

"HURRICANE HOPPING" IN THE CARIBBEAN WITH THE 461ST

By George Dickie, Editor

With much trepidation, members of the 461st Bomb Group headed for Miami, Florida for an Island Cruise aboard the Carnival Cruise Ship, "Celebration". The Virgin Islands had recently suffered damage at the hands of (or winds of, as the case may be) Hurricane "Luiz", and the island of St. Maarten had essentially been blown off the map. The Atlantic Ocean was loaded with tropical storms, and Hurricane "Marilyn" was headed our way.

Undaunted, the warriors of the 461st boarded the "Celebration" on Saturday, 9 September 1995 and, like days of yore, we sailed off to do battle at about 4 p.m. The weather was beautiful, and for two days we explored the "Fun Ship" with bright blue skies peppered with white fleecy cumulus clouds overhead.

We entered San Juan Harbor, Puerto Rico, about 5 p.m. on Monday, 11 September (See picture on next page). We debarked at 6 p.m. to tour the city of San Juan. It was a very short stay because we had to return to the ship by 1:30 a.m. so the crew could prepare to depart for our next stop. Although there were many options for touring the city, many chose to attend one of the two night club shows on the schedule. They were quite good and were timed to give us a little time to shop for duty free jewelry and booze. Because it was nighttime, we could not see how much damage was caused by the passage of "Luiz" a week or so before we arrived.

We landed on the island of St. Thomas, one of the U.S. Virgin Islands, about 7:30 a.m. on Tuesday, 12 September (See picture on next page). We would have a full day for touring and shopping. Again we were to board the ship by 5 p.m. There were numerous island tours and excursions to other small islands in the area for snorkeling, swimming and partying. We arrived back at the ship loaded (Those who took the Kon Tiki Party Tour actually were) with good memories of our stay and bags full of souvenirs.

At this point our cruise took a sharp change in course. We were scheduled to visit the island of St. Maarten but, as mentioned earlier, it was severely damaged by "Luiz", so our tour was redirected. We left St. Thomas early in the evening to sail 40 miles to the island of St. Croix, another of the U.S. Virgin Islands. We arrived there at 7:30 a.m. on Wednesday, 13 September after cruising very slowly around the area all night long. We believe they did this in order to be able to open the gambling casino for the night. The casino must be closed while in port.

About this time we began to hear rumors about Hurricane "Marilyn". The ship did not comment about the storm unless, during the tours of the ship's bridge, someone specifically asked for information. Then they pointed to a small weather map on the wall that showed her position. We were in no danger at the time but did not wish to share time with her.

On the island of St. Croix we visited the Whim Plantation Museum. It was a partially restored 18th century sugar cane plantation. On the grounds of the plantation were the remains of a very old windmill. When the production of sugar cane was at its peak, there were over 250 of these windmills dotting the island. They were used to provide power for processing the cane. As we traveled around the island, we saw many other windmill relics. We also visited the site where Christopher Columbus landed on St. Croix. It was a pretty, sandy, completely undeveloped beach. For the alcoholics among us, we stopped

at the Cruzan Rum Distillery. It didn't appear to me to be too clean a place, but the product tasted good. We landed at Frederiksted but traveled across the island to Christiansted for shopping. It was a pretty city, at least down by the harbor, where we bought more gifts for the coming holidays. We boarded the boat by the 5:30 p.m. deadline and prepared for our voyage back to Miami.

The accommodations, service and food were excellent. There was one little touch that my wife appreciated. Each night while we were at dinner, or some time later, the Cabin Steward came in and turned down the sheets on our bed. At the same time, he would take a towel, fashion it into some kind of animal and adorn it with some item of ours that he found in our cabin. The "Sculptures" really made us laugh. A sample is shown in the photograph below.

Ed Chan and I represented the 461st Bomb Group in the talent show. Ed played a Sing-Along with his harmonica. I told the story of "Rindercella". On Thursday night they treated us to a late night "Gala Buffet". What a spread!!!! Everything was carved or made of edible food (See picture below). We "Old Folk" went to bed. We couldn't stay up that late nor could we fill our stomachs that late at night.

We again settled down for a two day rest aboard "Celebration" on our way to Miami. The weather was again beautiful all the way back. Nobody was thinking of Hurricane "Marilyn" except the people on the Virgin Islands. Three days after we left St. Thomas she hit. The reports indicated that 80 percent of the island was destroyed. We were lucky. We dodged another bullet and the members of the 461st Bomb Group had a wonderful time on their 1995 Reunion.