Eric Wiberg • Wrecks of The Bahamas

Ditched drug planes on Eleuthera, Abaco, Long Island, San Salvador & Cat Island

"ARE you calling about the plane that landed upside down on Queens Highway loaded with cash for drug pay-outs and skidded along, spilling money everywhere?" the old timer asked innocently. I was calling to interview him about a US Navy fighter that had ditched behind the church and school house at Hard Bargain, Moore's Island, in the Bight of Abaco, and had not heard about that story. But still, it didn't entirely surprise me either.

In 1991 after Junkanoo, a friend and I had hopped on a mailboat and headed overnight to Bullock's Harbour in the Berry Islands, then to Moore's Island for the night. Another old timer had given us a long walking tour of the island, which included the landing strip, the caves where cash and drugs were stored, and more to tantalize our young imaginations before we headed over to Sandy Point.

Many of us may not realize the strategic importance of these ports: they are only 125 miles due east of Fort Lauderdale and other US drop offs for drugs. They each have their own airstrips. The Gorda Cay strip was built intentionally long by Trinidadian entrepreneur Alvin Tucker in the 1950s. They are also only 10 miles or less from each other, but close to mainland supply and logistics, have deep-water vessel access, and are conveniently many miles from interference. In fact, when I was there on the first of many visits to find a Norwegian WWII grave, Sandy Point was mostly cut off from Marsh Harbour and only served by a dirt road that was, at times, overgrown.

It could be an ideal area to smuggle, and I do recall the thrum of military helicopters, the roar of small planes, and the sweeping of searchlights and cackle of anxious radios while there.

Moore's Island lies between the east tip of Grand Bahama at Sweeting's Cay and the southern tip of Abaco. Officially, there have been three air accidents there, including a Cessna in October 1979 on a dirt road; a Piper in September 1992, owned by Zig Zag Airlines; and another Cessna in January 1991, for the Freeport Flying Club.

According to investigative journalist Oskar Johansen, in an article titled Degenerate Ark in The Avery Review, after 2018, the conversion of remote Gorda Cay into a runway for drug smuggling was far from accidental.

"In 1957, 150 acres of Gorda Cay was acquired by the Trinidadian real estate developer and entrepreneur Alvin Tucker, an aviation enthusiast [who] built a 2,400-foot tarmac

OLD plane on Castaway Cay runway, in Abaco.

Silver plane of Disney's Castaway Cay in Abaco.

CHART showing drug smuggling routes for planes Northern Bahamas.

Tucker's caretaker bought off with a bottle of rum . . . the Narcos would ship their product from South America by sea before sending it on planes bound for Florida. By the time Tucker sold the land to Leisure Club Ltd. in the early seventies, he had stopped visiting the island for fear of his life."

Johansen continues: "Leisure Club Ltd. was, of course, a front for one of these Narcos: an American named Frank Barber. Barber consolidated his smuggling enterprise, renting the airstrip to other Narcos, shipping his own product, and laying plans for a hotel complex. The first bust was in 1977 Barber was himself arrested in 1982, allegedly in possession of 1.8 million Quaalude tablets, but not before becoming an informant for the DEA."

At nearby Sandy Point, a Cessna flown by Terrance Gibson crashed and was destroyed in September 1993. Previously, a Joel Ribler-owned Beechcraft crashed in 1970.

At Treasure Cay alone during the 1970s to 1990s there were at least a dozen

Further south, in Eleuthera, over a dozen aircraft were damaged or destroyed during this time, most of them not carrying drugs: from two off Spanish Wells to Alice Town, Rock Sound, North Eleuthera, to Cotton Bay. There were two Cessna, four Beechcraft, and seven Pipers. In Spanish Wells the reasons given behind two accidents are worth noting. In October of 1970, on the way from Rudder Cay Cut to Nassau, a Piper went low on fuel and had to ditch in the water. The NTSB report cites "forced landing off airport on water, low on fuel, lost electrical power, dead battery, deviated due en route weather and became lost."

Seems like a bad day, except they survived.

The other aircraft was on its way from North Eleuthera to nearby Great Harbour Cay in the Berry Islands, doing what investigators call "in flight acrobatics" resulting in "collision with ground/water, uncontrolled: crashed in ocean."

A Fort Lauderdale Sun Sentinel newspaper headline from March, 1986, noted:

in Eleuthera laden with 750 pounds, filed a flight plan for Jamaica. But instead, they flew west, south of Andros, to the Florida Keys, then east to Palm Beach, where they ditched the twin-engine Cessna 337 into the Intracoastal Waterway at Loxahatchee, near Palm Beach. They were arrested by the DEA who had been following them.

Outside Magazine published an article titled "Blackbeard Doesn't Come Here Anymore" by Robert Antoni in 1999. "After my grandfather purchased the island, he'd made plans to build a house for himself and to clear a runway for his plane. He paved a 2,400-foot runway, which even today remains one of the best private airstrips in all the Bahamas."

By 1980, little Gorda Cay had made the big time—at least in terms of notoriety—appearing in the headlines of the Nassau Tribune. Although drug smuggling was written all over the story, those words remained conspicuously absent from the headline: "Foreigners Take Over Gorda Cay." According to the story, "two Sandy Point fishermen were found on tiny Upper Gorda Rock, a mile off the Cay, having

stun them at night, just as they always did. A guard and several Dobermans approached and held them up. He walked them to his boss, who ordered the guard to take them a mile offshore and dump them overboard. The guard carried them 700 feet from the rock and told them to swim for it."

Several "respected members of this Sandy Point community" were interviewed, who told of counting up to six light airplanes landing and leaving Gorda in a single night. The island was now off-limits to Bahamians, the residents alleged. When Tiny Darville attempted to go ashore to check her farm, she was greeted by armed guards and dogs. The only thing she could do was run, she said. Another story came from a fisherman named Bob Adderley, who up until a few months previous had been caretaker of the island. He told how some American gunmen came, ordered him off the cay by sundown, and then burned down his house.

Frank Barber told authorities how "the merchandise likely arrived by barge or freighter fresh from Colombia — [using] the airstrip of which my grandfather was so proud of. At Gorda it was off-loaded, often directly into light aircraft, which

Beach inlet in a little over an hour."

Owner or not, the quantity of narcotics that Barber managed to smuggle through Gorda Cay — or assisted with his rent-an-airstrip service — is inestimable. But between the first seizure at Gorda Cay, in 1977, when $30 million worth of marijuana was discovered in two yachts anchored in Pumpkin Harbour, to the last bust, in 1983, involving $100 million worth of cocaine (five days before Barber went to jail), scarcely a month went by when a drug run was not made through Gorda Cay.

The police found Barber on the island not long after, with the passenger seats of his plane removed.

Perhaps it was Judge Roettger, who sent Barber to prison for five years for trafficking (after Barber finked on the very DEA agent he'd had on his payroll for years), who put it most succinctly: "Marijuana. Cocaine. Quaaludes. He smuggled quantities on the order of what General Motors orders from US Steel."

Barber never saw his ambitions for Gorda Cay come to fruition. He died a few years after Roettger's pronouncement, before he'd even served his five-year sentence.

Gorda Cay may be playground for Disney today, but not long ago it was a launching pad for tons of narcotics and other drugs into the American market. The principal of delivery was the same, if the methods and cargoes varied.

The evidence is still there – aircraft on the runway – only today they are seen as harmless progs. Moore's Islands holds its secrets.