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Airboat Sinks as U.S. Conducts Safety Tests Of Virgin Islands Line

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ST. CROIX, V.I., Nov. 11 — A Grumman Goose airboat owned by the Antilles airline sank in 10,000 feet of water off the coast here minutes after the pilot and two Federal Aviation Administration officials escaped, culminating several days of air safety tests being conducted by the F A A

“I am pleased with the test but the boat sank,” the Antilles line's general manager, Brian Lincoln, said of last Sunday's accident. He explained that the boat had passed the weight safety test but had been forced down because of engine malfunction.

The safety tests were part of a threeday hearing conducted by the National Transportation Safety Board and the F.A.A. to determine the cause of the airline's latest fatal crash last September, which killed four people, including the pilot, Charles Blair, who was the founder and president of the Antilles line.

Although testimony at the hearing disclosed that the airboats, including the Goose in September's fatal crash, were overdue for inspection because of incomplete maintenance and record-keeping, a safety board investigator, Edward Montgomery, indicated that there was “practically no chance” that the board would order Antilles's shutdown or suspended service temporarily.

11 Deaths in Two Years

The 35-year-old Grumman Goose amphibious airplanes make up the bulk of the airboat fleet of Antilles, the largest amphibian airline in the country. However, in the last two years the aging amphibian has claimed 11 lives.

In the next few months, the Federal Government will release a report on the safety of the one-time World War 11 military aircraft.

After the fatal crash, business dropped nearly 40 percent with decreased passenger loads and a sharp cut in daily flight service. The reduced flight service was partly a result of the great number of • planes being overhauled for safety checks, leaving only three operable Gooses in the fleet to handle the daily flights around the Caribbean.

Other Caribbean airlines profited from the diminished airboat business, and many increased their daily scheduled flights for inter-island commuters.

Many Government employees and executives, including Gov. Juan Luis, this fall switched their commuter business to Aero Virgin Islands, Air Caribbean and Prinair.

Despite the lull in the fall business, Maureen O'Hara, the actress, widow of Mr: Blair and co-founder of Antilles, has announced plans to purchase new planes and increase the number of daily flight routes in, preparation for "an exciting and profitable" Christmas season. "We have received a lot of advance bookings from Danish and Norwegian people" in addition to the normal influx of mainland tourists, she stated.

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