

Virgin Islands veterans recall their time in service

By BRANDY BROOKES
Daily News Staff

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Tribute to Vets

Who also served at Antilles Air Boats



Marijane Sipple

Major hostilities of World War I were formally ended at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918 when the Armistice with Germany went into effect.

Originally observed as Armistice Day, at the urging of major United States veteran organizations, it was renamed Veterans Day in 1954. The British Commonwealth countries call it Remembrance Day, while other Allied Countries still use Armistice Day. But all countries observe the day as a tribute to their veterans and share many customs and traditions. For example, it is common to observe two minutes of silence at 11 a.m. to remember those who served in the military, the exact time when fighting ceased during World War I.

Today "Hire a Vet" programs are recognized by many businesses proud of the number of veterans they have working for them. Listed in the top ten military employers are Aerospace and Defense, NASA, Boeing, Northrop Grumman, airlines and internet and software companies. They praise veterans as disciplined team players who inspire others with their strong work ethics and sense of responsibility. Many received training in the military for jobs they got as civilians. Since 1945, the G.I. Bill has helped veterans pay for college or training that would help them get jobs.





Captain Charles F. Blair, founder and owner of Antilles Air Boats (AAB) was a precursor of this trend. Remembering all the employees I knew at AAB who served in the military, I decided to make a list.

It was interesting to read on the AAB website about the employees who had their information included, however, many employees weren't listed due to lack of information. I was touched by the number of family members, especially children who remembered their parents working at AAB, and sent updated information. They expressed their appreciation at the recognition their parents received on the website. I counted thirty-four former military members but am sure the number is much higher.



I always thought of Captain Blair as a retired airline pilot, not realizing until I searched for information on the website how much time he spent flying for the military. In 1932 he started his flight training at the Naval Flying School in Pensacola, Florida, where he earned his Navy wings of gold. His first assignment was to Patrol Squadron VP-7F at Naval Air Station North Island in San Diego, California.

After he was discharged from active duty, he joined the U. S. Navy Reserve. He continued to fly for the Navy part time in addition to flying with United Airlines for seven years.

Captain Blair left United to become chief pilot for American Export Airlines (later named American Overseas Airlines). In 1940 American Export ordered three Sikorsky VS-44 flying boats that could accommodate 40 passengers but were designed to carry only 16 on luxury trans-Atlantic flights. Captain





Blair was the chief test pilot and was the first to fly each new plane. As the chief pilot he hired and trained the new pilots.

Once they started commercial flights Blair set many world records flying the VS-44. In 1942 he was first to fly non-stop between Foynes, Ireland and New York City. He continued to set records for both the first non-stop flights and fastest flight time.

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and U. S. entry into World War II, the VS-44 flying boats were requisitioned for military service. They were given the Navy designation JR2S-1 and used to transport military personnel, freight and materials between New York City and Foynes, Ireland. Captain Blair was "requisitioned" by the Navy to fly full time for the Air Transport Command and Naval Air Transport Service.

In addition to flying the VS-44 flying boats, he worked as a test pilot for Grumman flying U. S. Navy fighter planes: the F6F Hellcat, F7F Tigercat, and F8F Bearcat. He also was the test pilot for the U. S. Navy Martin Mars flying boat.

Following the war, Captain Blair was the test pilot and did the first scheduled flights for American Overseas Airlines on the Lockheed Constellation and the Boeing Stratocruiser. In 1950 he became a Pan Am pilot when American Overseas Airlines merged with Pan American World Airways.

Blair approached the U. S. Air Force to request use of a P-51 fighter that he could modify for long distance flights to find new and improved routes and navigation techniques for long distance flights. The



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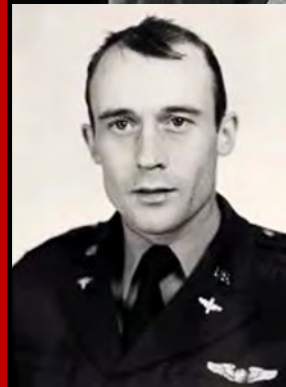
Air Force refused because they felt the missions, he had in mind were "impossible."

Undaunted, Captain Blair sought the help of his new employer, Pan American Airways. They sponsored his purchase of a P-51C Mustang from Paul Mantz, a well-known California racing pilot. Blair modified it with a more efficient engine, long-range fuel tanks, and special navigation equipment. He had it painted a bright scarlet red and named the plane "Excalibur III."

In 1951 Blair began to set records with Excalibur III. He flew nonstop from New York to London to test the jet stream. By using the jet stream he made the flight in under eight hours, flying as high as 37,000 feet. His speed record for a piston engine plane stands today.

A few months later he flew from Norway to Fairbanks, Alaska, 3,260 miles nonstop across the North Pole. Because a magnetic compass would be useless near the Pole and there was no radio navigation, he used a sextant for celestial navigation using pre-plotted sun lines to find his position. Blair wrote RED BALL IN THE SKY to relate this in detail as well as other early flying accomplishments.

In 1952 Captain Blair was awarded the International Harmon Trophy from President Truman "as the world's outstanding aviator". He also won the Gold Medal of the Norwegian Aero Club, only the 16th time in 45 years anyone had been so honored. Pan American World Airways donated Excalibur III to the Smithsonian Institution. The airplane's registration was cancelled on June 4, 1952. Completely restored,





it is on display at the Steven F. Udar-Hazy Center in Chantilly, Virginia.

That same year Blair resigned his Navy commission and joined the U. S. Air Force Reserve with the rank of colonel while he continued his civilian career as an airline pilot for Pan American. The success of his solo flight over the North Pole convinced the Air Force that they needed to develop an advanced celestial navigation system and put Blair in charge of it. In the pre-GPS era, he developed technology that was revolutionary. Blair's navigational systems made it possible to compute a fix to within 100-200 feet. The Air Force used it in the F105 Thunderchief during Vietnam and the SR-71 Blackbird, a long-range, high-altitude reconnaissance aircraft, in 1966.

In 1958 Blair received the Thurlow Award from the International Institute of Navigation after developing a new lightweight, all-weather, low-cost system for low-level NATO strike fighter operations.

The following year Blair led two USAF F-100 Super Sabres in a nonstop flight directly over the North Pole to test the automatic Doppler navigation system performance. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross from the United States Armed Forces for this accomplishment and promoted to Brigadier General.





Captain Blair retired from the Air Force Reserve as a Brigadier General in 1962 and became a consultant to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

On a flight to Ireland in 1947 he met Maureen O'Hara, the Irish born actress, whom he married in 1968. She accompanied Blair on his last flight around the world before retiring as a senior pilot for Pan American in 1969 at the age of 60.



Captain Blair built a beautiful retirement home on a hilltop overlooking Christiansted, St. Croix, USVI. It had views of Christiansted Harbor and the ocean. Later it looked down on the seaplane base where Antilles Air Boats operated.

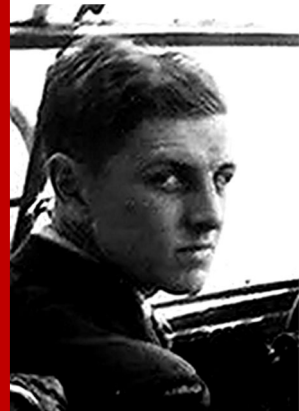
I don't know whether Blair planned for his retirement house or his retirement airplane first, but he selected the venerable Grumman Goose amphibian for his private plane.



The inspiration for the G-21 came from a syndicate of ten wealthy businessmen who wanted a plane they could use to



commute from their Long Island homes to their offices in Manhattan. The new G-21 amphibian "air yacht" was ready to go into production in 1937. During World War II all production was for the military. The Army was first to order a substantial number, operating as OA-9s and OA-13s. U. S. Navy and Coast Guard operated 169 designated as



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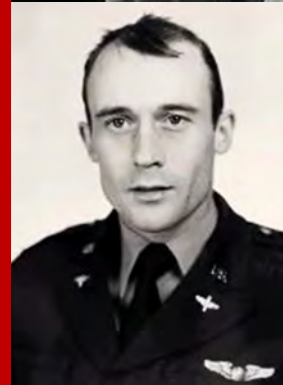


JRFs for utility, transport, and antisubmarine duty. Eleven nations flew the Goose. In France they were armed with bombs and machine guns. A total of 345 G-21s were produced by 1945 when production ended.

After moving to St. Croix, Captain Blair realized the potential the Goose had to operate "downtown to downtown" flights in what he described as the "Virgin Island Islands Streetcar." He started Antilles Air Boats with his Navy surplus Grumman Goose and five employees in 1964.

By 1970 the original route between St. Croix and St. Thomas had expanded to St. John, two bases on Tortola in the British Virgin Islands, three bases in Puerto Rico, and one on St. Martin.

The 23 Grumman Gooses operated by Antilles Air Boats were supplemented by other veteran amphibians and flying boats of the Second World War to handle the increased passenger load. AAB had three Consolidated PBY Catalinas, which were considered the most successful flying boat ever developed. They were involved in almost every major operation in World War II as patrol aircraft and bombers, and performed torpedo, antisubmarine, search-and-rescue, and transport roles. A total of 3,276 were built, more than any other flying boat in history.





In 1968 Antilles Air Boats bought a V-S44 Sikorsky flying boat. Charlie Blair was the first to fly the plane as a



test pilot for American Export Airlines and flew it for the Navy during the war years. The plane was damaged while landing in St. Thomas (during Blair's absence) in 1969. Repairs were so expensive that it became a local landmark on a concrete pad just across the fence from the Frenchtown Post Office. It had a happy ending when it was restored and put on display at the New England Air Museum at Winsor Locks, Connecticut where it is today.



Five years later AAB acquired two S-25 Shorts Sandringham flying boats from Ansett Airlines in Sydney, Australia. The planes had been converted for civilian use following WWII from S-25 Sunderland British flying boats, built as patrol bombers, air-sea rescue and transport missions for the Royal Air Force. During the war the planes were flown by the Royal Australian Air Force and Royal New Zealand Air Force as well as other allies. Due to the large number of machine guns bristling from the Sunderlands, the Luftwaffe nicknamed them "The Flying Porcupines."

Captain Blair and his crew, many of whom flew for Ansett Airlines, ferried both flying boats from Sydney, Australia to their new home in the Virgin Islands. A welcome addition to Antilles Air Boats





was Captain Ron Gillies, who flew the Sandringhams for Ansett Airlines for 16 years. From 1939 (at age 25) to 1945 Ron was the wing commander of an Australian Sunderland Squadron operating from England.

Captain Blair persuaded Air Force friends who were still active duty to retire and work for AAB. Brian Lincoln, who was active duty and based in Japan, signed on as AAB pilot and vice-president. Then Bob Scott agreed to leave the Air Force and join the team as a pilot and vice-president of operations.



Maureen O'Hara Blair shared her husband's enthusiasm for AAB and made only a few movies following their marriage as she became more involved in the operation. She often worked in the office on St. Croix and owned and published "Virgin Islander" magazine. The first article was always "Maureen O'Hara Says..." where she shared her opinion on a variety of subjects. While the magazine was primarily a tourist publication, it included information about Antilles Air Boats and featured articles and photos of their pilots.



Maureen was on her summer visit to her home in Ireland when she received the heartbreaking news on September 2, 1978, that her husband was killed when the Grumman Goose he was flying crashed due to engine failure as he approached St. Thomas. Maureen returned to St. Croix to make



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"We don't generally speak about our experiences — some of which are very painful," he said. Still, he wouldn't change the expe-



funeral arrangements. She then took Charlie's place as president of AAB until the airline was sold to Resorts International, owner of Chalk's Seaplane Airline between Miami and Nassau, Bahamas.

Charles F. Blair, age 69, a retired Brigadier General in the U. S. Air Force Reserve, was buried with full military honors on September 11, 1978, at Arlington National Cemetery, Washington D. C.



Maureen O'Hara passed away on October 25, 2015, at the age of 95. She is buried with Charlie at Arlington National Cemetery.

All AAB employees deserve a thank you for your service and for the role you played in making Antilles Air Boats "The World's Largest Seaplane Airline."



AAB Vets

Tom Anusewicz	U. S. Coast Guard
Howard Austin	U. S. Air Force
Charles F. Blair	U. S. Navy & Air Force
Chuck Billman	U. S. Air Force
Jack Broughton	U. S. Air Force
Nick Castruccio	U. S. Air Force
Eric Crossfield	Navy
Ron Crozier	U.S. Air Force
Jim Flanagan	U. S. Air Force
Charlie Freehling	U. S. Air Force
Tom Friedrich	U. S. Navy
Ralph Fuller	U. S. Navy
Dick Gilbert	U. S. Army Air Corps
Noreen Gilles	Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force
Ron Gillies	Royal Australian Air Force
Ed Hanley	U. S. Air Force
Lou Harris	U.S. Air Force
Alan Hoffsommer	U.S. Army
Dave Howard	U. S. Air Force
George Hubschmann	U. S. Air Force
Brian Lincoln	U. S. Air Force

Bill Mable	U. S. Army Air Corps
Bryan McCook	New Zealand Air Force
Bryan Monkton	Australian Air Force
Thomas Mooney	U. S. Marine Corps
Dan Morrison	U. S. Air Force
Charles McKay	U. S. Army
Svend Ovenen	U. S. Navy
John Pendley	U. S. Navy & Coast Guard
Don Purdy	U. S. Air Force
Bob Rambo	U. S. Air Force
Holland Redfield	U. S. Air Force
George Ruddell	U. S. Air Force
Bob Scott	U. S. Air Force
Don Schell	U. S. Air Force
Vince Sipple	U. S. Navy
John Steward-Jervis	British Royal Navy
Paul Wikander	U.S. Coast Guard

I recognize that the list may not be complete but used the information available at this time.