



Two American Inter-Island Convair 440s at St Thomas. The eagle on the tail was all-blue, as on the mainline fleet, but American Eagle adopted a red/blue logo.

AMERICAN INTER-ISLAND

A Forerunner of American Eagle

A NASTY CRASH normally means the end of a small airline. But for American Inter-Island, it was the start.

On Tuesday, April 27, 1976, American Airlines Flight 625 was to be a routine run to the Caribbean. A mostly over-water flight between two airports named after US presidents: New York's John F Kennedy to St Thomas's Harry S Truman. And, apart from a couple of popped ears during the descent, the flight proceeded as planned—until the Boeing 727 was just a few feet above the ground.

Although the precise facts are in dispute, it seems that Captain Arthur Bujnowski, an experienced pilot, landed long after floating a little above the runway. "Let's go around," he declared, opening the throttles. But seven seconds later he decided to reject the go-around, pulling off the power, and applying the brakes. It was too late.

The tri-jet sped off the end of the runway, crossed a road, smashed into a Shell service station, and came to rest in three sections. A fire erupted, completely destroying the airframe. Although a majority of those on board escaped, 35 passengers and two flight attendants died in what was left of N1963. It seems impossible that a pilot with 22,000 flight hours could act like an indecisive novice but, as in most commercial aircraft accidents, there was a long chain of events leading up to the devastation seen on television.

Problems with the pressurization system during the descent may have caused the pilot's retinas to slightly stretch, making the runway appear higher than it actually was. The airline's operations bulletin describing the use of flaps at St Thomas was worded ambiguously, leading to less flaps being selected than may have been optimal. One of the engines was very slow in spooling up after the thrust levers were advanced for the go-around. And the airport itself was widely known to be unforgiving.

BY DAVE ENGLISH

In fact, St Thomas was one of only three US airports given a 'black star' rating by IFALPA (International Federation of Air Line Pilots Association). The 4,650ft (1,417m)-long runway set in a pocket of steep hills had always made jet operations marginal. American used a very small fleet of nose-wheel brake-equipped 727-100s for the airport, and required frequent check airman (instructor pilot) supervision of the St Thomas-qualified pilots.

There had been talk of runway improvements for 20 years, but local politics mixed with concerns for the environment prevented change. Part of the political formula was legislators living in neighboring St Croix. They favored the big jets landing there, with a shuttle service to other islands.

When the American Airlines pilot union notified management it would soon refuse to operate jets into St Thomas, the politicians were granted their wish.

*Each day he picked up American passengers
in St Thomas, flew them to St Croix's
Alexander Hamilton Airport, ate lunch,
then flew new vacationers back to St Thomas.*

American established a wholly owned subsidiary—American Inter-Island—just to ferry AA passengers between St Croix and St Thomas.

American made an extensive search for suitable aircraft, which ended in the purchase of four Convair 440s from Delta Air Transport of Belgium. A fifth 440 was added later.

On May 24, 1977, American stopped flying 727s into St Thomas. After an absence of 17 years, Convair-Liners were again proudly sporting the American Airlines eagle logo. Although American owned the aircraft, it did not have an operating certificate for them and, initially, Inter-Island piloting duties were contracted out to Antilles Air Boats, at the time the world's largest flying boat airline. From these pilots, a separate non-union work force was established who flew only for American Inter-Island. These pilots were a completely separate group from the mainline jet drivers, and not part of the Allied Pilots Association (APA) which represents all AA pilots.

This arrangement was agreed to by the APA until runway improvements were finished at St Thomas. A tiny piston-powered island-hopping pilot group would not fit easily into the large APA, and a temporary exception was deemed reasonable in this case from the normal union requirement that all flying controlled by American Airlines be flown by American Airlines pilots.

Former assistant chief pilot Ariel Alvarez recalls the 45mi (72km)-long shuttle as, "the easiest flying job in the world." Each day he picked up American passengers in St Thomas, flew them to St Croix's Alexander Hamilton Airport, ate lunch, then flew new vacationers back to St Thomas.

By all accounts it was a smooth, well-run operation. The Convair-Liners met the American jets on the St Croix ramp, where passengers and bags were directly transferred. No local traffic was carried, only AA passengers using their original board-

ing passes. Returning passengers cleared customs in St Thomas and could use a 'sterile lounge' in St Croix to avoid having to pass through customs again. The operation was a slick example of what airline executives and their feeder partners now like to call 'seamless service'.

American set high standards for its little protégé. The mainline was well aware that although officially a separate airline, it was its good name on the side of the 'planes. The 48-seat Convairs were smartly painted, air-conditioned, and well maintained. Former chief pilot John Lucente remembers Inter-Island as being "the most by-the-book airline in the Caribbean."

While the old 'planes were piston-powered, they concealed a surprise kick in the tail: a JATO pack. Each Inter-Island 440 was fitted with an emergency Jet Assisted TakeOff device—literally a solid-fuel rocket—in a covered section of the tail. In the event of an engine failure while taking off from St Thomas, the pilot would ignite the JATO pack to ensure that the aircraft safely cleared the surrounding hills. The rocket burned for about 18 seconds, generating approximately 2,000lb (900kg/9kN) of thrust. Each new captain was required to experience a rocket ride before carrying passengers, and these training flights were a favorite air show for airport employees.

After a few years of operation, the ac-

countants at AA headquarters started to question the profitability of American Inter-Island. A figure of only \$10 was placed on the extra revenue the island hop generated. Expanded service to San Juan (for Aero Virgin Islands) and Antigua was tried but, never really successful, was eventually curtailed.

On June 10, 1982, American Airlines reinstated jet service into St Thomas. After years of delays and problems, the airport had been improved at both arrival and departure ends. The short runway had been substantially lengthened by building a pier into the bay. And maybe more dramatically, the top had actually been shaved off the steep hill facing into the wind. The Convairs immediately lost their purpose in life, and the entire airline was offered for sale.

Inter-Island was purchased for around \$3 million by Air Resorts Airlines. This company, based in Carlsbad, California, intended to provide scheduled and charter service in the Virgin Islands as an expansion of its West Coast operation. For a while, flights were offered between San Juan, St Croix, and St Thomas, and a DC-3 was added to the inter-island fleet. However, Air Resorts soon felt that these assets could be better used on the Mainland, and the remains of American Inter-Island flew west, never to return.

Although not directly linked, the short-lived American Inter-Island was the precursor to the huge American Eagle network. And it well served sun-seeking vacationers to St Thomas, for it never suffered a serious accident.

American Inter-Island: the little airline that started with a crash, and ended with the moving of a mountain. ✈



Still sporting basic AA colors (the lower fuselage stripe has been changed from red to blue), this former American Inter-Island Convair 440 ended its days in California with Air Resorts Airlines.