

Sikorsky
VS-44A
“Excambian”
N41881

Excerpt from Harry E. Pember book



On January 10, 1969 the aircraft was involved in an unusual incident that was to end her long service life.

There has been considerable controversy regarding the final flight of the “Excambian”. Recently, contact was made with Ted Pfeiffer, who was purser onboard the aircraft on that fateful day. Mr. Pfeiffer still resides in the Virgin Islands and his memories of that day and experiences with the VS-44A are as clear as can be. Ted recalls that day, We were returning from St. Croix and as usual were making our approach from the west. Captain Bill Sorrens was the pilot in command and he essentially had two co-pilots, a young somewhat inexperienced, but nevertheless talented co-pilot and a very experienced flight engineer who recently retired as a captain with a major airline. As we came off the step, the number four engine failed. Both co-pilots noticed immediately. Captain Sorren was busy controlling the aircraft and evidently did not notice the problem. As we entered the Rollover Cut, Bill revved the two outboard engines to compensate for drift caused by the wind or tides and of course, with number four engine out, the increased rpms on number one engine caused the aircraft to lurch to starboard and she went aground. Bill immediately feathered number one engine and the aircraft promptly sank. No one has ever figured out why neither co-pilot warned Bill regarding the engine outage.

Fortunately, the water was only four feet deep and as the aircraft quickly settled to the bottom, only the passengers in the very first compartment, which was actually the galley, got their feet wet. That compartment is two steps down from the “real” passenger compartments. The aircraft was quite close to shore and as a matter of fact, the starboard wing was close enough to land to allow a very attractive young lady named Molly to crawl out on the wing with food and beverages as we pondered our situation.

None of the passengers or crew was injured and with Molly’s help we were actually pretty comfortable. We stuffed the gash in the hull full of rags and other cloth and eventually managed to pump out enough water to taxi the aircraft to the ramp. She was too heavy to taxi up the ramp on her own power so we winched her up.



I later built a concrete pad for her and there she sat. “She became a local landmark”. Mr. Pfeiffer also recalled that he loved flying in the VS-44 so much that he could not wait to get to work in the morning and in fact would have worked for free!

Shortly after the mishap at St. Thomas, Charles Blair consulted with Dick Probert regarding the possibility of Avalon Air Transport’s maintenance crew refurbishing and repairing “Excambian”.

Because of the extensive corrosion on the airplane, the price to complete repairs to an airworthy condition was prohibitive and “Excambian” was relegated to becoming an item of curiosity parked for the next six years near the launching ramp in St. Thomas. Several uses of the aircraft were contemplated, including one where “Excambian” would have been the centerpiece for a theme restaurant, but was never implemented.



Photos by Charlie Freehling and diagrams added for web posting



Even though Ted Pfiffier's account is interesting you may say it doesn't hold water. The photo above indicates Excambian's stopping point on the rocks. Antilles Air Boats always had their Boston Whaler at the ready and I'm sure any support came directly to the door and not accessing the aircraft by the high wing. None of propellers are feathered and if landing/taxi occurred as stated the aircraft would have been on the opposite shore. So I guess the controversy continues.



Photo by Charlie Freehling

This photo was taken one month before *Excambian's* final flight.