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The Hour

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Weather
Cloudy tonight, 30; Saturday sunny, 50.
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Survivors—

I Said We're Crashing. . . And All Hell Broke Loose

BY RUTH MCDERMOTT

"As part of our trip today will be over water, please watch the flight attendants as they show you where the life jackets are and how to use them."

That was the start of a routine speech both the women had made hundreds of times back in the days when they were airline stewardesses. They knew it by heart and can still recite it years later. But thought neither it would

ever be more than a cautionary exercise in their lives. And it wasn't. Not during all the thousands of hours they logged as flight attendants.

When it did happen they were passengers on a very routine shuttle flight by airboat between St. John and St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands, a hop that one of them, Flip Blair, had made dozens of times. It's a favorite vacation spot of hers, and she's gone there often; always exciting times because of the many friends, ex-Westporters who have gone to settle there. In fact, her ex-husband is Charles Blair who owns Antilles Air Boats, Inc. that flies the sturdy ships. They have remained friends since their divorce and have two sons, Lee who is a medical student, and Steve, in college.

On this jaunt, Flip was accompanied by Mrs. Warren Clark of Ridgefield, June, who had also married a pilot, now a captain with Seaboard World Airlines. June and Flip had met the first day of Stewardess School, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, both trainees for American Airlines and had remained close friends ever since, roommates when they flew for the same airline and always in touch when their careers and finally marriage separated them.

Flip and June started this vacation on April 2 of this year, just one glorious week in the sun of the islands it was to be, a work-break for Flip who is a consultant with a travel agency in Westport, and some convalescent time for June who was still recovering from major surgery. Anyway, her husband was away that week himself, on a flight to Germany.

It happened on Wednesday afternoon, April 5. The women were at the halfway mark in their vacation and having a wonderful time. This day's schedule was a hop by airboat from St. Croix to St. Thomas and then by boat to Cancel Bay and return to St. Croix from St. John by air.

On the flight to St. Thomas June had sat in the co-pilot's seat, a common practice on these hops when there is usually only one pilot in the cockpit. But on the return flight that seat was occupied by a co-pilot, Thomas G. Mooney, a retired aviator from the U.S. Marine Corps with the rank of Lt. Colonel who had 7,000 command hours as a pilot with that service. He had recently joined this company and was being trained to fly the aircraft. So all seven passengers were in the cabin. That was to save the life of one of them. It cost Mooney his.

SURVIVORS of an airboat crash in the Caribbean are June Clark of Ridgefield, left, and Flip Blair of Westport, two of seven passengers on the downed plane who spent three hours in the choppy seas screaming at search planes that came agonizingly close and didn't see them. Hour Photo, Bramac Studio.

"The Grumman Goose took off at 4:30 in the afternoon," Flip said, "and the trouble started about five minutes out when the left engine sputtered and died and then the right. Then the pilot apparently kicked the right one over and then nothing and he yelled back for us to put on our life jackets. It all happened so fast. I remember thinking okay, he made the decision to land instead of trying to get the engines going. I was familiar with the airboat, I knew it would float until someone picked us up. Those were the thoughts racing through my head as we all frantically reached for our vests."

"It was such a feeling of disbelief," June said, "I looked at Flip and said, "we're crashing and then the first impact blew the life vest out of my hand."

"We bounced again and then all hell broke loose," Flip went on, "and I think whatever you do from that point on is completely automatic. None of us remember unfastening our seat belts. There was a tremendous crash and the sea poured in and I reached over and pulled open the hatch and we were carried out, still grabbing for things.

"We didn't have time to get the life raft and two of us, June, and ten-year old Betsy Craske who was traveling with her father, Dr. William Craske of Williamsburg, Mich. and her mother, Judith, didn't have life vests either."

"I managed to hang onto my seat pillow on the way out," June said, "and I saw two more float by and I got them too. We didn't see Captain David Howard or Mooney and we surmised they must have died on impact. None of us could recall hearing a Mayday."

"The people with us were superb," Flip said, "and we didn't know how brave until later when we could compare notes. The inclination was to hang onto the plane which was still afloat but I knew it was going down and so we told everyone to move away. But we remained in a close group, treading water and scissor kicking, with the vests and pillows doing a good job of holding us up. Betsy hung onto her father who sort of took charge of things and June, with no vest had the other man, Richard Brady of Salem, Oregon, to hold onto when she needed it.

"We really thought we were going to be picked up right away. Even with no radio contact, the trip was only 20 minutes long and when we didn't get to St. Croix on time everyone would know we were down. The Craskes' parents were waiting at the airport and certainly Charles would take action the minute a plane was overdue.

"So we kind of relaxed and I told everyone an airboat would be sent for us any minute now. We were very shaken but no one was seriously injured, mostly bruises and lacerations. Sandy Brady (Richard's wife) was cut up a bit and June had severe abdominal pains, reminders of her operation. So we floated and waited.

"But the plane went down within ten minutes, before anyone came out searching and we lost that guide-on. The worst thing was after a half hour we could see the planes out there looking for us, but they were off to the side, for some reason having surmised we went down nearer to St. Croix. They were looking for the plane but it was gone and they couldn't see us in the choppy water with the sun glinting off of the waves. We yelled and screamed and waved our hands but they didn't see or hear us.

"The water wasn't cold at first, between 65 and 70 in a windy, blustery day, but it got colder as the sun went down. And as time passed we got more and more anxious. The little girl was fantastic. Once she asked what we thought was underneath us in the water and all of us were thinking the same thing, sharks. But we just said there was nothing, just more water and coral.

"At first we talked to each other, keeping it light, saying when we thought we heard another plane or someone would say he was sure he saw something coming. And once a big tanker went agonizingly close, about 100 yards away and we screamed Help, Mayday and we imagined they were signaling us, but they just passed by and our hearts sank lower and lower. We'd talk about the big dinner we were going to have in St. Croix that night after we got rescued."

If they were rescued, but no one mentioned that.

"The vests," Flip said, "are about the minimum that will keep you afloat. If someone were to lean on you, you'd go right down. The waves broke over us but as long as we could see them coming, we could hold our breath and not swallow. When it got dark and we couldn't see them, then it was bad." Flip's voice is still husky and rough from all that she took in.

"We could see Frencheap Cay sticking like a big rock out of the water and Dr. Craske told us that was our goal; that we should propel ourselves in that direction. We know now there was no way we

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could have made it but at least we had something to hope for. After a while we got too exhausted from trying to swim though we kept reassuring Betsy we were getting closer. You have to have a pretense.

"All this time we were huddled near each other except for Judy Craske. She had separated herself from us, but we could see her and she called out every once in a while that she was just fine. Later we found out she did it deliberately. She couldn't swim and she thought if she was removed a bit, there'd be less chance of her panicking and clinging to her husband and *upsetting the applecart. She* thought if she did that he might let go of Betsy, so she kept her distance.

"She also told us she saw a shark over there, just before it got dark. Not just the fin, the whole thing but she thought it best not to mention that either. She just prayed it would go away. So maybe things evened out. The rough seas that kept the airplanes from seeing us also kept the shark from noticing our thrashing about, and the blood from the lacerations.

"I think we gave up when it got pitch black and we had seen no boats near us for a while; the last airplane had gone over at exactly six o'clock and we were sure they saw us, but they hadn't.

"We stopped talking then to save our strength and we lost all contact with Judith, couldn't see or hear her. Later she told us she didn't try to holler over because she was afraid we would misinterpret and think she was drowning and try to come to her rescue."

As it was Judith inadvertantly came to their rescue.

"Three hours after we went in," Flip said, "we were in numbing despair . . pitch dark, utterly weary and we knew we couldn't keep ourselves afloat much longer and the water was getting colder and colder. If they didn't see us in the daytime, they certainly wouldn't at night. It was really the end."

And suddenly they heard a droning, getting louder and louder and then their circle was engulfed in a blazing light from a helicopter hovering overhead.

"Do you want to know how long it takes to go from desperation to elation? We made it in a millionth of a second. That beautiful chopper hung there keeping us in its light and then a small motorboat came alongside us and two young men threw us a line and one by one we were yanked onto the deck and there was Judith and we tumbled all over her in our joy and the two boys slapped and hugged each other because they had saved us.

"It must have been quite a scene from the copter. How do you feel when your life has been saved. It was incredible. Our rescuers were David and Dusty Pearsall and the boat was the "24-Karat" named after their gold shop in St. Croix. They had been part of the huge flotilla of planes and boats that had been searching for us earlier in the day, but they decided to come back and try in a different area and what saved us was the small light on Judy's lifejacket. It's only about the size of a fuse head, but somehow they saw it in that vast darkness and picked her up (her first words to them were 'I love you') and radioed our position to the helicopter."

And so they finally completed their incredible journey four and a half hours after they had started on the half-hour trip, shaking uncontrollably from exposure and to be met by what looked like the world turned out for them: about 500 people really it was who lined the dock at St. Thomas, ambulances, Coast Guard, Gov. Juan Luis, Lt. Gov. Henry Millin, the Craskes' parents, the Blairs, Civil Air Patrol people, Civil Defense volunteers, all the people who had spent the hours looking for them.

They spent the night at the hospital in St. Thomas but unbelievably none of the seven had serious injuries.

"I called Warren from my room," June said, "and he had just gotten home from a long tough flight from Germany that entailed holding over New York for five hours in bad weather not knowing where to land. He hadn't even heard of the crash (I was glad of that) and he came right down to bail me out."

"We didn't have any luggage on the flight," Flip said, "because we were just day travelers but by some instinct that only a woman would understand, I did grab my purse as we were floating out of the plane. It was lost, of course, but the next day, when the search parties went out to the scene of the crash, the one and only thing they found was this." She held out her Westport bank book, now rather wrinkled and blurred from its experience.

They spent the rest of their vacation on St. Croix, "treated royally with parties non-stop" and then it was time to come home. "The seven of us," June and Flip said, "will never forget each other and we've vowed to keep in touch and to have reunions. And we are going to do something grand, not quite decided what it is yet, for the Pearsall men."

The experience has not made these veteran air travelers wary of flying. "They don't know what caused the plane to go down but a very intensive investigation is now underway," Flip said, "and Antilles Air Boats really has a fantastic safety record. Those aircraft schedule 100 flights daily over the islands and in the company's fourteen years of service have carried over two and a half million passengers. We just happened to be on one that something happened to."

And now it is in the past. "But you know," June said, "I still relive it. And then I shake my head and say that really couldn't have happened to us."