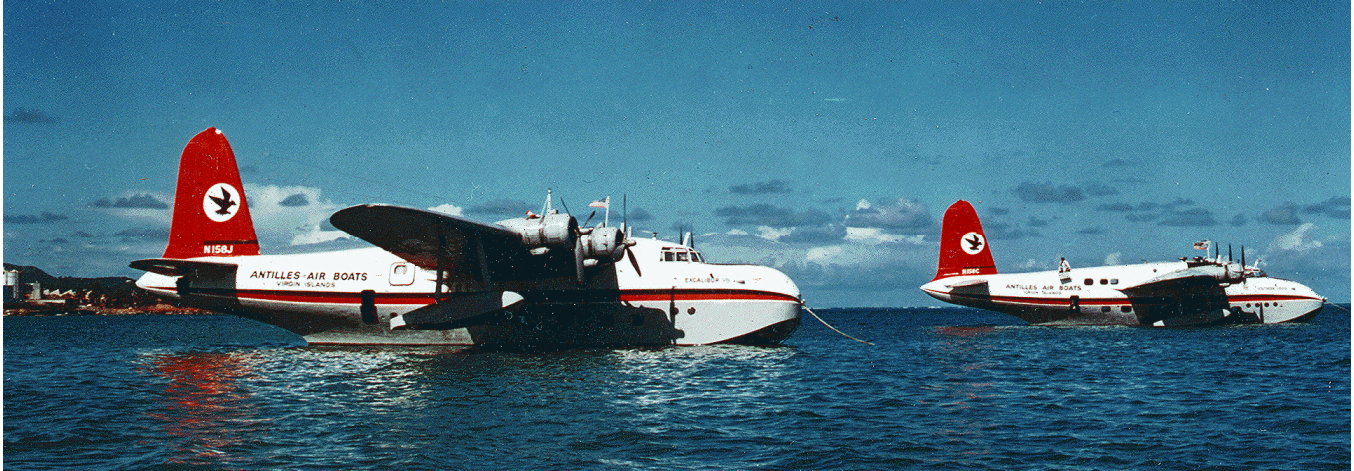


“Keep ‘Em Flying”

Marijane Sipple



Ansett Flying Boat Services operated out of Rose Bay in Sydney Harbor, from May 1952 to September 1974. They had six flights a week to Lord Howe Island in the Tasman Sea, a distance of 480 NM. It was a three-hour flight on two 45-seat Short S-25 Sandringham flying boats, named “Islander” and Beachcomber.”

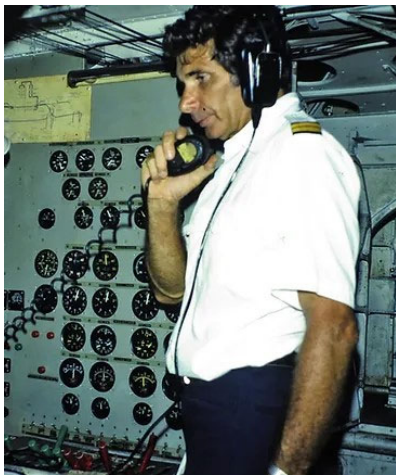
The flying boat service was discontinued in 1974 after a land airstrip was constructed on Lord Howe Island and Qantas Airways provided more frequent and faster flights. The two Sandringhams seemed destined to be high and dry in some museum. Then Captain Charles Blair, owner of Antilles Air Boats (AAB) in the Virgin Islands, arrived on the scene.

Following the WWII slogan “Keep ‘Em Flying,” Blair negotiated to buy the two Sandringhams, which he renamed “Excalibur” and “Southern Cross.” He hired some of the Ansett flight crews to help him make the long ferry flight from Sydney, Australia to St. Croix in the U. S. Virgin Islands. Some of them remained in the Virgin Islands to help operate the planes.



Captain Ron Gillies was a military pilot with the Royal Australia Air Force before flying for Ansett. He told me he made 650 round trips between Lord Howe Island and Sydney with Ansett. I enjoyed his stories about that time. He said that Ansett had no timetable for their service to Lord Howe Island because surrounding reefs made it necessary to arrive and depart during high tide.

Ron became operations manager for AAB. The Sandringhams were built by the British Short Brothers Aerospace Company based in Belfast, Ireland, and were not registered in the United States. Ron's office and desk were piled high with paperwork as he worked to obtain the necessary certification to operate the flying boats in the United States.



Nolle Holle, Sandringham Chief Engineer, and his wife, Margaret, who had been a flight attendant on the Ansett Sandringhams stayed with the flying boats in the Virgin Islands. Nolle is in many of the photos of the flying boats in operation.



Bryan Monkton flew as co-pilot on the second ferry flight with Captain Blair and Maureen O'Hara Blair. When Captain Blair offered Bryan a job flying for Antilles Air Boats, Bryan returned to Australia and resigned his job to work for the "World's Largest Seaplane Airline." He flew the Grumman Goose, often based in San Juan, Puerto Rico. The times I talked to Bryan he

complained more about the heat in the Virgin Islands than about his flying experiences, so I wasn't surprised when he quit his job and returned to Sydney. The last letter Dave Howard (my husband) and I received from him, he was complaining about the cold weather in Australia and asking if he could come visit us!

One day when I was waiting for them to call my flight on St. Croix, a petite lady in a sundress approached me and introduced herself. Her name was Betty McCook and her husband, Bryan, was a Grumman Goose pilot based on St. Croix. She was working in an office above the maintenance building and was checking to see if Bryan's flight from San Juan had arrived so they could have lunch together. She was quite delightful and friendly, and I just had time for a quick introduction to Bryan when he arrived as I was leaving!

Future encounters were infrequent and brief, mostly when Betty came down to say hello to me. Sometimes we had time to have lunch at the Goose Grill. Betty and Bryan came to AAB from Australia but were actually New Zealanders. Bryan flew PBY Catalinas and the Sunderland flying boats for the Royal New Zealand Air Force. One weekend when Bryan and I were not on the flight schedule, Betty invited me to come stay with them so that we could visit without interruption.

That Saturday I took the first flight leaving St. Thomas for St. Croix. The McCooks were there waiting for me when I got off the plane. When we arrived at their



Marijane and
Capt. McCook

home, Betty called out “Winston, Winston!” and a cute dog came trotting out on short, stubby legs. I burst out laughing at the sight of him. Indignant, Betty sputtered, “Winston is a Welsh Corgi, the Queen’s dog!” Winston saved the day when he hopped into my lap to be petted.

By the time I returned to St. Thomas I knew all about Welsh Corgis and heard about the Corgis Queen Elizabeth had owned since age 10. I also learned about the five McCook children (all in Australia at that time), and about Bryan’s past flying experiences.

I was spellbound as I listened to their experiences living and flying in Papua New Guinea. Papua New Guinea had few roads in the 1960s and villagers depended on air service for transportation and supplies. The rough runways were cleared strips constructed by the villagers with the materials at hand.

In 1960 Bryan founded the first airline in New Guinea to provide charter and contract service flights operated from nine centers in Papua New Guinea. Not only were the runways rough, but pilots flew in mountainous terrain, over jungles, and through frequent torrential rains that blocked their view. I told Bryan he should write a book about his experiences there, but he replied that he didn’t have time. I learned later that he finally did write a book, but it must not have been published in the USA as I have never found a copy.

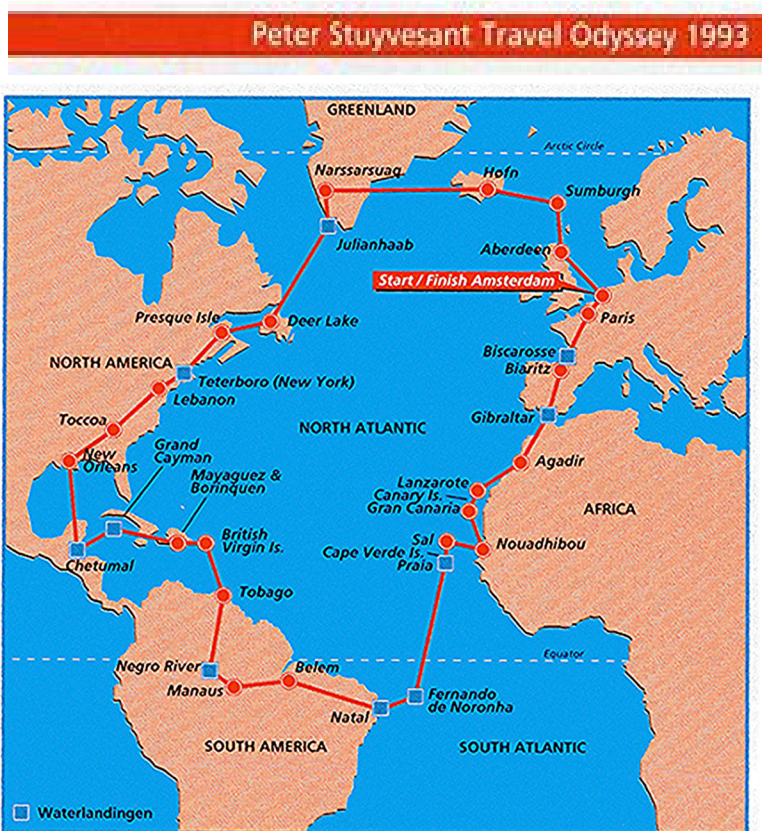
Bryan had come to AAB hoping to fly the Sandringham, but since they couldn’t get the necessary U.S. certification, he was flying the Grumman Goose. Following Captain Blair’s death in a Goose crash in 1978, the Sandringhams were sold. Bryan was hired by the investors to oversee renovations at the large ex-Navy hangar at Isla Grande, Puerto Rico near the AAB terminal. The new owners were considering luxury flying boat cruises on the Nile River and using the plane for the filming of the movie THE BLACK STALLION.

The owners of the Sandringham provided them with a nice apartment in Isla Verde right on the beach. Pets were not allowed, but Winston moved in also! During my stays with them Betty and I giggled like schoolgirls as we smuggled Winston in and out of the building in a large canvas bag. Bryan always took me to the hangar where they were working on the Sandringham. Or I should say should have been working on the Sandringham because often no one was there. Bryan never got mad, but he was certainly impatient! He had not expected to be grounded for so long.

I was not surprised when they phoned to tell me that they were leaving Puerto Rico. Bryan had been offered a job in Singapore and would be flying the Grumman Albatross to offshore oil rigs in the South China Sea.

Betty was a wonderful correspondent and wrote glowing reports about life on Singapore and the lovely WWII British house they were living in. All the floors were teak! And there was a large, fenced yard for Winston. They begged me to come stay with them, but I couldn't get enough time off from my job for such a long trip. In those days before email, we stayed in touch with frequent letters. I loved the Singapore stamps and saved many of them. The stamps showed city landmarks of the island state, flowers, fish, and birds native to Singapore and ships unique to the area.

Bryan finally got his wish to fly in Africa when he was hired to fly the PBY Catalina for Catalina Safari Company based in Zanzibar, Tanzania. They offered luxury flying excursions for wealthy people like Bill and Melinda Gates. Their most exciting charter was for the Peter Stuyvesant Travel "Odyssey" in 1993-1994 which was filmed. I actually was able to watch a few of the episodes on PBS British programming.



Bryan passed away on 20 August 2010 at age 83 in Tasmania, an island state of Australia. He had a total of 25,000 flying hours, of which 8,000 were seaplanes.

Gone but not forgotten. I will always have fond memories of my delightful, adventurous friends.