

Sunderland Mk 5 *VH-BRF 'Islander'*

Few, if any Short Bros civilian flying boats have had such a storied history as *VH-BRF 'Islander'*, later *Excalibur VIII* of Antilles Air Boats. Built as a Sunderland at Short Bros & Harland's Belfast factory as a Sunderland Mk iii in 1944, she was allocated to the Royal Air Force as serial number ML814. Then in December 1944 she transferred to the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) at Pembroke Dock, Wales.

In Feb 1945, with WW2 drawing to a close, ML814 returned to Belfast for conversion to a Sunderland Mk 5. For the next 10 months she operated for No 330 Squadron of the Royal Norwegian Airforce at Sullom Voe, Scotland. In November 1945 she was withdrawn from use and remained in storage until April 1952 when she was transferred to the Flying Boat Storage Unit. The following month she returned to Short Bros Belfast factory for refurbishment in preparation for a new life with the Royal New Zealand Air Force on the other side of the world.

Operating variously for numbers 5 and 6 squadrons until April 1956 she entered storage for several years. In December 1963, she was withdrawn from storage and prepared for sale to Ansett Flying Boat Services. The Sydney-based flying boat operator had for several years provided passenger services between Rose Bay, Sydney and Lord Howe Island but in 1963 its Sandringham *VH-BRE Pacific Chieftain* went aground at the island and was eventually declared a constructive total loss.

Anxious to replace their lost Sandringham Ansett scoured the world for a replacement aircraft but was unsuccessful. Consequently, they opted to buy a Sunderland from the RNZAF and bring it to Sydney for conversion at Rose Bay to a civilian flying boat. This groundbreaking project took nine months to complete with the first test flight taking place on September 28, 1963.

The 'boat was registered *VH-BRF* and named '*Islander*'. Because most people didn't notice the difference between *Islander* and Ansett's existing Sandringham '*Beachcomber*' they referred to the new addition as a Sandringham, although technically she was still a

Sunderland. For photos of this massive conversion project please visit this excellent page at Aussie Airliners. <https://www.aussieairliners.org/shortfb/vh-brf/vhbrf.html>

Islander was highly successful and remained in service with Ansett until February 1974 when she and her sister *Beachcomber* were sold to Antilles Air Boats, based in the US Virgin Islands. '*Islander*', now renamed *Excalibur VIII*, was the first to leave, flying off to St Croix on 25 September 1974. *Beachcomber* followed two months later on 28 November 1974, arriving at St Croix on 29 December 1974. Due to FAA restrictions the aircraft was unable to take a US registration, instead she was registered in the British Virgin Islands as LP-LVE.

Sadly, the plans to operate the ex-Ansett 'boats on the Antilles Air Boats service from St Croix to the Caribbean islands came to a premature end when the airline's owner, Charles Blair, was killed in a Grumman Goose accident in 1978. That tragic event spelt the end of Antilles Air Boats and both the ex-Ansett flying boats were placed in storage at San Juan Puerto Rico.

In May 1979 '*Excalibur VIII*' was sold to British millionaire Edward Hulton who planned to operate the aircraft in Britain under the name of Juliet Flying Boats Inc. After delivery to England later the same month the flying boat was renamed Juliet and a short time later renamed her '*Sir Arthur Gouge*', after the designer of virtually all Short Bros 4-engined flying boats. At the same time the aircraft was re-registered under the name of Sunderland Limited, Guernsey, Channel Islands and took on the British registration G-BJHS.

In August 1989 the aircraft was leased to Ryan Air and renamed '*Spirit of Foynes*' after the famous wartime flying boat base in Ireland. Then, after an on and off career operating in England and Ireland, in August 1989 the now elderly flying boat was sold to noted American aviation historian and collector Kermit Weeks whose business Weeks' Air Museum in Florida included over 100 aircraft types. G-BJHS finally departed England for the United States on 20 July 1993. Since her arrival at the museum the Sunderland was renamed '*Fantasy of Flight*' and as of today remains on occasional display at Kermit's

aviation museum. Kermit states that the flying boat is still airworthy but to my knowledge it has never flown again.



Former RNZAF Short Sunderland Mk 5 NZ4108 arriving at Sydney for conversion to near Sandringham standard in December 1963.



Technically still a Sunderland Mk 5, VH-BRF 'Islander' taxiing on Sydney harbour early in her Australian career.



VH-BRF 'Islander' taking off from Rose Bay en route to Lord Howe Island.



VH-BRF 'Islander' taxiing on Sydney Harbour early in her Ansett career (note the "Boomerang" livery).



'Islander' off-loading passengers at Lord Howe Island in December 1964.



'Islander' in her final Ansett Flying Boat Services' livery taking off from Rose Bay in July 1973.



In my opinion this iconic image is one of the best flying boat photos ever taken. It shows VH-BRF '*Islander*' flying directly towards the camera.



Ansett Flying Boat Services' Sandringham VH-BRC '*Beachcomber*' closest to the camera and Sunderland Mk 5 VH-BRF '*Islander*' taking off in the background late in their Australian career.



A rare photo of Ansett's two flying boats in different liveries, '*Beachcomber*' in the foreground with the so called "boomerange" livery and '*Islander*' in the background in her final Ansett livery.



Ansett Sunderland 5 VH-BRF '*Islander*' at Lord Howe Island in October 1972. Photo Col 'Charry' Smith Collection.



Short Sunderland Mk 5 VH-BRF 'Islander' on her beaching gear at Rose Bay, Sydney in 1972.



Antilles Air Boats owner Charles Blair and his wife actress Maureen O'Hara about to board 'Islander', newly renamed 'Excalibur VIII', for their long delivery flight from Sydney to the Caribbean on 25 September 1974.



Co-pilot/engineer Jim Flanigan (r) explains some finer points of 'Excalibur VIII' on 25 September 1974.



A fine photo of the former *VH-BRF 'Islander'* taking off from Cowes, Isle of Wight following her sale to British millionaire Edward Hulton. Hulton renamed the aircraft 'Sir Arthur Gouge', after the designer of Short Bros 4-engined flying boats.



The former VH-BRF 'Islander' on the buoy at Lough Derg, Ireland whilst on short-term lease to Ryan Air.



Sunderland Mk 5 G-BJHS 'Spirit of Foynes' on the buoy at Cowes, Isle of Wight whilst on charter to Ryan Air in August 1989.



Short Sunderland 5 G-BJHS 'Spirit of Foynes' on the buoy at Cowes, Isle of Wight in early 1989.



An excellent view of ex RNZAF Sunderland Mk 5 G-BJHS 'Spirit of Foynes' sometime during 1989.



Another fine photo of G-BJHS '*Spirit of Foynes*' as she flies low past the photographer.



Former Ansett Sunderland 'Excalibur VIII' in storage at San Juan, Puerto Rico in May 1979. Photo by Mick Bajcar.



The former Ansett Sandringham 'Islander', now named 'Fantasy of Flight', at Kermit Weeks Aviation Museum in Florida. It's a relief to know that the former VH-BRF is stored indoors and safe from the weather for the foreseeable future.