

Wild Goose Chase

By Marijane Sipple

After interviewing Captain Charles Blair for an article I was writing about the Sikorsky flying boat, he invited me to the Virgin Islands. He wanted me to write an article about Antilles Air Boats, the seaplane airline he started after retiring as senior pilot for Pan Am airlines in 1969.

After my arrival, Captain Blair told me that he had arranged to fly a regular schedule the next day. He had “reserved” the co-pilot’s seat for me as an introduction to their operation.

We wore headsets on the flights, so I had no problem hearing his comments about their destinations. He pointed out so many islands that I knew I would never remember all their names. Between flights, I had the opportunity to talk to some of their passengers. Blair was very cordial and would always greet the passengers, many of whom he knew by name.

As we waited for them to refuel the plane on a flight scheduled from St. Croix to St. Thomas, Captain Blair came over to tell me that I would have to relinquish the co-pilot’s seat because the governor of the Virgin Islands had requested it.

He took me over to introduce me to Melvin Evans, the first elected governor of the U. S. Virgin Islands (1969-1975). I said, “Oh, my maiden name is Evans!”

He looked at me with a wry grin and replied, “I wonder if we are related.”

The Legislative Building of the USVI is located on the waterfront in Charlotte Amalie on St. Thomas. The governor and the seven St. Croix senators frequently use the “downtown to downtown” seaplane service to avoid the long drive to and from the airports on St. Croix and St. Thomas.

Another passenger who especially liked the convenient seaplane service was a park ranger for the National Park Service on St. John. He told me there was no airport on St. John, so before the seaplane started flights there, He took a ferry to St. Thomas, then a taxi on the long drive to the St. Thomas airport to get on another flight to St. Croix. He said he met many day visitors to the National Park who flew from St. Croix that would not have come if not for AAB. He gave me his

card with his phone number and said he would be happy to give me a tour of St. John if I had the time.

The next morning Blair's wife, Maureen O'Hara, took me on a tour of the St. Croix seaplane base. I had not seen many of her films. I saw "How Green Was My Valley" (1941) at a classical film festival and remembered "McLintock!" (1963), but mainly because of John Wayne (Maureen played his wife).

Maureen gave up her film career when she married Charlie Blair in 1968 and was now focused on public relations for Antilles Air Boats. She was quite theatrical; I suppose from being a movie star for so many years. She was also immensely proud of her Irish heritage. She said she always spent summers in her "castle" in Ireland.

Our first stop was at an office run by Ginny Angus and Julie Rasmussen, both in charge of marketing and sales. They presented me with a nice "Welcome" folder containing information and a pass that I could use to fly on any of the AAB flights during my stay.

I asked Maureen if we could visit the maintenance hangar. Maureen looked skeptical. "Do you really think readers would be interested in that?" I assured her that anyone who reads aviation magazines would want to know how they maintained seaplanes operating in such a corrosive atmosphere, as well as how they found parts for planes built in World War II.

We walked to the maintenance hangar, only to find the personnel busy on an assortment of projects. Maureen didn't want to interrupt their work. As we started to leave, she spotted a man who didn't seem occupied at the time.

She introduced me to Nolle Holle, the flight engineer on the S25 Sandringham flying boat that Captain Blair bought in Australia. He persuaded Nolle and his wife to help ferry the Sandringham from Australia to the Virgin Islands, and then stay on to work for Antilles Air Boats.

Maureen asked Nolle if he would give me a tour of the flying boat while she did some paperwork in the office. Although he was polite, I could tell was not pleased with the unexpected assignment.

Antilles Air Boats was still working to get U. S. certification to operate the plane in U. S. waters, so it was out on a mooring. Nolle told me to wait at the Goose Grill while he found someone to take us out to the mooring.

I hope my face didn't show my surprise when Nolle returned with a man wearing two prosthetic arms from his elbows down. Nolle introduced him as Jerry Dodge. He was so adept using his artificial arms that I soon did not think of him as being handicapped. He skillfully handled the power boat to take us out to the Sandringham and told Nolle to call when he was ready to return. I later learned that Jerry lost his arms when he suffered an extreme electric shock while working as a lineman.

Much as I enjoyed my tour of the Sandringham, I was embarrassed to have imposed on the two men when I didn't plan to mention the flying boat in the article I intended to write.

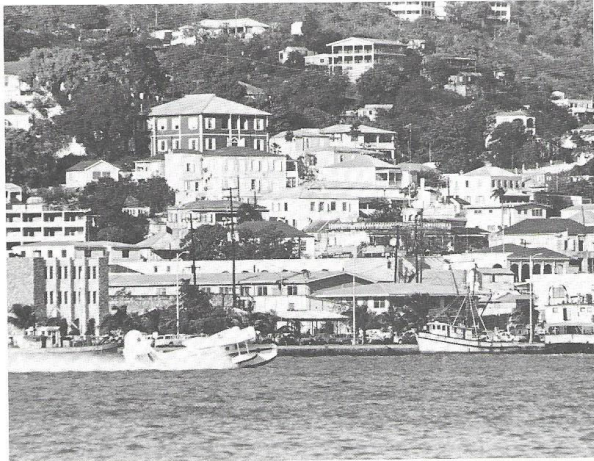
Maureen was waiting for me when we returned to the seaplane ramp. She said we were going to have lunch with a renowned photographer who did a lot of photo work for them. I had never heard of Fritz Henle, but the folder of black and white photos he brought for me were beautiful. I didn't mention that the editors I worked with always wanted 35mm color slides. I thanked him for the photos, thinking I could use them for another article if I could find a publication that would use them.

My day with Maureen was not going as smoothly as the previous day spent with Captain Blair. I didn't get the information I wanted for my article and felt sorry for wasting the time of others. I felt like this entire day had been a wild goose chase.

Obviously, it was time to use my free pass!

(to be continued)

Virgin Islands Commuter Plane
Service a Booming Enterprise



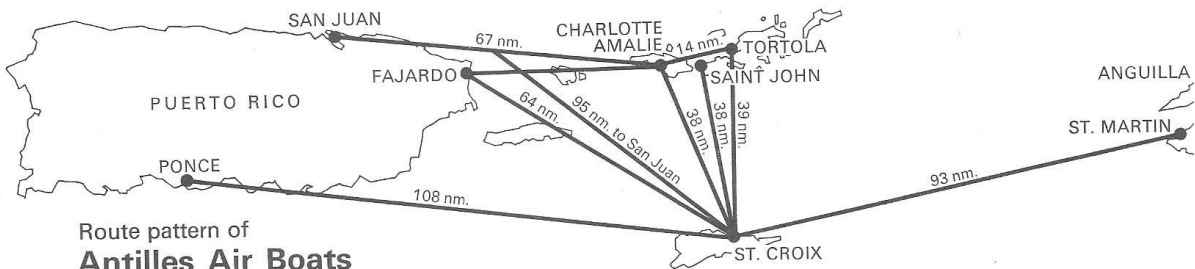
EFS-38-1



EFS-38-3



EFS-38-2



Route pattern of
Antilles Air Boats

EFS-38-4

EFS-38-1
An Antilles Air Boat, *Grumman Goose* "streetcar" takes off from the waterfront at Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, capital of the U. S. Virgin Islands. The line has 18 of these aircraft which serve commuters and tourists for island hopping in the Virgin Islands area, as well as offering service to nearby Puerto Rico and St. Martin.

EFS-38-2
Coming to rest on the water, a *Grumman Goose* settles gracefully to a landing at St. Thomas.

EFS-38-3
Capt. Charles Blair, founder and president of AAB, presents a copy of his book, "Red Ball in the Sky," to AAB's millionth passenger. The book describes Capt. Blair's long-distance flights in a P-51 Mustang.

EFS-38-4
The route map of Antilles Air Boats shows how thoroughly neighborly airline covers its territory. "NM" on the map stands for nautical miles, which are 6,080 feet in length, 800 feet longer than a land mile.

