

As chase plane, 'flying yacht' has dual role

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Pan Am was just starting passenger service across the Pacific. Ed Musick was the airline's top pilot; Fred Noonan was the chief navigator.

And Reid Dennis was a kid growing up in San Francisco. It was the mid-1930s, and Dennis

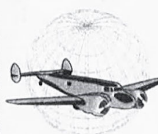
Tony Bacawicz / The Hartford Courant

■ Reid Dennis, owner and pilot of the 1955 Grumman Albatross flying around the world, adjusts controls in Miami. The Albatross and the 1935 Lockheed Electra it is following left Monday for San Juan and take off today for Venezuela.

was fascinated by the huge, graceful "flying boats" — amphibious planes that took off from the bay near his home and island-hopped to the Far East.

In the summer, when his family vacationed in Hawaii, Dennis would go to a Pan Am station on the northeast side of Oahu and listen in on Musick's radio transmissions.

Today, Dennis is 70, has his own large seaplane and dreams of flying



WORLD FLIGHT

In pursuit of Earhart

the same route.

But right now he's living another dream: flying around the world.

Dennis is captain of a 1955 Grumman Albatross, a onetime Navy search-and-rescue plane that's following Linda Finch as she circles the globe near the equator. They are flying roughly the same route Amelia Earhart was on when she disappeared in 1937 with Noonan, her navigator.

The two planes left Oakland, Calif., on March 17 — the 60th anniversary of Earhart's departure — and today they'll fly a four-hour leg from San Juan to Cumana, Venezuela.

The Albatross, equipped with floats that let it land in water, might

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Albatross chase plane has dual role on round-the-world flight

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be able to pick up Finch if her 1935 Lockheed Electra is forced down at sea.

But that's not the Albatross' chief mission on this flight. It's photography.

and knows the Albatross better than anyone; and Dennis' wife, Peg. All live in the San Francisco area.

Dennis, a pilot since 1963, left American Express as an investment manager in 1974 to form his own venture capital company: Institutional Venture Partners, based in Menlo Park, Calif.

He met Bell 17 years ago, when both were volunteers for a program that flies Stanford University cosmetic surgeons to Central America to repair birth defects. Both were pilots, and both also worked as nurses' assistants during operations.

They met Macfie, also a pilot, 10 years ago when he was working at an aircraft repair shop in Oakland. Macfie knew Finch from the annual air races at Reno, Nev., where she had competed in her World War II trainer. A year ago, Finch was looking for a chase plane for her around-the-world flight, and Macfie introduced her to Dennis.

In the two weeks the Albatross and Electra have been flying together,

Dennis' plane has attracted nearly as much attention as Finch's near twin of Earhart's plane. Curious schoolchildren and adults want to tour the Albatross, and a few veterans fondly recall their days on Albatrosses in the '50s and '60s.

Most people, though, have the same first question: "What type of plane is that?"

The Albatross is an almost homely aircraft, with a chubby body that sits low to the ground, a prow-shaped nose and wings that extend from the top of the fuselage.

"The love of an Albatross is an acquired love," admits Dennis, who spent seven years rebuilding the plane from a rusting, peeling hulk that was plucked from an aircraft graveyard near Tucson, Ariz.

From the outside it looks almost literally like a flying boat.

Inside, though, Dennis has turned it into a flying yacht.

The plane has just about every modern comfort, including a full lavatory, a galley-type kitchen with a small sink and a stove, and several fold-down tables. There's a small wine rack, a VCR, a CD player, wine glasses and a bookshelf that Dennis has stocked with a history of World War II sea battles, Amelia Earhart's "Last Flight" and an atlas of the world.

A 1937 issue of Life magazine

with a cover story about crossing the Pacific in flying boats is framed on one wall.

At the rear are two hatches that photographers can open in flight to get photos and videotape of the Electra gliding over the scenery below.

The engines and propellers on military Albatrosses were so loud that they damaged the hearing of some servicemen. But sound-deadening insulation in the fuselage of Dennis' plane keeps the noise level down. Earplugs and noise-canceling headsets are on board for those who want them.

The 63-foot plane seats up to 13, including the crew. But because the plane can carry only so much weight — the maximum takeoff weight is about 36,000 pounds — the number of passengers depends on the amount of fuel that has to be carried.

Dennis, Bell and Macfie are meticulous pilots who fly by the book, right down to life-vest demonstrations for passengers before any flight over water.

Although Dennis idolized the Pan Am pioneers as a boy, he didn't take his first flying lesson until he was in his mid-30s.

That first lesson was on a Friday afternoon. He loved it so much that

he soloed the following Thursday and bought his first plane — a used twin-engine Cessna — after just 100 hours in the air.

He now owns five planes.

Dennis has flown extensively on business and for fun, to Europe a half-dozen times, the Mideast, Central America, Alaska, and even West Berlin before the fall of communism. That was a feat for a private pilot, given the clearances that were required and the need to stay inside a narrow air corridor — or risk being forced down.

In 1974, Dennis bought a 1948 Grumman Mallard, an amphibian that looks like a small Albatross. He flew it up and down the Pacific Coast — and still owns it — but the Mallard doesn't have the range to get across the ocean.

"I've always had it in my mind that I wanted to fly the Pacific. I wanted to recreate the route of the Pan Am clippers," he said. "Maybe my desire really was to relieve it." A Navy veteran of World War II who as a 19-year-old was with the occupying forces in Japan, he also wants to visit sites of naval battles at Wake, Guam and Midway and pay tribute to those who died.

So when Dennis saw a restored Albatross at an air show in the late '80s, he was intrigued. The owner, Dennis Buhen, had found the Albatross

he served on in the military and restored the plane to its original appearance.

"He was the Pied Piper," Reid Dennis said. With Buhen's encouragement, Dennis did some research and found that with an extra fuel tank, an Albatross would have the range to cross the ocean.

Grumman built 466 Albatrosses from 1947 through 1955. Many were mothballed at an Air Force "bone yard" near Tucson, where surplus aircraft are periodically auctioned off.

Buhen found an Albatross for Dennis. It had been based at a Navy air station at Alameda, Calif., and was one of the last of its type built. Buhen picked it because it had relatively little corrosion.

That was seven years ago.

A repair shop near Tucson got the plane and two Curtiss-Wright engines in flying shape, and in 1992 it was flown to a shop in Yolo County, Calif., north of San Francisco, for work on the interior and electronics. The last details were finished just in time for Finch's flight. Dennis declines to say how much he's invested in the plane.

Dennis flew the Albatross quite a bit between renovations and has experimented to see how the plane can be flown most efficiently.

While trailing Finch, he plans to

make the long legs over the Atlantic and the Pacific just as Musick would have. While the plane is heavy with fuel he'll throttle back to save gas, dropping to altitudes as low as 1,000 feet. That's something only a seaplane pilot could consider doing.

If Finch got down, the Albatross might pick her up, depending on how heavy the seas were, whether she was injured and how far the accident was from land. The crew could also drop her one of its three rafts with food and radio beacons.

But while the Albatross may be the ideal chase plane for Finch, it's not ideal for crossing the ocean.

By the end of World War II, flying boats were dinosaurs, replaced by the faster and less expensive Douglas DC-3 and other planes. Because of World War II, runways were plentiful by the late '40s. Planes didn't have to land on water.

There were other problems with flying boats.

"It's very expensive to maintain a seaplane that lands in saltwater," Dennis said, because the salt accelerates corrosion and gets into the engines. Crews essentially were taking care of a boat as well as a plane.

But he intends to keep alive the memory of that grand era when flying boats made the first flights across the Pacific possible.

WORLD FLIGHT UPDATE

Nautical miles flown Monday (Miami to San Juan): 908 Total miles flown: 3,254 Miles to go: 23,548

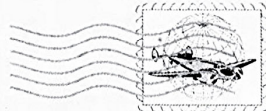
Hello from San Juan! And the real start of our journey, since this is our first stop off the U.S. mainland.

What a beautiful flight we had from Miami. The waters of the Atlantic can be such stunning colors — every shade of blue and green, from the palest sea mist to periwinkle and aquamarine, to turquoise and midnight. The shadows of fair-weather clouds skimmed across the water, just as they did when Amelia Earhart flew this leg of her trip 60 years ago. Reid Dennis, the pilot of our plane, saw a pod of whales.

"It's a beautiful day and I'm going to have a good time," Linda Finch told reporters as we left for the seven-hour flight. Hundreds of well-wishers showed up to send us off: Linda in the Electra and us in the Albatross.

Linda trailed behind us for a while as National Geographic and "48 Hours" (the CBS news show) shot some air-to-air footage. She caught up with us over Mayaguana, an island at the east end of the Bahamas. Then the photo people in our plane got their chance for some shots.

I think we're all happy to be on our way again after the one-week layover in Miami. Tomorrow we have a short hop to Venezuela, then Wednesday it's on to Suriname.



Barb Nagy

ALL ABOUT: PUERTO RICO

- ▶ **Population:** 3.8 million
- ▶ **Area:** 9,000 square kilometers (about three times the size of Rhode Island)
- ▶ **Climate:** Tropical marine, mild
- ▶ **Terrain:** Mostly mountains, with coastal plain in north
- ▶ **Languages:** Spanish, English
- ▶ **Religions:** Roman Catholic, 85 percent
- ▶ **Life expectancy at birth:** 75 years (76 years overall U.S.)
- ▶ **Main industries:** Manufacturing of pharmaceuticals, electronics, apparel and food products; tourism
- ▶ **Currency:** U.S. dollar
- ▶ **Form of government:** U.S. commonwealth
- ▶ **Capital:** San Juan
- ▶ **Outlook:** Puerto Rico has one of the most dynamic economies in the Caribbean. U.S. firms, encour-



aged by duty-free access to the U.S. mainland and by tax incentives, have invested heavily in Puerto Rico since the 1950s. But some of those tax breaks are being phased out by the year 2006, and many wonder about the island's economic future.

▶ **Would you have guessed:** Nearly 4 million tourists, more people than live permanently on the island, visited Puerto Rico in 1993.

SOURCE: U.S. Central Intelligence Agency's 1995 World Fact Book, U.S. Department of State.

For more information, check out the CIA Factbook on the Internet at <http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/pubs.html>. State Department travel advisories can be found at <http://www.travel.state.gov>.