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—Today's Thought—
Shallow men believe in
luck; strong men believe in
cause and effect.
Ralph Waldo Emerson
American Writer 1803-
1882.

Antilles Plane Ditches Off P.R., 2 Lost At Sea

Coast Guard Helicopter Picks Up 9

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Of the STAR Staff

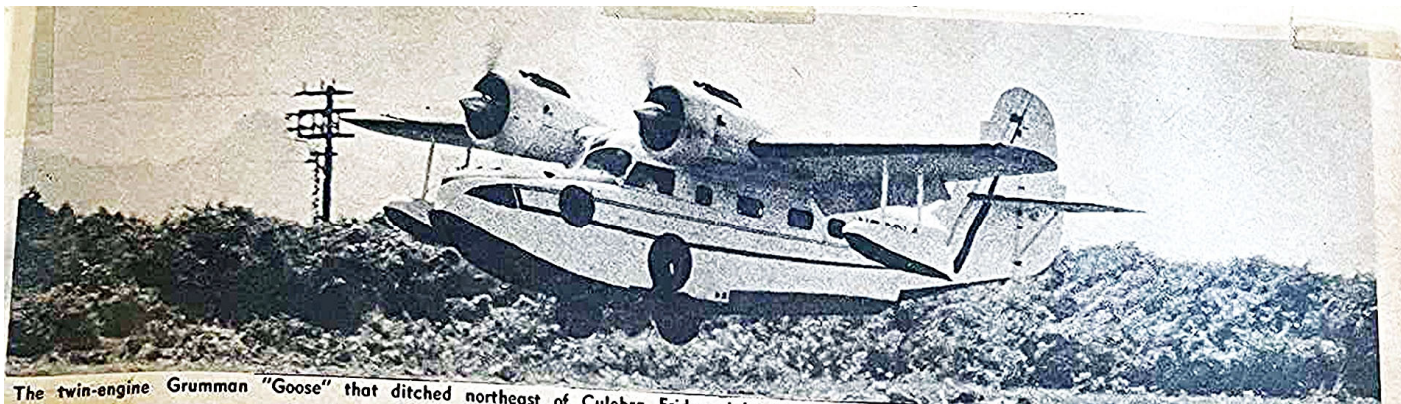
Two persons were still missing and presumed drowned Friday night after an Antilles Airboats seaplane plunged with 11 aboard into the waters northeast of Culebra.

The Grumman "Goose" was making the second of its two daily runs from St. Thomas to Fajardo when the accident occurred.

Still unaccounted for at press time were Hipolito Castro and Julio Ortiz — both from the Fajardo area.

The accident marked the first fatality for the Virgin Islands-based airline in seven

(See SEAPLANE, Page 16)



The twin-engine Grumman "Goose" that ditched northeast of Culebra Friday night carrying 10 passengers and the pilot. At presstime, nine persons, including the pilot, had been rescued and two remained missing.

SEAPLANE DITCHES

(Continued From Page 1)

years of operation. Listed among the survivors were Marlene Kaufman F Brooklyn, N.Y.; Sidney and Tinker Steiner of New Orleans, La.; Dr. and Mrs. Richard Patt of New Brunswick, N.J.; Fred Ruben of San Lorenzo, Puerto Rico; Jose Manuel Velazquez of Humacao, and Casillo Cabelleno Montez of Humacao. All non-Puerto Ricans were guests at El Conquistador Hotel.

The eight rescued passengers were described as having suffered "only minor cuts and bruises," but the pilot of the hapless seaplane, George Hubachman, was described as being "in serious condition but lucid."

The spokesman added that the place where the plane fell was "the roughest water in the area" and said: "I would not

like to have to ditch a plane into those waters." He also noted that there have been strong winds in the St. Thomas area in recent days. As of late Friday, the craft had not been recovered.

However, he said the weather was "clear" Friday afternoon in Charlotte Amalie harbor.

The captain of the airplane was described by the spokesman as "one of our senior pilots." He has been with the airline since March 1, 1968, the spokesman added he is married and a resident of St. Thomas.

The helicopter picked up the six survivors and ferried them to nearby Culebra. It was a full load for the rescue craft.

By the time the helicopter returned to the scene, there were three more survivors sighted drifting further down toward Culebra. The three were also lifted out of the water and taken to the tiny offshore island. They were the last survivors of the 11 reportedly on board to be rescued. Coast Guard rescue crews continued combing the area until night fell and then returned to San Juan to refuel and await further orders on whether to resume the search with flares or to call it off entirely. At press time the coast guard cutter "Little Rock" was still on the scene.

The decision hinged on interrogation of the passengers at the dispensary of Roosevelt Roads Naval Base where the rescued passengers were taken. Coast Guard officials were trying to confirm a preliminary report of a rescued passenger who told how he watched two of his fellow passengers drown, unable to help them.

Aiding in the interrogation of the passengers by naval authorities were two FAA investigators who flew to the base from San Juan.

Meanwhile, an Antilles Airboat spokesman said he had no idea of what "actually happened," but in answer to a question said that "ditching into a rough sea" could cause a rupture in the plane which could eventually make it sink.

The plane presumably went down about two-and-one-half miles eastnortheast of Culebra and about one mile off Cayo Norte, the nearest land.

There was no indication of what might have caused the accident. The plane a two-engine Grumman Goose, left St. Thomas at 3:47 p.m.; 17 minutes delayed from its scheduled daily 3:30 p.m.

Usually most or all of its passengers on the flight are guests at El Conquistador Hotel, off to St. Thomas for a brief sightseeing and shipping tour.

Harry S. Truman Airport at St. Thomas reported last hearing from the plane at 3:53 p.m., six minutes after takeoff. There reportedly was no indication at that time of any trouble aloft.

The Federal Aviation Agency in St. Thomas notified the Coast Guard in San Juan shortly before 5 p.m. that the plane was inexplicably delayed in arriving at Fajardo.

Within a few minutes, the Coast Guard dispatched one of its fixed-wing aircraft to the scene along with a helicopter. Antilles Airboats also dispatched one of its planes from St. Thomas retracing the route of the missing craft. Just as the Coast Guard was requesting a Navy plane in the area to join the air search for the missing plane, the first two survivors were sighted floating in the water. It was 6:30 p.m.

By the time the Coast Guard chopper had descended for a pickup, four more survivors had been sighted being carried by the current toward Culebra's northeast coast.