
SCENE

25

CGAS PUERTO RICO—1956-1958 (SEARCH-AND-RESCUE)

Another “Sea to Shining Sea” transfer, this time from San Diego to New York City with a sea voyage added on to complete the journey to San Juan, Puerto Rico.

I have a memory lapse on this trip. I know we went by car to New York because we had the same Ford station wagon in Puerto Rico. We sold it to become a “Publico” jitney when we left there for my next duty station. I don’t recollect visiting parks en route, as we usually did, nor the paperwork involved, but we had orders where and when to report aboard a Navy Sea Transport Ship (NSTS) in New York harbor for the sea journey to Puerto Rico. Mary’s Uncle George got us to the ship on time and promised to meet us on our return two years hence.

The big luxury **cruise ships** would appear years later to replace the **ocean liners** of the fifties. While the cruise ships offer constant entertainment with gambling, cocktail lounges, live bands and singers, swimming pool, gyms, and shore excursions, the primary purpose of ocean liners was to get the passengers from one place to another. Varying degrees of luxury were provided by classes such as First Class down to Steerage Class.

The NSTS ships could quickly be converted to troop ships in time of war, but the ship we took was in peacetime configuration like a poor man’s cruise ship. No bucket seats, a good lounge, private staterooms, open seating mess hall, children’s play room, nursery, some group activities, but no glamour.

This transfer was more like a Navy family transfer than what we had experienced in the Coast Guard, living on the economy as we did. It was one of the rare times when military housing was available to us.

Housing. We were assigned to one of the large, two-story separate houses on "Captain's Row." (No house hunting!) In addition to that, it was a Coast Guard tradition to put food and beer in the refrigerator as an arrival greeting!! We would for the first time have all the "On-Base" facilities such as Commissary, Exchange, schools, movie theater, medical clinic, Officers' Club (pool), gym, bowling alley, etc. And be qualified to participate in ongoing programs such as Boy and Girl Scouts, DeMolay, and Little League.

Full-time Maid. Our quarters had a Maid's Room attached for a full-time maid. We gave it a try and found we had taken on another "dependent" with bellyaches, scared of local lizards, lonesome, wouldn't answer the maid's buzzer to serve table until she felt like it, and worst of all she didn't recognize dirt!

CGAS San Juan, Puerto Rico. We made the most of the many programs and facilities available to us, but I had to remember that I was there to command the Air Station, which also served as the aviation facility for the Navy base. The Navy Admiral's responsibilities covered the Caribbean. Therefore, so did mine. My boss was the Commander, Greater Antilles Sector of the Coast Guard (primarily an aids-to-navigation responsibility). His headquarters were in San Juan; my station was on Isla Grande, actually a peninsula in San Juan harbor. I only saw him at staff meetings, which was fine with me. He kept his hands off, and I could do anything I wanted with my aircraft.

We flew the twin-engine amphibious **Grumman UF Albatross**. We were years before the Cuban and Haiti crises. There were not many search-and-rescue cases, so we had time for training flights. I saw an opportunity to visit several Caribbean islands by scheduling LORAN navigation flights to the islands, returning on airways under **Air Traffic Control**. By this means, we saw places the cruise ships and jet set would exploit in years to come, destroying a West Indies atmosphere I had enjoyed. More about this later.

At breakfast, all the talk was about a small **hurricane** headed our way. I called for a muster as a way to "install" myself. There would be no Change-of-Command Ceremony because the Commanding Officer I was to relieve had already departed to his new assignment. I read my orders and gave a little pep talk, then dismissed the crew and called for a briefing by the officers (I only had about ten).

I found out that our Coast Guard hangar was the only one of any size in San Juan, and everyone who had an airplane wanted to get into it for protection against a hurricane. The crew had been through this routine several times and knew how to pack in aircraft of many sizes. The largest was the Admiral's passenger plane. The smallest the Army cub-like spotter plane. The British West Indies commercial DC-3 was accommodated for goodwill. Our two amphibs were positioned for first out, should an emergency call come in.

The storm crossed over Puerto Rico from the southeast to the northwest and within a few hours it was gone, leaving good flying conditions behind. I was anxious to take a



My little command consisted of three little amphibian seaplanes of the kind I have previously mentioned using to court Mary and get her to our wedding. Here my area of operation was the entire Caribbean, and we took advantage by sending training flights to many interesting islands for airways training. We had many memorable experiences such as attending a steel-drum competition and the Trinidad Mardi Gras

look around and search for damage. I found that a village at the east end had been hit hard. The flimsy shacks had roofs missing, people waving as though in distress. Heavy rain made the roads look dangerous. While circling, to save time, I radioed the Air Station to notify the Red Cross so they could get a truck out there right away. I then returned to base to follow up on the situation.

Three days later the Red Cross phoned me and asked for a first hand report, as they were preparing a truck with emergency supplies! I was shocked. They were not. They knew that local country people would not suffer. They would just nail a few replacement boards on the roof. They could live on bananas, papaya, grapefruit, coconut, and plantain for a few days.

And now about those **training flights** as they apply to our primary search-and-rescue mission.

Military commanders have a responsibility to provide for the safety of their men, especially during military maneuvers. They will assign rescue facilities to meet that responsibility. The Air Force has what they call Air Sea Rescue (ASR) squadrons to cover their missions.

By contrast, the Coast Guard positions its **Search-and-Rescue (SAR)** equipment where the potential need is greatest. And, being a humanitarian service, the Coast Guard will give succor regardless of nationality, friend or foe. My Air Station was based in San Juan to best cover an area where American activity was the greatest. We could, however, be dispatched to any place within the Caribbean. The training flights gave us important local knowledge. I thought they were one of my “better ideas,” as Mary would say. I thought so too.

Each Caribbean island had its own charm and something of special interest.

The **Dominican Republic** occupies the eastern two-thirds of the tropical island of Hispaniola. The western one-third is occupied by the Republic of Haiti. It was a short flight to **Ciudad Trujillo** (Santo Domingo today), recently named for their strict dictator. It was the neatest West Indies city we would see, excepted for Curaçao, which was Dutch. We walked the shoreline to see the tree stump to which they claim Columbus moored his *Niña*. Columbus' bones are buried in the Ciudad Cathedral, but were not available for public viewing.

Haiti had a separate airport serving **Port-au-Prince**, its principal city. It was a favorite because of the informality—there was voice radio that cleared us to land. That was all. We would taxi close to the terminal and go to the fence which was jammed on the other side by French-African (black) local spectators. They would be there to trade articles carved of West Indies mahogany! A t-shirt, a pair of pants, any article of clothing (never mind the condition) would get you a nice bowl, large or small, mask, or figurine. I came home loaded! Because of the swapping, this was a favorite flight destination.

But for fun, **Antigua** could not be beat. That was because my flight was there on Children's Carnival Day. Children of all ages dress in costumes depicting whatever they want. Everything from royalty to animals. One boy was in a green shroud from head to foot and he inched like an inchworm across the stage. While the pageant took place, they were accompanied by steel-band music!

Steel drums are said to have originated when African slaves stirred up their tribes to revolt by beating on skin drums. When skin drums were forbidden, their answer was to cut off the ends of empty oil drums andpeen the surface to produce separate notes when tapped. Steel drums could play any kind of music if it had a good beat and soon became popular throughout the islands. Now steel-drum bands are formed in villages to keep the locals occupied and to compete with other bands on special occasions. The Navy Admiral was fascinated and the official Navy Band was soon equipped with steel drums. Its members played almost as well as the natives.

Antigua has history, too. In English Harbour is **Nelson's Dockyard**. Admiral Nelson's sail loft and storeroom stand in good condition as does the landing and bollards where he careened his ships for bottom cleaning and repair.

Curaçao is part of the southern Netherlands West Indies group which also includes Aruba and Bonaire. We landed at Curaçao and visited the capital, Willemstad. The

harbor had all the atmosphere of the tropics, with inter-island native cargo sail boats, their bow sprits hanging over the docks, but the little city was in deep contrast with rows of spic-and-span Dutch-style buildings looking more like Europe than the West Indies. English was widely spoken, which added to the pleasure of this visit.

Bridgetown, Barbados, the eastern gateway to the Caribbean, was the busiest harbor we visited. European cargo was offloaded there for distribution throughout the Caribbean. It was all very primitive and picturesque but what I remember best is a little cottage-like building in the middle of the busy crowds clearly labeled “Château du Nécessité”!!

I remember the French island of **Martinique**, although I can’t remember how I got there. It is noted for its many volcanic mountains, the highest of which is Montagne Pelée (4,600 feet). This mountain suddenly erupted in 1902. A ball of superheated gas rolled down over the city and killed an estimated thirty thousand people. Only one person survived. He was a prisoner locked in a dungeon-like jail in a deep cave.

I do remember the airport runway in the **Grenadines**. It ran east and west with a slight upward incline when landing to the west and a small hill directly ahead. That wasn’t too bad to handle, but a downwind down-slope takeoff was scary! It was called a spice island, but all I remember were naked little black boys skinny-dipping in the little cove where fishing skiffs were being unloaded of the day’s catch of good-size fish.

If this seems like a lot of “flights for fun,” it was. But, over a two-year time span, it didn’t seem very often. And there was a hidden mission we didn’t talk about—**reconnaissance**. We reported anything out of the ordinary. These were peaceful times. Smuggling dope was not a problem, nor were there boatloads of people trying to escape their homelands to seek better lives in the United States. Those years were just over the horizon, so to speak.

This next flight was not for training but was a mission made easy and with confidence gained by the training flights we had.

It was **Mardi Gras** time. A great time of year for politicians and military top brass to make field inspection trips. And what better place to focus in on than the Caribbean, where every island was jumping to the native beat of **Carnival**!! The world’s most famous Carnival celebration is in New Orleans and the next biggest (and most truly native) is in **Trinidad**. Local clubs are formed to come up with a theme and to work all year designing and creating costumes for their club to show off as they march and dance across an elevated stage to the shouts and cheers of the spectators.

The Commandant of the Coast Guard invited the Commissioner of Customs to accompany him to attend the Trinidad celebration. He would fly to our Air Station in San Juan in his **Lockheed C-130 Hercules** (with its customized posh interior insert) and requested the Air Station to provide the link between San Juan and Port-of-Spain. Needless to say, “We would be pleased!” And I assigned myself to pilot the plane. The

flight was uneventful and successful in all respects, but our little twin-engine amphib must have seemed tiny to the Admiral and Commissioner.

Receptions. With so many European nations owning islands in the Caribbean Sea, it is not surprising that there were many protocol calls to be made and returned by senior government representatives. Less formal ones might just consist of a cocktail reception. The Coast Guard did not host one, but I will never forget this one:

The Commandant of the Marine Corps was passing through just long enough for an exchange of calls between the Navy Admiral and the Marine General. The senior Marine officer stationed in San Juan, a full Colonel, held a reception for him in his On-Base quarters, in Captain's Row like mine. The problem was that his quarters had settled through the years and the living room and dining room had a list to starboard of about three degrees. It was unnoticeable, except that after standing awhile nursing a drink one found himself amongst the gathering crowd at the lee edge of the room!

We guests were all dressed in our Service Dress Whites for the occasion. I was upwind observing the crowd when out of the mist a younger officer appeared staring straight at me. As he approached, I observed he wore the aiguillettes of an Aide and Naval Aviator Wings. By golly, he did look familiar! He couldn't be, but surely looked like **Dickie Braun** who was caught with me stealing milk in Camp Emerald Bay. (See Scene 7) **IT WAS!!!** Dickie recognized me from across the room. We had just about five minutes together when he had to depart, never to be seen by me again. "What's the big hurry?" I asked. He replied, "I am the General's personal pilot and we are flying out immediately. Let's hope our paths cross again sometime somewhere!"