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## SPOTLIGHT

By JAMES F. LYNCH APRIL 15, 1979

ST. CROIX, V.I. — Antilles Air Boats threw a 15th anniversary party for itself in February; each employee was asked to bring a favorite dish. That kind of homey touch, right out atone of those old Western films starring Maureen O'Hara and John Wayne, was typical of the Virgin Islands commuter line that bills itself as the world's largest seaplane airline. And no wonder, considering the down-home flavor of the company and the person of its chairman, president and chief executive - Miss O'Hara, herself. She took over after the fatal crash last fall of her husband, Capt. Charles F. Blair, who founded the airline with one Grumman Goose, a Navy surplus plane that he acquired while he was still the chief pilot for Pan American World Airways. But the airline's style may soon become a bit less homey.

Resorts International, the conglomerate that develops hotels and gambling casinos, won approval late last week by the Civil Aeronautics Board of its agreement to purchase Antilles Air Boats. A C.A.B. spokesman said no objections to the purchase had been raised within or outside the agency.

Miss O'Hara, or Mrs: Blair as she prefers to be called in the islands, "will continue with us," said James M. Crosby, chairman of Resorts International. "She's a wonderful lady and does a good job."

"We are anticipating a formal closing the latter part of next week," said Lewis W. Dymond, a Resorts consultant for avia Lion affairs, last week from his base in Miami. "Initially, it will be an 80 percent acquisition, minimum, of their stock on a tax-free exchange basis, stock for stock, Class A Resorts stock for Antilles stock." The papers are to be signed in St. Croix, Antilles' home base. Resorts' Class A stock closed at 46% on Thursday.,

Resorts International, which also owns Chalk's International Airline Inc., a commuter line that operates between Miami and the Bahamas, initiated the acquisition talks with Captain Blair before his death in the crash of a plane he was hying on one of Antilles' scheduled flights from St. Croix to St. Thomas last September. His wife succeeded him as head of the airline and resumed talks with Resorts last October. The negotiations were completed in February, Mr. Crosby said.

"We've been giving them financial support and maintenance support since last October," Mr. Dymond said. "We found that because of Resorts' ownership of Chalk's Airline it might require Civil Aeronautics Board approval.

"We could have closed long before now," Mr. Dymond said, but Mrs. Blair had to settle her husband's estate. "Her stock and his stock were tied in together," Mr. Dymond said.

Paul Holt, Antilles' vice president for finance, would not disclose how much stock Mrs. Blair holds, but he did acknowledge that it is "substantial" and that she is the majority stockholder. The company is privately held, he noted, and does not disclose Its financial reports publicly. He was false reluctant to be specific about the comp& ny's assets, saying that they were "consistent for an airline or our size," of "in the neighborhood of 83.5 million," he said.

### **Two Fatal Crashes**

Revenues run to \$5 million a year, Mrs. Blair said, with 250.000 passengers and 2 million pounds of freight carried annually. The line's best year, Mr. Holt said, was 1977, when 266,000 passengers were carried. After the fatal crash last year - the second in two years that have claimed a total of 11 lives, Antilles' business dropped 40 percent with decreased passenger loads and a sharp cut in daily flight service. A decline in passenger loads generally follows air accidents; lawsuits are pending over

the deaths of three passengers in the crash that killed Captain Blair. The reduced flight service was partly a result of the number of planes undergoing safety checks, leaving only three operable Grumman Goose planes in the fleet to handle the daily flights around the Caribbean.

Other Caribbean airlines profited from the diminished airboat business, and many increased their daily scheduled flights for inter-island commuters.

Nevertheless, Antilles Air Boats rode out the storm. Now the line, which has logged more than 116 million passenger revenue miles, is approaching another milestone, its three millionth passenger.

Captain Blair, who married Miss O'Hara in 1968, bought the original Goose to make trips between the islands after buying a home in St. Croix. After friends began hitching rides regularly, he set up an air taxi service, acquiring other amphibians as surplus from the United States Navy. When he retired from Pan American in 1969, he continued as a chief pilot, but this time with his own airline, Antilles.

The winner of the Harmon International Aviation Award in 1952 for the first solo flight in a single-engine plane over the North Pole, Captain Blair, 68 years old, was one of four persons killed when his plane was forced down after what is believed to have been an engine explosion.

Mrs. Blair is not the only woman president of an airline, but she undoubtedly is the only movie star to head such an operation. She fills the role easily - as well as performing other tasks as she sees them. Mrs. Blair answers the phone, picks up trash as she walks along the ramp, rewrites advertising and publicity copy and keeps the maintenance men on their toes as she spots areas that haven't been cleaned to her satisfaction.

Eighty-one flights a day are scheduled by Antilles Air Boats. The line serves San Juan and Farajado in Puerto Rico, St. Croix, St. Thomas and St. John in the United States Virgin Islands and Tortola in the British Virgin Islands.

At present, Mrs. Blair says, the Antilles fleet numbers 27 aircraft, but only nine are operational. The 15-passenger Grumman Mallard, a twin-engine plane with Pratt & Whitney power plants of 600 horsepower each, is the workhorse, with five of them in service, the last being activated shortly before the anniversary celebration.

Of the 16 Goose planes owned by the airline, only four are in service. Leonard Davis, the chief of flight standards in the Federal Aviation Administration district

office in San Juan, said, "Some of the derelicts will never fly again. They are in disrepair, and it would take them a long time to get them into service."

Two four-engine, 48-passenger Sandringham flying boats are being certified at San Juan for Antilles Air Boats. "We might go back to St. Maarten," Mrs. Blair said, "and we've been invited to go into Antigua." The line formerly served St. Maarten, and with legal casinos on the island, this could be a revived trip as part of Resorts International's operations. But Mr. Dymond said the service of St. Maarten "hadn't been discussed."

The year before his death, Captain Blair was talking of applying for permission to offer downtown-to-downtown service between New York and Washington and New York and Boston. The "downtown-to-downtown" concept is the central theme of all Antilles advertising, with the landing ramps at St. Croix, St. Thomas and San Juan within walking distance of hotels, restaurants and shops. But the Boston and Washington service, Mrs. Blair said, is "on the back burner" for now.

Most of the Antilles passengers are Virgin Island residents traveling between the islands because of business. During the winter season, tourists make up about half of the passenger volume, Mr. Holt said, but at other times the ratio is 75-25 in favor of the island residents.

In its 15 years of operation, Mr. Holt said, the company has never paid a dividend. "The profits are plowed back into the business," he said. "The business has been expanded as the result of earnings, rather than additional capital expansion." He described the financial condition of the company as "healthy; very good. We expect it to remain that way."

Financing for the expected expansion has been "taken care of," Mr. Holt said, but he declined to say whether bank loans were involved. Part of the expansion involved an increase in the number of employees from 110 to 150, with 12 licensed mechanics and one new pilot hired. There are 21 full-time pilots, including a woman co-pilot, and two part-time pilots. Mr. Gillies, the chief engineer who is also a pilot, has 44 men in his maintenance department, with the main force in St. Croix. The line also has four vice presidents and an eight-member board of directors.

Mr. Davis, the F.A.A. official, characterized Antilles' pilots as "equal or better" than competing lines in the area - Caribe Air and Prinair. Most of the Antilles pilots are former military men, with 1,000-hour flight loss more common than those

showing fewer than 500 hours. The line's "training is excellent," Mr. Davis said, adding that its requirements for its pilots "exceed those of most air taxis."

Pilots, Mr. Gillies said, make "18 to 20 trips a day, which is why they're so lean and eager." However, the flights are of short duration - about 20 minutes each and Mr. Davis said that he would rate the pilots' daily air time as "not excessive." Both the Goose and the Mallard cruise at 150 miles an hour, with their longest leg the 90-mile trip from San Juan to St. Croix, with the other flights about 40 miles.

#### Bases on Leased Land

Because passengers are brought from Tortola in the British Virgin Islands, there is an immigration shed at the Antilles base in St. Croix and St. Thomas. All of the bases are on land leased from the Government and Mrs. Blair is negotiating for land to enlarge the parking at St. Croix.

The passengers board and disembark on slanted concrete aprons leading into the water from the head of the landing ramps. Planes touch down in the water, lower their wheels and roll up to the top of the ramps, so that passengers can disembark.

Mrs. Blair also runs a controlled circulation magazine that is distributed in hotels, and aboard Eastern Airlines and American Airlines planes servicing the islands, *The Virgin Islander*, that is long on ads and short on substantive articles. The circulation is 20,000, Mrs. Blair said, adding that although the magazine was a monthly she had been forced to go to every other month since the September issue because of the press of details after her husband's death. But she plans to resume a monthly press run.

While in Hollywood, the actress operated a dress shop that was highly successful, and she has used some of her merchandising skills in selling "Goose" T-shirts, key rings and other souvenirs. She also owns a grill at the St. Croix base, she said, that does business of \$60,000 to \$100,000 a year.

Mrs. Blair's last picture, "The Red Pony," with Henry Fonda, was made in 1973, but like most actresses, she says, she really is not retired; she is merely "waiting for the right script." Mrs. Blair added that as Maureen O'Hara she would like to return to the Broadway stage in "a quality musical."

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