

My Trans-Atlantic Flight on Southern Cross 31 May to 2 June 1977

The flight I made in 1977 from New York to Foynes (Lough Derg), Ireland, via Gander, must arguably be the most exciting thing I have ever done. It came about, rather cheekily as usual, when I phoned Charles at his home in St. Croix. Charles had purchased the two Ansett flying boats for his seaplane operation Antilles Air Boats, so I asked if I could come on the forthcoming trans-Atlantic flight.

Very surprisingly he said, yes, if you put in money for petrol. My heart sank, because I knew how thirsty those Sandringhams were, so of course I asked how much he had in mind. He said USD300, which astonished me at how cheap that was, so I said, "you're on!" I quick visit to the Qantas Staff Credit Union and the requested cash was in my hand!

I should add that my phone call wasn't from an unknown person as I had got to know Charles and Maureen well during my frequent visits to Rose Bay when Charles was buying the two 'boats'. In fact, I spent a couple of days taking them sightseeing around Sydney and its environment, which they both enjoyed.

Anyway, to cut a very long story short, courtesy of my Qantas staff travel concessions I was soon winging my way to New York where I was to join Beachcomber, now renamed Southern Cross. I was picked up at Kennedy Airport by the daughter of one of Charles' oldest friends who I stayed with that night, and the following afternoon went with them out to Port Washington to watch the Sandringham fly in from St Croix.



Stephen Berry with Southern Cross crew and friends at the home of Gene Neville on Long Island, N.Y. before the aircraft departed for Gander, Newfoundland,



Friends of Charles and Maureen O'Hara Blair assemble to bid them and "Southern Cross" farewell as they depart Port Washington for Gander, Newfoundland and then on to Ireland.



The next day, at the crack of dawn, we took off for Gander, Newfoundland, flying up the eastern seaboard of the United States, over Boston and Martha's Vineyard (home of the Kennedys) and into Canada and finally on to Gander Lake which we reached just as the sun

was setting. During the flight Maureen acted as air hostess, keeping us well fed (KFC!) and watered. And of course, just being Maureen!

At Gander we stayed the night at a lakeside motel before taking off the next day, again at the crack of dawn, for the long Atlantic crossing to Ireland. Most flights today from Gander to London take around 6.5 hours, the crossing on the flying boat took 14.5 hours. For me, that long flight was nothing but pure excitement, I'd have been happy if it had taken a week!

Finally, the Irish coast and Shannon Airport came into sight, and shortly after the town of Limerick and Lough Derg, which we circled before landing just on dusk. And that was the end of the most thrilling flight of my life. The next day Jim Flanigan and I took off in a hire car for a few days sightseeing, ending in Belfast where I flew to London and back to Sydney.