

The pilot who came back from the dead

By Paul Backshall

Question: How many flights do you make a day?

Answer: Fifteen to twenty.

Question: How long have you been doing this and do you enjoy it?

Answer: I've been here two and a half years and I do enjoy it.

Question: What's that island (between St. Thomas and Puerto Rico)?

Answer: Culebra.

It's not that Antilles Air Boat pilot **Ron Crozier** does not enjoy talking to his passengers as he flies a Goose between the islands. It's just that it's a little difficult to carry on a conversation above the heavy drone of the engines with anyone except the person sitting immediately beside him.

"So if we put it in the magazine, even those sitting at the rear of the plane will know the answers to the three questions I get asked more than any other."

Ron is a tall New Yorker with greying hair and an easy smile. He obviously likes flying, period. And you get the feeling right away that here is a man who has done a hell of a lot more than just flying a Goose. Which makes you immediately want to probe and ask a lot more questions than just those three.

Like, was he ever a fighter pilot; did he see action in Vietnam and did he win any medals?

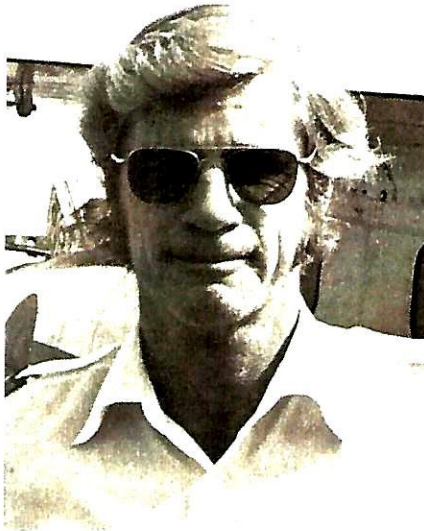
The answer to all three of those questions is "yes." But to Ron, it's no big deal. A good percentage of Antilles Air Boats pilots are multi-decorated veteran fighter pilots. And in fact, when I asked Ron to recount just how he won his first Distinguished Flying Cross (D.F.C.), it took him a while to remember.

"There was a local South Vietnamese village chief and his group who were ambushed and we were called in to hit the Viet Cong. In other words, we beat up the bad guys and got medals for it."

Being a pilot just happened to Ron. His brother was a World War Two pilot and as a kid who had a big brother in the Air Force, Ron naturally became the neighborhood expert on what planes were flying by.

"I don't know at that stage if I ever thought I would go into the Air Force, but I had made up my

mind by the time I was in high school. I spent three years in college as a biology major but I was not too serious about it. I wanted to hurry up and get into the Korean



war."

He enlisted in the Air Force in 1952 and checked out in the F-84 (a single seat, straight wing jet fighter). He got to Korea at the tail end of the war. "In time to get a couple of ribbons just for being there but not soon enough to have anybody scare me."

Ron stayed in Korea for about eight months flying support for reconnaissance missions and then his unit moved to Clovis, New Mexico where they were re-equipped with F-86 sabre-jets and later F-100 super sabres. He was now part of a combat-ready deployable unit and took part in "flag-showing", missions to Turkey and Spain and became involved in the Laotian crisis, the Lebanese crisis and the Berlin drama.

"There was a lot of sabre-rattling going on then, but no actual combat."

At the end of the Berlin crisis, he went to Misawa, Japan for two and a half years and in 1964, he was back in the U.S. at England Air Force Base, Louisiana. It was from here that he had his first exposure to the conflict in Vietnam.

In February 1965, his unit was deployed to the Philippines and then sent on to Danang, South Vietnam.

"I was on what I think was the

first openly publicized strike from South Vietnam into the north. It was a joint South Vietnamese/U.S. Air Force attack on a barracks area.

"My feeling about the war never changed. Almost everyone has the feeling they are traveling in their invisible shield until they get shot down. Happily, my shield never got penetrated too seriously."

In fact, Ron's nearest call came when his plane took a hit in the back of the cockpit and he suffered a few moments of embarrassment on landing when he could not get his canopy open.

He was lucky, and that incident served, in Ron's words, to make him realise "they weren't kidding."

His second D.F.C. was for leading a "Rescap" mission, which involved "capping" a downed pilot. His unit was returning from a bombing mission when they spotted a downed U.S. airman. The enemy were closing in on him and Ron and his group made a series of low passes using their machine guns to keep the Reds at bay. They kept it up, even after their ammunition ran out, swooping low over the bush in the face of heavy ground fire. Eventually, a slower moving Rescap aircraft took over and Ron's group returned to base.

Then there was the time when Ron was reported dead — and remained "dead" as far as many of his friends were concerned for several years.

"We were based in Danang and had gone on a mission up north. We were away for several hours and when we got back the runway was closed due to enemy action. We landed in a little Marine base further south and there were no communications with Danang.

"Meanwhile a squadron based in Danang returned to the U.S. and all they knew about us was that we had failed to return from our mission.

"For years after that, friends in bars would turn pale when I walked in."

Outside of the war theatre, Ron spent some time in F-5's as an instructor for a mixed bag of allied nation pilots including South Vietnamese, Arabs and Norwegians.

Then he volunteered for the

F-105 which he considered the best fighter in the Vietnam war for the delivery of ordinance and taking punishment.

"It was called Thunderchief, which sounded like a train. When it first came out it had a lot of problems and was involved in several accidents and Thunderchief got shortened into "Thud". But by the mid-60's the wrinkles were straightened out and it was a great aircraft."

He had hoped to go back to South East Asia with the F-105, but unexpectedly an interesting and completely different opportunity came up — to go to the 1967 Paris Air Show and fly the F-5. It was a unique experience for Ron and one that he seized.

However, it meant that he stayed with F-5's for a time and on his return home, he was assigned as an advisor to the Moroccan Air Force. This was a disappointment, but turned out to be a stroke of fate, for he was sent to the Department of Defence language school to study French prior to his departure for Morocco. One of the teachers there was the girl who was to become his wife.

He spent 18 months in Morocco,

returned home, got married and finally got his F-105 assignment and back to South East Asia. By now he was Squadron Operations Officer and again on active missions over Vietnam.

But by then things were winding down and he finally headed the first section of 18 F-105's coming back to the States. The trip was from Thailand to Wichita, Kansas and in every place we stopped, former F-105 pilots would come out to pat the aircraft they had flown.

The next aircraft in Ron's life was the F-111. "I was super-impressed by the advances in the entire weapons system. It was completely computerized. You could feed the whole mission into it by tape. An auto-pilot would fly the plane low through mountain passes at night. All you had to do was drop the bombs at the right time. Sometimes you got the impression that as the pilot, all you had to do was ferry this computer into the target area."

In 1973, Lieutenant Colonel Crozier got his first Headquarters assignment at Tactical Air Command H.Q. in Langley Air Force Base, Virginia. It proved to him that "living behind a desk wasn't my bag."

He retired after one and a half

years at Langley and started looking around for something active to do.

"A guy in the office had the address of Antilles Air Boats and through this friend, Ron wrote a letter to then Chief Pilot Don Schell.

"He seemed to think that an out of work fighter pilot was what he needed and offered me a job."

Another job offer came up at the same time with Cessna in Kansas, but this would have meant wearing a coat and tie and after 22 years in uniform, Ron opted for shorts and a white shirt.

He admits that he hadn't the vaguest idea where the Virgin Islands were and he had never flown an amphibian before but he checked out in one in New Jersey and flew down here.

Stepping out of an F-111 into a Goose was like going into the twilight zone of aviation with a 30 year difference in technology to cope with. But, says Ron, "it's enjoyable because it's flying."

And with a touch of humor appreciated by all his fellow Goose pilots, he added: "the only problem is I get more oil spots on my shirt."

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