


FLYING ON GOODWILL


Kevin Waters reinvents island air service

BY SALLY NOBLE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER RALSTON



Lifting over fields of snowy pine trees on a surprisingly balmy February day, the ice chunks floating off the coastline of Owl's Head look like wedding confetti, sprinkled in the sunny blue water of Penobscot Bay below. Often characterized as a tad high-strung—particularly while strapped into small aircraft flying off to unpaved landing strips—I find myself serenely flying the 10-minute puddle jump to Vinalhaven. Inches from me in this cockpit is my trusty pilot, Kevin Waters, a big bear of a man who exudes a huggable air of slow-and-steady reassurance—it wasn't jarring, for example, when, in his pre-liftoff safety drill, he had vaguely waved at the “regular Mae West” life jackets stuffed somewhere near my right knee: “If necessary, just take one out of the bag and throw it over your shoulders,” he instructed.

 P/N: 1213400 - 200
M/DATE 7889



Delivering the morning mail, North Haven. The cookies were a surprise present to Island Air.

Come to think of it, as pilot of this cramped Cessna 206 Stationair (capable of carrying 1,200 pounds of mail or five passengers carrying 300 pounds of luggage, but definitely not both), the lumbering Waters becomes rather graceful shortly after takeoff, ascending smoothly in a matter of minutes. Perhaps it's his short, declarative remarks that come through particularly loud and clear on my bulky headset, pinned to my head since takeoff. "That's Monhegan in the distance, looking like a whale," he calmly observes.

There's something sweet about a man who suddenly starts an airline in the dead of winter, with no appreciable assets other than an enormous amount of goodwill from the people he services. Together with three equal partners, all of whom agreed not to pay themselves salaries, Kevin Waters is the most visible face of Penobscot Island Air, the fledgling airline company now regularly shuttling mail, freight and passengers between Knox County Airport and the islands of Matinicus, Vinalhaven, North Haven, Swan's and Criehaven. When Roland Lussier, new owner of Maine Atlantic Aviation, abruptly suspended service last December 13, saying that flying freight and about 6,800 people on and off these islands had put his balance sheet \$100,000 in the red two years running,

Waters, his former general manager, leased a plane and began taking reservations from his cell phone. Then he went after and won a temporary, six-month mail contract from the U.S. Postal Service in Rockland. Contracts with UPS and Federal Express business followed shortly thereafter. A first-year's insurance premium of \$13,000 was paid up front to Aviation Insurance Agency of Bedford, Massachusetts, and the little airline's most visible start-up capital was a grateful donation of \$17,000 from the residents of Matinicus.

"I told my wife, 'We don't have a hangar, we don't own an airplane, but we have the support of the people of the islands,'" boasts Waters, proud of the community spirit keeping him aloft.

Matinicus, for one, had been outraged when its lifeline was suddenly cut. The two dozen individuals who live on this remote island, 22 miles out at sea, depend on air service for delivery of routine groceries, mail and prescription drugs. The state ferry only travels out there once a month, for about an hour, depending on the tide, from November through April. When Maine Atlantic suspended service right before the holidays, not only Christmas presents were endangered, but also milk and fresh vegetables from Shaw's

supermarket, delivery of silk for one woman's scarf business, several Social Security checks and a diabetic's medication.

At the request of Bob Hastings, CEO of the Rockland-Thomaston Area Chamber of Commerce and Peter Ralston, executive vice president of the Island Institute, Roland Lussier agreed to a temporary, 90-day resumption of Maine Atlantic's air service while interested stakeholders came together to resolve operation issues. A series of meetings was held at the Island Institute; island representatives, state and federal officials and economic development interests met to help create long-term solutions to fundamental problems.

"My only interest in this whole thing is that it be done well and reasonably," states Lussier flatly. "Without significant changes to the way island flying is done, the problems that are inherent to flying to the islands are not going to go away. For example, the North Haven Witherspoon strip remains 200 feet too short for landings during the busy summer season; the 1,700-foot airstrip on Vinalhaven loses about 43 days a year to mud, and there's a sense of entitlement to daily air service that exists with the 20-odd people who live on Matinicus year-round."

The town offices of Matinicus, Vinalhaven and North Haven responded decis-



Waters (center) with Matinicus residents Sari and Vance Bunker.

ively—each one voted, respectively, to give exclusive landing rights to Waters, and by mid-February Penobscot Island Air had already leased a second Cessna 206 Stationair. Front-desk man Jim Nichols was putting a fresh coat of white paint on the airline's just-rented trailer headquarters, while Richard Wright, responsible for training and logistics, was busy negotiating a small-business plan with Verizon for the phone line just laid in the muddy ground from the trailer to the parking lot—all of this action, mind you, within shouting distance of Maine Atlantic Aviation, a fixed-base operation currently focused on sale of aviation fuel, aircraft maintenance and flight instruction. Don Campbell, on-ground logistics partner, was pacing the day I saw him; simply itching for imminent FAA approval of Penobscot's new flight manuals. He hoped to soon share some of Kevin's pilot responsibilities. A longtime pilot himself, Campbell sensed the air pressure changes indicative of an impending northeaster, particularly in his right ear.

Not just any seasoned pilot can land uneventfully on the airstrips on the islands of Penobscot Bay. Waters is proud of the fact that his aircraft is specifically rigged with Alaska modifications, meaning big tires and dual-puck brakes. A plane typically accustomed to landing on a long, smooth, paved runway would take a beating at any of the airstrips on Waters's route.

Dick Witherspoon, owner of a private grass landing strip on North Haven, well remembers the day, some four years ago, when a pilot came in too fast, hit the brakes and rolled off the end of the runway: his plane crossed the road, ending up in a field with its

nose stuck in the mud. To get this disaster off the island, the plane's wings were dismantled by mechanics and ferried back to Rockland by the ISLAND TRANSPORTER.

On North Haven, strike up a conversation about island air service these days and you immediately hit controversy over property rights. No one has yet figured out a way to lengthen the privately owned Witherspoon airstrip by 200 feet so planes meet insurance standards during the lucrative summer market. The Meigs family, which owns the adjacent property, remains steadfast in its refusal to allow small aircraft to potentially land so close to their summer residence. In the event of an emergency and during off-season months, Waters has permission to land on the 3,000-foot Watson strip, but it reverts to completely private use during the summer months,

which are the most lucrative time to be flying in passengers.

Ralston of the Island Institute explains that resolution of this ongoing problem is critical to the survival of any island commuter service, whoever the owner. "Just as Vinalhaven has done its strategic planning and soul searching and stepped up to the plate to ensure that Penobscot Island Air has every advantage possible as a new entity, it's time for the residents and greater community of North Haven to step up to the plate," he argues.

Every season brings new challenges to flying freight and passengers. On a warm, humid summer day, Waters typically worries about air density altitude, or maybe an early-morning fog that affects visibility but just might dissipate as the

day wears on. Dew on a grass strip anytime before 8:30 feels like ice, even to a plane with Alaska modifications. In the fall, weather changes come through quickly—a cold front rolls in with crosswinds, the day becomes blustery. Come winter, snowy ice on the runways must be diligently plowed. "Six inches of snow may not be a drag for a car, but for a plane, six inches of wet snow can be a lot of pressure on nose gear," notes Waters, who has by this time landed on Vinalhaven's 1,700-foot, stone-dust, crushed-rock strip. After a simple, swift landing, we sit still awhile, headsets off.

After Maine Atlantic stopped serving this island, the town of Vinalhaven, along with those on Matinicus and North Haven, voted to give Waters exclusive landing rights. But in the case of Vinalhaven, the town also agreed to assume responsibility for maintenance. The community of 1,200 year-round residents now

RAPID SERVICE

"I had just purchased one of the new computer-based, chart-navigation systems for my boat and had a few problems with the flat-screen monitor for it," recalls Clayton Philbrook, a lobsterman on Matinicus. "So I called my wife, Wanda, on the VHF and told her to call the marine electronics shop where I had bought the computer and tell them to deliver me a new monitor to the airport, ASAP. When I got in from haul, the new monitor had been delivered to my wife and was waiting for me. Half an hour later, it was installed and the old one was ready to ship back to the mainland, where it was found to have a manufacturing defect—no charge for the new one and only \$8 for shipping the new one to me by what was then Telford Aviation, managed by Kevin [Waters], with no time lost."



Running an airline doesn't excuse Waters from the maintenance chores.

keeps a keen eye on 30-odd reflectors made of reflective tape, mounted on PVC piping lined up neatly 100 feet apart down the runway. The electricity powering Vinalhaven runs from a deteriorating underwater cable to the mainland, Waters informs me, and the night lights frequently fail, making these reflectors crucial to successful nighttime medical evacuations. On this unexpectedly warm day, an orange windsock in the distance indicates direction of a wind that Waters interprets to be light and variable—then he pauses to make mental note of puddles on the runway, because shortly after sunset he expects them to freeze, becoming treacherous.

Vinalhaven relies on whoever's flying island air service to provide anywhere from 60 to 65 emergency medical evacuations a year, according to Dinah Moyer, executive director of Island Community Medical Services. Penobscot Island Air's new rates are \$500 for a day flight, \$600 after dark, billable to most insurance companies. All sorts of safety concerns crop up after nightfall that any bush pilot doing a rescue operation must understand. Waters knows to inquire in advance about wandering deer and the random island teenager doing doughnuts on a dark, desolate runway.

In the true spirit of a community that pulls together in any crisis, Vinalhaven's fire department has been known to drive over and shine lights on the runway when the power fails—old-fashioned, but apparently effective in a pinch. Recently, when a 97-year-old island resident was diagnosed with pneumonia, within minutes her doctor arranged for

her to be transported to the mainland by Waters for admission to Pen Bay Medical Center; the woman was also blind and justifiably anxious, so Moyer flew to the mainland with her and the EMT, where she was transferred to the waiting Rockland Ambulance.

"A patient is often sent over to the mainland within 60 minutes of the call first coming in to Knox Dispatch, which is extraordinary considering all the coordination that is required," says Moyer.

With Waters it's not business, it's personal: "Kevin will do things like wear a pager, get hauled out of a wedding or a concert or something on the mainland to respond to a medical call on the island, without knowing anything about the call, if it's serious or not," says Eva Murray, town manager on Matinicus. "He comes out some years to the Matinicus Town Meeting, which is held on a Saturday night in mud season, and he gets very emotional trying to explain how he wants to provide better customer service. He doesn't act like it's just a job, just a business."

My return flight with Waters from Vinalhaven to Owl's Head runs about 10 minutes, far less time than the one-hour-and-fifteen-minute ferry that shuttles three times a day, round trip. After all this adventure, I find landing back on Runway 3-21 to be quite luxurious. Recently renovated for \$2.3 million, Runway 3-21 is the perfect example of the interdependence that exists between this small airport in Owl's Head and the islands of Penobscot Bay. When Maine Atlantic stopped island service on December 13, everyone with a vested interest in Knox County Airport

received something of a wake-up call. Only eligible to apply for up to \$1 million a year in FAA funds if the airport meets a prerequisite of handling 10,000 enplanements a year (my little trip counted as two enplanements, by the way), Knox County Airport has been relying on federal money from the FAA's Airport Improvement Program (AIP) since 1971, according to Jeff Northgraves, interim manager. And thanks to a new rule passed by Congress in June 2004, even more federal funding has become available to Knox County. "Part 139 has changed the way airports are governed, by lifting restriction to monies available only to airports with regularly scheduled commercial aircraft carrying a minimum of 31 passengers," explains Northgraves. "The National Traffic Air Safety Board had been pushing for this legislation to include smaller airports, maintaining that travelers should enjoy the same safety standards, wherever they fly."

THE BOTTOM LINE

Should those warm-hearted fellows with their leased Cessna, rented trailer headquarters and no hangar (yet)—the guys who just won the contracts to haul mail, Fed Ex, UPS and groceries to the islands—fail to get their operation off the ground, the airport stands to lose millions in federal grants. While ostensibly remaining impartial, Knox County Airport has waived its minimum standards for six months, while Waters finds hangar space—technically he should have .25 acres and 2,000 square feet of hangar space before taking reservations,



The crew, left to right: Don Campbell, Rich Wright, Jim Nichols, Kevin Waters.

but the airport decided to charge him only 13 cents per square foot for the trailer he's just rented, which comes out to be \$50 a month. Also, rather than charge Waters the usual 2-and-a-half percent of his gross to the county in fees, the county commissioners agreed to drop the rate to 1-and-three-fourths, with a plan to pay the difference in the future. "We're not holding him to the letter of our local documents, because they're under revision," explains Northgraves. "It just makes sense and gives me the time to rewrite the universal standards, which I was planning to do anyway, to open up the airport to other possibilities, as well."

A new federal grant program, the Small Community Air Service Development Program (SCASDP), could be used to improve island airports, and assuming it gets funded this year for an anticipated \$20 to \$35 million, Knox County has offered to work with the island communities to apply for 2006 grants—legally, the airport cannot apply directly for funding to improve the islands' private airstrips.

Several years ago, several officials from the Maine Department of Transportation flew to the islands to check out these runways. Marjorie Stratton, town manager on Vinalhaven, keeps a copy of David Nelson's 2002 report in her desk. In 2002, the state engineer found that the "runway was too narrow," "there were drainage problems" and that "trees and bushes create obstructions to the runway." Disappointedly, Stratton recalls a \$200,000 bond issue that might have funded transportation improvements to the islands of Vinalhaven and Matinicus, but that never made it out of the legislature.

"What really should happen on Vinalhaven is the height of the runway should come up about seven inches," fumes Waters—this being one topic that ruffles his easygoing feathers. "Right now the runway is lower than the sides, so when it rains, the whole runway acts like a ditch."

Furthermore, whenever it rains on Matinicus, it takes people with shovels, pickaxes and rakes to unclog the culverts and divert the little rivers that run on the airstrip, which is privately owned by actress Victoria

Holt. Unresolved maintenance issues like these, along with long-term capital concerns, are earnestly discussed by islanders now that everyone has suffered a substantial jolt in reality. Waters has repeatedly expressed confidence that the island communities will "step up to the plate" to provide what he needs. Bob Hastings of the Rockland-Thomaston Chamber of Commerce calls Penobscot Island Air a "glorified bush operator who definitely seems to have market support." The Island Institute's Ralston would agree: "Kevin Waters earned the respect of the islanders the hard way—by showing up and being part of the community."

"The islands were presented a clear and present danger to their lifeline," continues Ralston. "There must be heart and spirit in safely and faithfully servicing these islands—and that pretty much defines Kevin."

A Portland-based freelance writer, Sally Noble has written numerous stories about island air service and other topics for The Working Waterfront.