

Captain John Esmond Mathew Levenston

By: Will Johnson

During hurricane season I often think of him. He once said to me: "Will why you are building your house up on the top of that hill? Did you ever see any of the old timers building up so high?" And then he went on to tell me stories of the hurricanes of old passed down by our ancestors. After hurricane Lenny the officials from the U.S. Weather Bureau in Miami visited Saba and confirmed the same thing to me. Where my house is located, around two thousand feet, a category one hurricane is paying me a category three visit according to the officials.

Captain John Esmond Mathew Levenston was born "Below-the-Gap" on Saba on October 3rd, 1912. He was the son of Joshua Levenston and Mrs. Emilia Levenston born Hassell. He passed away on St. Maarten on June 30, and was laid to rest here on Saba on July 4th, 1994.

The world which he grew up in was much different to the Saba the young people know today. He, and my father and most other Sabans of the older generation were not privileged to attend school of any kind. In those days life was hard, and all family members had to do their part in order to survive. Yet as Matthews's life proved, his lack of a formal education did not serve as an impediment. A good dose of common sense and a willingness to work led him forward and to achieve much for Saba and its people.

He started sailing when he was eighteen with Captain Randolph Dunkin on a small sloop called the "Nautilus". His very first trip from St. Maarten on the "Nautilus" nearly ended up in disaster as a squall caught the sloop just outside Fort Amsterdam and nearly turned her over. He continued sailing on that sloop for over a year. As was the custom back then, he, like many others headed for Curacao where he went to work for the Shell Oil Company. He started sailing on Shell oil tankers, one of which was named the "Alicia." He mostly sailed between Curacao and Lake Maracaibo hauling crude oil for the refinery. After a couple of years he went to Aruba and worked there on Esso oil tankers, again hauling crude oil from Venezuela and carrying oil products between Aruba and Jacksonville Florida as well as to other ports along the Gulf of Mexico.



Sailing on an oil tanker during World War II was a very dangerous business as they were the targets of the German submarines known as U-boats which wanted to deprive the Allied Forces of much needed fuel of which two thirds were provided by the large oil refineries on Aruba and Curacao.

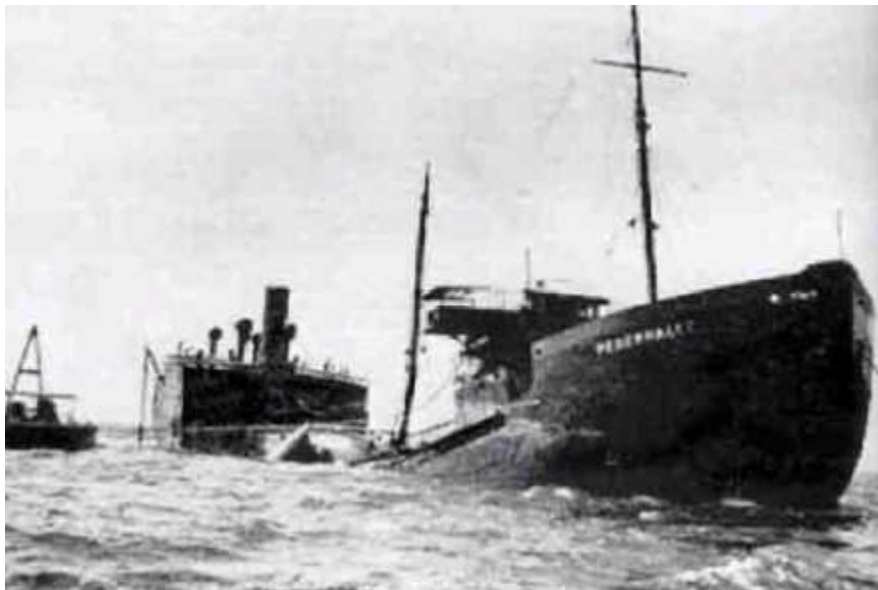
During World War II the tanker on which Mathew sailed came into the harbor in San Nicolas loaded down with crude oil for the Esso oil refinery. The tanker had to wait out in the harbor to get into berth as there were other tankers waiting as well. Little did they know that a German submarine was lurking below waiting to blow up the oil refinery. The submarine attacked during the night of February 16th, 1942, and Mathew and several Sabans had to take to the water in a sea of fire. The late Hubert Smith and Willa Every were also part of the crew of the tankers which went down, and they survived. Several other Sabans though lost their lives that night, while Mathew swam for eight hours. He swam from San Nicolas harbor all the way down to above the Strand Hotel in Oranjestad before he was picked up. The four tankers which were torpedoed were the "Pedernalas", the "Oranjestad", the "Tia Juana" and the "San Nicolas." The "Pedernalas" was beached and later restored. The tankers had a crew of 102 of which 47 lost their lives. Those from Saba were: Clifford Achilles, Wilson Fireman age 30, Kenneth Darcey Lynch, sailor 33, Eric Norbert Linzey, mess boy 21, Anthony D. Jackson, student fireman age 37 and James Stewart Cornett, sailor age 28. They all sailed on the "Pedernalas". On the "Tia Juana" John William Dunlock, Quartermaster born Saba Feb. 3, 1905 and Walter Whitfield born Saba August 12, 1912, Fireman also lost their lives. So on that one night alone Saba lost seven men in the attack on the Lago oil refinery. After that experience Mathew came back to Saba and he bought a small sloop called the "Astria" which he renamed the "Gloria" after his daughter. In the meantime he was married to Mrs. Hilda Levenston born Sorton, and together they had a total of eight children.



Captain Mathew and I survived many political storms here on land, and together we also survived one at sea. The storm at sea took place on September 1st, 1959. We left here at five in the evening for St. Maarten. The other passenger was Mr. Percy Labega the father of Mr. Clem Labega among others. Around eleven o'clock that night a sudden storm came up and there we were out in the middle of the ocean. Before we left Saba, Captain Mathew had said that he did not like to leave as his uncle Fernandus

(Feredoom) Hassell was dying and would call him back. Well call him back he certainly did. We passed through a night of sheer terror. By the next afternoon we had been tossed about and drifted till we ended up to the South of Saba. An oil tanker almost ran us over. It passed so close to the sloop that you could nearly touch its sides. Luckily the next day people spotted the crippled sloop drifting in the distance and a motor launch of Kenneth Peterson's came out and helped to tow us back into the roadstead in the late afternoon. In W.F.M. Lampe's book "Buiten de Schaduw van de Gouverneur" he has a chapter on how he, the then Minister of Finance Juancho Irausquin, and Lampe's daughter Sheila nearly got lost on the "Gloria" in a storm with Capt. Mathew. Lampe claims that Irausquin swore that if he survived that he would try and get some money from Holland to build an airport on Saba.

Other sloops which Mathew owned were the cobalt named the "Anna Louise" which went ashore in a hurricane on St. Maarten. Then he had the "Island Pride" which ran into the Diamond Rock by Saba and sunk. Once again Mathew found himself for five hours in the water. After that he bought the large sloop the "Fidelity B." On a trip to Statia the rudder head of the sloop broke and it started to drift. He managed to anchor on the Saba Bank where he remained for four days. On the evening of the fourth day his anchor chain broke and the sloop went adrift once more. Leo Chance was Minister then and he gave the Dutch Marines directions on how to fly from Curacao. By that time Mathew had been listening on the radio as to how the search for him had been abandoned. But the Marine plane located him and threw out flares. A fruit boat rescued him about 150 miles South of Saba and took the sloop in tow, but it was later abandoned. Mathew and his son and the other crew members were taken with the fruit boat all the way to Panama from where they were able to fly back home. It was after that incident that Capt. Mathew decided to throw in the towel as far as sea life was concerned.



In the meantime Mathew had been a captain on land as well, and had quite a successful political career behind him. He ran for political office in 1951 and together with Mr. Ulric Hassell he became one of the Islands first Commissioners and he served on the Island Council as well. In that election Mathew only had 12 votes. The large vote getters were people like Kenneth Peterson, David Doncker, and

Herman Hassell and so on. However the salary of Commissioner was fls. 50.—per month back then and the others were told that they could not own a business and be a Commissioner. By 1955 Mathew had proven himself and in turn became the biggest vote getter. He and Arthur Anslyn became Commissioners. I remember overhearing my mother telling my father that he could vote for Anslyn if he wanted to but she was voting for Matthew as he could do something for her children. My old lady had know her politics you hear!!! He remained on as Commissioner for twelve years until 1963. He served a total of 20 years as a Member of the Island Council from 1951 to 1967 and from 1971 to 1975.



Left to right: Member of Parliament Carl Anslyn (Aruba), Minister Ronchi Isa (Curacao, later Prime Minister) Minister Ernesto Petronia (Aruba, later Prime Minister) and Commissioner Mathew Levenston.

During his term as Commissioner the road was built from The Bottom all the way to the airport. The schools in both The Bottom and Windwardside were also built, the hospital on St. John's and so on. The road work provided much employment as it was all done by hand. Saba before 1951 had received very little assistance from colonial headquarters on Curacao. In the old representative system a few voters elected two men to advise the Administrator of the Island on budgetary matters. Some of the local councillors stand out for very good proposals they made on how to improve the island. The local councillors were always advocating for a wharf to be built and an attempt was made in 1934 but

functioned more as a lookout point than a real wharf as not enough money had been granted to complete the job. Also local councilor Errol Hassell was able to divert money on Saba's budget in the nineteen thirties to start a "real" road in 1938 from Fort Bay to The Bottom which included the famous S-curve. However it was up to the goodwill of the Dutch colonial Governor on Curacao to approve budget proposals from Saba. His job was to keep expenses as low as possible and it was only perhaps because of an oversight that Errol's ten thousand guilder proposal passed the Governor's attention. From the time Saba was settled by Europeans in the early sixteen hundreds until well after World War II, the island functioned as an independent nation. All officials were local people, mostly unpaid and even when the island had nearly 2500 native residents the budget was around twelve thousand guilders a year, most of which was brought up locally from some import duties. With the exception of the historian M.D. Teenstra who visited Saba in 1829 when my great-great grandfather Richard Johnson was the Governor, the island saw few if any Dutch officials until the beginning of the 20th century. Nowadays a Dutchman comes in today and tomorrow is telling the Saba people their business and pretends to know it all better than us who have survived here for fourteen generations. Imagine! It is only when Saba started real elections with everyone allowed to vote that progress came. It came about because all the politicians on the various islands were obliged to deliver. Saba as part of the Windward Islands Territory also played a role in the development of St. Maarten. Mathew was sent on many missions for St. Maarten to Curacao in the nineteen fifties. We used to tease him how Prime Minister Efraim Jonckheer's white dog had bitten him when one night Mathew jumped the fence to carry a message from Claude to the Prime Minister. In the process of helping St. Maarten, Mathew was accused of accepting crumbs for Saba. However compared to what we had before 1951, the funds coming in to Saba after that were a big boost for employment. Mathew considered one of his biggest accomplishments the building of the Juancho Yrausquin airport. He said that a Dutchman had told him that an airport might be possible at Flat Point but that it would cost too much. Of course a Dutchman would say that. They still do. Mathew said he would not take no for an answer, so he asked his friend the contractor Jacques Deldevert if he had any ideas. Deldevert was a good friend of Remy de Haenen who later became Mayor of St. Barths. Remy was a daredevil, had landed on several of the surrounding islands and even had an airport on the island of Tintamarre. Remy had already scouted out Saba for a possible landing. He had already landed here in 1946 with a sea plane and had flown around the island numerous times. Remy came to Saba and they came up with a plan. He asked Mathew to get the land cleared and he would attempt a landing. The land of course had owners, much of which was owned by my father's family where the runway is and so on. Everyone was interested to cooperate in the interest of the island. Mathew was a man who never took all the credit for himself. I have often heard him praise Eugenius Johnson saying: "If it was not for Eugenius I could not have gotten through. It was he who got permission from the owners of the land and mobilized the people to go down to Flat Point and clear the land so that pilot Remy de Haenen could land". Despite rumors that the Administrator was against the risk of landing a plane and had even threatened to arrest Mathew if anything went wrong, the landing was a success and the airport made a huge difference in the lives of Sabans and those who since then have come here to live.

Of course just like the Commissioners now get unfair criticism to the point that one has to ask where the venom is coming from and why, Mathew also had many critics. He was even given a vote of no confidence in 1962 by the Island Council. A motion which he survived as the rules were different then

and he was able to prove with a letter signed by the Administrator that the sloop the "Gloria" was in his father's name and not his. Despite much criticism and some of it very unfair, he kept his calm. He would always tell me that when I was going with him on his sloop to go to school on Curacao he would admire me with so many pens in my pocket. I still carry many pens in my pocket. Even when I go to church I don't feel dressed unless I have a number of pens in my pocket. Politically I was his opposition and in 1971 my party won the elections on Saba. Mathew and I maintained a respectful relationship all our lives. I would give him more credit in this case, as I was a firebrand and a name caller myself, and when I matured I regretted many of the things which I had said about him and other politicians and I would now admit that in his last years we actually became good friends. A speech that I made on his 80th birthday in the Anglican Christ Church in The Bottom was well received by him. So much so that when the main road in The Bottom was named in his honor by my government, he insisted to Commissioner Roy Smith that he wanted the exact same speech made for the occasion. Of course Commissioner Smith had to make his own speech, but I can assure you that Mathew was not amused. Although Roy made a good speech for the occasion Mathew told me on a number of occasions: "Man Roy mess up the thing." And when he passed away I was asked by the family to honor him with a eulogy and I used most of the speech he liked so much also for the eulogy. He was honored with a Medal in Gold by her Majesty the Queen, and he was also honored by the Lions Club of Saba and St. Maarten. The greatest honor which he could not witness though was when he died on St. Maarten many of the prominent people on St. Maarten came over with the body to pay their respects and he was laid to rest next to the World War II monument in The Bottom. In my book 'Dreaming Big' I honored him and Eugenius Johnson for the role they had played in the early years of representative government on Saba. They opened the road for all future politicians to follow and before they passed away both of them gave me frequent advice on how to go about doing things for Saba.

Mathew Levenston in one way or the other touched the lives of all of us living on Saba today. His generation never had the opportunities which the young people have today. Mathew's generation had to work in order to survive and they did so with pride and dignity. Despite his limitations in the educational field Captain and Commissioner Mathew Levenston succeeded in doing great things for Saba, and also for St. Maarten where he resided as well and shared his time between the two islands.

When you drive pass the monument give him a thought. Things he may have done in the past are still of great benefit to you today. And May he rest in peace!