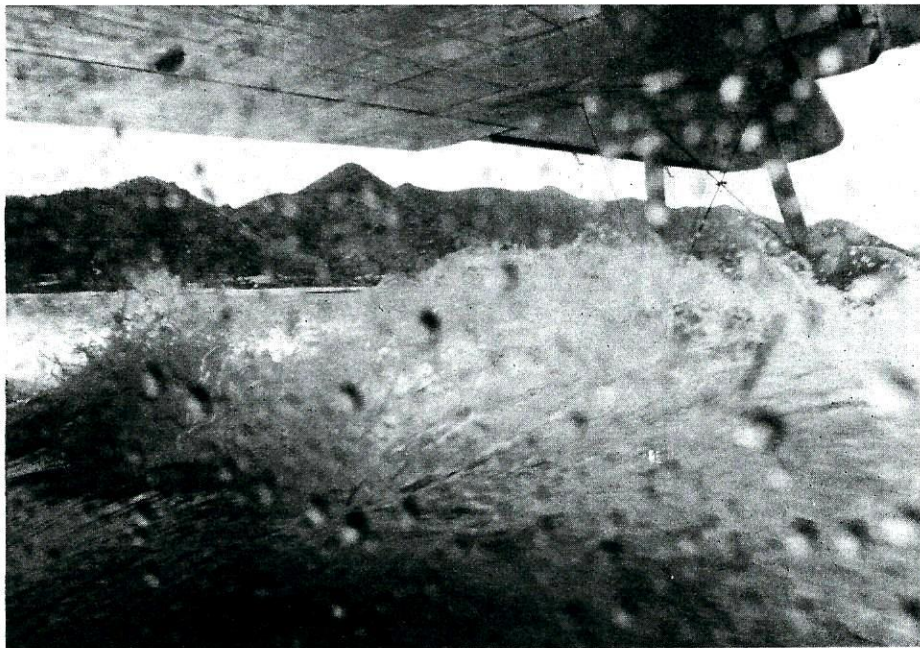


Above: Captain Charles Blair, president of Antilles Air Boats, takes it easy in one of his Sandringhams at about 140 knots, 1,950 feet above the Caribbean which, right, dapples a cabin window during take-off from St. Martin in the Leeward Islands.



Sandringhams in the Caribbean

by Marijane Nelson

SEAFARING aviators who bemoan the advent of the concrete runway will applaud the latest venture of Charlie Blair, who has put the only two Short Sandringham flying-boats still operational back in business. Captain Charles F. Blair, president of Antilles Air Boats, claims that this makes him the world's only commercial operator of four-engined flying-boats.

Captain Blair acquired the Sandringhams, civil versions of the World War II vintage Sunderland, after he learned that Ansett Airlines planned to discontinue their use on the route between Sydney and Lord Howe Island (420 nautical miles north-east of Sydney), Australia.

The addition of the giant flying-boats to his thriving Caribbean-based airline marks another milestone in the colourful aviation career of Blair, who, at 66, shows no signs of trading his cockpit seat for an easy chair.

One might suspect that Blair's motives for wanting the Sandringhams are more sentimental than practical: his association with mammoth four-engined flying-boats dates back to 1942 when he made the test flights on the long-range Sikorsky S-44. Named *Excalibur* (after the sword in the tale of the legendary King Arthur), the prototype S-44 was the first of three ordered by American Export Airlines for trans-Atlantic service. Then, as chief pilot for American Export, Blair established records in the S-44s for the first non-stop airline crossing of the Atlantic and the fastest flying-boat crossing of the Atlantic. He later adopted the name *Excalibur* for a

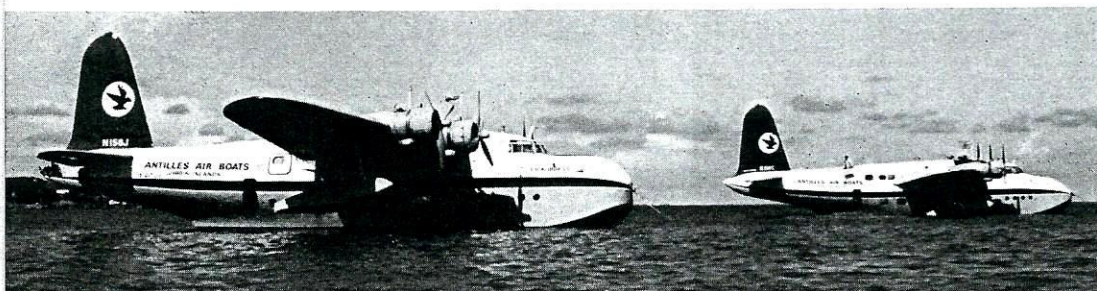
succession of airplanes that he used to make aviation history, earning the Harmon International Trophy, the Thurlow Award, and the Distinguished Flying Cross in recognition of his accomplishments.

Blair has never lost faith in the useful role of flying-boats. Since retiring in 1969 as a senior pilot for Pan Am, he has devoted full attention to Antilles Air Boats, the commuter service he started in the Virgin Islands in 1964.

The mainstay of that operation is the twin-engined, ten-passenger Grumman Goose amphibian. AAB has 18 of them, plus two of the larger Grumman Mallards. Blair added the first S-44 *Excalibur* in 1968, and operated the 47-passenger flying-boat until it was involved in a mishap and damaged. Repair would have been uneconomical but the plane still stands on the ramp at St. Thomas.

Captain Blair bought the 43-passenger Sandringhams with the idea of establishing a company called Coastal Airboats to transport passengers between a New York terminal on the Hudson River to a seaplane base in Boston Harbour. Estimated travel time was 1 hr 20 mins, with the flying-boats remaining at an altitude of 1,000 feet (305 m), well below the air traffic routes of land-based planes.

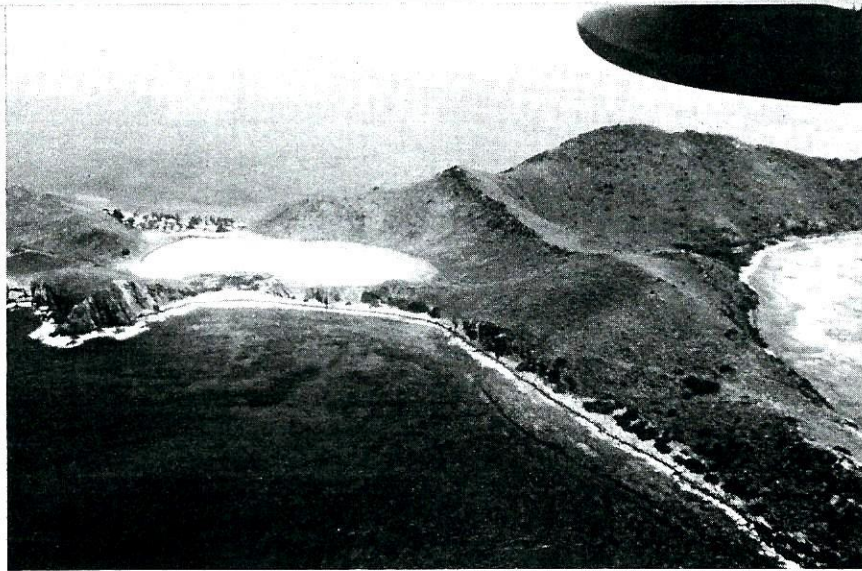
Blair demonstrated the feasibility of his plan last winter when he flew one of the Sandringhams to the East Coast and took officials on courtesy flights at New York, Boston, and Washington D.C. The major obstacle



◀ A pair of Shorts on buoys—Together again after their long, separate voyages from Australia, the two Short Sandringhams, named *Southern Cross* and *Excalibur VIII*, swing tranquilly at their moorings at St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands, the Antilles Air Boats base.



The large, unpressurized hull of the Sandringham allows spacious cabins with panoramic windows for luxury cruise passengers to savour the flavour of the Caribbean's numerous islands and bays.



is to get certification from the Federal Aviation Administration for the venerable British transports. To receive FAA approval to operate the Sandringhams in the U.S. Virgin Islands or on the eastern seaboard, the British Government would have to certify that the craft comply with U.S. standards; otherwise the Sandringhams will have to undergo the same expensive certification process that is required for new aircraft.

Until this problem is resolved, Captain Blair is using the Sandringhams as airborne cruise ships through the Virgin, Leeward and Windward islands of the Caribbean. Passengers are flown by Grumman Goose to West End, Tortola, in the British Virgin Islands, where they make the transfer to the Sandringham for an eight-day trip. The tour includes overnight accommodation at St. Croix, Antigua, St. Lucia, Martinique, and St. Martin; an added attraction is viewing other islands along the route from low altitudes as the Sandringham cruises leisurely at 140 knots. A running commentary is provided by the captain and co-pilot.

Captain Blair heads the crew of five, which includes another well-qualified flying-boat pilot in the person of First Officer Brian W. Monkton. Monkton, who returned with Captain Blair on the second Sandringham flight from Australia, used RAAF disposal Sunderlands after the war to form Trans Oceanic Airways, which provided a vital link between Sydney and Lord Howe Island and other points. It was purchased in 1953 by Ansett Airlines who continued the Lord Howe service until September 10, 1974.

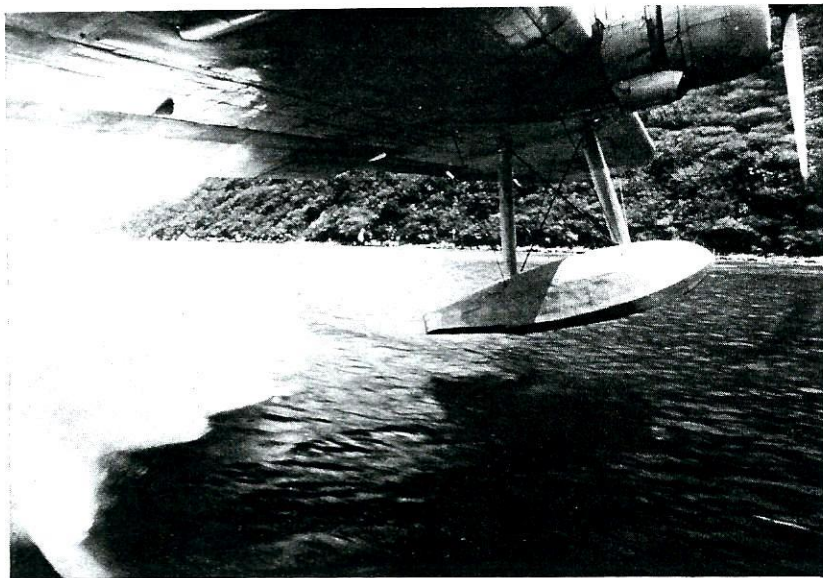
At stops on the long ferry flights from Australia to the U.S. Virgin Islands, the flying-boats were much admired by aviation enthusiasts, as was Captain Blair's wife, the Irish-born film star Maureen O'Hara.

The first flying-boat picked up by Captain Blair, named *The Islander* by Ansett Airlines, was acquired by that airline from the Royal New Zealand Air Force in 1964. It took ten months and \$200,000 (Australian) to convert the Sunderland to a civil aircraft.

The second aircraft, the *Southern Cross*, came perilously close to not accompanying her sister ship to

the Caribbean. Captain Blair and his crew had gone to Australia and were waiting to take delivery of the flying-boat when gale force winds wrenched it from its mooring at Lord Howe Island and drove it ashore. Local residents joined forces with the Army to move the massive flying-boat (then called *Beachcomber*) to higher ground where it would suffer less damage from the pounding surf. Blair returned for it six months later, after repairs were completed on the starboard wing and the interior refurbished.

The residents of Lord Howe who struggled to save *Beachcomber* from destruction can be assured that the flying-boat is in excellent hands at its new home. Although the roar of four Pratt and Whitney engines no longer rattles their windows or brings children scurrying to the harbour, they share Charles Blair's belief that flying-boats have still not outlived their usefulness.



Above right: In flying-boats you don't land, you alight, a delightful change from the contact with concrete runways. Beyond the wing-tip float is the luxuriant flora of Tortola, one of the Virgin Islands. Below right: Boarding Sandringham *Southern Cross*, before its name was changed from that which it bore in service on the Sydney-Lord Howe run with Ansett Airways.