

◀ An Antilles Air Boats Grumman Goose "streetcar" takes off from the waterfront at Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

by

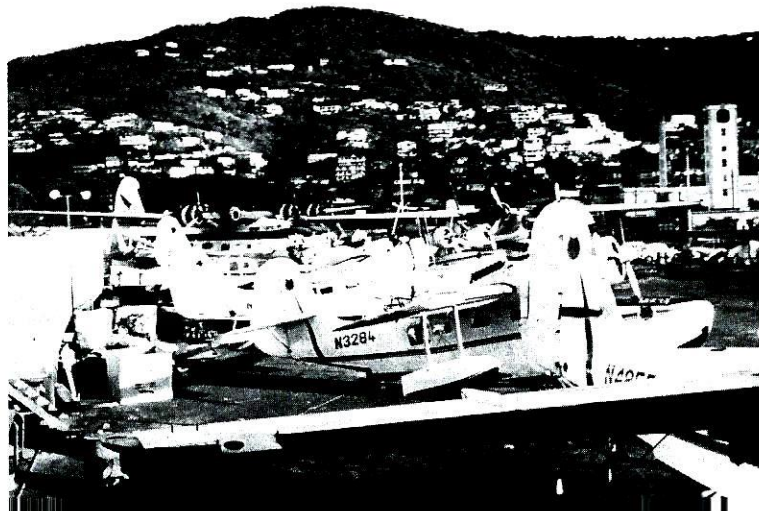
Marijane Nelson

Photographs by the author
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▲ Capt. Charles Blair, founder and president of AAB, presents a copy of his book "Red Ball in the Sky", which describes his remarkable long-distance flights in a P-51 Mustang, to AAB's millionth passenger.

AAB's base at St. Thomas. Some of the fleet of 18 Grumman Goose amphibians are seen, also the Super Catalina and the now-grounded Sikorsky S-44, last of the great American pre-war company of four-engined civil flying boats. ▼



"Virgin Islands Streetcar"

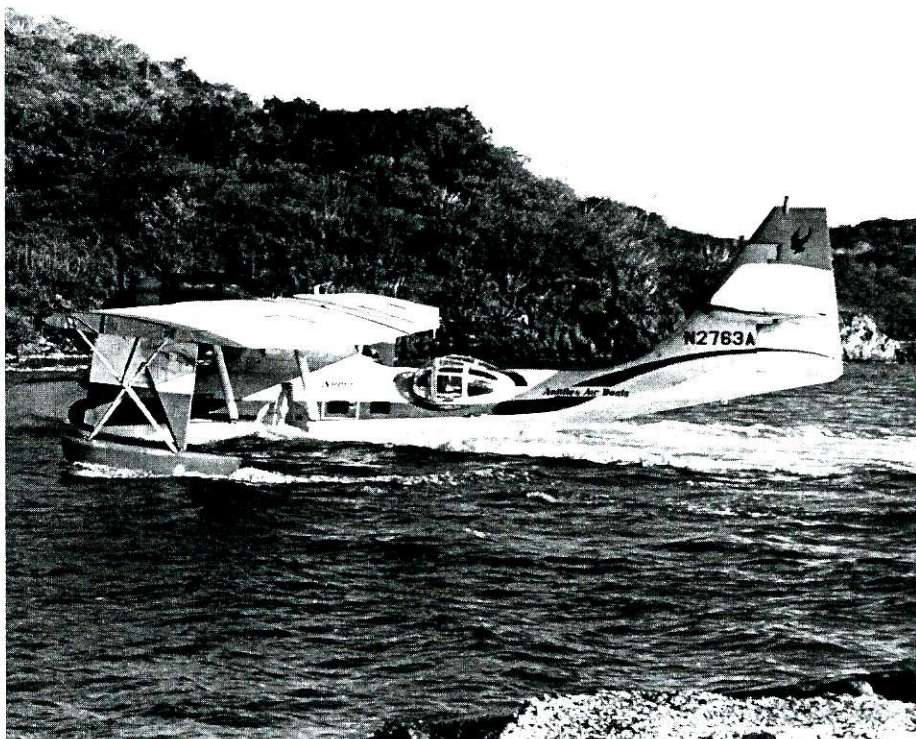
Charles Blair's Antilles Air Boats benefits residents and tourists

THE ramp agent latches the door of the Grumman Goose behind the last passenger and pulls the steps away. The twin engines are started and the ten-passenger amphibian, ungainly on the ground, ship-shape in the water, and almost graceful when airborne, rolls down the ramp into St. Thomas harbour.

A first-time passenger on Antilles Air Boats—"The World's Largest Seaplane Airline"—might be startled to observe the pilot through the open cockpit doorway as he vigorously turns the hand crank to retract the wheel gear prior to take-off! Although not in the first flush of youth, the Goose is no anachronism to local commuters, such as the government officials who travel from their homes on neighbouring islands to Charlotte Amalie, the capital of the U.S. Virgin Islands, on St. Thomas.

The Grumman G-21 Goose, which was in production from 1937 to 1945, is still capable of doing a special job that no modern aircraft can match; and this venerable performer shows no intention of filing for retirement benefits.

"The Goose is probably one of the few aircraft now flying that will see this century out," claims Charles F. Blair, the founder of Antilles Air Boats and president of the company. "I won't worry about finding a replacement until we're ready to phase out the G-21s—about the year 2000."

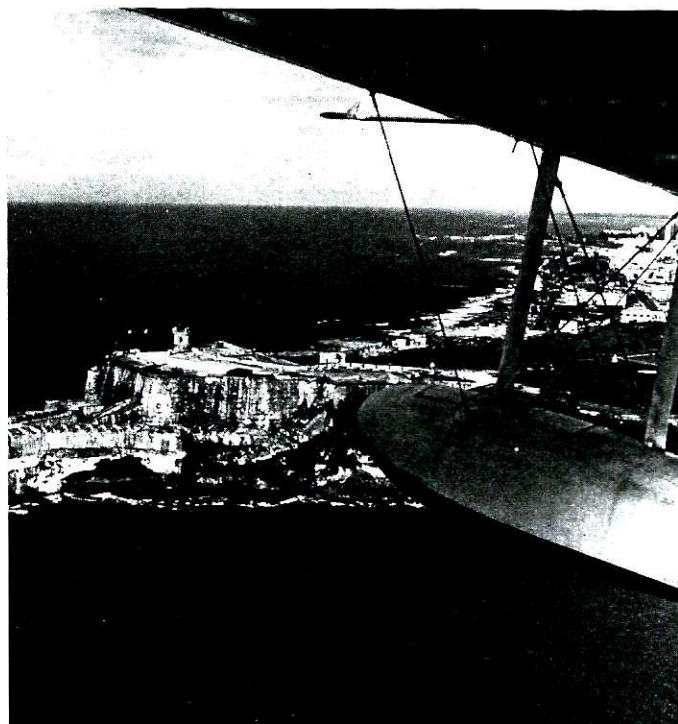


Above left : Antilles' Super Catalina taxiing through Haulover Cut into the inner harbour of Charlotte Amalie.

Above right : Melvin H. Evans, Governor of the U.S. Virgin Islands, cheerfully anticipates the flight from St. Croix to St. Thomas, where his office is located.

Left : A picture that captures the Caribbean atmosphere—sunshine, showers, informality and lush tropical vegetation.

Below : Antilles' passenger-view of the defences of Morro Castle at old San Juan, capital of Puerto Rico.



four-engined commercial flying-boat. As chief pilot for American Export Airlines (later acquired by Pan Am), Captain Blair was the test pilot for the original S-44. This aircraft, bearing the name *Excalibur I* and piloted by Charles Blair, made the first non-stop passenger and mail flight across the North Atlantic.

Blair continued to set aviation records in a succession of *Excaliburs*. In 1951 he made the first solo flight across the Arctic Ocean and the North Pole in *Excalibur III*, his P-51 Mustang. For this achievement Captain Blair was awarded the Harmon International Trophy, and the Thurlow Award for his contribution to the science of navigation.

Under Blair's guidance, Antilles Air Boats has expanded to a fleet of eighteen Grumman Gooses and twenty pilots, including Captain Blair, who flies the line in addition to his administrative duties. In 1971, Antilles carried 206,043 passengers, ranking it fourth, in number of passengers carried, among all U.S. commuter air carriers this year.

The success of Antilles Air Boats is easily attributed to two factors : the service is fast and dependable ; and the passengers are delivered to locations within easy walking distance of the major shopping areas and sight-seeing attractions—a great convenience to commuters and island-hopping tourists alike.

Regular passengers arrive well in advance of their flight departure time, hoping to be first in line and have a crack at the co-pilot's seat ! The thrill of the water take-offs and landings, the excellent opportunity for sight-seeing afforded by the low-altitude routes, and the pleasure of seeing a fine old plane that hasn't outlived its usefulness in action, make flying in Captain Blair's Goose much more than a means of transportation. It's an adventure !

Captain Blair initiated the first Goose flight between St. Thomas and St. Croix in 1964 while on vacation from his regular job as a senior captain for Pan American Airways. The quick and convenient inter-island transportation provided by what Captain Blair refers to as his "street car line of the Virgin Islands" proved so popular that he hired another pilot to keep the service going when he went back to his Pan Am 707—and Antilles Air Boats has been adding pilots and planes ever since to keep up with the demand.

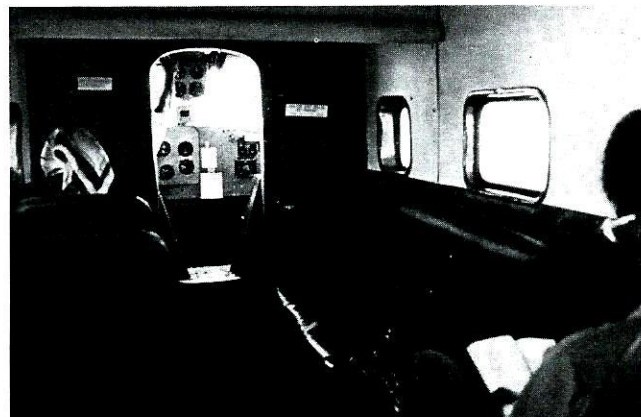
The Goose seemed a logical choice for the operation because of its amphibious capability, its rugged performance and its good manoeuvrability on the small seaplane ramps. Economically, it is a much better proposition than a helicopter, and it has the added advantage of always having a landing site available on the inter-island flights. Like the San Francisco cable car, devised to meet the peculiar demands of transportation up and down the steep hills of that city, the Goose has become a part of the local scene in the Virgin Islands and is regarded with affection by tourists and residents alike.

Captain Blair and his wife, actress Maureen O'Hara, live in Christiansted, St. Croix. Since his retirement from Pan Am he has been able to devote more of his time to operating Antilles Air Boats. The constantly expanding airline has been so widely accepted that his original intention of maintaining it as a small business has proven impossible.

While the initial service between St. Croix and St. Thomas remains the most heavily travelled, AAB now provides service to St. John (the third major island in the U.S. Virgins), to Tortola in the British Virgin Islands, and to two cities in Puerto Rico—San Juan and the northeast coastal port of Fajardo. In the near future, service will also be provided to Ponce, Puerto Rico's second largest city, and to the French/Dutch island of St. Martin, 123 miles east of St. Thomas. Additional routes are pending as more planes are acquired, but the limited supply of Gooses (Geese?) poses a problem.

In an effort to meet the demand for increased capacity which the ten-passenger Goose could not fill, Captain Blair bought a 26-year old, 47-passenger Sikorsky S-44 in January of 1968. Although the plane still dwarfs all else on the Antilles ramp in St. Thomas, use of the former trans-Atlantic flying-boat was discontinued because of the difficulty and expense of keeping it airworthy. A 28-passenger PBY Super Catalina now helps absorb the passenger overflow during the busy commuter periods.

Most passers-by, pausing to admire the comparatively huge S-44, are unaware of its significance. This aircraft is the sole remaining S-44 of three built in 1942 for American Export Airlines, and the only remaining U.S.



Top : The thrill and the beauty of flying-boat operation—a Goose alighting at St. Thomas.

Centre : A light load for an off-peak Goose flight.

Bottom : Two colourfully-dressed passengers board at Christiansted, St. Croix, to fly to a St. Thomas carnival.

