

# Mother Goose

By Marijane Sipple

The happy clickety-clack of my typewriter was brought to an abrupt halt by the shrill ringing of the telephone. Who dared to break my reverie?

It was Bob O'Hara, the executive editor of AIR CLASSICS Magazine calling to see if I had more photos he could use for the last article I sent him. I did not but assured him that I could take more.

Before hanging up, Bob asked if I would be interested in doing an article on "Mother Goose," the huge Sikorsky VS-44A flying boat that Catalina Airlines had operated for ten years between Long Beach and Catalina Island. They also had a contract with the Navy to make flights to San Clemente Island, where the Polaris missile was being developed.

I had never flown on Mother Goose but had watched it take-off from Catalina Island when we were vacationing there. It was a true flying boat without gear to operate out of the water. Bob gave me the telephone number for Dick Probert, the owner/operator of Catalina Seaplanes who always flew the Sikorsky.

I phoned Dick Probert as soon as I got off the telephone with Bob. To my relief he was as enthusiastic about the proposed article as I was! We agreed on a date and time to meet in his office and he promised to have information and photos for me to use.

After arriving at the San Pedro seaplane ramp for my appointment, I was greeted by Dick Probert and his charming wife, Nancy. Nancy told me that she worked as the stewardess on Mother Goose on all the flights from Long Beach to Catalina Island and thought she could give me a different perspective from the viewpoint of the passengers.

It was a wonderful interview and the love and enthusiasm that Dick and Nancy shared of their memories of their times flying Mother Goose was exciting to hear.

Because of the problem Dick had accommodating all the passengers who wanted to fly their route on the nine- passenger Gooses, he was interested in a telephone

call he received about the sale of a Sikorsky VS44-A (the only surviving one of the three built) that was in a harbor near Lima, Peru. He felt that the interior could be remodeled to accommodate 47 passengers (equal to what they could carry on five Grumman Gooses).

After flying down to look at the Sikorsky, he offered to buy it for \$100,000, which was half of the asking price. The owners finally agreed with the stipulation that getting the plane operational was his to deal with.

Six weeks were lost as they tried to solve a problem with two of the four engines quitting. Dick phoned Long Beach and told their chief mechanic about the problem and asked him to come to Peru right away. The mechanic finally found the problem. Two of the magnetos on the two bad engines were a different brand from the mags on the two good ones.

His hopes of a quick trip back to Long Beach were soon dashed as their perilous ferry trip was plagued by a series of mishaps.

Once in Long Beach he still needed time to renovate the plane and change the interior so they could accommodate 47 passengers.

When his dreams of getting the Sikorsky operational were achieved, he started regular flights. The plane quickly was dubbed "Mother Goose" by both passengers and the admiring public.

In 1967 Probert decided he needed to sell the plane because his age would soon prohibit him from flying a plane that size in a passenger operation. He felt it would be impossible to find a pilot with big seaplane experience. He lost the Navy contract due to an airport being put in on San Clemente Island. Now he just used Mother Goose five months out of the year during the busy tourist season.

Although Probert worried about finding a buyer for a 4-engine flying boat, he found the perfect new owner: Charles F. Blair, the owner/operator of Antilles Air Boats in the Virgin Islands. Once the sale of the plane was complete, Probert helped Blair fly the Sikorsky from Long Beach to the Virgin Islands. He stayed in the Virgin Islands long enough to help train Antilles Air Boats pilots to fly the plane.

Dick Probert told me about the history of the Sikorsky. He said Blair was the test pilot for the Sikorsky VS-44 built for American Export Airlines when they were looking for a plane that could make nonstop flights across the Atlantic, which would be a real breakthrough.

After two test flights from Long Island Sound, Blair took the Sikorsky to Jacksonville Naval Air Station where he spent two months making test flights from the St. Johns River.

Blair set many records with the new flying boat, including becoming the first to fly an airliner carrying passengers and mail across the Atlantic nonstop.

Dick Probert urged me to contact Charlie Blair to add his recollections of flying the Sikorsky in my article. "Isn't he in the Virgin Islands?" I asked.

"Yes, but his wife, Maureen O'Hara, is here in California making a movie, and he also has a Grumman Goose being overhauled at K. C. Sheet Metal, right here at Long Beach Airport." Probert offered to contact Captain Blair to see if he would be coming to California soon.

The next week I was contacted by Captain Blair, offering to meet me at K. C. Sheet Metal for an interview for my article. He promised to also provide photos he had of the Sikorsky.

When I went to Long Beach Airport for the interview, Captain Blair and his wife had just returned from a flight to Catalina on the Grumman Goose that was under-going repairs.

Blair and his wife were quite pleasant, and as I was leaving following the interview, Blair asked me if I would be interested in making the ferry flight from Long Beach to St. Croix in another week or two. He said if I would spend a week with them, I could get material to do an article on Antilles Airboats, and I could fly in the co-pilot's seat with him on all his flights.

I tried to suppress my excitement! I was eager to get home and complete my article on the Sikorsky and tell the editor at AIR CLASSICS about my opportunity for my next aviation article.



**TWILIGHT FOR THE SIKORSKY GIANTS**  
 A FORMER TRANS-ATLANTIC QUEEN, THE VS-44A TAKES HER THE ANTILLES LAST PARES AS AN ISLAND HOPPING TAIL IN

The old beauty returned to the water at the Lackland plant in Fort Worth, Texas, where it was built. The plane was built by Sikorsky Aircraft Corp. in Stratford, Connecticut, and was the last of a line of amphibious aircraft built by the company.

Charles A. Bickel, the test pilot for the VS-44A, says that the plane is "a real beauty" and that it is "a real beauty" and that it is "a real beauty".

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