



After Her Flying Hero Husband Dies in a Crash, Maureen O'Hara Fights to Keep His Dream Aloft

BY JANE RIEKER

POSTED ON NOVEMBER 6, 1978 AT 12:00PM EDT

For most of Maureen O'Hara's 30 years in Hollywood her staple character was the staunch and gallant heroine. Now she is playing the part again, but this time it is tragically real. In September her husband, famed aviation trailblazer Charles F. Blair, 69, was killed when his seaplane crashed in the Virgin Islands. In widow's black, Maureen now labors to keep his dream aloft.

That dream is Antilles Air Boats (AAB), which Blair built up from a single aircraft to a 20-plane commercial fleet ranging the Caribbean. Though little known beyond the islands, AAB carries more than 250,000 passengers and grosses some \$5 million a year. It is the largest seaplane airline in the world. Mrs. Blair was executive vice-president before her husband's death. Now she is acting president, based on St. Croix.

Maureen was never a pilot herself. "That was Charlie's job," she says—and his record as a flier was unparalleled. Among his many pioneering achievements was the first solo flight in a single-engine plane across the North Pole in 1951, for which he won the coveted Harmon International Trophy. (His converted P-51 is now on display at the Smithsonian.) Maureen had shared his love of flying since their marriage (a third for both) more than 10 years ago. In 1974 she flew with him in a World War II-vintage Sandringham from Australia to the U.S. to demonstrate that, as she puts it, "water can be the airport of the future."

"They really had a loving marriage," says a friend in Christiansted, St. Croix, and her old Hollywood friends agree. Many have sent condolences and expressions of support for the job she faces in Charlie's absence. Former co-star John (The Quiet Man) Wayne, for one, isn't worried. "She has stamina and grit," he says, "and she knows the business."

Though the new responsibilities may seem overwhelming at times, Maureen is not at all anxious to return to life as a movie star. "I don't miss it," she says, and adds a dim view of the new Hollywood. "If some of today's pimply-faced, mumbling boys ever had to put on the costumes and do the kinds of parts Ty Power did, they'd stumble over their swords!" One of her last films was *How Do I Love Thee?* in 1971 with Jackie Gleason. "It was pretty damn lousy," she admits. (Nor is there much Hollywood vanity left; she laughs at the thought of a facelift. "I recently saw a woman I knew on an airplane with a lift that made her face look like a polished apple. I was embarrassed because she caught me staring at her while I was making up my mind if it was the same person.")

Now "55—and let it go at that," Maureen concentrates on raising funds for AAB expansion, which will include construction of the island's biggest hangar. It will be named in memory of Charles F. Blair. "Charlie and I were a team," she says. "All of a sudden the guiding light is gone. It's a tough road. I just hope the Lord is on my side."