

American Inter-Island

On April 27, 1976 an American Airlines Boeing 727 crashed at the St. Thomas airport, killing 37 passengers and two flight attendants. Another 38 passengers and crew suffered injuries. The airport at St. Thomas was notorious among pilots for its short (4,658 feet) run way with the ocean at one end and high hills at the other. Turbulent crosswinds were also a factor in the pilots not being able to go-around.

The American pilots refused to make future landings there until the runway was extended to 7,000 feet.

American Airlines sent a representative to St. Croix to meet with Captain Blair and pilot David Howard about establishing a shuttle flight using propeller-driven aircraft to shuttle passengers from the airports in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and St. Croix, USVI.

Captain Howard, who had experience flying Convair 440s for the Air Force, recommended it for this service. The aircraft would also be equipped with rockets to aid in clearing the hills in case a go-around was necessary.

American Inter-Island was ready to start operations in the spring of 1977. Captain Howard was the Chief Pilot for the organization.

Captain Howard submitted his resignation in the spring of 1978. He was looking forward to returning to returning to Antilles Air Boats full time so that he could accompany Captain Blair to Ireland to fly the large Sandringham flying boat on summer "Flight Seeing" tours. He also wanted to help with the planned transition to the larger Grumman Mallard from the older Grumman Goose.

He recommended Captain Vincent Sipple to take his place as Chief Pilot and Convair training pilot. Captain Sipple also had Convair 440 experience from his time in the Navy.

Although Captain Sipple insisted he just wanted to fly and not do paperwork behind a desk, he did agree to take the job following the untimely death of Dave Howard when he crashed while flying a Grumman Goose on April 5, 1978.

Another American Inter-Island pilot eventually agreed to take over the desk work while Captain Sipple continued doing flight training and flight checks.

When I (Marijane) was hired as a co-pilot on the Convair, I was lucky enough to have Vince Sipple as my flight instructor. Although our relationship got off to a somewhat bumpy start, our mutual love of flying and interest in aviation soon won out. I learned that life was still worth living.

After the American jets resumed flights into St. Thomas, we finally had the time to sail away to the many beautiful and interesting islands of the Caribbean.

We eventually bought property in the Puerto Rican countryside with a view of the ocean where we built our dream home, "Mango Manor." We loved our time there, but moved to the states due to medical problems (and not a devastating hurricane).

Our home is now in Jacksonville, Fl. Vincent passed away on August 19, 2017, at age 82 after a courageous battle with Parkinson's Disease.

I am now 78 years old and happy to have had such a good life and wonderful memories.