

The Sikorsky VS-44A, designed and built by Igor Sikorsky in the early 1940s, was a high-wing monoplane flying boat designed for non-stop transatlantic operations carrying a full load of passengers, crew and mail. Powered by four Pratt & Whitney Twin Wasp air-cooled engines, the airplane had a top speed of 235 miles an hour. Maximum non-stop range under special fuel and load conditions was in excess of 6000 miles. With a wing span of 124 feet and an overall length of nearly 80 feet, the VS-44A had a normal gross weight of 57,500 pounds.

The wings of the aircraft were a full cantilever type consisting of three assemblies — one center section and two outboard panels. The trailing edge, flaps and ailerons of the wings were covered with a fire-proofed fabric. Fuel was carried in the wing center section, consisting of three separate built-in compartments with a 3900 gallon capacity. Baggage, mail and additional fuel was stored between the center tank and the outboard tank.

Tail surfaces were full cantilever construction, similar to the wings. The fin and horizontal stabilizer were metal covered, while the rudder and elevators were fabric covered.

The hull was of aluminum alloy semi-monocoque construction with six watertight bulkheads. Hinged sections of the floor comprised the water-tight doors for the bulkheads, designed to allow flooding of any two compartments while keeping the aircraft on a reasonably level keel.

Takeoff power of the four Pratt & Whitney engines totaled 4800 horsepower. The engines were fitted with three-bladed Hamilton Standard hydromatic quick-feathering propellers.

Detachable beaching gear consisted of three units, two forward on the hull and one aft. It was designed to allow movement of the aircraft in any direction within the smallest possible space.

THE EARLY YEARS

The Sikorsky VS-44A flying boat was a commercial version of the S-44 patrol bomber designed and built for the US Navy in 1937. In December 1939, American Export Airlines placed an order with Vought-Sikorsky Aircraft Division of United Aircraft Corporation (now United Technologies) for preliminary engineering, and option for construction, of three four-engined, long-range S-44 type flying boats for non-stop transatlantic service. Design work began in February 1940. American Export Airlines, upon being granted a Certificate of Convenience and Necessity by the Civil Aeronautics Board on 15 July 1940, to operate non-stop trans-Atlantic service, exercised its option and immediately signed a contract for the construction of three VS-44A aircraft at a price of \$2,100,000.

Known as the "Flying Aces," the three airplanes were the *Excalibur*, registration number N41880, the *Excambian*, N41881, and the *Exeter*, N41882.

The first aircraft was completed and christened *Excalibur* by Mrs. Henry Agard Wallace, wife of the vice president of the United States, at a ceremony at the Vought-Sikorsky factory in Stratford on 17 January 1942. The next day, *Excalibur* made its first flight.

American Export Airlines had signed a contract with the Naval Air Transport Service on 12 January 1942, to operate a wartime trans-Atlantic route. On 10 February 1942, AEA was granted a temporary certificate to fly from New York to Foynes, Ireland. The

Sikorsky VS-44A *Excalibur* during christening ceremonies at Vought-Sikorsky in Stratford, Connecticut, on 17 January 1942. *Excalibur* made its first flight the next day.



first proving flight non-stop from New York to Foynes was made by *Excalibur* on 26 May 1942. Regular service began on 20 June with round trip flights continuing on a weekly basis until the other two VS-44As were delivered when three weekly round trips were inaugurated.

Excalibur was lost on takeoff at Botwood, Newfoundland, on 3 October 1942, when the wing flap was inadvertently fully lowered, which caused the airplane to crash immediately after takeoff.

Excambian was delivered to American Export Airlines in May 1942, and *Exeter* in June. The two aircraft went into contract service for the Navy and were painted in subdued Navy camouflage of sky blue on top and light gray underneath. Large American flags were painted on the bows.

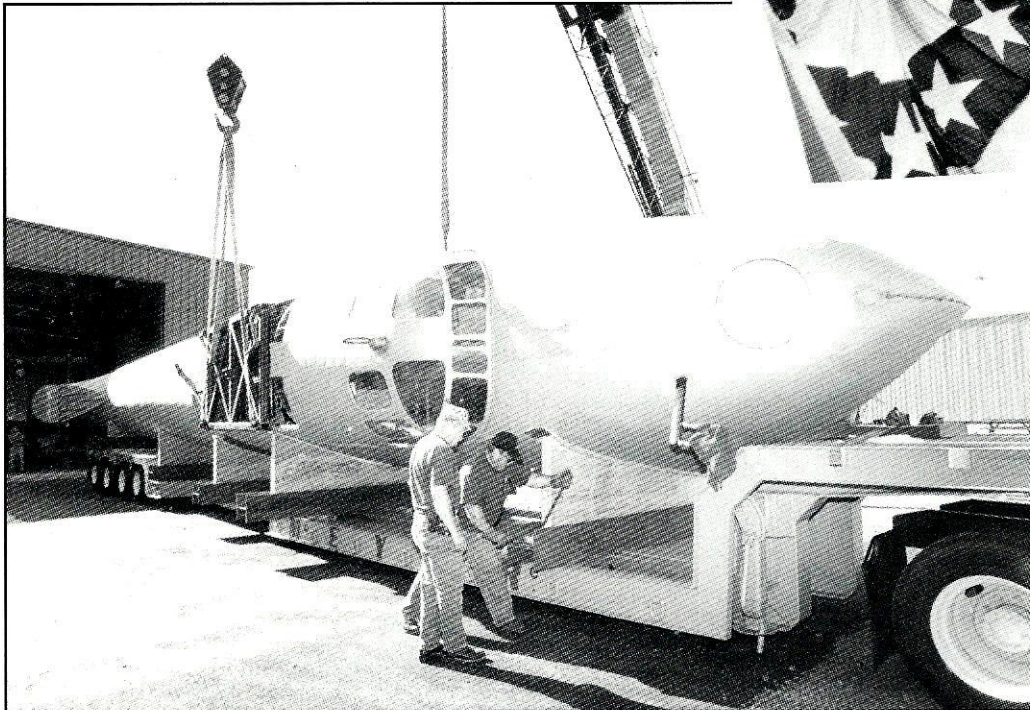
The two VS-44As continued to fly the Atlantic throughout the war carrying priority passengers and freight. At the time they were the longest-range commercial aircraft in the service of any airline, and they were the only aircraft that



Mrs. Henry Wallace, wife of the vice president of the US, christens *Excalibur* on 17 January 1942.

Transporting the massive hull of the VS-44A was not an easy undertaking. (Charles Pickett)

The VS-44A was in extremely poor shape when received by the volunteers and corrosion had taken a firm hold of the airframe. (Charles Pickett)



had flown commercial schedules non-stop with a capacity payload across the North and South Atlantic on flights in excess of 3100 miles.

COMMERCIAL SERVICE

The contract services for the Navy were terminated on 31 December 1944, while, in January 1945, operations were begun for the Army Air Transport Command.

On 1 June 1945, the Civil Aeronautics Board approved the merger of American Export Airlines with American Airlines, Inc. Already plans were made by AEA to replace the flying boats with land planes. In September, six Douglas C-54s were



acquired from the Surplus Property Board. On 24 October 1945, AEA made the first commercial scheduled transatlantic flight by land plane with a DC-4 from New York to Bournemouth, England. The last transatlantic flight of a VS-44A was on 22 October 1945, from Foynes to New York. On 10 November 1945, the airline's name was changed to American Overseas Airlines, Inc. Soon thereafter, the VS-44As were retired and put up for sale by the Reconstruction Finance Corporation.

EXCAMBIAN PURCHASED

In 1948, the City of Baltimore, Maryland, seized *Excambian* for non-payment of fees. Then in 1950 a group of Baltimore businessmen formed Skyways International Trading Company, investing \$240,000 in rebuilding and re-equipping the plane. Their idea was to use it as a flying trading post. It was to carry freight to natives at the mouth of the Amazon River and to bring back commercial diamonds, semi-

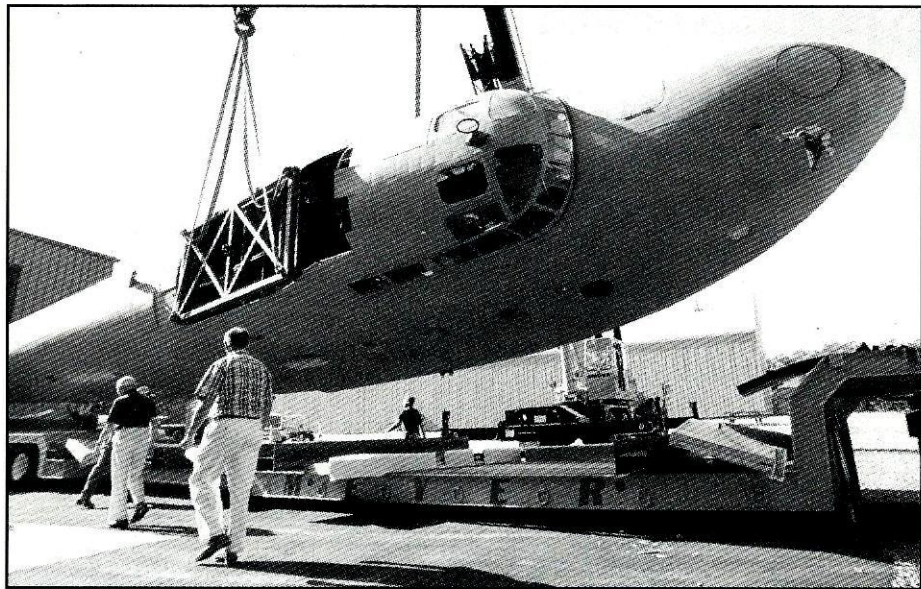
personnel "Mother Goose" as the flagship of the airline. The aircraft spent ten active years on the West Coast. In addition to the Catalina run, the aircraft provided transportation for the Navy to San Clemente Island, where the Polaris missile was being developed. It also went to Hollywood, making a film debut in *The Gallant Hours*, a movie about Fleet Admiral William "Bull" Halsey.

In 1967, Probert sold the airplane to Charles Blair and his wife, actress Maureen O'Hara. Blair had an established seaplane airline in the US Virgin Islands. In January 1968, Blair brought the VS-44A to his Antilles Air Boats operations and put it into service on the busy St. Croix/St. Thomas route. Later that year, the aircraft was damaged beyond reasonable repair. It was retired from service and grounded on St. Thomas.

VS-44A BECOMES A MUSEUM PIECE

The Bradley Air Museum in Windsor Locks, Connecticut, undertook to acquire the *Excambian* because of its great service in air transportation and as the last example of a large four-engined American flying boat. The museum also wanted to have the airplane because of its Connecticut connection, having been designed and built by Vought-Sikorsky in Stratford. Charles Blair tentatively agreed to house the *Excambian* at the museum if they could transport the craft, which was not airworthy. A valiant search for safe transportation proved futile and the museum was forced to give up its plan.

In 1976, Blair gave the airplane to the Naval Aviation Museum at Pensacola, Florida. It was then moved to the Navy museum, where it sat awaiting restoration. Charles Blair was killed in a crash of a Grumman Goose in 1978. Shortly thereafter, the Naval Aviation Museum advised Bradley Air Museum that the civilian VS-44A did not properly fit into the Navy museum's mission of telling the history of Naval aviation (even though it had served as a military transport) and that a transfer of the ship to the Bradley Air Museum would be in order. Accordingly, the Navy curator transferred the airplane on "permanent" loan to Bradley Air Museum. Once again the search for



Gently removing the hull from its transporter. (Charles Pickett)

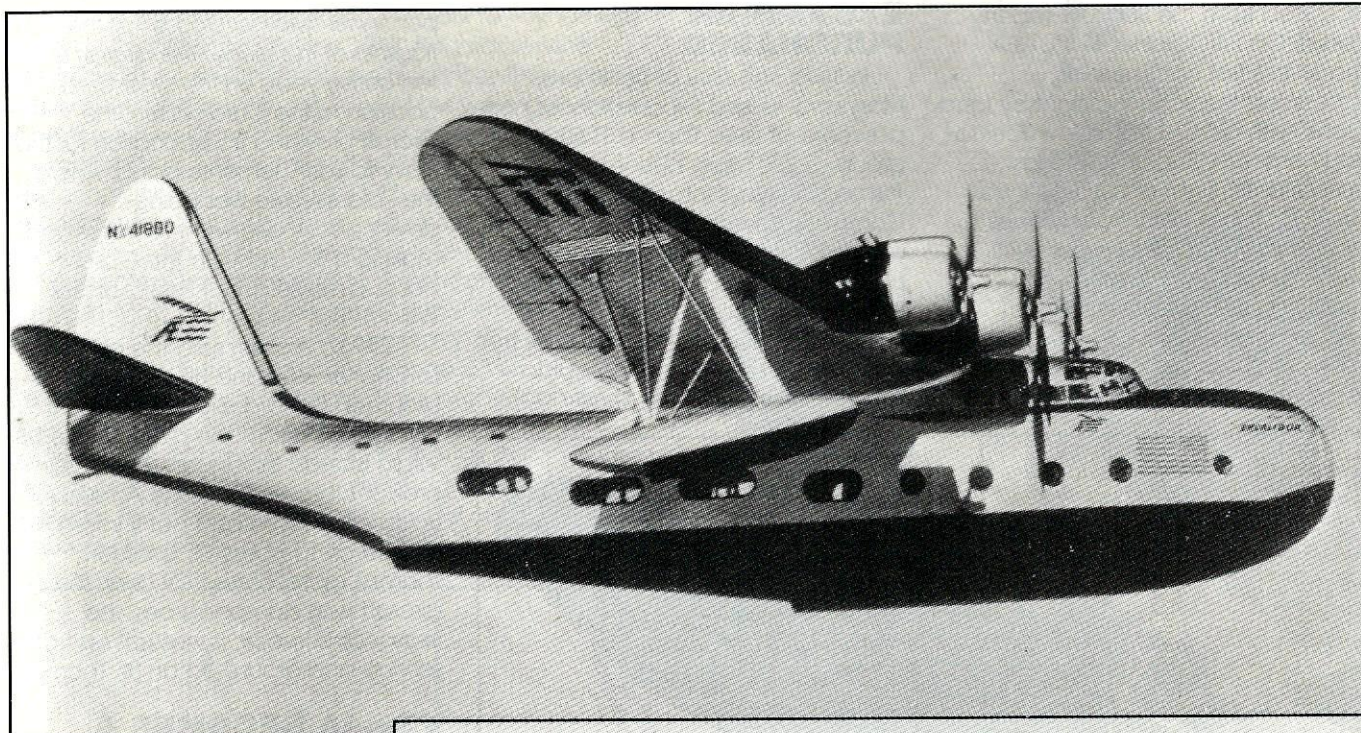
In 1946, Tampico Airlines purchased *Excambian* and apparently *Exeter* as well. It is believed that Hugh Wells of Lima, Peru, headed this operation. Before World War Two, Wells founded *Condor Peruana de Aviacion* Airline to provide air service in South America and to the United States. He operated the VS-44As in charter service until 1948, when Tampico apparently ceased operations. During this period, *Excambian* made one of its many record-setting non-stop flights from Lima, Peru, to New York City, making the trip in 26 hours 48 minutes, covering a distance of approximately 3300 miles.

Exeter crashed on the river Rio del la Plata at Montevideo, Uruguay, in 1947 while attempting a night landing. The flying boat was ferrying arms to Paraguayan rebels at the time. Divers have explored the wreck at the bottom of the river. The wreck was found reasonably intact although the wing is broken off from the hull.

precious stones, quinine and alligator skins. But the plan collapsed and the plane was stored in Ancon Harbor, near Lima, Peru.

In the spring of 1957, Wilton R. "Dick" Probert, president of Avalon Air Transport, heard of the VS-44A at Ancon Harbor. He inspected the plane there and decided it would make a splendid flagship and attraction to his fleet of twin-engined Grumman Goose amphibians used on Avalon's 21-mile flights from Long Beach, California to Catalina Island. He bought the airplane from Aviation Exchange Corporation. After trouble getting the plane airborne, it was finally flown to Long Beach where it was overhauled and refurbished.

Excambian went into scheduled service with Avalon in 1957. In 1963, Avalon changed its name to Catalina Air Lines, Inc. Though the airplane had been renamed *Excalibur*, it was affectionately called by Avalon



The elegant lines of the VS-44A in flight.

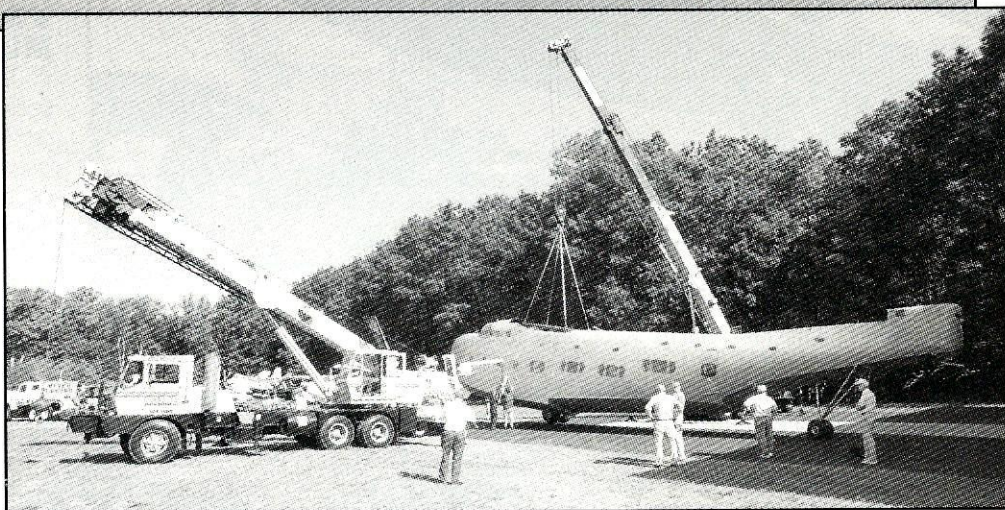
transportation of the aircraft began. In 1982, S.C. Loveland & Co., of Philadelphia, offered to bring the *Excambian* to Connecticut as a contribution to the museum. In the last week of February 1983, the venerable aircraft was loaded on an ocean-going barge and began its voyage from the Gulf of Mexico to Connecticut. It arrived in Bridgeport on 6 April 1983, and was stored at the Sikorsky Memorial Airport,

awaiting restoration. Somewhat later, the plane was moved into a temporary structure at the airport, approximately 300 yards from its birthplace.

VOLUNTEER RESTORATION EFFORT BEGINS

On 4 November 1987, a ceremony was held at the airport to celebrate the start of restoration efforts on VS-44A *Excambian*. A team of volunteers was being assembled to work on the major restoration effort.

The restoration took an intense ten years. Volunteers such as Harry M. Hleva, who was part of the



The VS-44A will be a major center piece for the New England Air Museum. (Charles Pickett)

original crew that built the *Excambian* in 1942, formed the basis for the extensive project. "This has certainly been a labor of love," said Hleva.

In early June of this year, the fuselage of the craft made its final journey of 71 miles on an oversized tractor trailer with a police escort to its new home at the New England Air Museum (the museum's new name) at Windsor Locks. Originally, it was planned to use a giant crane helicopter to lift the flying boat to a barge, transport it by water along Long Island Sound and up the Connecticut River to Hartford, then have the helicopter pick it up again and take it to the air museum. The plan was canceled, however,

because of liability concerns.

At Windsor Locks, the wings will be added and the craft painted in its original colors — sky blue and gray.

The New England Air Museum, located on Perimeter Road off Route 75 at Bradley International Airport, is a non-profit educational institution operated by the Connecticut Aeronautical Historical Association. The museum is open year-round, seven days a week, and is closed on Thanksgiving and Christmas. Hours of operation are 10 to 5. Admission is \$6.50 for adults, \$3 for children ages 6-11, free for children under age 6. Group rates are available upon request. For more information, call (860) 623-3305.

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