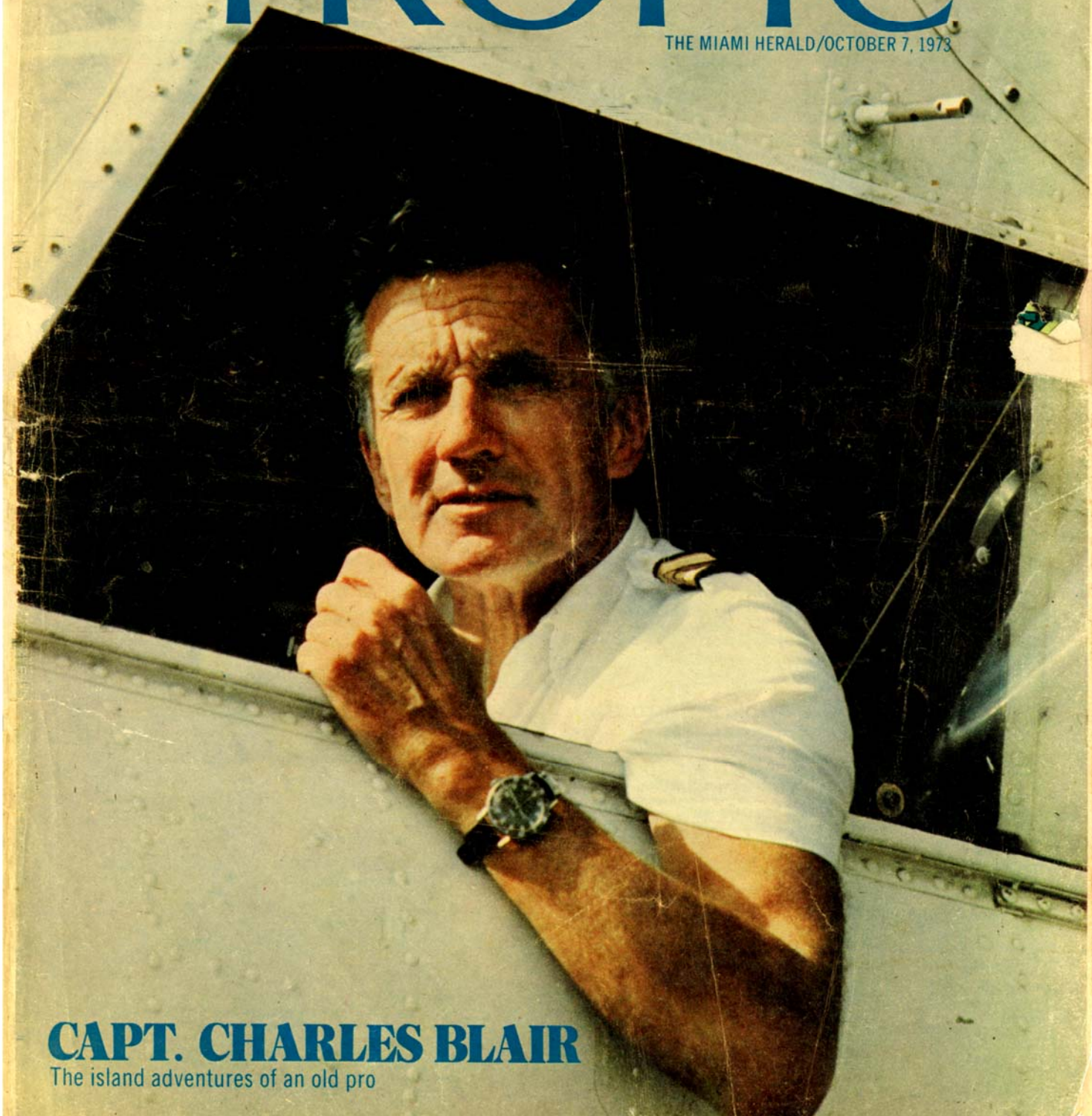


# TROPIC

THE MIAMI HERALD/OCTOBER 7, 1973



## CAPT. CHARLES BLAIR

The island adventures of an old pro



## **The Endless Flight of Captain Blair**

After spending more than four years of his life in the air, Capt. Charles Blair refuses to be grounded. Why should he, when flying has brought him several world records, his own Caribbean airline, and Maureen O'Hara as his wife?

Story by John Dorschner   Photography by Jeff Joffe



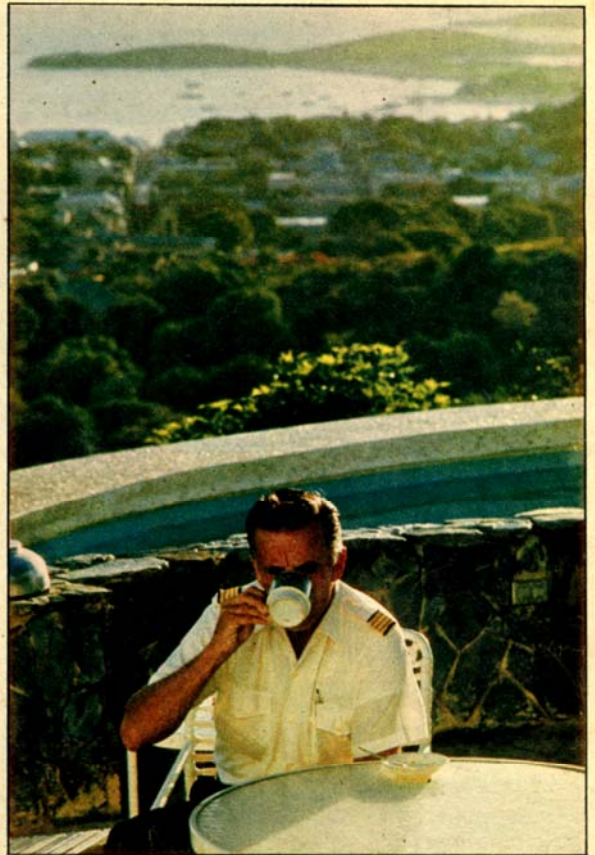
He's a hard man to catch: each weekend during the summer, Capt. Charles Blair is on his way again, rushing between Ireland and the Virgin Islands, catching commercial flights through New York. A minimum of 12 hours "if everything goes right."

On one end, in a 28-acre cottage estate in southwestern Ireland, is his wife of five years, actress Maureen O'Hara, known for more than 30 years as Hollywood's fiery redhead. On the other end is his kinky little airline, Antilles Air Boats, 20 amphibian Gooses that link a handful of islands in

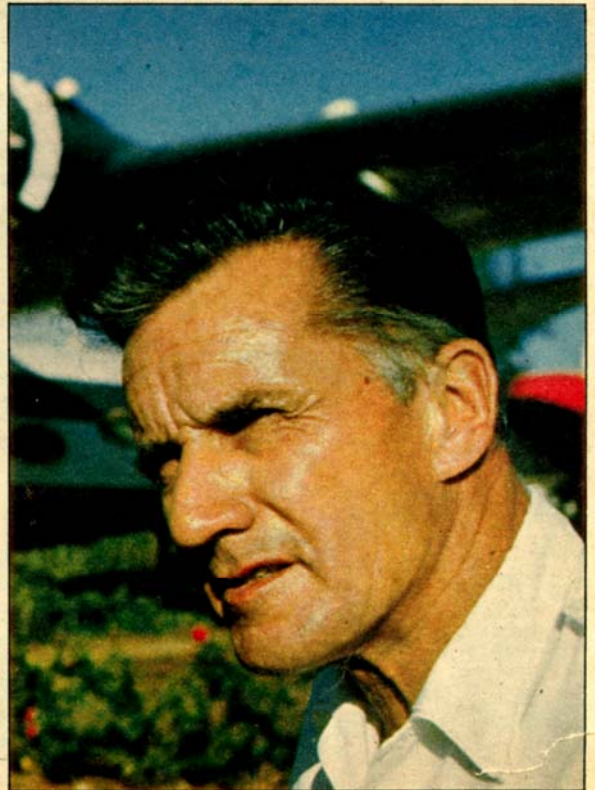
the upper Caribbean.

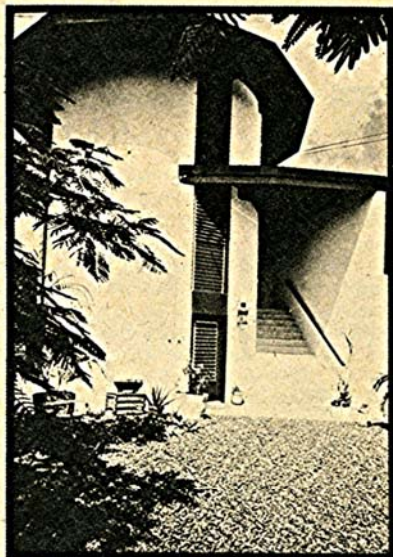
Ah yes, the jet-setting businessman, of course. But no, that doesn't fit Captain Blair, as everyone calls him. This here's an old-fashioned guy, with a Gary Cooper, Charles Lindbergh kind of understated quiet, a fellow who insisted his wife give up romantic parts when they got married and doesn't even like to watch her kissing some other man when her old movies are run on the late show.

In fact, he's not even really a businessman. No, he doesn't rush back to his home in St. Croix to check the ledgers for credits



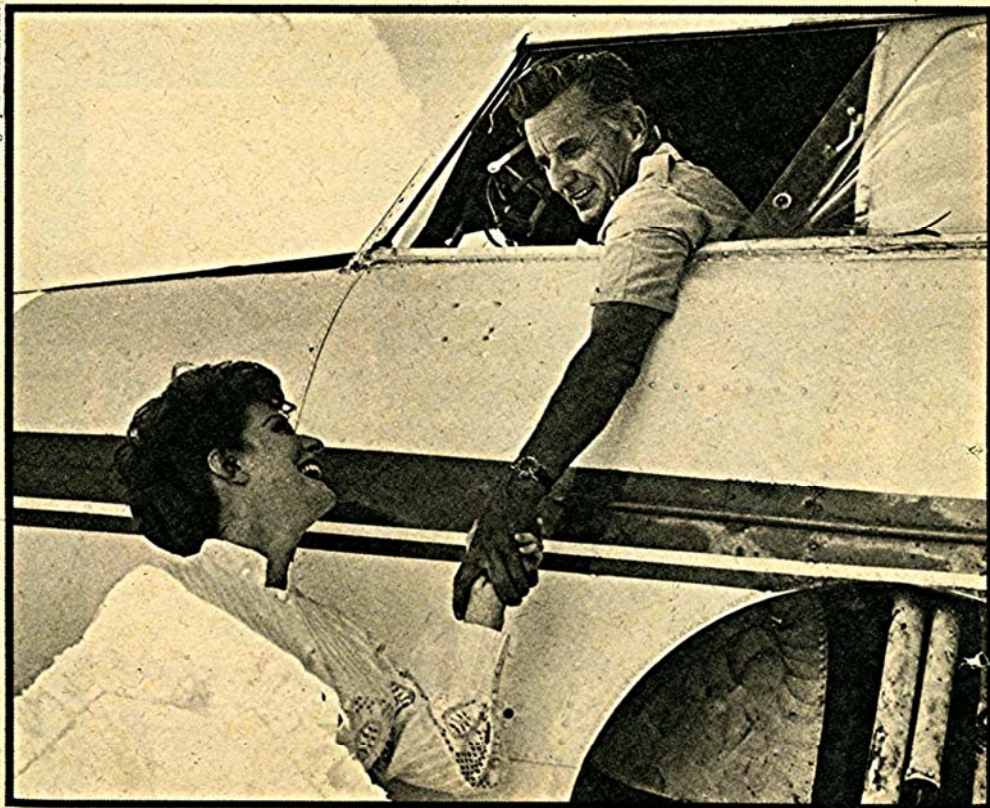
Billed as the world's largest seaplane airline, Blair's Antilles Air Boats link the Virgins with Puerto Rico and St. Martin. At sunrise, the former Pan Am captain, 64, gulps a cup of coffee on the patio of his St. Croix home (above), then rushes off for a day of flying





The Captain and actress-wife Maureen O'Hara: when they're residing in their St. Croix home (above), Blair sometimes takes "The Redhead" on a Sunday afternoon "drive," meandering over the island chains in one of his airline's Grumman amphibians. These days, Maureen doesn't like to fly too much, a reaction perhaps to the year and a half when she flew with Blair on every one of his Pan Am flights

Photograph: Fritz Henle



## BLAIR

Continued

and debts. He doesn't even have a business office. The Captain comes back for one thing, really: to fly, to climb into the cockpit of a small Grumman Goose, crank 'er up and start ferrying passengers around the islands.

Not that he needs the money — it's just . . . well, that Charles Blair has somewhat of a compulsion about flying. Since he first soloed in a Waco 10 back in 1928, the Captain has spent a total of four-and-a-half years of his life *in the air*, including 37,000 hours as a pilot. He set a world record for the fastest New York-London trip in a piston-engine plane, and he became the first man to fly a long-distance solo over the North Pole.

Not even this crazy commuting bit is new to him. For more than 10 years, during the '50s and early '60s, he held down two full-time jobs, as a world-girdling pilot for Pan Am and as a "special consultant" for the Air Force. He commuted between New York and air bases like Turner in Georgia in his own Pentagon-provided jet. And if all this wasn't enough, he had a bunch of business deals on the side, and anytime he found himself in a hotel room in an exotic spot, he would write.

His Virgin Islands operation started in a typical Blair manner. He was still working for Pan Am and the Pentagon when he started exploring the islands and found that "it was a real production getting between St. Thomas and St. Croix." He learned that one fellow with an air boat

JOHN DORSCHNER, *Tropic's* assistant editor, interviewed Captain Blair in St. Croix.

TROPIC — October 7, 1973

had gone broke on the run. But Blair was used to experts warning him that his exploits would either get him killed or break his bankbook, and so, undaunted, he decided the Virgins "were ripe for air boats."

In January, 1964, Blair took a leave from Pan Am and started ferrying passengers between Charlotte Amalie in St. Thomas and Christiansted in St. Croix. Boston Whalers would take passengers between the land and the plane. "When I finished two months of flying, I found I had a business," he recalls. He hired a pilot to fly the plane, "and a few months later, we bought a second Goose, and it (the business) just took off."

Several years later, when Blair "happened to be a free man" (after going through the second of his divorces) he decided to go looking for "The Redhead" — Maureen O'Hara. He had first met her in 1947, after a movie director introduced them, but both were married at the time, and nothing came of it.

This time, something did. They were married in St. Thomas and moved into a new, custom-commissioned house high in the hills above Christiansted on St. Croix.

For the next year and a half, however, they were rarely home: Maureen flew with the Captain everytime he took off on a Pan Am flight. Lagos, Nairobi, Tahiti, South Africa — they saw them all together.

In 1969, Blair retired from Pan Am, and except for the hot summer months when Maureen goes to Ireland, the couple has settled permanently into their St. Croix house, or as settled as Blair ever gets.

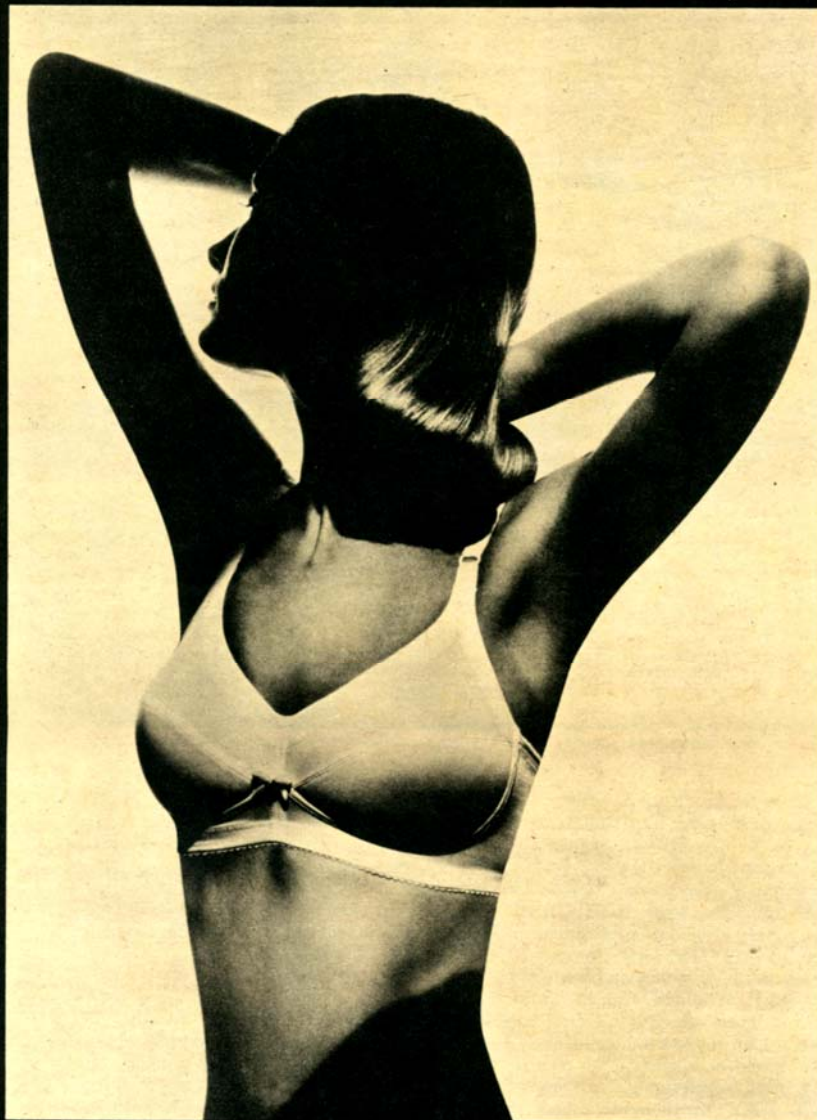
Resting on the peak of a hill, the house has a pair of two-story turrets connected by a single story, all of which opens up to a crescent-shaped pool and a large patio that serves as the main living-dining area. Inside, the rooms are furnished with an old-world flavor, and dotted with Catholic icons. (Blair was raised Protestant, but now goes to mass each Sunday with Maureen.)

"We're hermits up here, actually," he says, tacking on one of his favorite words. "We don't socialize much. We go to bed early, get up early, and just eat hamburgers." Maureen may not be much on cooking, but she is a fanatical housekeeper — "Sometimes, I can't get a mop out of her hands."

And it's equally hard to get a plane's controls out of Blair's hands. In St. Croix, he rises about daybreak, jogs a mile with his dog Mick, gulps down a simple breakfast on the patio and is down at the seaplane ramp for the 7:01 flight to St. Thomas.

His airline (he and Maureen own 70 per cent of the stock "because we don't want any mainland smart alecks fooling around with it") has 140 employees and a payroll of over \$1 million annually. "Tongue in cheek," he says, "we're the largest seaplane airline in the world. . . in the *free* world. I don't know about the Russians." Blair's airline brochures do use the line "The Goose: World's Largest Seaplane Airline," but Blair admits he hasn't had the courage yet to try an old Alaska Airlines motto: "We'll Goose You Anywhere."

With 120 flights each day connecting Puerto Rico, the American Virgins, Tortola in the British Virgins and St. Martin in the



It's an incredibly soft comfortable Doubleknit fabric. That molds to your body like a smooth second skin. To move with you.

Not against you. It's a classic dress-maker design. And a deliciously feminine feel. It sounds like a Love Touch.<sup>®</sup> And it is.

Give it a try, and you'll know what we mean. In white and beige. Available in lightly padded or underwire styles. From \$6.50

Warner's<sup>®</sup>  
THE WARNACO GROUP

Available at: JACKSON'S/BYRONS—ALL STORES; FAY POTTER—MIAMI BEACH; BRITT'S—FORT LAUDERDALE; SIROTEX CORSET CORNER—CORAL GABLES

## BLAIR

Continued

French West Indies, Antilles Air Boats carried an astounding 241,000 passengers last year, including 157,000 between St. Thomas and St. Croix.

Blair is proud of his aging Gooses. They are flown out to California periodically for major overhauls, and he has so many custom-manufactured parts made for them, each one is almost like a completely new plane. He's also proud of his 20 pilots, most of whom are retired military officers — 12 USAF, two Navy, one Marine Corps, one Coast Guard, one Royal Navy, one Australian, one CIA (in Indochina) and only one without military experience. There are a bunch of colonels in the group, and one retired brigadier general, who recently stepped in as Blair's assistant manager.

Each pilot makes between \$16,000 and \$21,000 a year, depending on flight time, and that, coupled with a healthy officer's retirement pension, means that the men can live very comfortably on a sunny Caribbean island.

All in all, Blair chuckles wryly, thinking of his veteran pilots, "we could just put bombs in the bottoms of these little planes, and have a hell of an air force."

With such experienced pilots, accustomed to guiding jets that blast past the speed of sound, flying Gooses at 140 mph a few hundred feet above the sea has an air of casual careflessness. Most pilots wear Bermudas (though not Blair), and after getting the engines roaring, will turn to the passengers and mumble something like: "It'll be 20 minutes to St. Thomas. Fine weather and all that. Are you bundled in?" And off they go, wheeling the plane into the water, bobbing out into the harbor, and then skimming over the waves for takeoff.

"Knowing the business," says Blair, "we're probably a lot more practical. I know what makes an airplane safe. We know what's airworthy."

"We've never scratched a passenger, though two Puerto Ricans died when they refused to swim off a sinking Goose near Culebra." He adds regretfully that all the two had to do was jump into the water with their life jackets and they would have been rescued.

In all his years of flying, Blair himself has never had an accident. He was born in 1909, the second of five children of a Buffalo, N.Y., attorney. Financed by his parents, he went to the University of Michigan, then to the University of Vermont, where he graduated in 1931 with a degree in mechanical engineering.

He went through flight training with the Navy at Pensacola and served a stint as a military pilot. Then, while many Depression-plagued pilots were scrambling for coins with barnstorming tours, Blair found an honest-to-God steady job. "It was a real plum," he recalls. "It paid only a couple hundred bucks a month, but that was a real bonanza back then."

The year was 1933, and the route was be-

'Cracking up was more or less routine'

When the artisans of Italy  
see this table, they take off their hats  
in respect.



In Italy,  
this Sculptured Block  
Table is a respected  
work of art. Its designer—  
Saporiti—is a man of respect.

A man whose mediums include glass and steel and even concrete.

But you don't have to go to Italy to hold the same admiration.  
All you have to do is come to the Casa Bella showroom and look.

See how the plane of glass appears to float free of support as it  
cantilevers from its base of sculptured block. Magnificently simple.  
Yet simply magnificent in your home, your office or wherever.

While you're at Casa Bella you can also admire the work  
of another Italian artist—Romeo Rega. His "Z-chairs" are as significant  
a statement of design as the Sculptured Block Table.

And once the grouping is on display at your home, your friends  
will probably express the same  
admiration.

Art touches everyone.

**CASA BELLA**

Italian Contemporary design from \$5 to \$5,000.

Open Monday through Saturday, 10-6, 1801 Bay Road (just off Venetian Causeway), Miami Beach / Phone 538-6247

**BLAIR**

Continued

tween Cheyenne, Wyo., and Salt Lake City, Utah, for Boeing Air Transport, one of the four airlines that flew under the loose title of United Air Lines.

With mountains most of the way, the route was not an easy one. "Cracking up there," he says, "was more or less routine." Between 1933 and 1937, half of the 10 pilots who flew that route died. "In those days, we flew low—we'd fly the railroad tracks in snowy weather when navigation was reduced. They'd go down the canyons, and someday they'd go down the *wrong* canyon. . . ."

In 1940, Blair moved from the mountains to the sea—as chief pilot for the spanking new airline, American Export, a subsidiary of a steamship company and Pan Am's first international competition. The war interrupted the company's plans, and soon Blair found himself at the controls of a monstrous four-engine flying boat, a Sikorsky S-44, ferrying military and governmental VIPs across the Atlantic. The boat was dubbed the *Excalibur*, named after an American Export steamship that had been sunk by a German torpedo.

But American Export's airplanes were not to last long. "In 1945, the CAB decided a steamship company couldn't own an airline," Blair says. The airline was spun off and eventually merged with Pan Am. "I was one of the slaves that went along with the plantation," recalls Blair wryly.

**I**n the next few years, Blair busied himself as a commercial pilot while enmeshed in a number of business deals with small air services to lease them planes, including a C-46 that was dubbed *Excalibur II*.

But that was just business. The real fun was "my sleek and shiny P-51 fighter, *Excalibur III*." With guns removed and the hollow wings filled with fuel, the plane was the ultimate in piston-engine one-seaters. It has a range of 4,000 miles and a true airspeed of 400 mph—facts that would later allow British journalists to dub it "the flying gas tank."

In 1950, the world was near the end of that Charles Lindbergh era of quiet-spoken men who climbed into odd aircraft and raced off into the void to find either fame or death. But Blair still fitted into that mold, and already had a number of minor air records to his credit.

Originally, Blair had in mind a round-the-world record, including an unauthorized hop over China at night. But the Korean War had put a stop to those thoughts, and Blair turned toward the Atlantic.

The attempt came in January, 1951. Blair was at a bridge game when a call came from a wind expert: "Tonight's the night. It should average a hundred on the tail."

For the first two hours of the flight, everything went smoothly. Then, when flying at 29,000 feet, Blair found his energy was draining away. The lights on the cockpit instruments dimmed. The numbers on the dials lost their meaning. He was sleepy, very sleepy.

"The airplane flops aimlessly in the

'I'm on the verge of becoming  
a witless derelict'



## The Green Witch Gimlet

Spell-binding cocktail.  
Conjure it up with 1 part  
Rose's Lime Juice to 4  
or 5 parts Wolfschmidt  
Vodka and a dash of  
dry vermouth. Shake or  
stir. Add a thin slice of  
lime to the potion.

But take care, the  
Green Witch Gimlet will  
get you if you don't  
watch out.

## BLAIR

Continued

stratosphere, one wing going down, then up, then down, and then up, rocking me deeper into sleep," Blair wrote in a book on his flying exploits, *Red Ball in the Sky*. "I'm on the verge of becoming a witless derelict in the Newfoundland sky, being blown out to sea on a torrent of wind."

The plane plunged 4,000 feet before, in his last moment of consciousness, he realized that the life-giving oxygen mask had slipped off his face. Quickly, he flipped on the emergency oxygen. Lucidness began to return.

When he became fully awake, he understood what had happened: while twisting in his seat to make notes on wind conditions broadcast to him by a ground-control station, his oxygen mask had slipped up on his face, and the precious gas had escaped out of the unpressurized cabin.

The rest of the trip was comparatively uneventful. Seven hours and 48 minutes after he took off from New York, Blair and his flying gas tank landed in London. With an average speed of 450 miles per hour, Blair set a record with a piston engine that, in all likelihood, will never be bettered.

Four months later, on May 29, 1951, Blair went after another record — the first long-distance solo flight across the North Pole, again in the *Excalibur III*. Armed with three wristwatches to help navigate, he took off from a Luftwaffe-built airstrip in Bardufoss, Norway, and 10 hours and 27 minutes later, escorted the last few miles by a pair of F-80 jets, landed in Fairbanks, Alaska.

The polar flight, and the navigation required where the only direction is south, came at an opportune time for Blair. For it was then, in the early '50s, that the Pentagon was shrinking its nuclear weapons so they could fit into smaller, lightly manned aircraft. In the spring of '52, Blair was hired as a consultant, and after going through training in the F-84G Thunderjet, became the only civilian fighter pilot in the Air Force.

For more than 10 years, he worked as a free-lance creator of weapons-delivery systems, flying around in a wrinkled business suit that left mechanics scratching their heads. Using first a F-84G, then the swept-wing F-84F (*Excalibur IV*), then a Supersabre (*Excalibur V*), Blair had a string of his own personal flying machines in which he bored holes, installed experimental black boxes and fiddled around with what he called a "gadgeteer's dream."

All the time, of course, he kept up his job with Pan Am — "On three weekends each month, I changed hats and went back to my Pan Am Stratocruiser." When he finally left the military, he had the rank of brigadier general in the Air Force Reserve, though he has never bothered to collect his pension.

Today, in St. Croix, Blair seems to have it made. With the money from the airline (his planes take off with an average of 70 per cent of the seats filled), plus his Pan Am pension, plus his free airline pass (which means he goes between Ireland and

Continued on Page 46

## BLAIR

Continued from Page 34

the Virgins free), he sums it up by saying, "We're not hurting."

His wife, after appearing in more than 50 movies, is now in semi-retirement, limiting herself to a project or two a year. "The less work she does," says Blair, "the better, but I know she does like to work, and I don't stand in her way."

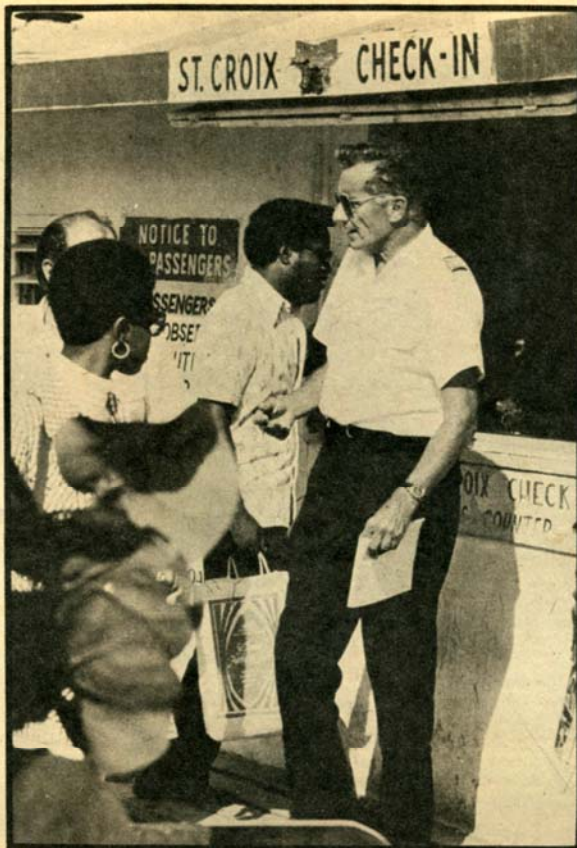
When she is on a movie set, the Captain usually goes along, but he finds it dull and usually turns to writing.

He has, in addition to *Red Ball in the Sky*, coauthored an adventure novel, *Thunder Above*, which was made into a movie, *Beyond the Curtain*. "Not a very good movie," admits Blair. "Well — it wasn't a bad movie, but the flying scenes were terrible."

Maureen, now 52, has been in movies since 1939, when she made *Jamaica Inn*, followed by *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.

In her earlier roles, she usually played a fiery redhead, in the later roles, a mother. And, in movies like *The Gentlemen from West Point* and *To The Shores of Tripoli*, she was the lone female in an all-male world.

In her personal life, she and British film exec George Brown went to the altar in 1938. The marriage was annulled in 1941, and three months later she married Hollywood producer Will Price. They were divorced in 1952, and she remained single until she got together with Blair 16 years later.



Says Blair today: "She's in a class by herself, a wonderful gal. She doesn't have much of Hollywood in her, but when she wants, she can really turn on the act. . . We have an agreement that she doesn't appear in any romantic parts.

"She has a great voice. I kind of wish she had developed that part of her, rather than the movie thing." The couple rarely go to the movies, and Blair especially does not like to watch his wife's old pictures on television.

If Blair does appear to have a worry, it's his age. At 64, he knows he does not have many years left for flying. He boasts he still has 20/15 vision and "the ticker is still good," but there's a touch of anxiety in his voice when he speaks of periodic pilot tests — "It shouldn't be chronological age," he says. "The last check ride was my best." And these days, when he has to read fine print, he occasionally slips a monocle out of his pocket.

In his business, "I don't want to expand too fast." But he does have a plan of sorts — an amphibian service between New York and Boston. By using the water next to the downtown as an airstrip, he could whisk passengers back and forth, skimming a mere 500 feet above the water, with at least as much speed as a jet that has to land at airports miles from downtown. Blair calls this idea "strictly a pipe dream," but he has located a large, 50-passenger flying boat in the South Pacific that would be just perfect for the job. And that might be just the thing that will enable Charles F. Blair to continue his "unending flight." T

The toothpaste that gives you  
this Close-Up smile  
can get you this  
Kodak camera...for just \$12.75.

Buy the whitest teeth and freshest breath from Close-Up® and you can buy Kodak's Hawkeye pocket Instamatic® camera plus film, magicube and flash extender for just \$12.75. Comparable value \$25.00. Offer expires August 31, 1974. If you have any questions about your order, please write to: Close-Up Camera Offer, P.O. Box 1912, Baltimore, Md. 21203. Allow 4 weeks for delivery.

I've got the Close-Up smile, now I want Kodak's Hawkeye pocket camera kit. I'm enclosing \$12.75 check or money order plus proof of purchase (side of the box with Lever Guarantee) from Family or Large size tube of regular or mint Close-Up. Send to: Close-Up Camera Offer, P.O. Box 2012, Baltimore, Md. 21203.

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_  
State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

