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# When Flying Was Indeed Glamorous

By BILL RYAN

HER name is Excambian and she has had more lives than a cat, some good, some bad, but all interesting. In truth, she should be long gone but somehow she has survived and, piece by piece, rivet by rivet, she is being restored inside a hangar at Sikorsky Memorial Airport in Stratford. Someday, perhaps in two years, she will be as radiant as she was half a century ago.

The Excambian is a flying boat, a genre of aircraft that enjoyed only a brief time of importance, the mid-1930's to the mid-1940's. But people who remember that time and were privileged to see a giant flying boat take off say there was nothing quite like it. The plane was akin to a huge seabird sitting low in the water, churning up huge waves of spray on either side, and then, rising, rising into the sky. The giant aircraft was not particularly fast but, oh, so beautiful.

During World War II the Excambian performed a vital and dangerous job: ferrying military personnel and civilians across the Atlantic Ocean. Its passengers included spies and U.S.O. entertainers, high-level military men and foreign diplomats. Eleanor Roosevelt was a passenger as was Lord Beaverbrook, Edward R. Murrow, Humphrey Bogart and his first wife, Mayo Methot, whom he called Sluggo and who lived up to the name by getting in a fight with him on the flight.

The story of the Excambian started in the early 1940's when the Vought-Sikorsky Aircraft Division of United Aircraft Corporation (now United Technologies Corporation) received a contract from a new corporation, American Export Airlines, to build three flying boats capable of making it across the Atlantic without refueling.

It was less than 15 years after Charles Lindbergh had made the first solo flight across the Atlantic, but already dawning was the day of the big long-range plane -- which had been envisioned years before by Lindbergh and his friend, Igor Sikorsky, the builder of planes who had fled his native Russia after the revolution. Since there were few airports, particularly in Europe, the two air pioneers reasoned that the best way to bridge the Atlantic was by a powerful seaplane.

In 1937 Igor Sikorsky had built a giant seaplane patrol bomber, powered by four Pratt & Whitney air-cooled engines, for the Navy. The three planes for American Export were basically civilian versions of the military plane but with all sorts of added luxuries: wood-paneled cabins, sofa-like seats, sleeping quarters for 16 passengers, meals cooked from scratch by stewards and cool-headed stewardesses who were also nurses ready to treat airsickness, injuries, panic or hangovers. But shortly before the first of the planes, named the Excalibur, was finished, something dramatic happened. Pearl Harbor was attacked, and the United States was at war. The Three Ex's

The giant seaplanes became part of the war effort. American Export quickly entered into a contract with the Navy to fly the three planes from waters off LaGuardia Airport in New York to Foynes on the Shannon River in neutral Ireland; the planes would be carrying people vital to the American war effort. But first the two other planes had to be completed. They became the highest of priorities at Vought-Sikorsky, with Igor Sikorsky directing operations from an office he had set up in the hangar where the planes were taking shape.

By the middle of the summer of 1942, all three planes -- the Excalibur, the Excambian and the Exeter -- had started regular service between New York and Ireland with, it was hoped, each of the planes making it back and forth twice a week. They became known as the "Flying Aces," establishing records for time and distance like United States to Europe, 14 hours, 17 minutes, and Europe to New York, 18 hours, 14 minutes.

It was glamorous business. It was also dangerous business. The Excalibur would not survive the first year. It crashed on takeoff from the waters off Newfoundland on Oct. 3, 1942. That left just the Excambian and the Exeter to make the perilous trips across the Atlantic. History Better Said

Most of the legend of the flying boats is oral rather than written. To date the Navy has never released wartime passenger lists of the planes, perhaps much to the relief of spies, domestic and foreign. The stories have come out bit by bit from the people who rode the planes and the people who flew them.

One of the latter is John Liddell of Wallingford who was one of the flight engineers. He is 72 years old but when he talks about the flying boats, the memories are like yesterday. "The pilots were fabulous people," he recalled. "They were known as the nine old men and had been open-cockpit mail-plane pilots. The trip to Ireland usually took close to 20 hours and we didn't know much about the passengers." Except the movie stars, of course. "Oh yeah. George Raft was on one flight. And Paul Douglas, Merle Oberon, Bogart. Douglas Fairbanks Jr. was with us a couple of times."

For one young serviceman, the flight to Ireland on the Excambian was an adventure in itself and what happened shortly after was an eye opener about the expertise of German intelligence. In 1942 E. Curtis Ambler, who lives in Newington, was a young Navy lieutenant who rode the Excambian to Ireland on a secret mission. Memories of the long flight include the pilot taking the plane to 18,000 feet, probably to evade an enemy plane or ship, and a Danish diplomat passing out at that altitude because the cabin was not pressurized.

What happened later became an even sharper memory. After the plane landed on the Shannon River, Mr. Ambler and three other naval officers on the flight went to a local bar to listen to Lord Haw-Haw on the radio. Lord Haw-Haw was a British traitor, William Joyce, who broadcast Nazi propaganda from Germany. On this night, Lord Haw-Haw told his listening audience, that four American naval officers had landed that day on the Excambian and then proceeded to give the names, ranks and home towns of Lieutenant Ambler and the other three officers. Flight Into Obsolence

When World War II ended, so also did the era of the giant flying boat. On Oct. 24, 1945, a landplane, the DC-4, made the first commercial flight from New York to England. The seaplane was obsolete.

Both the Excambian and the Exeter were sold and carried on in lesser roles. The Exeter crashed in Uruguay in 1947 while ferrying arms to Paraguayan rebels. That left the Excambian as the sole survivor in

a continuing drama with a script out of Hollywood, and complete with a legendary movie star.

The seaplane was operated as a charter service in South America, then for years used for transport passengers from Long Beach, Calif., to Catalina Island. Then, in the late 1960's, Charles F. Blair Jr. obtained the old seaplane for a shuttle business, Antilles Air Boats, that he had started in the Virgin Islands. Mr. Blair, the husband of the actress Maureen O'Hara, had been the original test pilot on the Sikorsky flying boats, then had flown them during World War II.

The Excambian had a sentimental value for him but it proved too expensive to fly on short hops between islands. After a year, the giant plane was grounded on the beach at St. Thomas, never to fly again. Mr. Blair and his wife eventually gave the decaying plane to the Naval Aviation Museum at Pensacola, Fla. After letting the plane deteriorate in an open field, museum officials decided they did not want the plane because it was really a commercial craft in World War II, not a military craft. With that tenuous reasoning, the old plane appeared to be heading for the junkyard. *Coming Full Circle*

Then in the early 1980's, the Navy made a permanent loan of the old wreck to the New England Air Museum and it was taken by barge back to Connecticut and to the hangar at Sikorsky airport, only a few hundred feet away from where it had been built four decades before.

After the plane is restored, it will be transferred to the museum near Bradley International Airport in Windsor Locks. Charles Blair was killed in a plane crash but Maureen O'Hara came to Stratford in 1987 for ceremonies marking the start of a new life for the old plane.

Some 75 volunteers have been working in their spare time to restore the plane, week after week, month after month, year after year. A dozen of them, like Harry M. Hieva who came out of retirement to supervise the project, worked on the Excambian half a century ago at Sikorsky. Some helped fly it during its glory days. Others are aviation history buffs. Sikorsky Aircraft has provided space for the restoration and money for the necessary materials. But without the volunteers, many of whom show up every week, the restoration could never be accomplished. *'Racing the Clock'*

It has been a slow, painstaking process. Originally, it was estimated that it would take two years but Mr. Hieva said the damage and decay had been far worse than anticipated and the forecast for completion is now mid-summer 1994. "We're racing the clock," he said. Two volunteers who had originally help build the Excambian, and whose expertise is particularly needed, have died.

No one thinks the graceful old plane is not worth the trouble. "There's nostalgia about the big flying boats," said John Gill, 70, one of the volunteers. He had worked on the Excambian in 1941, then became a naval aviator, and returned to Sikorsky after the war.

"It's beautiful," said John Liddell, who had helped fly it.

That it is.

Photos: Harry M. Hieva, project coordinator for the Excambian project, examining hull of the flying boat at Sikorsky Memorial Airport in Stratford. Right, the flying boat about 1944. (Top, David LaBianca for The New York Times; above, Sikorsky Aircraft) (pg. 1); The flying boat being unloaded from barge after trip from Florida to Stratford in 1983. (Sikorsky Aircraft) (pg. 13)

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