

“One Flew Over the Goose’s Nest”

By Marijane Sipple

True to his word, Captain Blair phoned to tell me that the Grumman Goose undergoing overhaul at K. C.’s Sheet Metal would be ready for the ferry flight back to the Virgin Islands in three days. “Do you still want to make the flight down and spend a week getting material for an article about Antilles Air Boats?”

I already had my suitcase and camera bag packed and ready to go!

A few days later I received a phone call from Captain Mable, the ferry pilot, saying that he had just arrived from bringing another Goose in for overhaul, and hoped to make the return trip with the restored Goose in two days. After telling me to meet him at K.C.’s Sheet Metal at Long Beach Airport, he warned me that there was no heating system in the Goose and that I would need to dress in warm clothes for the first part of the trip.

When I arrived, Captain Mable was busy demonstrating to a mechanic the lack of rudder trim. He was obviously upset at the delay in our departure and without introductions, told me to put my suitcase in the small luggage compartment at the back of the plane. There was a box already there and I put my suitcase on top of it because the floor was dirty. Then I waited outside, sweltering in the hot California sun in my thermal underwear, jeans, and wool ski sweater.

When the problem seemed to be resolved, I followed Captain Mable into the plane. He stopped, looked in the luggage compartment and barked at me, “Get your damn suitcase off my box of produce.” I quickly complied, thinking “3,500 miles to go!”

I sat in the co-pilot’s seat and Captain Mabel informed me that we still had to fly to Orange County Airport to pick up a third member of our “crew.” USMC General (Ret) M. A. Severson was ready to go when we taxied in. The General told me that he was going to St. Croix to visit his daughter and son-in-law, Jimmy Thompson, a pilot for AAB.

Entering the plane, he tossed his bag on top of the precious box of produce. I waited with a smirk on my face for Captain Mable to get on board. He glanced in the back, sighed, and continued to the cockpit without saying a word.

The General advanced to the cockpit and took his place in the co-pilot's seat. I was outranked.

Before take-off Captain Mable briefed us on the rules of a professional ferry pilot. Take-offs were to be made at sunup, mid-day stops were to refuel the plane and not the passengers, and our "destination" for the day would be however far we could make it before sunset. The Goose only had basic instruments, so flying was VFR (visual flight rules).

Because of our late departure, we couldn't go far that first day. The General (hereafter referred to by his nickname "Seevee"), feeling responsible, told Captain Mable that if he wanted to land at Yuma, Arizona, he would call the nearby Marine base and arrange for a car to pick us up, rooms at Lodging and dinner at the Officer's Club. I was both impressed and grateful.

Captain Mable must have been, too, because he was more congenial and talkative at dinner that night. I was especially interested in the history of the Goose we were flying, N8229. At one time it belonged to the Cuban Navy and was the personal aircraft of General Batista, the military dictator. It is unique to the Antilles Air Boats' fleet. It has retractable floats and Mallard brakes, much more effective when wet than the standard shoe and drum brakes of the Goose. It has an electrical gear retraction modification that saves the pilot the exertion of making forty-one turns to crank the gear up and down. It has honest to goodness aircraft tires and not the cheaper and more plentiful truck tires. It also was modified for long-range fuel tanks, good for seven hours. I groaned.

After that first day we were "M.J.," "Seevee," and "Iggie" (Bill Mabel's long-time nickname that was a character in an Al Capp comic strip). I suspected it must have been very grumpy.

After our departure from Yuma, Iggie asked me if I wanted to fly. Nothing is better than the view from the cockpit! Arizona passed below with green, irrigated fields, and barren desert framed by jagged mountain peaks. We crossed southern New Mexico, and soon Iggie took the controls to land in Midland, Texas, to refuel. It felt good to be on the ground again after four and a half hours.

The navigational aids weren't much of an "aid" as we generally had the omni station in sight before the VOR would function properly. I kept track of our progress on a sectional map clamped to the instrument panel. I should have let Seevee take the controls to fly across Texas. The view below was boring and seemed to go on forever.

Another four and a half hours in the air, and darkness was beginning to fall as we began to let down over Lake Pontchartrain to land at the New Orleans Lakefront Airport. Iggle had a miniature Sanyo flashlight gripped between his teeth to monitor the unlighted instrument panel as he taxied in and prepared to shut down the plane for the night. A taxi came to pick us up for the ride to a nearby motel.

Early the next morning, New Orleans Lakefront Airport was cold, windy and deserted. Iggle couldn't find a screwdriver to work on the rudder trim or adjust the latch on the door. He exhausted his supply of magic words on the latch, slammed it shut from outside, and climbed in through the cockpit window.

I rolled Seevee's Marine flight suit into a makeshift cushion so I could sit on the raised space in the doorway between the pilot's and co-pilot's seats. We merely nodded approvingly when Iggle used paper towels to stuff around the edges of the instrument panel to cut down on the vibration which was causing the overhead radios to quit. Then we tore off small pieces to stuff in our ears to cut down on cockpit noise. Iggle needed to add ear plugs to his briefing list!

We flew along snow white beaches off the beautiful Gulf Coast until we saw Tampa ahead, then turned to a southeast heading across Florida's orchards and swamps. An hour and a half later, we landed at Hollywood International Airport in Fort Lauderdale. We had time for a cup of coffee while the Goose was refueled and DVFR flight plan filed.

Iggle let me take the controls until it was time to start our descent into Providenciales, part of the Turks and Caicos Islands. We made a low pass over the Third Turtle Inn and called on the UNICOM to request transportation from the airstrip.

As Iggle called to close our flight plan from the air, the generator decided to call it a day. The island had no phones and no telegram service. We hoped they wouldn't think we had disappeared in the Bermuda Triangle.

The customs official caught up with us at the bar at the Third Turtle Inn. We filled out his forms before checking into our rooms and getting ready for dinner. I was charmed by the place and the wonderful people who worked there.

I thought we might get to spend a day there while the generator was being fixed. I did not get my wish, but the repair precluded any dawn departure.

After three days and 24 hours of flying time, we reached St. Thomas, U. S. Virgin Islands. This was our first water landing of the trip, and I was horrified as we zipped through the water, heading straight for a green knoll. Suddenly the gear was down, and we were going up the ramp at the seaplane base, or the "Goose's Nest" as I thought of it, recalling a nursery rhyme in my son's MOTHER GOOSE book: *"Three geese in a flock, one flew east, and one flew west*

And One Flew Over the Goose's Nest"



