent right away. She said Dick was working out in the boatyard. She worked at the marina, handling the office business while Dick was busy working outside. She assured me that they would be glad to help me, but that they couldn't move the boat from Antilles Air Boats (AAB) until I returned and signed the necessary paperwork.

I hoped the Salvation Army would come pick up all items that wouldn't go with the boat. I knew an AAB mechanic at the seaplane ramp who didn't have a car. I thought he would be glad to buy my rusty island car for \$1.00. It had been reliable transportation.

Then, like a bolt out of the blue, I received a phone call from AAB asking how soon I could be there to start flying as co-pilot on the Grumman Mallard. They had contacted George Lambros in New Jersey to see if he could do the training and give me the check ride for my multi-engine seaplane rating in his Grumman Widgeon. They gave me his telephone number and said to call him with my arrival time, and he would pick me up.

When I decided to move to St. Thomas to be with Dave, the Aloha Chapter of the Ninety-Nines (International Organization of Women Pilots) had a going away party for me and gave me a T-shirt with a caricature of a woman pilot flying a plane that said, "Ninety-Nines are Just Plane Crazy." It was true. In a flash, I switched from teaching school in Honolulu to flying seaplanes in the Virgin Islands.

George Lambros picked me up at the airport as promised. He said that he and his wife had a guest room I could use so that I wouldn't have to rent a car. They couldn't have been nicer and flying the Grumman Widgeon over the Hudson River was a thrill. There was so much to see, including West Point military academy high on a cliff overlooking the Hudson. As soon as George saw I was distracted, he would stop the engine. I did a lot of engine failure procedures.

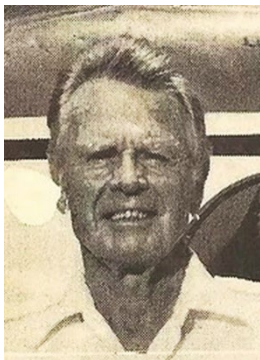


Eager to make the transition from the Widgeon to the larger Mallard, I made my first stop after arriving in St. Thomas at the seaplane ramp. I told the desk clerk in the office that I wanted my



training schedule. She shuffled through a stack of papers and informed me that I was on the schedule to fly the regular route with Howard Austin the next morning. "But I haven't been checked out in the Mallard yet" I explained. She shrugged. "I guess you are going to get on- the job training."

Perturbed, I returned early the next morning to fly with Howard Austin and see if he could explain why I wasn't getting a Mallard check-out. Howard was already there pre-flying the plane. He ignored my "Good Morning" and was obviously in a bad mood. I felt like a stray dog following him around on the preflight and then into the plane. He stopped before entering the cockpit and exploded. "Women have no business flying! Make sure the passengers have their seatbelts fastened and life jackets under their seats. Then take your seat up here and don't say anything or touch anything." I couldn't believe it. So much for on-the-job training.



I was relieved when I saw that I was scheduled to fly with George Ruddell the next day. George was good natured and didn't seem like the type to be prejudiced. I was doing the outside preflight the following morning when George arrived. I thought it was a good sign when he said "Good Morning" to me. When I took the co-pilot's seat George gave me a stern look and said, "I like women, but they aren't capable of flying. Don't say anything and don't touch anything!" Where had I heard that speech before?

My only friend on the long days was my Mallard Flight Manual. I always went through the pre-flight check, even though I didn't dare say anything. The Flight Manual was like a bible that I read every day. One day Howard added take-off power without retracting the gear. I broke my code of silence to warn him. His "thank you" was a sour grimace. The only time he gave me credit for anything was when he came in too fast landing at STT and almost wiped out the Tortola ferry at the customs dock. As the commander at the Battle of Bunker Hill proclaimed, I could see the whites of their eyes as the passengers watched the seaplane careen wildly toward them. When Howard recovered his landing and returned to the seaplane ramp, I heard him tell the staff that he would never let me do the landing again!

A few days later I saw Howard's wife, Norma, having coffee at a waterfront restaurant and asked if I could join her. I was relieved to see she was her usual delightful self. Hoping she might act as a peacemaker, I told her about Howard's mistreatment of me. Norma looked me in the eye and said, "Just be glad you aren't married to him."

One time George Ruddell, who also ignored the take-off and landing check list, forgot to put the gear down when he started up the STT ramp. He didn't go very far before the loud sound of the hull scraping the concrete ramp alerted him to the fact. George, a retired USAF fighter pilot, lived up to his nickname "Speedy."

Lucky for me, it didn't take long before George realized how useful a co-pilot could be. In the late afternoons we flew to the San Juan seaplane base to pick up passengers going to St. Croix. Several times a week a showgirl from one of the large San Juan resorts flew to her home on St. Croix where her wealthy husband lived. George and I would eagerly scan the passengers waiting to board to see if the showgirl was there. If she was, after take-off George would go back to sit with her, leaving me alone in the cockpit for the duration of the trip. I don't know who was happier.

When I was scheduled to fly with John Pendley, I knew it was going to be a good day. John retired as a Coast Guard pilot where he flew the large Grumman Albatross amphibian. The Albatross was a rugged, seaworthy craft used by the military primarily for air-and-sea rescue work. Perhaps because of this experience, John was an exceptional seaplane pilot, and it was a privilege to fly with him. He was professional and courteous and never yelled at me for being a female pilot. He and Dave had been good friends and shared an apartment when they both started working for AAB.



On a clear, beautiful November day, John and I were ready to make our last flight of the day from St. Croix to St. Thomas. Passengers were loaded and we were ready to go...but not the right engine. Mechanics told us they needed to put the Mallard in the hangar to work on it, so our passengers were put on other flights to St. Thomas.

John and I waited at the Goose Grill. Finally, a mechanic came to tell us that they needed to work on the plane overnight. The St. Croix office staff made reservations for us at the Anchor Inn on the Christiansted waterfront and said we could have dinner and breakfast there. I was overjoyed! I could spend the night in an air-conditioned room with a TV set, have a hot shower, and eat at a restaurant instead of making a sandwich on the boat.

"Oh, NO!" John wailed. "Jacqueline will kill me if I tell her I have to stay overnight in St. Croix with you." I looked at him with disbelief. He rushed to phone Eastern Caribbean Airways to see if they had a flight we could take to St. Thomas.

The dispatcher told John that their pilot, Irving Rivers, was taking a Piper Navajo Chieftain to St. Thomas to pick up charter passengers, and she would see if he could wait for us to get to the airport and go with him. In a few minutes she returned to say the pilot had already taxied out to the runway for take-off.

The next morning when John and I returned to the seaplane ramp, the mechanics told us how lucky we were that we didn't get on the Eastern Caribbean Airways flight to St. Thomas. Their radio was on with the news. The St. Thomas control tower operators said they saw the plane's blinking lights and cleared the pilot for landing. The plane was just one mile from the runway when it disappeared from radar.

The pilot and the plane were never found.