

Winston Churchill and the Boeing 314 Flying Boat

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*The BOAC Boeing 314A flying boat **Berwick** which carried Winston Churchill from America to England in 1942.*

I first became aware of the link between Sir Winston Churchill and the Boeing 314A flying boat when I met Captain Jack Kelly-Rogers on my own trans-Atlantic flight on *Southern Cross* in June 1977. Captain Kelly-Rogers was in command of the BOAC Boeing 314A *Berwick* when he flew Mr. Churchill from the United States to England via Bermuda in January 1942.



Winston Churchill talking to Captain Jack Kelly-Rogers while flying from Bermuda to Plymouth, England on the Boeing 314 Clipper Berwick.

It was a privilege to meet and chat with such a famous aviator, and this plane-mad boy learnt a lot from our conversations. Our flight across the Atlantic from Gander to Ireland took 15 hours so we had plenty of time to "chew the fat".

At the time I was keen to talk to Captain Kelly-Rogers about the extraordinary recovery of the Imperial Airway's Empire flying boat *Corsair* which in 1939 had been forced to land on the Dungu River in the Belgian Congo when the flying boat got lost and was low on fuel. During the landing on this tiny river *Corsair* struck a rock and was badly holed, leaving the flying boat half submerged.



Imperial Airways Empire flying boat **Corsair** partially sunk in the Belgian Congo in 1939.

Rather than declare the hull a CTL (constructive total loss), Imperial Airways, the aircraft's owner, sent engineers out to the Congo to repair and fly *Corsair* off the river. After four long months, *Corsair*, with her hull repaired, was ready for flight. Sadly, the take-off was a disaster and the flying boat, with her hull badly holed by another rock, was back where she started.

Again, Imperial Airways were adamant that the flying boat should not end her days on the Dungeness River and ordered new repairs, which in the event took another four months. This time the company sent their most experienced pilot, Captain Jack Kelly-Rogers, out to the Congo to fly the beleaguered flying boat off the river. This time, with Kelly-Rogers at the controls, the take-off was successful and *Corsair* headed home to England. The entire episode took 9 months.

The Boeing 314 Clipper

Reverting to the main topic of this article, the Boeing 314 flying boat, the aircraft first flew in June 1938, entering service with Pan Am in 1939. Boeing went on to build 12 aircraft. Pan Am purchased nine of these and BOAC three (these were initially ordered by Pan Am and transferred before completion).

Pan Am carried on its tradition of naming the aircraft 'Clippers' - after the 19th Century merchant sailing ships. The first six Clippers - *Honolulu*, *California*, *Yankee*, *Atlantic*, *Dixie*, and *American* were all delivered between January and June 1939.

The following aircraft - *Pacific*, *Anzac*, and *Cape Town* - were designated as 314A and had larger fuel tanks and upgraded engines. As some of the names suggest, these quickly went on with Pan Am to offer global service from the United States. BOAC's three model 314A aircraft were delivered starting in 1941, mainly for military service. They likewise were given names - *Berwick*, *Bristol*, and *Bangor*.

Wartime service

Soon after the launch of the Boeing 314, the Second World War began. With passenger travel on hold, the aircraft switched to transporting military personnel and cargo. They saw service to both the European and Pacific battlefronts, including transporting supplies to the Soviet Union (where its range was beneficial). Ownership of the Pan Am Clippers transferred to the military, but they continued to be operated by Pan Am's civilian airline crews.

Gone by 1952

Despite their romantic appeal today, the flying boats had their problems. Speed was a significant limitation. They could cross oceans, but only at around 155 miles per hour - almost four times slower than a Boeing 787 today.

The Second World War brought major changes to aviation. New airports removed the need for water landings, and new aircraft, such as the Douglas DC-3, were ready for service. Some 314s had a short post-war life - but none survived for long. Pan Am and BOAC retired them, and they saw limited service with other airlines. By 1952, they had all been scrapped.

Today, the best chance to see a Boeing 314 is with a reconstruction of *Yankee Clipper* at the Foynes Flying Boat Museum in Ireland. In recent years, there have been plans to recover the remains of two sunken Boeing 314s - *Honolulu* and *Cape Town Clipper* (which became *Bermuda Sky Queen*).



The Boeing 314 Clipper Yankee Clipper replica at the Foynes Flying Boat Museum in Foynes, Ireland.



The author with former Imperial Airways captain, Jack Kelly-Rogers, on board Antilles Air Boats' Southern Cross somewhere over the Atlantic on 1 June 1977.

Born in in Dún Laoghaire, County Dublin, Ireland, John Kelly-Rogers was 22 when he left the sea and joined the [RAF](#). In 1937 he quit the air force for the growing commercial sector of aviation, joining the fledgling airline, Imperial Airways, soon to become British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC). He became Commanding Officer of the fleet of Short Empire flying boats (there were 28!), ferrying passengers to Australia, South Africa and America.

He made the first scheduled west and eastbound airmail flights across the Atlantic by a European operator, landing at Foynes. In 1940 he flew the four-engine Short Empire flying boat, *Corsair* out of the narrow Dungeness River in the Belgian Congo where it had been marooned for 10 months. That same year he flew the first passenger flight to and from the United States and was the first overseas pilot to land at LaGuardia Airport.

The historic January 1942 flight on the BOAC Boeing 314 flying boat, *Berwick*, came about after Churchill had insisted on a face-to-face meeting with President Roosevelt following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Churchill made the outward journey to Washington on the battleship *Duke of York*, a long and stormy crossing, after which both leaders plotted the war and Churchill addressed the US Congress. Hours after his speech came the first of many scares about Churchill's health when he suffered a mild heart attack.

Keen to avoid another long and hard sea voyage, Churchill and his party agreed to fly in the BOAC Boeing 314 flying boat *Berwick* to the British colony of Bermuda on the first leg of their journey home and meet the *Duke of York* there. Headed for Bermuda and a sea voyage home, Winston Churchill climbed into the Boeing's cockpit and happily sat opposite the pilot with a cigar clamped in his teeth. He was so taken with the plane that he inquired with Captain Jack Kelly-Rogers whether *Berwick* could fly him home. Assured that she could, Churchill cancelled plans to sail back to the UK from Bermuda. Rogers took on a full load of fuel and saved the Prime Minister several days in transit.

The day after landing at Bermuda, the aircraft, with Churchill, two Chiefs of Staff and Lord Beaverbrook, his Minister of Supply, among those on board, set off for England. Churchill, in his own account of the flight, wrote years later that he believed a navigational error had taken them to within "five or six minutes" of German gun batteries at Brest. In the nick of time, he claimed, they altered course, but the aircraft was reported as a hostile bomber coming in from France and Fighter Command planes were ordered to shoot it down. In fact, at no time, according to Captain Kelly-Rogers, were they within 90 miles of Brest. Churchill, with his amateur navigation, was confused as he sat in the co-pilot's seat with the nervous Lord Beaverbrook standing beside him.



*Winston Churchill at the controls of the BOAC Boeing 314A flying boat **Berwick** whilst en route from New York to Bermuda in January 1942.*

Churchill's Wartime Travels

Churchill's wartime travels began less than a week after he became Prime Minister in May 1940. His first five treks were to France during the May-June six-week war, usually in one of three new de Havilland D.H. 95 Flamingo transports of RAF No. 24 (Commonwealth) Squadron, based at RAF Hendon. The twin-engine Flamingo was all-metal, though de Havilland had built only wooden aircraft up to that point. It held twelve to seventeen passengers. The Flamingos were registered as G-AFUE, G-AFUF, and R2765, though none was given an individual name, a then-common practice.



The de Havilland DH-95 Flamingo

Always escorted by fighters (since German aircraft posed a constant threat), Churchill flew to Paris three times; then pursued the retreating French leadership on difficult and dangerous flights to Briare, eighty miles south of Paris, and later to Tours on the eve of French capitulation. The flights were uneventful—and, sadly, so were the talks.

Then, as previously mentioned, returning from meetings with Allied leaders in Washington and Ottawa in January 1942, Churchill made his first flight across the Atlantic aboard the *Berwick*, a Boeing 314A flying boat painted in olive drab camouflage with large Union Flags under her cockpit windows. She was flown by British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC) personnel under military orders.

The plane was comfortably fitted with peacetime luxury furnishings and food service for VIPs. Her cabin was divided into several compartments, including a dining area and separate bathrooms for men and women. Passengers could move about, and comfortable full-length bunks could be folded down from the bulkhead. Until the arrival of his Douglas DC-4 Skymaster toward the end of the war, the flying boat was Churchill's most luxurious transport.

Six months later, Churchill made his only Atlantic round trip by air during the war. Only a handful of prewar passenger flights had followed that route, though military aircraft were being regularly ferried across by mid-1942. On 17 June 1942, Churchill and his party boarded BOAC's *Bristol* (a sister to *Berwick*) at Stanraer, Scotland, flying to Baltimore. Ten days later, they returned on a northerly route via Newfoundland.



*The BOAC Boeing 314A Clipper **Berwick** on which Winston Churchill flew from America to England in 1942.*



The BOAC Boeing 314A Clipper Bristol which Churchill flew on several times during WW2.



*Boeing 314A **Bristol** carried Winston Churchill on several occasions.*

Churchill's Personal B-24 *Commando*

A trip to the Middle East and on to Moscow in August 1942 involved the first aircraft assigned specifically to Churchill, an American-built Consolidated LB-30A Liberator named *Commando*. Based on the four-engine B-24 bomber but with a single tail like U.S. Navy variants, she was one of a growing number of bombers and transports flying the risky Atlantic (nearly fifty air personnel were killed in the ferrying process over five years).



Winston Churchill disembarking from his personal Liberator II Commando sometime during WW2.



Winston Churchill's luggage being unloaded from Commando, his personal [Liberator II](#) transport aircraft, after the Casablanca Conference of January 1943.



Churchill's Liberator II Commando after modifications were made to its nose and fin.

At this point the aircraft still resembled a standard B-24, but it was later modified with a solid nose and single fin. The aircraft was lost during March 1945 while flying to the United States. The aircraft was originally accepted as Liberator II AL504 in August 1941. Despite being assigned to the Prime Minister, *Commando* was a far cry from the luxurious flying boats.

None of Churchill's aircraft were pressurized. Since he was susceptible to pneumonia, a special oxygen mask was made for him by the Institute of Aviation Medicine at Farnborough. He slept wearing it, even with *Commando's* low altitude. Sometime later a transparent pressure chamber was devised, into which Churchill could crawl, cigar and all, if the aircraft had to climb. But it would not fit into any of his aircraft without disassembling the rear fuselage and was rejected out of hand.

Churchill ventured abroad four times in 1943, including two of his longest wartime journeys. On 12 January he flew on *Commando* from RAF Lyneham to Casablanca. The trip lasted nearly a month, including subsequent stops at Nicosia, Cairo, Tripoli and Algiers, and was his final journey on that aircraft.

On 7 May 1945 the Allies accepted Germany's surrender. The next day was Victory in Europe Day (VE Day) when Churchill broadcast to the nation that Germany had surrendered. Every serious biography of Winston Churchill returns to the same puzzle: how a politician written off more than once in his own lifetime became, in his sixty-sixth year, the voice of national survival. Sir Winston Churchill died at his London home on 24 January 1965. He was 90 years old.



Crew embarking on a Pan American Airways System Boeing 314A Clipper flying boat in 1948. The sloping platform the crewman is standing on is actually the starboard float.



A Pan American Airways' Boeing 314 Clipper about to alight late in the war.



A fine aerial view of a Pan American Boeing 314 flying boat taxiing out for take-off.



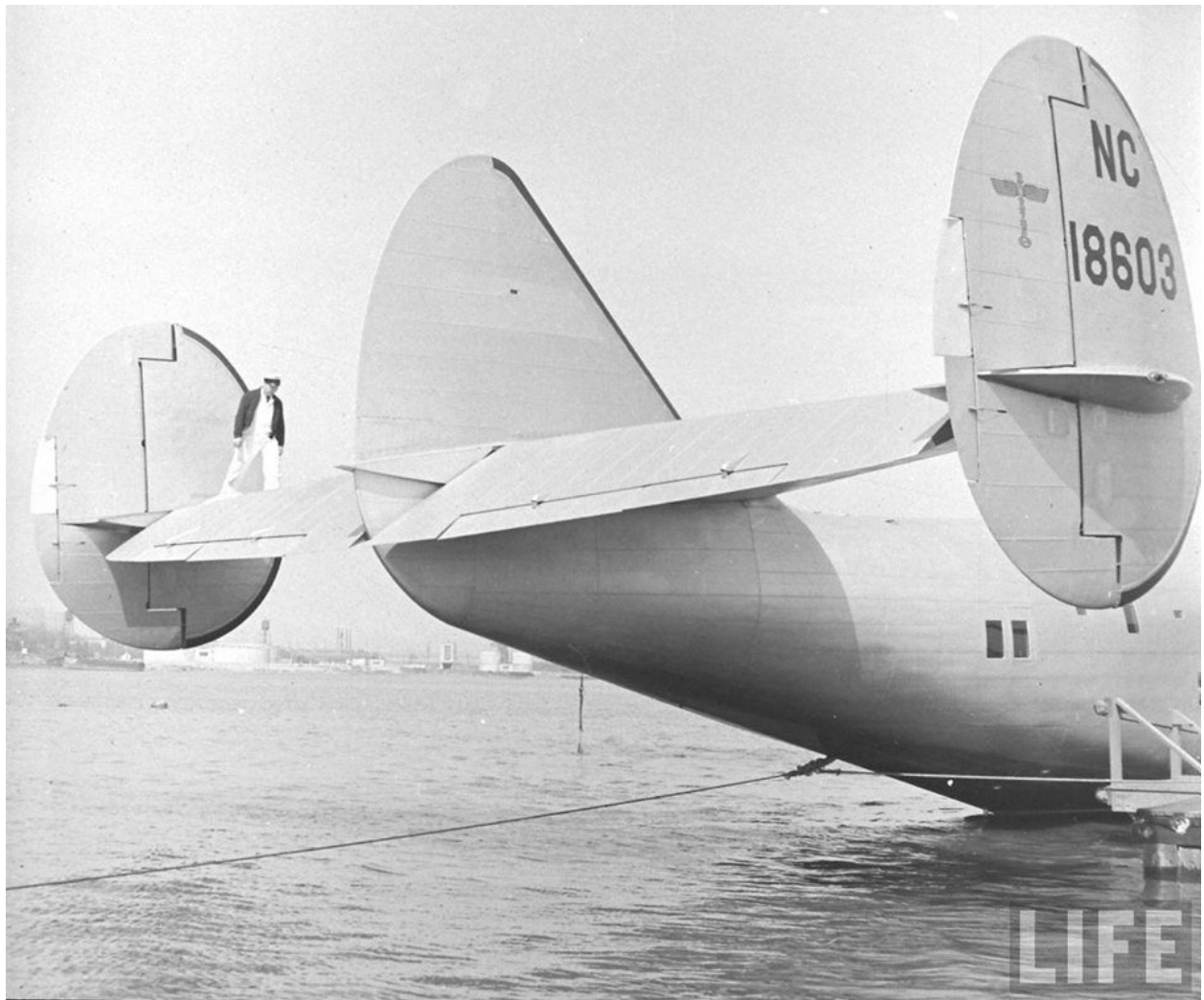
An aerial view of the Marine Air Terminal at La Guardia Airport in New York City showing a Pan American Airways Boeing 314 flying boat at the dock.



A Pan American Boeing 314 gets airborne shortly after World War 2.



This photo showing crew members refueling a Boeing 314 flying boat at the dock well demonstrates its large size compared to the British Short Bros commercial flying boats.



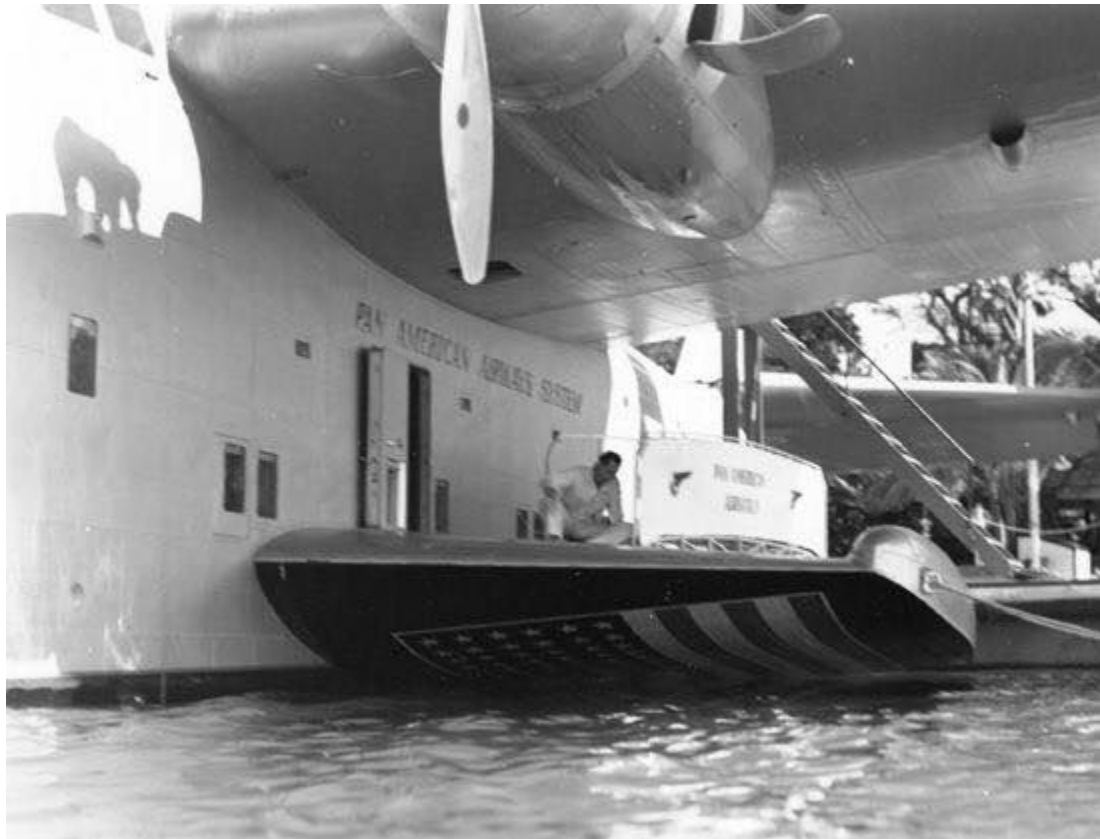
This photo showing a crew member standing on the tailplane of a Boeing 314 flying boat demonstrates its large size compared to the British Short Bros commercial flying boats.



And this photo shows a crew member standing on the starboard wing of a Boeing 314 flying boat demonstrates its large size.



Pan American Airways' Boeing 314A flying boat Clipper Honolulu.



A closeup view of the port float on a Boeing 314A Clipper. The float also served as the primary boarding location; the main entry door can be clearly seen.

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