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SANDRINGHAM OVER THE SOLENT

FRED BARNES remembers fulfilling a lifetime ambition taking a flight in an historic flying-boat over the famous waters of the Solent nearly forty years ago

In October 1973 my wife and I made the long journey from London to Sydney, Australia, to visit relations who had emigrated from the UK. The Australian contingent of the family were keen to show us the sights of Sydney and the local area, but were bemused when I said I would like to visit Rose Bay. My cousin explained that there was nothing special to see at Rose Bay apart from some old Ansett flying-boats. The following day, Rose Bay was duly added to our tour, and we arrived in the late morning to see one of the Ansett Flying Boat Services Short Sandringhams - VH-BRF *"Islander"* - moored just offshore from the flying-boat base.

VH-BRF was painted in the airline's corporate red and black 'delta' style livery and looked splendid in the sunshine. I was disappointed when I saw that the hangar was empty, as I had hoped to see both Ansett aircraft, but when I spoke to an engineer he revealed that the other Sandringham was flying a local charter and would return in about thirty minutes. Then I noticed that VH-BRF was being manoeuvred and hauled backwards towards the docking jetty - an ideal photo opportunity. An offer to buy ice cream for the family bought me some precious extra time, and soon I could see the unmistakable outline of a Sandringham flying low over the water in Rose Bay. As the flying-boat came nearer, I could hear the rumble of the four Pratt & Whitney Twin Wasp radials, and then the majestic aircraft alighted on the aquamarine water, with spray foaming excitedly behind the hull. The second Sandringham was VH-BRC *"Beachcomber"*, and as the aircraft taxied towards the shore I was really thrilled to think that I had at least seen a real flying-boat in the air. All too soon it was time to move on, and as we drove away from Rose Bay I realised that my chances of actually ever flying in such a magnificent aircraft were slim.

OPPORTUNITY FOR SANDRINGHAM FLIGHT

In the early summer of 1976 there were 'hot rumours' among the aviation enthusiast groups that Charles Blair, legendary aviator and founder of Antilles Air Boats, was bringing one of his Sandringham flying-boats to the UK to operate sight-seeing charter flights. It was soon apparent that the UK CAA was reluctant to grant permission for the flying-boat to operate in British airspace, and instead the planned flights would be undertaken in Ireland. Like so many, I was disappointed as I could not afford to travel to Foynes, near Shannon, to take a flight. However, a last minute change of heart by the CAA permitted the Sandringham to fly for a short period only from Studland Bay, near Poole, and this led to a frantic flurry of activity to get a flight arranged.

I joined a group organised by the Gatwick Aviation Society, and my good friend Richard Church decided to join me. Demand for the Sandringham was so great that two flights were organised for August 26, and I was lucky to change my shift at work in order to enable me to join the trip of a lifetime. Two flights were also operated a day earlier on August 25, with the afternoon excursion seeing a group of CAA air traffic controllers enjoying a flight which not only saw Captain Keith Sissons flying alongside the Sandringham in his Supermarine S.6b as she cruised along the south coast, but also involved a flypast along the main runway at Hurn Airport!

SO NEAR AND YET SO FAR!

On August 26 we arrived by coach at Sandbanks around lunchtime for our flight, and Richard and I were allocated seats with the second group of passengers. We could see the Sandringham moored out in Studland Bay, and everyone was excited about the prospect of the forthcoming event. The first group left by passenger launch from the ferry steps at the Haven Approach in Sandbanks in order to sail out to the flying boat for boarding. Some time later the Sandringham slipped her mooring buoy and with all four Twin Wasps turning started to taxy to the designated 'operational area' in Studland Bay. With all four engines roaring at full power and with water foaming from beneath the hull of the Sandringham, the aircraft accelerated, rose up on to the 'step' and was air-

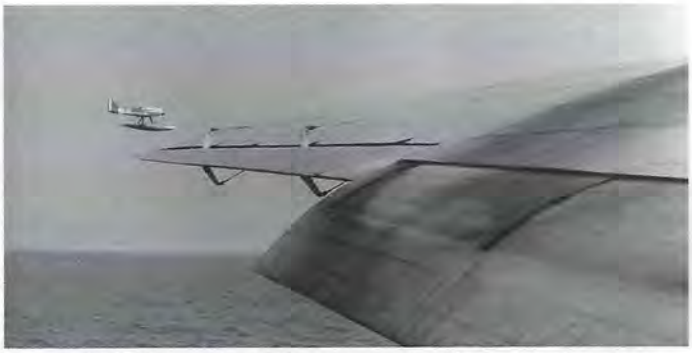
HEADING PHOTOGRAPH: *Antilles Air Boats charismatic Short Sandringham VP-LVE resting at anchor in Studland Bay off the Dorset coast on August 26 1976.* *(Fred Barnes)*

RIGHT: *Relaxed scene at the Rose Bay flying-boat base in Sydney, Australia, on October 29 1973 showing Ansett Flying Boat Services Short Sandringham VH-BRF "Islander" being hauled slowly back towards the docking jetty.* *(Fred Barnes)*

Another idyllic view of the Ansett Flying Boat Services Short Sandringham VH-BRF during the author's visit to Rose Bay, Sydney, on October 29 1973.

borne at 1340. After watching the flying-boat climbing slowly away, Richard and I decided that it was time to find a local pub for some lunch. We commented on how the wind had increased since our arrival.

After the Sandringham had returned and alighted back in Studland Bay, it took nearly an hour for the first group of passengers to return by launch to the jetty. Then, to our horror, Captain Blair announced that the next flight would have to be delayed for about two hours as the easterly wind had increased and was 'whipping up the swell' out in Studland Bay, and that the wave conditions were over the permitted limits for fully-loaded flying-boat operations. He explained that between forty and sixty knots the Sandringham was in a critical phase during take-off and landing, and any large waves could cause damage to the bow plates. With no repair facilities available locally, he could not risk the chance of any damage. He mitigated our disappointment by stating that when the tide turned, the 'wave action' out in the bay would decrease, and that the swell would be less than two feet. It was anticipated that these conditions would exist at about five o'clock. Captain Blair went on to say that operating from a more sheltered stretch of water, such as Poole Harbour, would have been preferable, but he had to accept Studland Bay or not visit the UK at all. Furthermore, there were practical operational problems with a lack of refuelling facilities, and that the Sandringham had arrived from Ireland with nearly a full load of fuel aboard, but would require refuelling that evening. Fuel would have to be taken out to the flying boat at its mooring in 45-gallon drums on a pontoon, and then manhandled aboard to replenish the tanks.



Captain Keith Sissons flies off the port wing-tip of the Sandringham shortly before she alights on the waters of Studland Bay on the afternoon of August 25 1976. *(Tony Merton Jones)*

Some of our group decided to go by launch to photograph the flying boat at its mooring buoy just in case the planned flight was cancelled. Now registered VP-LVE, the Sandringham still retained the basic Ansett Flying Boat Services livery of white top, red and black cheat-line and grey undersides to the wings and floats that I had seen at Rose Bay three years earlier when the registration was VH-BRC. The amended fuselage titling now read 'Antilles Air Boats' in black and the tail fin remained red, but the former Ansett 'delta' logo in a white circle had been replaced by the black sea eagle emblem of the new owner, and the name had been changed to *"Southern Cross"*. Beneath the name an extra legend reading 'Leased by Aer Arann' had also been applied to the fuselage in recognition of the Irish airline's hosting of the aircraft on her visit to Ireland. From the launch the flying-boat looked to be in reasonable condition for her age, and many photographs were taken from different angles as the launch circled around VP-LVE in the afternoon sunshine. After returning to the jetty at Sandbanks, there was a huge cheer and great sighs of relief when Captain Blair announced at 1630 that sea conditions had improved and that our flight was 'on'.

During the twenty minute launch trip out from the jetty to VP-LVE I had the opportunity to speak to Captain Gillies. He was an Australian who had joined Antilles Air Boats after many years with Ansett Flying Boat Services flying the famous Sydney (Rose Bay) to Lord Howe Island route in addition to many charters in Australia and around the South Pacific. Having amassed over 10,000 flying hours on the Sandringham, Captain Gillies was now training younger pilots to fly the aircraft for future operations. He said that maintenance was a major problem as most components had to be hand made by Antilles Air Boats engineers in St Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands for each individual aircraft, and that only the engines and propellers were readily available. The second Sandringham (N158J) was at St Croix undergoing a major overhaul. I enquired why the Sandringham had been registered in the British Virgin Islands, and Captain Gillies replied that the U.S. FAA was sceptical about legislation covering 30 year old flying-boats, and would only permit operations with thirty passengers, whereas under British Virgin Islands registration, 42 passengers could be carried for commercial operations. He hoped that a full U.S. FAA operating certificate would be permitted in the future. Antilles Air Boats wanted to operate both flying-boats on aerial cruise charters around the Caribbean. I thanked Captain Gillies for his time, and said how much I was looking forward to the Sandringham flight.

FLIGHT ABOARD THE SANDRINGHAM

VP-LVE was in sight at the mooring buoy, and the launch finally came alongside it and was skilfully manoeuvred to the large door in the fuselage. Care had to be taken when stepping from the launch to the entrance door to pick the right moment as both craft rolled gently in

Excellent weather blessed the Sandringham during her brief stay at Studland Bay during the summer of 1976, and here the aircraft is seen resting on the water in between pleasure flights on August 26 1976. *(Fred Barnes)*

The highly experienced cockpit crew of veteran Australian aviator Captain Ron Gillies and record-breaking naval and airline pilot Captain Charles Blair relax in command of the Sandringham on August 26 1976. Among many of Blair's incredible achievements was the award of the prestigious Harmon Trophy in 1951 following his record-breaking non-stop flights from New York to London in 7 hours 48 minutes (a record for a piston-engined aircraft), and from Bardufoss, Norway, to Fairbanks, Alaska, across the North Pole in his personal P-51 Mustang "Excalibur III". His heart, though, was with the great flying-boats, having become chief pilot of American Export Airlines in 1940, while in 1967 he purchased the sole surviving Vought-Sikorsky VS-44A flying-boat from Catalina Airlines for use in the Caribbean. This veteran had once flown the 45-mile route linking Catalina Island and Long Island off the coast of California, and Blair later donated this remarkable aircraft to the New England Air Museum.

the swell. Once on board, Richard and I moved towards the rear of the aircraft and climbed the internal stairs to take our seats on the rear upper deck. I was impressed by the large comfortable seats, large window and the remarkably good condition of the interior furnishings. I also noticed embossed under layers of paint on the side of the seats the evocative letters 'T.E.A.L.' from previous days with Tasman Empire Airways Limited in New Zealand. There was an excited atmosphere in the cabin as everybody was looking forward to the flight and exploring the many areas of this remarkable aircraft. Adding to the almost surreal atmosphere of the occasion, our air hostess for the flight would be Maureen O'Hara, the famous Hollywood film star and wife of Charles Blair. The couple had originally met during a flight to Ireland in 1947, when Captain Blair was an American Overseas Constellation pilot, although they had not married until 1968. Miss O'Hara was accompanying her husband during the Sandringham's visit to Ireland and the UK.

Once all the passengers had boarded and the doors closed, the four Pratt & Whitney Twin Wasp radials were started in turn and burst into life, with characteristic blue smoke coming from the exhausts. The mooring buoy was slipped, and as the Sandringham moved slowly forward I was surprised by the smoothness of the ride on the water. When each engine was tested at take-off power, sea spray covered the lower fuselage and spattered on the windows on the upper deck. After heading for the cliffs at Handfast Point the flaps were lowered and the flying-boat turned through 180 degrees and lined up for take-off. When take-off power was selected on all four engines, VP-LVE started to purposefully accelerate across the water, with the rear lower deck disappearing in a shower of spray. With the engines roaring, the mighty Sandringham gathered speed, rose majestically on to the 'step', and after bumping on a few crests of waves, with a banging sound coming from the fuselage, she became airborne making a stately climb to an altitude of about 500 feet. The flying-boat entered a gentle turn before heading east along the coast towards Bournemouth, settling into a panoramic low level cruise with the power reduced and the flaps retracted. Noise level in the roomy passenger cabin was low, with just a background rumbling of all four engines, and there was surprisingly little vibration. I relaxed in my seat, closed my eyes, and pretended I was flying across the South Pacific Ocean on the 'Coral Route' from Suva, Fiji, to Aitutaki in the Cook Islands and onwards to Papeete, Tahiti, imagining what it might have been like in those golden days of real air travel. The 'Coral Route' was actually flown by T.E.A.L. Short Solent flying-boats.

Each passenger was invited for a brief visit to the flight deck in small groups of three. When it was out turn, Richard and I moved forward and down through the lower deck where there were a number of small cabins with seats, and as we passed abeam the wings the cabin noise became louder with the rumble of the engines. When I clambered up the metal ladder to the flight deck I noticed that the noise level and vibration from the engines increased considerably. I was surprised by the size of the flight deck area, and even with two pilots and three visitors there was a lot of space, unlike modern jet airliners!

The Sandringham purred along happily at an altitude of 500 feet and at an airspeed of 130 knots over the Solent - an area of the sea between the south coast of England and the Isle of Wight which was once shared by the great ocean liners and BOAC and later Aquila Airways flying-boats. It was an honour and great pleasure to observe Captain Charles Blair in his favourite environment, the cockpit of a classic flying-boat. Our route had taken us past Canford Cliffs, Bournemouth and Boscombe Piers, over Christchurch and then past the Isle of Wight. By the time that I had returned to my seat, the Sandringham was flying over the Isle of Wight, and then turned to head west towards the Needles, a chalk rock formation on the western tip of the island, a landmark familiar to mariners for many centuries. The flight then proceeded in a westerly direction, serenely passing over the waters of the Solent again as we made our way back to Studland Bay.

All too soon the flaps were lowered, and engine power adjusted as the magnificent flying-boat commenced a gentle descent for landing. There was a great 'whoosh' as the Sandringham alighted onto the water, and although the sea spray was less than on take-off, the retardation effect was clearly noticeable. Our flight time had been 36 minutes, and the flying-boat was taxied back to the mooring buoy. After two unsuccessful attempts, VP-LVE was secured, and the four engines shut down. There was certainly a great sense of occasion when silence descended upon the occupants of the Sandringham. Our flight was over.

Captain Blair signed a copy of the history of VP-LVE as 'Proof of Flight' for all members of the group. Then it was time to disembark by

Antilles Air Boats Short Sandringham VP-LVE awaits boarding of the Gatwick Aviation Society party on the afternoon of August 26 1976. (Fred Barnes)

means of the internal stairs and careful negotiation of the steps from the flying-boat into the waiting launch. Another launch was on hand with the next group of passengers. As our craft headed back towards the jetty at Sandbanks we saw the engines burst into life again, and were treated to the wonderful sight of VP-LVE bounding across the water and becoming airborne, leaving a trail of spray as she departed on another flight. It had been a truly unforgettable day, and a lifetime ambition surely fulfilled.

The port wing float surfs across the water as the Sandringham taxies at Studland Bay on August 26 1976. (Fred Barnes)

HISTORY OF SANDRINGHAM VP-LVE

VP-LVE was originally built by Short Brothers at Rochester, Kent, in July 1943 as a S.25 Sunderland Mk.III, one of a batch of 31 aircraft constructed under Ministry of Transport Contract No. B.78939/40/c20(b). No construction number was allocated to the airframe, but the 'shop order number' SB 2018 was used to identify the aircraft. The aircraft was originally powered by four Bristol Pegasus XVIII radial engines, and was delivered to the Royal Air Force at the No.1 Flying Boat Servicing Unit at Wig Bay, Stranraer in Scotland on July 8 1943 with the serial JM715. On January 8 1944 JM715 was transferred to No.57 Maintenance Unit at Wig Bay, and was held in reserve and not placed into operational service. Together with five other Sunderland flying-boats, JM 715 was earmarked for a special project with the name 'Chariot', but that was cancelled and the aircraft remained in storage. Eventually, on April 6 1945 JM715 was flown to Scottish Aviation's Flying Boat Modification Unit facility at Greenock, and subsequently converted to Sunderland Mk.V standard with four Pratt & Whitney R-1830 Twin Wasp engines rated at 1,200hp, replacing the earlier Pegasus powerplants. During the conversion, ASV Mk.IVc radar was installed, and JM715 was returned to No.57 MU at Wig Bay on August 3 1945. Another period of inactivity followed and on April 30 1947 the aircraft was transferred to Short Brothers & Harland in Belfast. As the RAF had a policy of not flying or water-towing aircraft that had been stored for long periods, JM715 was water taxied the 40 miles from Wig Bay to Belfast. JM715 was selected by Short Brothers for conversion to a 30-seat Sandringham Mk.IV 'Dominion' Class flying-boat, and was given conversion number SH.55C.

Short Sandringham 5 VP-LVE made her debut in airline service with Tasman Empire Airways Limited flying as ZK-AMH. (Short Brothers)

After conversion, Sandringham SH.55C was transferred to the Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation and was leased to Tasman Empire Airways Limited (T.E.A.L.) as a 'Tasman' Class flying-boat, and was placed on the New Zealand register as ZK-AMH. It was the last of four 'Tasman' Class Sandringhams leased by T.E.A.L. to replace their ageing Short S.30 Empire Class flying-boats on the Auckland to Sydney route. JM715 departed Poole Harbour on delivery on October 15 1947, arriving in Mechanics Bay, Auckland, on October 28, at the end of a marathon delivery flight taking some 87 flying hours. On October 29 the aircraft was formally leased to T.E.A.L., taking up the registration ZK-AMH and the name *"R.M.A. Auckland"*. The aircraft flew her first revenue earning service from Auckland to Sydney on November 7 1947.

During service with T.E.A.L. the four Sandringhams developed problems with overheating of the Twin Wasp engines, resulting in a disruption to services, and ZK-AMH was taken out of service in line with the rest of the fleet for rectification in February 1948. Between February 23 and June 17 1948, DC-4 landplanes of Trans Australia Airlines and Australian National Airways took over from the flying-boats on the Auckland to Sydney route. Even after the Sandringhams returned to service, there were still some engine problems, and T.E.A.L. decided to replace the type with four Short S.45 Solent Mk.IV flying-boats that were delivered in late 1949. ZK-AMH operated her final service from Sydney to Auckland on December 16 1949, and was then withdrawn from service and stored at RNZAF Hobsonville, Auckland.

The aircraft was sold to Barrier Reef Airways in Australia - a company founded in June 1946 to operate tourist flights to the Great Barrier Reef - and flown to Brisbane on April 27 1950. Barrier Reef Airways purchased two Sandringhams from T.E.A.L., with the other aircraft being ZK-AME. In order to finance the deal, the company sold 51 per cent of its shares to Ansett Transport Industries, with ZK-AMH becoming VH-BRC and ZK-AME becoming VH-BRD. VH-BRC was named *"Coral Clipper"*, converted to carry 41 passengers, and placed into service on May 23 1950 on the Whitsunday Island routes Brisbane-Lindeman Island-Daydream Island, with Hayman Island being added later. VH-BRD, meanwhile, required further modifications, and did not enter service until April 1951. The overheating problems with the Pratt & Whitney Twin Wasps were finally overcome after modifications to the carburettor. However, VH-BRC only saw brief service before flying her final Barrier Reef Airways scheduled service on November 12 1950, and being placed in store at Colmslie, near Brisbane, in January 1951. The airline continued operations using its Catalina flying-boats. In June 1951 the Whitsunday Islands route was extended to Townsville, and in July 1951 Barrier Reef Airways launched services linking Sydney with Brisbane. On May 31 1952 the route network was further extended when the Townsville to Cairns route was introduced.

On May 1 1952 Ansett Transport Industries increased its shareholding to two-thirds in Barrier Reef Airways, and in July 1953 bought out all the remaining shares, together with the assets of Trans Oceanic Airways, leading to the airline trading as Ansett Flying Boat Services Pty. After VH-BRD was damaged on July 12 1952 when struck by a barge at

One of the hazards of flying-boat operations, Short Sandringham VH-BRF undergoing recovery after breaking free from her moorings on Lord Howe Island. She was soon repaired and returned to service.

Ansett Flying Boat Services Sandringham VH-BRE after being damaged during a storm at Lord Howe Island in July 1963, following which the aircraft was stripped of useful parts and scuttled.

its moorings and further damaged on October 31 1952, VH-BRC was taken out of storage, refurbished and registered to Ansett Airways on December 15 1952. She was test flown from the Brisbane River on December 17 and a day later ferried to Rose Bay, Sydney. Painted in the 'white' Ansett Airways livery and named *"Beachcomber"*, the Sandringham re-entered service between Sydney and Brisbane on December 27 1952. Following the take-over of Trans Oceanic Airways, Ansett Flying Boat Services took over the Sydney to Lord Howe route. VH-BRC operated Sydney to Lord Howe Island on January 13 1953 on a charter flight for Trans Oceanic, and the last service from Hamilton Reach, Brisbane, in March 1953. After some of the Queensland routes were taken over by landplanes when new airfields were constructed, VH-BRC was based at Rose Bay, Sydney. It was while operating from Rose Bay that the aircraft sustained damage on March 7 1955 when the port wing float struts broke during take-off on a flight to Hobart.

By 1963, VH-BRC was the sole survivor of the Ansett Flying Boat Services fleet after a series of accidents, including the loss of Catalina VH-BRI off Hayman Island on July 8 1962, and Sandringham VH-BRE at Lord Howe Island on July 3 1963. Ansett, therefore, needed another Sandringham in order to maintain services on the 480 nautical mile route to Lord Howe Island. As there were no suitable aircraft available, Ansett purchased former RNZAF Sunderland Mk.V NZ4108 (c/n SH.113 and originally RAF ML814) on December 12 1963, and that aircraft was flown from Auckland to Rose Bay on December 18. Registered as VH-BRF, this Sunderland was converted from military configuration to 'near Sandringham standard' at Rose Bay, with 42 passenger seats being installed and the aircraft painted in smart Ansett livery. VH-BRF remained technically a Sunderland Mk.V and entered service on October 9 1964 named *"Islander"*. From that time onwards, VH-BRC and VH-BRF operated the Sydney to Lord Howe Island route together with a handful of charter flights.

During 1969 both flying-boats were repainted into the new Ansett 'delta' style corporate livery. As passenger traffic increased on the popular Sydney to Lord Howe Island route, it was not uncommon for both Sandringhams to operate the service in tandem. VH-BRC flew the last officially scheduled Ansett Flying Boat Service from Lord Howe Island to Sydney on May 31 1974. As the new runway on Lord Howe Island had not been completed, the flying-boats continued operating the route, although VH-BRC was damaged whilst moored overnight at Lord Howe Island on June 9 1974. Meanwhile, VH-BRF had entered the hangar at Rose Bay in preparation of her sale to Antilles Air Boats, and had to be quickly returned to operational service. Painted in an all-white livery, she resumed Ansett service on June 13. Temporary repairs were made to VH-BRC on site at Lord Howe Island, and the aircraft was ferried back to Rose Bay on July 3 1974 for permanent repair. VH-BRC then conducted the final Ansett Flying Boat Services passenger schedule over the route Sydney-Lord Howe Island-Sydney on September 10 1974. On the following day she returned to Lord Howe Island to collect company equipment, marking the Sandringham's 1,360th flight to the island and the end of Ansett Flying Boat Services' operations.

VH-BRC was legally sold to Antilles Air Boats on September 10 1974, and after the last flight on September 11 was placed into the Ansett hangar at Rose Bay. During repainting with Antilles Air Boats titles and logo, the Sandringham was renamed *"Southern Star"*, but that was amended to *"Southern Cross"* before leaving the hangar. On November 28 1974 the flying-boat was re-registered N158C, and when the Australian registration VH-BRC was cancelled the same day the aircraft had amassed 17,820 airframe hours. When N158C departed from Rose Bay for the last time on November 28, it marked the end of the Ansett Flying Boat Services era and closed an historic chapter in Australian commercial aviation. N158C arrived in St Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands on December 9 1974 after her 9,900 nautical mile long delivery flight across the South Pacific. As mentioned earlier, there were some problems with the U.S. FAA concerning American registry, and the flying-boat was later re-registered in the British Virgin Islands as VP-LVE in April 1975.

Sandringham 5 VH-BRC sporting a short-lived Ansett Airways livery during her service with the airline. (MAP)

When VP-LVE alighted back on the water in Poole Harbour on August 23 1976, this historic flying-boat had completed a global circumnavigation that had started on October 15 1947. During the course of the next five days, nine sight-seeing flights were operated from Studland Bay before VP-LVE returned to the Caribbean. This same Sandringham returned to the UK on September 5 1977, and flew a further seventeen sight-seeing flights from Calshot, operating from the mouth of the Beaulieu River until September 9. VP-LVE was officially registered to Antilles Air Boats Inc., Christiansted, British Virgin Islands, on June 17 1978. After Captain Charles Blair was tragically killed in a flying accident in a Grumman Goose on September 2 1978, VP-LVE was subsequently withdrawn from use and stored at Grande, Puerto Rico.

The Science Museum in London made an offer to purchase the flying-boat subject to the aircraft being flown to the UK. During 1980 the Sandringham was restored to flying condition and re-registered N158C. On October 9 1980 N158C departed from San Juan, Puerto Rico, on her ferry flight to Ireland with Captain Ron Gillies in command. Finally arriving in Killaloe on October 24, the aircraft had staged via St Croix, Boston, Port Washington, Oyster Bay, Sydney (Nova Scotia) and Gander. Having waited for some three months in Ireland for official approval to fly into the UK, N158C was eventually flown to Calshot on February 2 1981 for beaching and storage. On arrival at Calshot, the aircraft had recorded 19,500 flying hours, more than any other Sandringham or Sunderland.

On July 6 1981 the Sandringham was launched from Calshot, and water taxied to H.M.S. Daedalus at Lee-on-Solent for further storage. In 1982 the Science Museum purchased her for £85,000, and on March 1 1983 the flying-boat was transferred to Southampton Eastern Docks for further storage. The aircraft was partially dismantled for the journey by Army barge, and was then placed into secure storage for maintenance and painting. During that time the Sandringham was repainted into Ansett Flying Boat Services livery, with the registration VH-BRC and the name *"Beachcomber"* applied. Restoration work was also undertaken on the interior during this period. On August 27/28 1983 the iconic flying-boat was installed in the Hall of Aviation in Southampton, which opened to the public on May 26 1984. The museum was renamed 'Solent Sky' in 2005, and the Sandringham remains as the main exhibit dominating the entire hall. She remains open to the public, conveying something of the magic of air travel during the great flying-boat era, displayed in a city rich in maritime history.

Still sporting her final Ansett colour scheme, Sandringham N158C awaits departure from the Rose Bay flying-boat base for the final time in November 1974 carrying the titling of Antilles Air Boats and the name "Southern Cross". (MAP)

The author, Fred Barnes, would like to dedicate this story to good friend and long time "Propliner" supporter David Harding, who sadly passed away on July 13 2013 after a long illness. David leaves his wife Sheila, their daughters Donna and Jo, and son Darren.

Painted in an overall drab colour scheme, Sandringham N158C arrives at a blustery Calshot on the afternoon of February 2 1981. (Mike Jerram)