



# The Legend of Charlie Blair

Best known for his solo polar flight, Capt. Charles Blair was one of a vanishing breed.

By First Officer Robert L. Gandt (PAA)

It is May 29, 1951. At the airfield in Bardufoss, Norway, two degrees above the Arctic Circle, Capt. Charles Blair sits poised in the cockpit of his P-51C Mustang. Through the plexiglass canopy he observes the sun suspended in the northwest—a bright-orange disc.

The Mustang's name, *Excalibur III*, is emblazoned on the cowl. Twice this aging fighter has won the Bendix race from Los Angeles to Cleveland. And four months ago, flown by Blair, the Mustang captured a new transatlantic record: New York to London in seven hours, 48 minutes.

Today Charlie Blair seeks another record. Navigating by the sun, he intends to fly where no man has flown alone—over the North Pole, then southward to Alaska.

The big Merlin engine warms slowly. Now it has settled to a siacato rumble; pressures and temperatures are easing into the normal range. It is 1458 GMT (Greenwich mean time), two minutes ahead of Blair's precomputer departure time. He orders the chocks away.

The tail-heavy, overloaded Mustang

takes the runway. The low rumble swells to a deep-throated bellow, and the fighter lumbers ahead, gathering speed slowly. Near the end of the mile-long runway, carved in the notch of an arctic fjord, Charlie Blair coaxes *Excalibur III* into the air. He is bound for the top of the world.

#### 'World's outstanding aviator'

By the time he retired from Pan Am in 1969, the name of Charles Blair already filled pages of aviation history. His stunning polar flight—10 hours and 20 minutes from Norway to Alaska—had established him, in the words of President Truman, as the "world's outstanding aviator."

Yet Blair's name never became, like Lindbergh's or Doolittle's, a household word. Charlie's accomplishments seemed diminished by their very precision. He had made a solo Atlantic dash and a single-handed polar flight appear altogether too easy, too free of risk. And Charlie had not indulged in showmanship.

He won almost every accolade in flying, including the Harmon Trophy, the Thurlow Award, and the Distinguished Flying Cross. And he wore all the hats: airline owner, chief pilot, Air Force general, test pilot, tactician in a Pentagon "think tank," and writer.

Fortune followed the career of Charlie Blair, filling it with glamour, accomplishment, and, ultimately, sadness.

Since 1928, when he first soloed, Charlie had known the direction his life would take. Following his graduation from the University of Vermont, he entered the Navy, served a tour as a fighter pilot, then joined the old Boeing Air Transport, flying the mountain routes over western America.

His rise in the airlines was rapid. By 1940 he occupied the chief pilot's seat, with seniority No. 1, of the newly formed American Export Airlines. With the approach of World War II, American Export would operate, under a Navy contract, a fleet of 15 large flying boats.

OPPOSITE: Blair gives a parting wave before settling into the cockpit of *Excalibur III* for the first leg of his trans-Arctic flight. RIGHT: A similar pose four months earlier before his record-setting transatlantic flight.

The first *Excalibur* was a big, ocean-going Sikorsky S-44, in which Charlie established the first of his oceanic records. On a flight from Foynes, Ireland, he elected to pass up his refuelling stop in Newfoundland, continuing on to New York. After 25 hours and 40 minutes in the air, Blair had completed the first nonstop airline flight over the Atlantic with passengers and mail.

American Export was eventually acquired by American Airlines, renamed American Overseas Airlines, and then, in 1950, it merged with Pan Am. Meanwhile Charlie Blair, in his off time, was testing his wings as owner-operator of a succession of aviation enterprises: flying beef from Nicaragua, construction workers to Iceland, tools to Saudi Arabia, refugees to Haifa.

And as his nest egg grew, he dreamed of another record flight.

#### Seeking the jet stream

When Charlie bought the P-51C from Hollywood flyer Paul Mantz, he had his eye on the solo around-the-world record, which stood then at 73 hours. Charlie calculated that his new racing

plane, with its fuel-filled wings, could circle the planet, making five fuel stops, in 54 hours. But then fate intervened—the outbreak of war in Korea—and the dream died. His plans had depended on an overflight of China, whose skies were now closed.

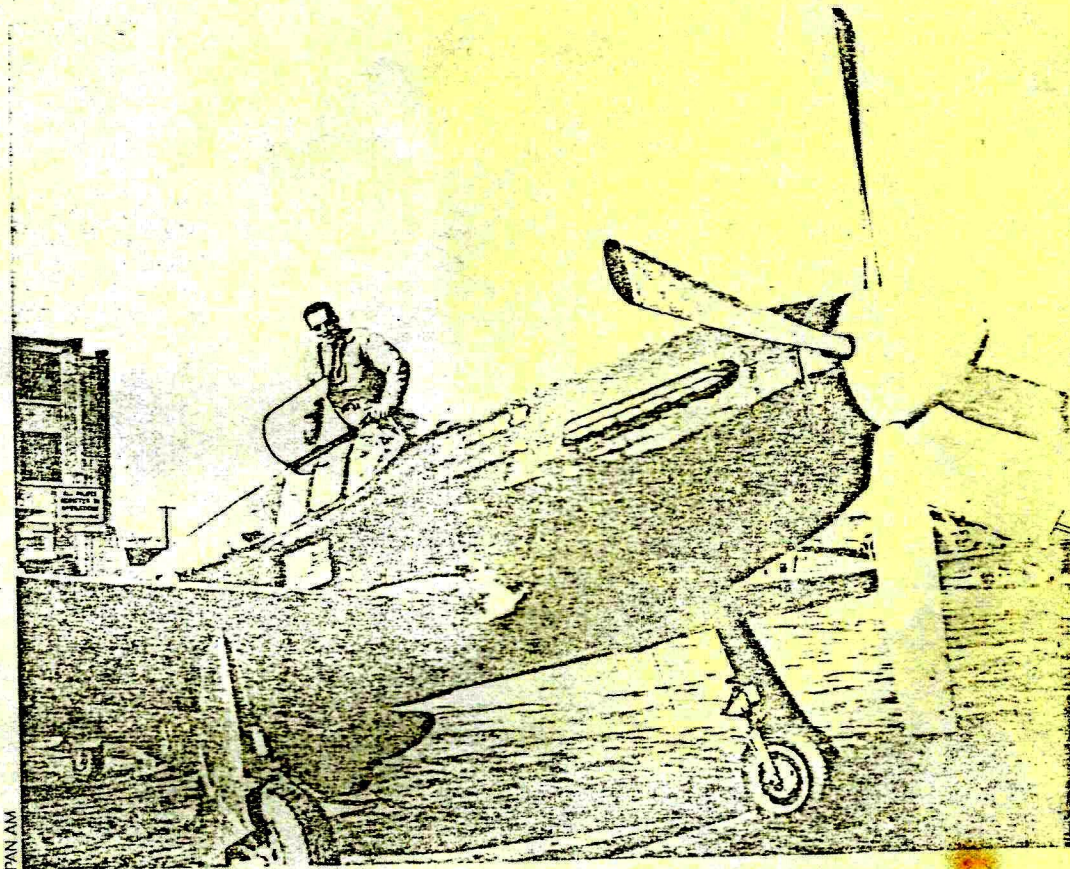
Undeterred, Charlie changed flight plans. On the night of Jan. 30, 1951, he took off from Idlewild Airport, bound for Europe, seeking the core of the mysterious wind meteorologists had begun to call the jet stream. Despite a near-fatal grey-out from a loose-fitting oxygen mask, Charlie rode the crest of the great wind across the Atlantic, landing in London with a record time that still stands for propeller-driven aircraft.

Two days later he was flying a Pan Am Stratocruiser, again eastbound toward London.

"Captain," said a passenger, stopping him in the aisle. "I hear a Pan Am pilot just flew across here on one engine—all by himself—you know solo. Must be crazy."

"Must be," said Charlie Blair.

Four months later—the Pole. Meticu-





Blair and his wife, Maureen O'Hara, in photo taken before they embarked on a reenactment of Blair's 1940 record-setting transatlantic flight. The 1977 flight, in a Short Sandringham four-engine flying boat Blair owned, took 14 hours.

lously Blair had plotted sun lines by which he intended to straddle the 20th meridian directly to 90 North. He had even taken his computations to the famous navigator, Captain P. V. H. Weems, who gave them his stamp of approval while deploring Charlie's single-engine plan.

But the big Merlin engine performed faultlessly. "When the time reached 1955 GMT," wrote Blair, "I pointed the sextant at the sun. The little green pea of the sun wobbles once again in the center of the bubble. Suddenly I'm heading due south."

After a 10-hour rest in Fairbanks, Charlie completed his odyssey, landing back at Idlewild amid a hero's welcome. *Excalibur III* was retired to a place of honor in the Smithsonian. Charlie Blair was summoned to the White House where, in the Oval Office, President Truman presented him with the Harmon Trophy.

Blair's pioneering flights had attracted the attention of the U.S. Air Force, who now invited him to train as a part-time consultant and fighter pilot. Thus began yet another career. For

the next decade and a half Charlie would divide his life between flying for Pan Am and the Air Force.

In 1956, having been officially promoted to colonel, Charlie sought another record. Leading a flight of three F-84Fs, he pioneered the first nonstop flight of fighters over the Atlantic, refuelling in the air, on the direct route.

And then in 1959, Charlie pinned on his brigadier general's star. Two weeks after his promotion, he commanded *Exercise Julius Caesar*—a nonstop flight of two F-100s from England to Alaska—via the North Pole. For this flawlessly executed flight, General Blair was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Looking tanned and fit and nearer 40 than his 60 years, Charlie retired from Pan Am. With him on all his last trips was his movie actress wife, Maureen O'Hara, whom he always proudly introduced as "my bride."

Retirement held no terrors for Charlie, only a change of uniform. Already he was owner and operator of Antilles Air Boats, a St. Croix-based fleet of seaplanes that plied the Caribbean like

ghosts from a bygone time. Maureen added a dash of glamour and an Irish touch, serving as publisher of the airline's onboard magazine.

Then on Sept. 2, 1978, fate intervened in Charlie's career for the last time. On a scheduled flight to St. Thomas, the left engine of his Grumman Goose blew a cylinder and destroyed the cowling. In four-foot waves the amphibian caught a wingtip, flipped, and sank. Four of the eleven persons aboard were killed, including the captain, Charles Blair.

In his time Charlie Blair had been an authentic American hero. He was, like Lindbergh, a son of a vanishing America that had conquered frontiers and pioneered routes and dreamed larger-than-life dreams.

His legend, like the record of his famous flights, will remain. □

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