



Don Schell - Fighter Pilot

ANTILLES Air Boats may provide the fastest downtown to downtown commuter air service in the Virgin Islands, but one or two of its pilots must consider the Goose pretty slow compared to some of the machines they have piloted.

Take **Capt. Don Schell** for example. In 1964, he was with the F-104 Fighter Interceptor Squadron based near Miami. The F-104 was the first U.S. Air Force aircraft to fly faster than twice the speed of sound. The wings were so short they resembled rocket fins and the aircraft was known as "the missile with the man in it."

Recalling the performance of the aircraft, Capt. Schell said: "Imagine taking off and hitting a target over 50 miles away at 80,000 feet and being back on the runway in less than ten minutes."

Capt. Schell, now senior pilot with Antilles and into his ninth year with the company, was a late starter as a pilot though he joined the Air Force directly from high school at the age of 17.

"As a kid I was always crazy about airplanes," he said. "While others were playing baseball, I was

building and flying model airplanes."

Don found that he was neither old enough or well enough qualified to get a pilot's seat right away but he did become a control tower operator and remained in the approach control field as a sergeant for about five years. He operated both in the tower and in G.C.A. (Ground Controlled Approach) - a system utilizing radar, where the controller talks continuously to the pilot, giving course and rate of descent corrections, guiding the pilot for a landing when poor weather conditions prevent him from seeing the runway.

As a G.C.A. operator in Iceland during 1951 and 1952, Don suspects that he guided **Capt. Charles Blair** (now President of Antilles Air Boats) through more than one snow storm on his approach to Keflavik Airport. Capt. Blair was then flying the North Atlantic route as a captain with Pan American.

Don finally qualified for pilot training during the Korean conflict, but by the time he got his wings, the war was over.

He completed advanced training as a B-29 (Superfortress) pilot and was sent to Florida to tow targets for

fighter pilots.

"Flying a large airplane like the B-29 was a big thrill for me. Especially so because I managed to get into the left seat while I was still a Second Lieutenant. The mission however, was something else again," said Don.

"Flying a race track pattern over the Gulf of Mexico for ten to 12 hours at a time became a bit of a bore - even with a few rockets getting closer to my airplane than the target at times. Along about this time I realized that I should have become a fighter pilot."

As a first step in this direction, Don checked out in the 7-33 jet trainer in his spare time. He got plenty of encouragement from the Air Force, since at that time, they wanted everyone to become jet qualified and Don had a lot of spare time.

With jet experience he was accepted into the Instrument Pilot Instructor School which qualified him for a position as an instructor with the All Weather Interceptor School where he was checked out in the F-86 by **Capt. Howard Austin**.

"Twenty years later I checked out Capt. Austin in the Goose, when he joined Antilles Airboats," said Don



Don Schell at the controls of a Goose.

with the slow, easy smile he wears almost permanently.

He remained with the All Weather Interceptor School as an instructor pilot in T-33, F-86 and F-102 type aircraft for six years. In 1963 he volunteered for Vietnam.

"If anyone asks me why, I usually say I went early to avoid the rush, but actually we were an eager group and we figured it would be all over with inside six months.

"In those days you had to know somebody to get to Vietnam. I had a good friend with an uncle who was a General in the Pentagon. A letter to his office put me on my way."

In Vietnam Don was a Forward Air Controller (F.A.C.), assigned to the First Air Commando Group at Bien Hoa. To best describe the air action in 1963, he said, you could imagine World War II aircraft flying against the British in the Revolutionary War.

"For instance, one day I was flying a few feet off the water along a river bank down in the delta, searching under the mangroves for the crew of an Army helicopter that had gone down in the area.

"Suddenly a half dozen fellows in black pajamas stood up on the river bank and disappeared behind a cloud of smoke (the smoke came from the black powder they were using). Although they were less than 50 feet away I am sure that all their rounds went behind my aircraft.

"Fortunately none of them had been bird hunting in Kentucky. Later on they did receive training at firing on aircraft."

Just how much good this

training did them can best be described by another tale related by an Army pilot acquaintance of Don's who was hovering his helicopter in a clearing when his gunner reported sniper fire from a tree. But the sniper was firing at a point in front of the helicopter. He hadn't yet grasped the difference between a moving airborne target and a stationary one.

Although these war stories were the norm in the early days of the conflict, there were times when the case was different. "Like when a hard-core Viet Cong unit with a quad-fifty would move into your area. Now they really knew how to punch holes in your aircraft," said Don.

"Also, when enough of those pajama-clad fellows would all start shooting into the sky at the same time, we did suffer losses. But nothing like years later then the V.C. were tossing SAM's and MIG's at us."

Don's job as an F.A.C. was to mark targets and control air strikes from the air. It was an interesting job and at times it included landing on dirt roads to discuss tactics with the local province chief.

"This sometimes resulted in me flying a few relatives, the family goat and some chickens to Saigon for the weekend - all in the back seat of a single engine Cessna L-19."

Don thought at the time that flying the L-19 was hardly a step forward in his career after flying supersonic jets, but it was good "stick and rudder" experience that turned out to be invaluable a few years later for flying the Goose.

By this time, he was also second-in-command of a primary flying school

for Vietnamese student pilots.

"We taught them how to fly with the plan that they would eventually replace us. The L-19 was a difficult airplane to train in and although they spent a lot of time bruising wingtips and running off the runway, most of them were really very good and managed to solo in eight to 12 hours. One such man was a student of mine, a French-trained navigator who was an aide to Marshall (then General) Ky."

Don Schell returned to the U.S. in 1964 and was assigned to the F-104 Fighter Interceptor Squadron and if he thought the L-19 was slow, he had no complaints now.

"Today, of course, the F-104 is obsolete, but in those days it was very hot. A very light fighter - 20,000 lbs when full of fuel - you weren't airborne very long before the weight was down for a thrust to weight ratio of almost one to one. So when you pointed it up - it really went."

While in Miami, Don met one of the Antilles stockholders at a dinner party on the Beach. He talked about Antilles Air Boats in the Virgin Islands and the possibility of Don joining them as a pilot. Since he only had one more year in the Air Force before retirement, Don was interested since it appeared to be an ideal second career for the 37-year-old airman.

During his last year with the service, Don went to North Florida and instructed target controllers on the operation of a new target drone designed to simulate high-"G" evasive maneuvers.

He also served as liaison between the target controllers and fighter pilots from the Tactical Air Command. Their mission was testing and evaluating new air-to-air missiles for the guys who were still trying to get it over with in Vietnam.

Shortly before leaving the U.S.A.F., Don received a phone call from St. Thomas asking if he was still interested in the job with Antilles Air Boats.

"My answer was 'yes,' and I was told to 'come on down.'

"Coming to St. Thomas turned out to be one of the smartest moves I ever made," says Don. It turned out to be the second career I was looking for and where I met my wife **Christine.**"

His first position with Antilles was as a pilot on the four engined Sikorsky VS-44A (Super Goose). Because of his name and association with the airplane, he picked up the nick-name "Super Schell," and some

CONTINUED ON PAGE 29

where and in everything — a great sport and a great guy in the days when Road Town was a happy, friendly place — a community in the true sense of the word."

According to Dr. Harrigan, Sir Olva and his family were "veritable pillars" of the Methodist Church. Rain or shine, sick or well, he would go to play the organ and eventually he rose to the highest lay office of the Virgin Islands circuit of the Methodist Church. To Dr. Harrigan, he exemplified "my idea of what a Christian should be."

Another one of his interests was traveling and he and his wife **Egbertha**, made several extensive tours of Europe during the course of their long lives.

Sir Olva's involvement in government did not occur until 1939, when he succeeded his father as a member of the B.V.I. Executive Council and a nominated member of the General Legislative Council of the Leeward Islands.

Howard R. Penn, who served alongside Sir Olva in government for 20 out of 28 years, explained that during that period "I got to know him quite well and always found him a kind and understanding person who worked constructively behind the scenes in a quiet, unassuming way and for the general good of the country and all the people."

According to Dr. Harrigan, Sir Olva was a conservative whose success was as firmly entrenched in what he did as in what he did not do, and that he created for these islands an image of respectability and good sense throughout the Caribbean.

"Handsome, debonaire, faultless in dress for every occasion . . . from Jamaica to Guyana he is remembered with genuine pleasure," stated Dr. Harrigan.

Those 20 years in government,

SCHELL CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

of the employees still around from those days still call him that or "Supes" for short.

Don was offered the position of Training Captain because of his previous experience with the Air Force. In this position he trained all of the new Goose captains for Antilles for several years.

He was Chief Pilot from 1971-1975. He found this a rewarding but very demanding position. So much so that last year he decided he needed a rest and now enjoys the position of company Senior Pilot.

though, were only a small percentage of the total years Sir Olva spent working for the public. Among his innumerable public capacities, he was Chairman of the Board of Education for many years, as well as a member of the Primary School Commission, the Midwives Board and the Board of Health. Not only was he Chairman of the Public Service Commission, but also a Justice of the Peace.

On several occasions he acted as the territory's Chief Executive and according to Dr. Harrigan, it was at these times "that I realized in all its fullness, the importance of the affairs of a country being run by its own people and I am sure that to the youth, a local man in the highest office in the land must have been an inspiration.

All these qualities did not go unnoticed and when Sir Olva was awarded both the M.B.E. (Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire and the O.B.E. (Officer of the British Empire), it came as no surprise to the people of the territory. It was appropriate that when **Queen Elizabeth** visited the B.V.I. in 1966, the Honorable J. Olva Georges gave the principal address of welcome and presented her with a gift from the people of the British Virgin Islands.

The ultimate honor for this stately gentleman, came in 1971 when, at the age of 81, he was made a Knight of the Realm — the first British Virgin Islander on whom this title was bestowed. Sir Olva and Lady Georges journeyed to England to accept this well-deserved honor.

No one could have put it better than when Dr. Harrigan stated: "it was a proud day for him and a proud day for the Virgin Islands."

And if you watch Don fly, you can tell he enjoys his job. He is always relaxed, with a light touch on the controls, looking out over the blue waters and the mountains in the distance with that slight smile on his face.

He has flown all the company seaplanes from the single engine Cessna float plane to the four-engined Sandringham. Over 10,000 hours of seaplane time with Antilles equals over 20,000 landings on the company routes. Most of this time has been at the controls of the Goose, his own personal favorite airplane.

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