SOLO FLIGHT OVER THE N

A bold speck of red races across the vast white expanses of the frozen north in Blair Reaches for the Pole, *by Michael Boze. It's 1951 and Charles F. Blair, Jr., is out to make history.*

E NORTH POLE

MICHAEL BOZE

Charles Blair paved the way for today's regular transpolar flights in his hopped-up P-51.

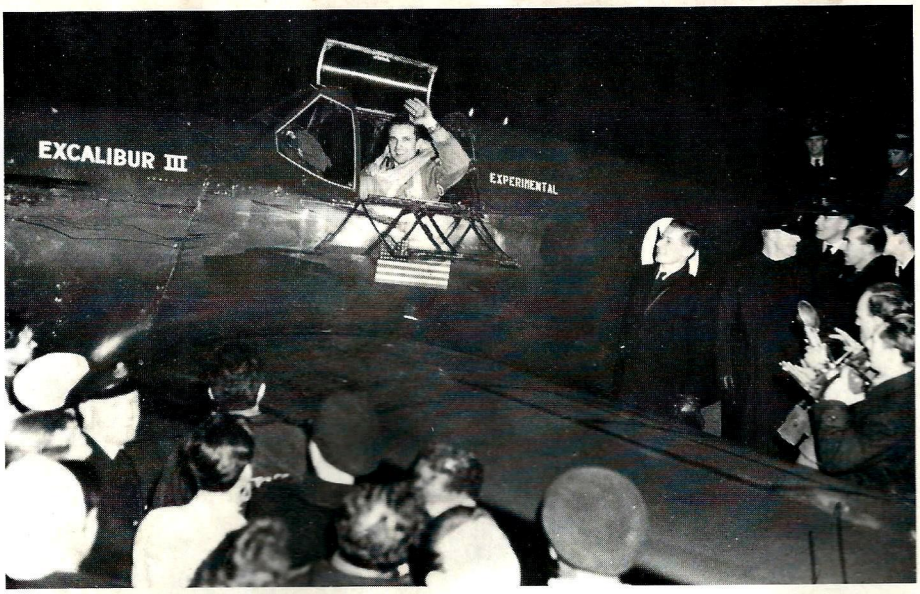
By William B. Allmon

A military surplus North American P-51C Mustang, painted red in its civilian garb and named *Excalibur III,* sat at the end of the long runway in Bardufoss, Norway, on May 29, 1951. The Mustang's Rolls Royce Merlin engine idled at low speed. In the cramped cockpit, pilot Charles F. Blair, Jr., of Pan American Airways, went over the departure checklist, looking over levers, switches and instruments. "Over the nose of my single-engine P-51 fighter a mile of runway splits the steep pine forest of Bardufoss Fjord," Blair wrote. "The runway strip ahead is surrounded by lofty mountains with only one opening—to the east."

In planning his pioneering solo flight over the top of the world, Blair had reduced every aspect to its simplest form. "Simplicity is the key requirement," Blair recalled. "My working quarters are cramped, and along with accelerating fatigue will come the intellect-depressing effects of ten hours of high-altitude flight in an unpressurized cockpit, subsisting on oxygen in the deadly thin air."

All the advance preparation in the world could not, however, eliminate all the uncertainties. In fact, there was uncertainty about the takeoff from Bardufoss. "The easterly takeoff will be stretched by a tantalizing tailwind," Blair wrote, "and my airplane is overloaded so far beyond design limits that it rides too heavily on its troublesome tail wheel. If the tailwind freshens without warning, or if the corroded tail wheel collapses after I've used up too much concrete, my fuel-glutted craft could suddenly turn into a billow of black smoke at the far end of the runway."

Despite the difficulty of takeoff, Blair's flight plan called for him to lift *Excalibur III* off the Bardufoss runway at exactly 3 p.m. "The sun angles measured around the horizon won't fit the flight plan if I run too many minutes late," he wrote,



PHOTOGRAPHS: ROBERT C. MIKESH

TOP: The triumphant Charlie Blair pulls to a stop at Heathrow Airport on January 31, 1951, having flown from New York to London in 7 hours, 48 minutes—a record for single-engine, piston-driven aircraft that still stands. ABOVE: Blair checks his equipment before embarking on his next challenge—a solo flight over the North Pole.

"and a landfall on the coast of Siberia could do worse than jolt my navigational ego. It might spoil the trip" An officer of the Norwegian Royal Air Force (NRAF) stood at *Excalibur III*'s wingtip, ready to signal Blair when it was time to take off.

Charles Blair's goal was to fly alone across an ocean that never before had been flown solo, 2,300 miles from Bardufoss to Fairbanks, Alaska—over the North Pole. The planning and preparations of 23 years were about to be put to the ultimate test. All, from start to finish, the work and dream of a single remarkable man.

Charles Foster Blair, Jr., was born in Buffalo, N.Y., in 1909, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Charles F. Blair. After earning his pilot's license in 1928, the younger Charles studied aeronautical and mechanical engineering at the Universities of Michigan and Vermont, graduating from the University of Vermont in 1931. In 1933 he took a job with Boeing Air Transport (now United Airlines), flying air mail to Cheyenne, Wyo., and Salt Lake City, Utah.

"The men of the air mail never knew it," Blair wrote, "but they had a share in my Arctic experience." During flights through the Wyoming mountains between 1933 and 1940, Charles Blair had learned about stellar navigation. "The first requisite for navigating the Arctic with assurance and precision is to know the traveling habits and time tables of the stars, sun, planets and moon," he said. It had taken Blair years of practice to earn such assurance and precision.

After leaving Boeing Air Transport in 1940, Blair became chief pilot for American Export Airlines (AEA). During World War II, he flew the vital air supply route across the Atlantic, hauling cargo and passengers. During this time, Blair flew a four-engine Vought-Sikorsky VS-44 seaplane, which he named *Excalibur*. "It was the first of a long line of Excaliburs I would be destined to fly," he wrote.

"A taste for setting new records may have been whetted for Blair during these Atlantic crossings," aviation historian and author Robert Mikesh wrote of Blair's flights in the VS-44 *Excalibur*. In June 1942, on his second trip from Ireland, bad weather at many refueling points on Newfoundland forced Blair to extend his flight to New York City. Closely watching wind, weather and fuel, Blair landed *Excalibur* in Flushing Bay, N.Y., unofficially making the first nonstop flight by an airliner across the Atlantic. Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, commander of the British Mediterranean Fleet and one of *Excalibur*'s 16 passengers on the flight, called it "a remarkable voyage."

A year later in October 1944, flying *Excalibur*'s sister VS-44, Blair took advantage of strong tail winds to fly the 3,100 miles from New York to Foynes, Ireland, in 14 hours, 17 minutes and set a record for the fastest flying-boat crossing of the Atlantic. "Setting a trans-Atlantic speed record with a large margin to spare is stimulating to an aviator's ego," Blair later said, "and gives him a possessive feeling about *his* ocean. I was no exception to this rule." When his speed record was broken by other trans-Atlantic aircraft, Blair was not pleased. "I viewed this high-handed intrusion of my domain by rubber-tired, dust-blowing vehicles with a jealous eye and resolved to do something about it some day."

To his friends, Charles Blair did not seem to be a man dedicated to setting records. "Handsome, soft spoken, he has a conservative demeanor that conceals the ardent fervor of an idealist," Mikesh wrote. Once Charles Blair gave himself a task, he laid it out with precision, taking all the necessary steps to accomplish it. "Skepticism on the part of others inspires him with greater determination to put his plan into action and make it succeed."

After World War II, Blair continued flying for American Overseas Airlines. When Pan Am merged with AOA in 1945, Blair took a job with Pan Am, flying Boeing 307 Stratocruisers across the Atlantic. "But the airline job," he recalled, "now changed from seaplanes to landplanes, was just making me a living." With his Atlantic speed record broken, Blair had begun seriously thinking about how to recapture it. He needed

ROBERT C. MIKESH

On the runway at Bardufoss, Norway, Blair is now alone, away from the flock of well-wishers who came to see him off on his history-making flight to Alaska. Many people doubted that such a distant flight could be made in a single-engine fighter with a crew of one.

two things: the right airplane, and the best navigational aids that a man could use alone. Both required large sums of money, which Blair did not have. "I would need to look elsewhere for 'off airways' money," he wrote.

In 1947, Blair purchased a war surplus twin-engine Curtiss C-46 transport and started an airline that he named Associated Air Transport Inc. Blair renamed his airplane *Excalibur II* and, while keeping his regular pilot's job with Pan Am, flew various cargos from South America, Cuba, Iceland, Europe and Saudi Arabia. Blair also leased *Excalibur II* to other pilots to fly cargo and passengers. In January 1950, during takeoff on a routine flight from La Paz, Bolivia, one of *Excalibur II*'s engines quit and the C-46 crashed. No one was hurt, and enough money was left from the insurance settlement for Blair to fulfill a dream he had been nurturing since the mid-1930s.

"The next airplane would surely be noncommercial," Blair wrote. "There were interesting things to be done with airborne vehicles besides making a lot of money. For instance, could there be anything better than a single-engine fighter or a racing airplane for escaping earthbound realities and, among other things, recapturing my trans-Atlantic speed record?"

Inspired by the round-the-world flights of Wiley Post and others, Blair began looking for an airplane with enough speed and range for the record-setting flights he wanted to make. He considered, at first, buying a racing plane named *Mister Mulligan* but could not get a supercharger for its engine, which would have enabled the light racer to reach higher altitudes and fly faster. Then he thought of buying a Seversky P-35 fighter from Republic Aircraft, but he didn't have the money. His search led him to Paul Penrose, a wartime P-51 test pilot, who told him that Paul Mantz, the famous Hollywood stunt pilot and racer, owned a pair of racing P-51s—and was willing to sell one.

The Mustang that Mantz wanted to part with had already had an active life. It began its service life as a fighter aircraft in the U.S. Army Air Forces on July 25, 1944, with serial number 44-10947.

After a year of active duty with the Combat Crew Training Station at Pinellas Army Air Field, near St. Petersburg, Fla., and Venice Army Air Field, south of Sarasota, Mustang 947 was transferred to the Cincinnati Division of the Air Transport Command on August 26, 1945, and on October 5, 1945, was flown to the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) facility at Searcy Field, Stillwater, Okla., to await final disposal.

Mustang 947, along with 475 other surplus aircraft, was purchased by Paul Mantz. Those of the 475 aircraft Mantz did not need were turned into scrap; others were later used in movies. Two of the best P-51Cs, Mustang 947 and Mustang 831, Mantz kept and modified for racing.

On February 28, 1947, Mustang 947 (now redesignated with the civilian registration number NX-1202), with Paul Mantz at the controls, set a new West–East record for a single-engine plane, flying from Burbank, Calif., to New York in 6 hours, 7 minutes and 5 seconds. Mantz also won the Bendix Air Race from Los Angeles to Cleveland, Ohio, in 1946 and 1947 in NX-1202. After the 1949 Bendix Race, both of Mantz's P-51Cs sat idle for months, secure in the glory of past victories, until Blair asked Mantz if he would sell one of them.

Mantz was willing to part with one Mustang, and offered Blair N-1202. Blair inspected the plane and liked what he saw. "This airplane, together with its Rolls Royce engine, was a remarkable combination that could do better than win a race," he wrote. Blair agreed to pay Mantz $11,000 for the airplane, which Mantz would modify before the sale went through.

A new Rolls Royce Merlin V-1650-9 engine would be installed, replacing the power plant used in the races, and the wings would be modified to hold 275 gallons of gasoline each. After the modifications were complete, Blair was certain

that the Mustang would "set a new record for a flight around the world solo, a mark which stood at 73 hours, and take back the Atlantic speed record on the first leg."

Blair's plan for N-1202 was similar to Wiley Post's 1933 round-the-world flight, except that Blair would detour south of Russia. Starting in New York, Blair would fly the 3,500 miles to London, refuel, then fly on to fueling stops provided by Pan Am at Baghdad, Calcutta, Tokyo and Anchorage, and then back to New York, for a planned total of 54 hours in the air. "A tight but reasonable schedule for the journey," Blair wrote. "By gently flogging the engine, I could make the P-51 cruise at a true airspeed of 450 miles an hour without protest."

To increase ground speed, Blair planned to fly his P-51 at very high altitudes and use tail winds to push him along. "This respectable speed, plus a few knots of tail wind, plus five fuel stops, expending one hour each, added up to a flight plan of two days and six hours—19 hours better than the existing record."

One of the main problems with flight at such high altitudes, 30,000-35,000 feet, was a lack of oxygen. The Mustang's cockpit was unpressurized, but Blair installed a 16-hour oxygen supply. Another problem was fatigue; Bill Lear, inventor of the lightweight L-2 automatic pilot, helped out by personally installing one of his devices inside the P-51's cockpit.

As modifications to his Mustang neared completion, and Pan Am gave its reluctant approval for the time off, Blair felt that nothing could stop him. Then on June 25, 1950, the Korean War began, forcing a change in his plans. Blair heard the news while flying a Pan Am Stratocruiser out of London. "It took only a couple of minutes to realize that my round-the-world plans had been shot down in the flames of war," Blair recalled. "Round-the-world flights would be decidedly unwelcome in the new international atmosphere. In peacetime such a trip would have been hailed as an achievement. In time of war the flight would appear frivolous."

Blair had already invested far too much money in his project to let his Mustang sit idle for long, though. "But what could an old fighter airplane without guns hope to contribute?" Blair wondered.

In August 1950, Charles Blair flew his plane from Los Angeles to Fairbanks, Alaska, as a shakedown cruise for another record-setting flight, this time across the North Pole. The flight did not go as planned—Blair had to make an unscheduled stop in Seattle, Wash., to make adjustments to the airplane's engine. The next morning, he took off again for Fairbanks, and the rest of the flight was uneventful. Blair returned to Los Angeles the next day. "The main objective was to find out if the P-51 could do what I wanted," Blair said of his flight, "and I found that it could."

ROBERT C. MIKESH

Blair makes a final check of his astro compass, the sole navigational aide used on his 10-hour polar flight, before leaving his departure point at Bardufoss.

On his shakedown flight to Alaska, Blair's plane had the name *Stormy Petrel,* given it by Paul Mantz, painted on the nose. "I've never been too superstitious before," Blair later wrote, "but there may be something in a name." A stormy petrel is a small seabird, reputed to be bad luck. "Misfortune dogged this airplane while it bore the name. Every flight I made from its original base at Burbank, California, produced some mechanical problem that taxed my ingenuity....Being the lone backer of this project, the bills and the bad luck were on my back. When I started suspecting the name of my airplane, it became time for a change." Blair renamed the Mustang *Excalibur III.* "My other *Excaliburs* were [good] luck ships when I flew them," Blair explained, "and I haven't forgotten the story of King Arthur. There was magic in his sword Excalibur. Now there is magic in this little airplane."

As if to prove that the airplane was up to snuff, on January 31, 1951, Blair lifted off in *Excalibur III* from New York's Idlewild Airport in an attempt to recapture the Atlantic crossing speed record. He took off at 4:50 a.m. and climbed over the ice-filled clouds to the jet stream high above. Helped by Pan Am weather forecasters in New York, Blair adjusted his flight path to catch the jet stream and used it to speed across the ocean.

The 3,500-mile nonstop flight was made at an average ground speed of 450 mph, cruising at altitudes between 29,000 and 37,000 feet. At the midpoint of the crossing, a tail wind gave *Excalibur III* an extra push of 230 mph, giving the Mustang a ground speed of 600 miles per hour. With this extra speed, Blair landed at London's Heathrow Airport 7 hours, 48 minutes after leaving New York, breaking his old record by 1 hour, 7 minutes. Besides regaining his Atlantic speed record, Blair had another reason to celebrate: "This final test flight revealed the true greatness of my airplane."

Two days later, piloting a Pan Am Stratocruiser to New York, Blair was stopped in the aisle by a passenger. "Captain," he said, "I hear a Pan Am pilot just flew across here on one engine—all by himself—you know, solo. Must be crazy."

"Must be," Blair said. However, he did not tell the passenger that his New York-to-London flight had been a last shakedown in preparation for his next flight—across the Arctic Ocean.

After the cancellation of his original round-the-world plan, Blair began considering another idea for *Excalibur III.* "It took a few weeks to recover from this jolt and decide on a useful alternative.

"A new idea that might have military value eventually unfolded, but it would take some additional preparation," Blair wrote. "A gunless P-51 with four thousand miles of flying range might point in the direction of new reconnaissance concepts, and there could be nothing better than the Arctic for providing the navigational aspects."

While planning his polar flight, Blair developed a new method of air navigation in polar regions, where a magnetic compass is unreliable. Using navigation principles existing in the early 1950s, Blair figured out a way of doing the complicated navigational work before the flight. "I developed a scheme for pricking this arctic balloon by boiling down flight procedures to the simplest routine," Blair said. He called it "prepackaged navigation."

First, he set a precise day, hour and minute for his takeoff. Then he plotted a straight course for Norway over the North Pole to Fairbanks. Next, he chopped the course into steps, precomputing his position for every 150 miles—which equaled 30 minutes flying time. Using navigational tables, Blair established the angle that the sun would make at each of these intersections at a specific minute.

With a fixed takeoff time, using a sun compass and a bubble sextant, Blair could use the sun as a route marker for nearly the entire flight. All he needed to do was read off sun angles and compare them with his chart. If the readings agreed, he was on course. If not, Blair would make navigational adjustments until they did.

Blair was certain that his system would work, based on his own experience. Confident as he was, he took nothing for granted, carefully planning every step of his flight. "It is the preparation for a trip of this kind which always proves to be the hardest part of the venture," Blair wrote. "I was particularly concerned with the navigational problem, of course."

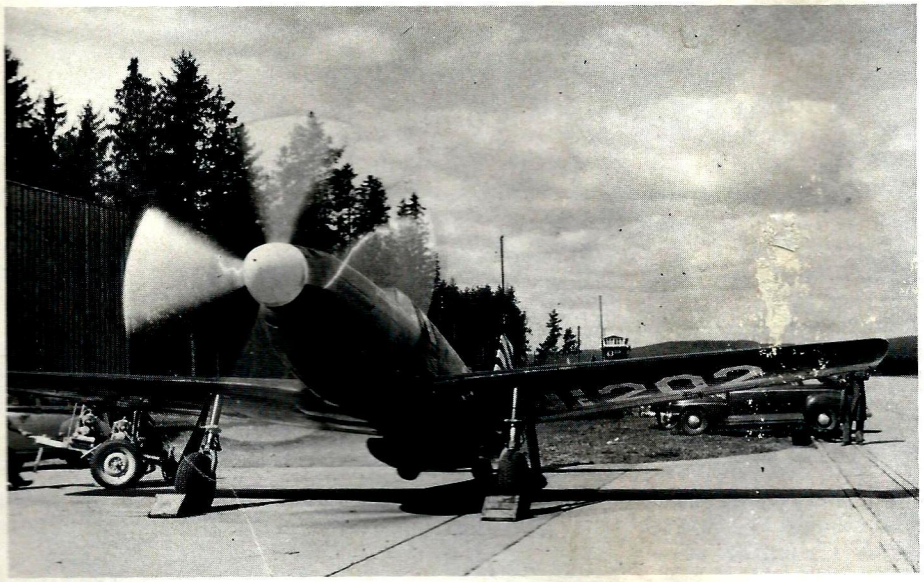
He went over his navigational procedure with Pan Am's chief navigator and with famed navigation expert Captain P.V.H. Weems. "Captain Weems wasn't too pleased with my single engine," Blair recalled, "but he indicated that my theory was entirely correct, and we sat down and worked out the entire problem backwards and forwards to be sure there were no mistakes."

Blair chose May 29, 1951, for the flight across the Arctic, because the sun and moon would be almost at right angles at the North Pole, which offered him a chance to double-check his navigation.

May 30 was chosen as an alternative date in case of bad weather or a mechanical delay. For his departure point, Blair chose Bardufoss, which had a mile-long paved runway, built by the Germans during World War II, and was now used by the Norwegian Royal Air Force.

In mid-May, Blair flew to London to pick up *Excalibur III,* which had been stored in a hangar at Heathrow Airport. Pan Am's office in London, along with Rolls Royce in Hucknall, put *Excalibur III*'s engine and radios in top condition for the flight. In late May, Blair flew *Excalibur III* across the North Sea to Oslo, Norway.

While at Oslo's Gardemoen Airport, he discovered that *Excalibur III*'s tail wheel strut was badly corroded and could fail when *Excalibur III* was fully loaded. The corrosion made it impossible to pump the strut up sufficiently to support the full weight of the Mustang's fuel load on takeoff. Blair knew the risk, that a strong lurch



PHOTOGRAPHS: ROBERT C. MIKESH

TOP: Blair runs up his Rolls Royce Merlin engine at Bardufoss. The North American P-51C Mustang used for the polar flight was modified in that it had a wet wing, able to hold 690 gallons, supplementing the fuselage tank. ABOVE: Excalibur III *after being restored to correct the excessive corrosion of the wings from fuel seepage, ready for display at the National Air and Space Museum, Washington, D.C.*

could break the tire, but he decided to go ahead with the flight.

Late on the morning of May 29, Blair flew *Excalibur III* from Oslo to Bardufoss, slightly north of the Arctic Circle.

Excalibur III's flight went without incident until Blair began circling for a landing at Bardufoss. While he was circling, the right cockpit window behind *Excalibur III*'s folding canopy separated, glancing off the Mustang's starboard stabilizer and falling near the airfield. Spectators saw the enclosure fall, recovered it and returned it to Blair. The assembly was quickly reinstalled on the P-51's canopy, where it remained for the rest of the flight.

Excalibur III remained in Bardufoss for three hours. During its stay, the Mustang was refueled to its full 865-gallon fuel load. Of that, 690 gallons were now carried in the wings, the entire wing from tip to tip being an integral fuel tank divided into three sections, and 175 gallons were stored in a tank behind the cockpit. *Excalibur III* also received a 16-hour oxygen supply and a 10-gallon oil reserve in a separate oil tank with a transfer pump, in addition to its normal 21-gallon oil capacity.

While at Bardufoss, Blair saw to some minor maintenance on *Excalibur III:* "There are other last minute preparations: checking the sextant, stowing the navigation gear and inspecting the stowage of survival gear contributed by the U.S. Air Force. Including a .45 caliber pistol, in case a belligerent walrus should cross our path."

For the flight Blair wore a sports jacket, slacks, and a white shirt, covered by a light-weight flying suit, adding a hunting jacket and flying boots in case he had to land on the ice. "If I am forced down, I will be the most fashionable tourist ever to roam the ice pack," he wrote.

A few minutes before the scheduled time for takeoff, helped by an NRAF officer, Blair climbed into *Excalibur III*'s cockpit. Crowded with two automatic direction finders, two VHF transmitters and receivers, an HF transmitter with a trailing wire antenna, an HF receiver and the L-2 auto pilot, the cockpit was a tight fit for the 6-foot, 2-inch Blair. "The added array of navigational and survival gear makes it smaller than ever. This will be my prison for ten and a half hours," he noted. Crammed into the Mustang's cockpit, Blair started *Excalibur III*'s Rolls Royce Merlin, then taxied to the end of the runway. "All the gauges read as they should. I clamp on my oxygen mask."

At 2:58 p.m., two minutes early, Blair's hand went to *Excalibur III*'s throttle. When the brakes were released, Blair began his takeoff roll.

The red Mustang gathered speed, with the delicate tail wheel sharing the weight of the overloaded airplane. Halfway down the runway, *Excalibur III*'s tail rose, committing Blair to take off. "There's no stopping this fuel-heavy bird now," Blair wrote, "but one problem disappears as the tail wheel comes free of the ground." However, the tail wind added length to the takeoff roll, forcing Blair to keep the main wheels on the ground until nearly the end of the runway.

"The end of the runway is coming up with a rush," Blair wrote. "A dip near the end is followed by a rise...I pull back on the stick. *Excalibur III* is launched as if by a catapult."

Blair guided *Excalibur III* up Bardufoss Fjord, escorted part of the way by two de Havilland Vampire jet fighters of the Norwegian Air Force. *Excalibur III* turned onto the 20th meridian, its highway to the pole, and headed north. The Vampires returned to Bardufoss.

Leveling off at 15,000 feet, Blair flew on to Spitzbergen, following a radio beacon located there, left on after normal operating hours by order of the Norwegian Civil Aeronautics Association (CAA) to help Blair. Also in the air nearby was an NRAF PBY Catalina seaplane, for search and rescue in case he went down. Blair managed a brief radio message to the PBY, then passed over the beacon at 5:16 p.m. and continued north. Soon he and his airplane were alone above the vast Arctic. "*Excalibur III,* and the sun, are now my only companions."

After crossing 80 degrees north, Blair climbed to 22,000 feet and remained at that altitude. As time passed, he settled into a routine: taking a sun bearing every 10 minutes, checked with the chart; adjusting *Excalibur III*'s course to keep astride the 20th meridian; double-checking the course with the sextant. Taking fuel from one wing at a time, *Excalibur III* gradually grew wing heavy. Blair had to shift the fuel source from one wing to another every half-hour to keep the airplane balanced.

Along with shifting fuel, Blair kept busy with chores such as occasionally running *Excalibur*'s Merlin engine at high rpm to burn out lead deposits that accumulated on the spark plugs; watching the fuel, checking the oil, and

WILLIAM B. ALLMON

"The sensation of reaching a long sought goal was fleeting," remarked Charles F. Blair, Jr., in retrospect, "....over before I realized it had happened."

WILLIAM B. ALLMON

Excalibur III *after returning from the polar flight. Blair's flight from Bardufoss, Norway, to Fairbanks, Alaska, had taken 10 hours, 27 minutes—one minute ahead of schedule. Ahead lay a 3,450-mile flight to New York—and a graceful retirement for* Excalibur III.

noting the distance run on the chart. "[All] keep me so busy there's no time for thinking about trouble....Even the loneliness of the Arctic hasn't registered—yet."

Between Spitzbergen and the Pole Blair encountered mostly scattered and broken stratus clouds. Passing 85 degrees north, he flew into a haze that extended to 30,000 feet, blocking out the daylight moon—a sighting he needed to double-check his course. The haze deepened, causing the sun to redden, highlighting the spectacular white glow from the ice cap below. As *Excalibur III* flew on, past 86, 87, 88, 89 degrees north, the sun drew closer to the Mustang's nose. "It is low in the southeast, hanging like a red ball in the sky, some 21 degrees above the horizon," Blair wrote. But Blair could not see the moon through the thickening haze. For a moment, he thought he was flying in circles; then he realized the moon was hidden by the haze.

Excalibur III flew on. At 8:55 p.m., the plane crossed 90 degrees, 0 minutes north latitude—the top of the world. "At 1955 [8:55 p.m.] GMT I point the sextant at the sun," Blair wrote. "The little green pea of the sun wobbles once again in the center of the bubble."

The moment was brief. "Suddenly I'm heading due south....The sensation of reaching a long sought goal was fleeting—over before I realized it had happened." Before leaving the Pole, Blair tossed out of *Excalibur III*'s cockpit a letter to Santa Claus from his son Chris, along with a book of matches from the Savoy Hotel in London. Then he flew south toward Point Barrow, Alaska.

After leaving the pole, Blair flew along the 160th west meridian, navigating by sun sightings toward Alaska. The haze changed to ice crystals. "These shimmering frost particles fail to blot out the sun, but horizontal visibility is reduced to nothing," he noted. Blair went on instruments. Later, when he took a sun shot, a check of his position through the sextant showed *Excalibur III* one minute ahead of Blair's flight plan. "I'm holding closer to flight plan than I had dared anticipate."

Shortly afterward, Blair switched on his radio compass, which he had shut down after leaving Spitzbergen. He picked up the Point Barrow radio station right away on his automatic direction finder. "The radio direction finder needle quivers, swings, then comes to rest." Blair checked the bearing with a sun line and found he was on course. "The wonderful, cockeyed world is calling us back!" Blair left the 160th meridian and took a direct bearing to Point Barrow.

"The odds against failure have risen sharply," Blair wrote, "and keep rising as the miles of unbroken ice roll by underneath." *Excalibur III* passed over Point Barrow, Alaska, at 11:47 p.m., one minute ahead of Blair's schedule. One hour, 40 minutes after passing Point Barrow, *Excalibur III* landed at Fairbanks, Alaska, 10 hours, 27 minutes after leaving Bardufoss.

It was a moment of triumph for Blair, who wrote: "But it was a fleeting moment. The action that leads to victory—when the result is still in suspense—leaves the more indelible recollections." After resting in Fairbanks for 10 hours, he flew *Excalibur III* nonstop from Alaska to New York, flying 3,450 miles in 9½ hours. It was *Excalibur III*'s last flight. After arriving in New York, it was flown across the Hudson River to Teterboro Airport in New Jersey, where it remained while its fate was decided.

On November 18, 1952, President Harry S. Truman awarded Charles Blair the Harmon International Trophy "in

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recognition of being the first to fly a single-engine fighter plane across the North Pole from Norway to Alaska...."

A year later on November 6, 1953, Pan Am, after buying *Excalibur III* from Blair for $10,000, at his suggestion donated the airplane to the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum.

Following his record-setting flights, Blair became a civilian consultant to the Defense Department. In 1958 and again in 1960, he flew Republic F-84 and North American F-100 jet fighters across the Atlantic and over the North Pole. Also in 1958, Blair was one of the first pilots to fly the Boeing 707 jet airliner. In 1968, he married actress Maureen O'Hara.

Shortly after retiring from Pan Am in 1969, Blair became founder and principal owner of Antilles Airboats, with his wife as a founding partner. A commuter airline using Grumman Goose flying boats, Antilles Airboats flew cargo and passengers throughout the Virgin Islands. Blair often took the controls of one of the airline's seaplanes himself.

On Saturday, September 2, 1978, Blair took off from St. Croix with a co-pilot and nine passengers on a routine flight to St. Thomas. As the Grumman seaplane approached the harbor of Charlotte Amalie, on St. Thomas, its left engine suddenly exploded. The seaplane crashed into the rough sea, flipped over, and sank.

Seven of the nine passengers were rescued after the crash. Charles Blair and three others were killed, their bodies later recovered from the wrecked Grumman seaplane. Charles Blair was 71 years old.

In a flying career that stretched back to 1933, Blair logged more than 43,000 hours of flying time in propeller and jet, land and sea aircraft. His achievements—the record trans-Atlantic crossing in January 1951; the solo polar flight in May 1951; the first jet aircraft flights across the Atlantic and Arctic oceans in 1958 and 1960—were accomplished in what author Mikesh has called "the spirit of development and progress of the aviation industry"...and those achievements will not soon be forgotten. □

William B. Allmon, a freelance writer living in Jefferson City, Mo., has written for several Cowles History Group magazines, including Aviation History; *he has a longtime interest in airplanes and their history. For additional reading, he recommends:* Red Ball in the Sky, *by Charles Blair; and* Excalibur III—Story of a P-51 Mustang, *by Robert Mikesh.*

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