

CHAPTER 23

RED BALL IN THE SKY

The world keeps turning, with or without us. Vietnam was over. Watergate had come and gone, and a gentle peanut farmer was poised to become president. After a long period of turmoil and unrest in the world, everything seemed to be settling down and finally getting back to normal.

My heart and mind were miles and miles away from Hollywood by now, and I was no longer interested in offers to act. My not running off to make pictures made Charlie deliriously happy. He had me all to himself, and that was just the way he wanted it. Me too. Still, he decided to hedge his bets and came home one night with a surprise. In February 1976, Antilles Air Boats purchased the *Virgin Islander*, a magazine that focused on Virgin Islands living—dining, fashion, entertainment, and culture. Everyone on the islands read it. “What are we going to do with it, Charlie?” I asked. He grinned at me and replied, “You mean what are *you* going to do with it. You’re running it.”

Publishing a magazine was an exciting proposition, and I loved a good challenge, but I was wise to his motive. “Why me, Charlie?” I quizzed suspiciously. “Because I know you can do it,” he replied, and then put all his

cards on the table. "And this way you'll be far too busy to be tempted back to Hollywood." At least he was honest. I accepted my assignment from the general and happily became the new publisher of the *Virgin Islander*.

The truth is, I loved it. I loved the medium, its unique creative process, and the excitement of meeting a deadline each month, or "putting the issue to bed," as we say in the biz. I also added my own column in every issue and called it "Maureen O'Hara Says . . ." My monthly articles varied from commentary on lighthearted subjects like the heartache of cleaning my purse, to technical articles on aviation that discussed the inherent benefits of seaplanes. And of course, there was plenty about Hollywood and show business.

Of course, Charlie knew there were some things I just had to do when special requests came in from Hollywood. On November 6, Frank Sinatra hosted a star-studded extravaganza for the show-business charity Variety Boys Clubs International, honoring John Wayne. Very few people actually knew I was coming, and those who did were sworn to secrecy. Toward the end of the evening, after all the guests had entertained and spoken tributes to Duke, I descended the steps in a gorgeous dress—whirling black chiffon, embroidered with beaded orchids and pale green stems and leaves, with white organza ruffled collar and cuffs—and sang "I've Grown Accustomed to Your Face." Duke kissed both my hands and we stood together as I finished the song. It was a wonderful, magical moment between us. There wasn't a dry eye in the house.

A few weeks later, I was back in St. Croix when a postcard arrived in the mail. It was a picture of a Pan Am 747 flying into the sunset. On the other side, it read:

In the sunset of our lives, when the hell are you going to invite me to St. Croix?

—Duke

We called Duke right away and made plans. He had to go to Washington first and attend the inaugural gala for Jimmy Carter, but would come to St.

Croix straight from there. He and his friend Pat Stacy arrived on St. Croix the last week in January 1977. We tried to sneak him off the plane so he could really rest and soak up the sunshine, but it was impossible. How do you hide John Wayne? Duke and Charlie loved spending time together playing chess and I rarely saw them the whole time Duke was visiting. They went fishing and flying in the big seaplane almost every day.

One day, they had apparently gone to Puerto Rico and almost landed themselves in big trouble. There was a pilot who worked for Antilles at the time who I never really liked or trusted. I think he knew that Charlie and Duke had flown to Puerto Rico and he called the FAA to lodge a complaint. He reported that they were flying in violation of FAA regulations. Well, the FAA boys came down to where the plane was docked and where Charlie and Duke were. They told them it had been reported that Charlie had made an illegal flight with only one certified pilot onboard. The regulations required two certified pilots for a seaplane of that size, and Duke wasn't a certified pilot. Charlie and Duke, those two bastards, bluffed their way out of it. Charlie's eyes widened in shock and disbelief, and he quipped with absolute astonishment, "Oh, come on. Haven't you guys ever seen *The High and the Mighty*?" The two FAA men looked at each other, remembering the picture in which Duke had played an airline pilot on a troubled plane. They bought it hook, line, and sinker, and said, "Oh, oh yes. Of course. Of course. We're sorry, Mr. Wayne." Of course, Duke had never really flown a plane, and that spoke volumes about the actor he really was.

The last day of Duke's visit, he and Charlie were deep in another game of chess. They were whispering like schoolboys as I approached with their lunch. Duke looked at Charlie and then up at me with the most envious eyes. "You sure do love him, don't you?" I felt a little sad because I knew Duke hadn't found contentment and happiness. "I sure do," I replied. "All right then," Duke went on, "don't you think it's time you quit movies and stayed home?" I'm sure both of them were expecting me to raise holy hell, but I didn't. I knew Duke was right, and I was finally ready to walk away from acting. Life with Charlie on that island had brought me more happiness and joy than all my days in Hollywood ever had.

To their surprise, I answered with “Okay, fine. I quit . . . right now,” and I meant it. Saying good-bye to Hollywood was the easiest decision I have ever made. I was set to live the remainder of my days with Charlie, but the old Gypsy wasn’t through with me yet.

I always thought it was strange that all the pilots who worked for Antilles Air Boats were military men who had just retired. I wondered, With all the high-paying jobs that go to former officers, why would a bunch of ex-colonels and captains come to the Caribbean to fly little seaplanes?

In late 1977, I got my answer. We received from one of our vendors new billing instructions that I found quite odd. The monthly payments we made on our seaplanes, which had always been mailed to a company in the United States, were now to be routed to a Swiss bank account. All we had was an account number. The change in payments came right as the Central Intelligence Agency was receiving bad press over some covert operations that had gone terribly wrong. Maybe I have a suspicious nature, but I knew instantly that the two were linked. I started looking for some kind of proof that Antilles Air Boats was much more than a friendly little commuter airline in the Caribbean. After a bit of snooping, I found it several days later. Paperwork in Charlie’s desk revealed that some of our seaplanes had actually been provided by the CIA.

General Blair had not retired at all. I’d be lying if I didn’t admit that I believed all along that Charlie was still working for the United States government. I had seen too much, but chose to ignore it. I had gone with him to the home of Senator Barry Goldwater, in Arizona, on numerous occasions, and had sat in the parlor as they talked elsewhere about matters I wasn’t privy to. Like Charlie, Barry Goldwater was an aviation pioneer who had flown 165 different types of aircraft by the time he retired from the air force as a general. Whenever these two old friends got together, they spoke behind closed doors about very important business. I had also often accompanied Charlie to the Pentagon. Again, I would sit on a bench and sew in the waiting area while Charlie was taken somewhere to meet with whoever had ordered him there. I never ever asked him his business—and if I had, he wouldn’t have told me.

I had a theory, but kept it to myself. I believed that Antilles was not only a commercial airline, but was also a secret fleet used by the CIA. Under General Blair's command, I think Antilles pilots flew reconnaissance missions to monitor who and what was going in and out of Cuba. Antilles was founded in 1963, a very short time after the Cuban missile crisis. The United States was still very concerned about the small Communist island. I kept my eyes closed and my mouth shut from that moment on. A military wife learns to accept that there are some things about her husband she will never fully know.

In the spring of 1978, I started feeling absolutely awful. I had no aches, no pains, but I still felt terrible. If the phone rang, I wanted to smash it to smithereens. I knew something had to be wrong. I didn't tell anyone, not even Charlie, and flew out to California to see my family doctor, Blake Watson. He checked me over and said I was finishing my period. "What the hell are you still doing with this thing? That should have been finished with a long time ago. You're too old." I thanked him for the uncomplimentary compliment with a few very special words; he recommended that I have curettage, and that was just fine by me.

The operation is simple and it was done the very next day. I was downstairs a few hours later, sitting in the hallway of the hospital, waiting for more tests. Dr. Watson tapped me on the shoulder. "You'll be going back into surgery in a few days. You have cancer." His tone was so matter-of-fact that I couldn't believe I'd actually heard him right. Then he just walked away.

In fact, I had cancer of the womb, and it was quite serious. The surgical procedure was not a small matter, but I wanted it done fast. I also didn't want Charlie to know. We had just won a big charter contract at Antilles Air Boats (excellent money), and I knew Charlie would have canceled it and flown to be at my side if he knew. I decided to tell him after the operation was over and I was safe.

I had the surgery and the doctors were confident they had cut out all the cancer, although it was going to take me some time to recover. Charlie had finished the contract by this time and flew in to Los Angeles to be with me. My sister Florrie met him at the airport and told him about my cancer sur-

gery. It nearly killed him and he fell to pieces. He came straight to the hospital and just held me tightly and cried and cried. "If anything ever happened to you," he wept, "I'd fill a Goose, fly out to sea, and keep flying until the fuel ran out."

"Don't worry. Everything's going to be fine, Charlie," I reassured him. "I won't leave you."

I was in the hospital for several days and stayed in Los Angeles for several weeks after that to finish all the checkups that were required. I still wasn't feeling that great, so I told Charlie, "I don't want to go back to St. Croix and face the heat just yet. I'm not up to it. Would you mind if I go to Lugdine for a while?"

He thought it was a good idea and suggested that Florrie go with me. "I'll fly out and join you as soon as I can."

By the time I made it to Ireland, it was the middle of June. Antilles was so busy that it took Charlie over a month to squeeze in time for a little rest and relaxation. He finally made it to Glengarriff in August, but then had to go back just a few days later. Florrie and I drove him up to Shannon Airport. As soon as we got to the gate, I had a very strange feeling. It overwhelmed me and I thought, Oh God, I wish he wouldn't go. I wish he would stay.

I didn't heed it. I didn't say the words. We said good-bye and I watched him walk down the ramp to board his plane. I still felt awful but let it pass. I wish I had shouted as loudly as I could for him to stop and come back. A few days later, Florrie and I were out running some errands in the car. There are three sets of gates at Lugdine along the way from the top of the driveway to the house. When we reached the first set, they were locked. I had to get out of the car to open them and that was strange. When we got to the second set of gates, they were locked too. When I saw that the gates in the second set were also closed, I knew then that something was wrong. I told Florrie, "I don't know what, but something terrible has happened." We never locked those gates, nor did the neighbors.

We got down to the gates at the house and they were locked too. I've never to this day found out who locked them. All the way to the house, and in the hallway as soon as we entered, I just kept saying, "Something's wrong."

Something's wrong." Just then the phone rang. It was Charlie's oldest son, Chris.

"There's been an accident, Maureen," he began softly, "and Dad was flying the plane."

"Oh dear God! Is he badly hurt?"

"No. He's dead."

The words shattered me. I felt as if I were free-falling into darkness. I fell apart, sobbing uncontrollably over the phone. I don't remember how or when I hung up. We weren't on the phone long, if memory serves. I remember hearing the words come out of my mouth, "Charlie is dead."

Florrie took me in her arms and held me as we both cried. The great love of my life was gone, and a part of me died and went with him that very moment.

On September 2, 1978, Charlie was making a routine flight from St. Croix to St. Thomas in a two-engine Grumman Goose. He had made that flight hundreds of times over the years. Just one mile west of St. Thomas, on the approach to the Charlotte Amalie Harbor, the port engine exploded, killing Charlie instantly. Eyewitnesses watched a red ball fall from the sky. They said the plane struck heavy seas, flipped over, and sank within minutes. Tragically, three other passengers died with Charlie. There were seven survivors.

Bad news spreads fast and I knew I had to pull myself together. The very next morning, I boarded a plane to New York so I could accompany Charlie's kids back to St. Croix. I asked my sister Peggy to call Duke because I wasn't up to it. I was told he took the news very hard. I also asked my brother-in-law, Colonel Harry Edwards, USMC, to accompany us back to St. Croix. I wanted him to be with me when I went to see Charlie's body.

I had to see him one last time and say good-bye. I took holy water with me and blessed him with it during a baptism ceremony I had learned as a young girl in school.

"I baptize you, Charles Francis Blair, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." I sprinkled him with the holy water and spoke to him, but not out loud, only in my head, and I want what I said to remain private.

When I reached the house, I telephoned Charlie's mother. At one hundred years of age, Grace McGonegal Blair was still a lion of a woman. I started to cry, but she put an end to it quickly. "Stop that right now. He died doing what he loved to do."

A few hours later, the phone rang. When I answered it, a man whose voice I did not recognize said, "Mrs. Blair, I'm calling from Washington, D.C. We'd like to know the true story of the assassination of General Blair." I went into shock and started to cry. "I don't know what you're talking about," I blurted out through tears, then hung up the phone.

The idea that Charlie's death had been anything other than a horrible accident was inconceivable to me. I don't know who made that call. The man never identified himself, nor did he say who the "we" was. I called a friend in New York who was connected with the Secret Service and told him about the call. He warned me to keep my mouth shut. I was told, "Maureen, act dumb and ignorant if they call again. Have hysterics. Don't say anything about this to anyone. It's too dangerous. Keep your mouth shut!"

After that, I received two more calls about Charlie's "assassination." It was not the same person, but it was a man each time. Both times I did exactly as I'd been instructed and got off the phone as quickly as I could.

A few days after that, I was standing at the airport in St. Croix looking through a Cyclone fence at some planes coming in. Both of my hands were raised, my fingers gripping the Cyclone fence wire. I suddenly felt a presence behind me. Then a man—whose voice I did not recognize—said, "Mrs. Blair, I know who killed General Blair." His words turned my blood cold and my instincts warned me not to look back. I answered, "If you do, don't tell me. I'll have to kill whoever it was." The man walked away and I didn't turn to see him. I was too terrified.

I was never able to get any more information about Charlie's death. Nobody was willing to get involved, and I was told not to ask. And so I never did. I have never discussed it with anyone until now, not even my own daughter. For twenty-five years, I have kept my mouth shut, but I cannot remain silent forever. I owe it to Charlie and to myself at least to ask the questions. I honestly don't know if Charlie's death was an accident, as is the

official explanation, or whether he was assassinated. I will say that I have serious questions and suspicions about how he died.

Why did Charlie end up on that flight? He wasn't scheduled to fly it. An important air force pilot was supposed to fly the plane that day, but just as it was ready to take off, he suddenly changed his mind and didn't want to fly it. Since it was a full flight, Charlie didn't want to disappoint the passengers, so he said he'd take it. I can't help but wonder why that pilot backed out just minutes before they were scheduled for takeoff.

Why was the engine replaced in Puerto Rico before it exploded, and what happened to the plane after it crashed? When I arrived in St. Croix, I asked to see the plane that had killed Charlie. They told me, "Oh, it's gone. It doesn't exist anymore." I was never told why. I don't know where it is or who has it. Is it still at the bottom of the sea? I also found it strange that almost immediately after the accident, many of the pilots left the company. Within weeks, they were gone, scattered around the globe, some to Africa, some to the Middle East, and others to the Pacific Rim.

Why would someone want to kill Charlie? Perhaps Charlie simply knew too much. One thing I was told about Charlie by someone who knew his military background well was that he not only worked for years in a nuclear weapons think tank, but actually helped place the small nukes for the United States. I was told that Charlie knew where they were—their precise location—and that was very serious information during the Cold War.

I remembered a completely unrelated event, years earlier, which confirmed this for me. Pan Am was about to fly the first American commercial flight into the Soviet Union. Naturally, Charlie wanted to be the pilot to fly into Moscow because he loved being the first in everything to do with aviation. He requested that he be allowed to pilot the flight, but his request had to be made to Washington for approval. Washington refused and offered a warning as an explanation, "If Charlie Blair goes into Moscow, we'll never get him back."

There are just too many loose ends, too many unanswered questions. Something is fishy. I'm not looking to blame anyone, I'd just like to know what happened.

There were two services for Charlie. The first was held at the Catholic church in St. Croix. It was very sad. The second was also important to me, and not easy to achieve. I wanted Charlie buried with his peers at Arlington National Cemetery. I didn't want it for any reason other than that Brigadier General Charles F. Blair, the great American patriot and aviator, had earned it. Surprisingly, I was getting some resistance. I was told Washington was planning to open a new Arlington National Cemetery because the original was getting full. I didn't want Charlie laid to rest surrounded by people he never knew or served with. It wasn't right.

They gave me such a tough time that I enlisted a group of distinguished citizens to help me. The group, including Duke, Barry Goldwater, and columnist Frank Farrel, USMC, petitioned on my behalf for Charlie to be laid to rest with the honors he deserved.

It was all very strange. When they called the Pentagon for help, Curtis LeMay, a very big and important general, said, "Blair? Charlie Blair? Don't know him. Never heard of him." I know damn well he knew Charlie because I had answered the phone many times when he called. Charlie had worked with General LeMay at Strategic Air Command, and LeMay had called our home in St. Croix often when Charlie was alive.

I finally received a call from the assistant to the president. The president was at Camp David at the time, with Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin, reaching the Camp David Peace Accord. The president's assistant asked me, "What are you going to do if President Carter denies your request?" My answer got his attention: "If the president denies it, I will bring Charlie Blair's body to Washington. I will pickle it, and then I will fight until permission is given."

"The president is at Camp David on matters of world peace," he replied in disbelief.

"Then please send him my message."

Shortly after that conversation, President Carter personally approved a well-located grave for Charlie in Arlington and a burial with full military honors. They must have warned President Carter that I'm not one to back down from a fight. I'm sure he said, "We had better do it or we'll have noth-

ing but trouble from her." Would I really have done it? Yes, indeed, and I would have kicked up a holy stink and kept it on the front page of the papers until I won.

Charlie was buried at the original Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors. A band played, guns saluted, and I was handed a tightly folded American flag. There is room for my name on his headstone, and I will be laid to rest with him when my time comes. All the top military and political brass were present. Senator Barry Goldwater delivered the eulogy. Halfway through it, he was moved to tears and couldn't finish.

I put on a brave face for the public and held myself together with as much grace as I could muster. Inside, though, I was an absolute basket case. Everything was happening so quickly that I hadn't had time to come to terms with my feelings and my grief. That would have to come later.

Antilles Air Boats was still a going concern, and its future was now in jeopardy. But the company was Charlie's dream and I couldn't let it die too. A meeting of the stockholders was called. I did not campaign for the presidency of Antilles Air Boats, but as Charlie's widow, I was the largest shareholder and the person closest to the business as its vice president. The shareholders placed my name in nomination and asked me to become president. There was nothing else for me to say or do but accept, and so I was made president of Antilles Air Boats by a vote of its shareholders. In doing so, they made me the first woman president of a scheduled airline in the United States of America. It's a feat of which I'm proud.

As the head of the company, I quickly found myself knee-deep in it. The Virgin Islands' Senator Sydney Lee, of St. Croix, introduced a bill asking for the appointment of a blue-ribbon committee to investigate the airline after the accident. The FAA stepped in also and conducted its own review of the incident. The FAA acted very strangely during this process and tried to do things I still don't understand. I couldn't believe it when they intimated that they wanted the man who had changed the engine on Charlie's plane in Puerto Rico—the engine that blew—to be made president of the airline. I refused. I didn't see how a newly hired mechanic was suddenly qualified to run the airline.

After its review, the FAA called a meeting with all the interested parties to discuss its proposal regarding the fate of Antilles Air Boats. Basically, they wanted to shut it down and put it out of business. They blamed it on the accident, but that was ludicrous. If that were a reason to close airlines, the skies would be empty.

The FAA administrator told me, "The airline has to be closed, and our decision is final. I have the papers to hand you, right here in my coat pocket, that will shut the airline down."

There was no way I was going to sit still and let that happen. I was not about to see Charlie's airline destroyed as long as I had anything to do with it. I pointed a finger at that man. "Don't you do it," I said. "Don't you dare put your hand in that pocket. If you do, God will cut your arm off!" I locked eyes with him. He never did put his hand in that pocket and pull those papers out. Over time, we worked it all out and the airline stayed open.

There were also lawsuits resulting from the accident, which had to be settled, and they were handled expeditiously. The lawsuits needed to be resolved so that we could go through with the sale of Antilles to Resorts International. Charlie had initiated discussions with them shortly before his death.

James Crosby was the founder and president of Resorts International, and he loved airplanes. I went to meet with him to close the deal. Crosby was a straight shooter and asked me, "Do you recommend that I buy the airline?" I answered confidently, "Yes, indeed I do." His next question shocked me. "Well, if I go through with this, can I tell everyone that I'm now a member of the CIA?" Mr. Crosby obviously had friends in high places and had done his homework well. I didn't skip a beat and replied, "If you want to." The deal was done and we shook hands on it. Resorts International acquired Antilles Air Boats within a matter of months. I was pleased that the stockholders didn't lose money and that the airline was in the hands of someone who would protect it.

Years later, Crosby died on the operating table. Resorts International was put up for sale, and talk-show king Merv Griffin bought it. He wasn't as fond of airplanes as Crosby was, and ultimately either shut Antilles Air Boats down or sold it. It's gone now, which makes me feel sad.

In the months that followed Charlie's death, we all tried to pick up the pieces of our lives and go on. Bronwyn was devastated, and little Conor Beau even more so. Charlie was the only father and male role model he had ever known.

It wasn't much of a holiday that year as Christmas came and went. Soon New Year's Eve was upon me and it made me even sadder.

I don't like New Year's Eve. I never have. Only once in my life did I ever go to a New Year's Eve party. I was fifteen years old, and the party was held at the Royal Marine, an elegant old-world hotel in Dublin. I was with Daddy and Mammy and feeling conspicuous in my pink taffeta ball gown. It was a marvelous time at first, as we all danced the night away. But when the stroke of midnight came, I wished that I could be anywhere else but at that party.

The bells were tolling the death of the old year, a year I had loved, a year that had felt comfortable and safe. That year was gone now. It would bring no more happiness. We were all turning our backs on it, forgetting it and leaving it in the past for a New Year hardly born a second ago, the unknown, the untried, the unpromising New Year. I missed that old year, just as I would miss my husband. I would never turn my back on it or on him.

As 1979 began, I was grieving hard for Charlie. I'm still grieving to this day. But then there came a point when I had to say to myself, "Enough of this. Life goes on, so get to it. There is a future. There has to be." I struggled for a bit and asked myself, "If I come out of this fog, where will I be? What lies ahead for me now?" I didn't know the answer to that question. I just knew that I had to take my first step. I had to open my eyes again and see.