My Trans-Atlantic Flight on *Southern Cross* 31 May to 2 June 1977

Please let me introduce Captain Charles F. Blair Jr. who was in command of our flight across the Atlantic in June 1977. From 1942 to 1945 Captain Blair flew flying boats into Foynes, Ireland, coincidently the destination on our flight. Foynes' sheltered inlet made for a good operation area for flying boats and was the last port of call on Ireland's western shore. As a result, Foynes became one of the biggest civilian airports in Europe during World War 2.
Captain Blair was the first pilot to make the transatlantic flight from the U.S. to Foynes carrying passengers and mail. On July 8, 1989, his widow, Maureen O'Hara Blair, cut the opening ceremony ribbon for the Foynes Flying Boat and Maritime Museum. She also presided over the Grand Reopening and Expansion of the Flying Boat Museum in 2006. Maureen had been asked to be the museum's patron. She accepted and served in this capacity from its opening until her death in 2015.
Maureen O'Hara Blair donated her late husband's flying boat, a Sikorsky VS-44A, *Queen of the Skies,* to the National Museum of Naval Aviation and it was subsequently given on permanent loan to the New England Air Museum in Connecticut.
Captain Blair's Short Sandringham flying boat VP-LVE *Southern Cross,* on which we were flying, has been the centre piece of the Southampton Hall of Aviation since 1984. The plane has been restored to appear as it did for an earlier owner, Ansett Flying Boat Services, with registration VH-BRC and the name *Beachcomber*.

The Seaplane terminal located at The Charlotte Amalie Harbor Seaplane Base was dedicated in Captain Blair's honour. Captain Blair and Maureen O'Hara Blair are buried together at Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia.

T**HE FLIGHT**

The flight I made in 1977 from Port Washington, New York, to Foynes (Lough Derg), Ireland, via Gander, was probably the most exciting thing I have ever done. It came about, rather cheekily I recall, when I phoned Captain Blair at his home in St. Croix, US Virgin Islands. In 1974 he had purchased the two Ansett flying boats for his amphibious seaplane operation Antilles Air Boats. Somehow, I learned that he was planning to take Southern Cross to Ireland in June 1977, so I asked if I could come on the forthcoming trans-Atlantic flight. Very surprisingly he said, yes, if you put in money for petrol. My heart sank, because I knew how thirsty those Pratt & Whitney powered Sandringhams were, so of course I asked how much he had in mind. He said USD300, which astonished me at how cheap that was, so I said, "thanks, you're on!" A quick visit to the Qantas Staff Credit Union and the requested cash was in my hand! I should add that my phone call to Captain Blair wasn't from an unknown person as I had got to know he and his Hollywood actress wife Maureen O'Hara well during my frequent visits to Rose Bay when Charles was buying the two 'boats'. In fact, I spent a couple of days taking them sightseeing around Sydney and its environs which they both enjoyed.

To cut a long story short, courtesy of my Qantas staff travel concession I was soon winging my way to New York where I was to join *Beachcomber,* now renamed *Southern Cross*. I was picked up at Kennedy Airport by the daughter of one of Charles' oldest friends who I stayed with that night, and the following afternoon went with them out to Manhasset Bay, Port Washington, to watch the Sandringham fly in from St Croix. Port Washington was the US terminal for the trans-Atlantic air service until the Boeing flying boats were replaced by landplanes after the war.

At 6:30pm, in perfect weather, Captain Blair set the graceful flying boat down on the calm waters of Manhasset Bay. Helicopters and small seaplanes flew around, photographing the arrival for all the major TV networks. The harbour police brought Captain Blair, his crew and passengers ashore in their launch, while people waved, and cameras clicked from press boats and private yachts gathered in the bay. The lower and upper levels of the dock were packed with excited people, applauding and calling greetings of welcome.

On the upper level of the town dock speeches were made and plaques presented by North Hempstead Town Supervisor, Michael J. Tully, and Herbert Haines of the Port Washington Chamber of Commerce. Captain Blair and Maureen O'Hara also spoke, thanking the dignitaries and crowd for their warm welcome.
Many people wanted to talk to Captain Blair and remind him that they used to serve him in the local stores, or had worked with him on the flying boats, or had known him when he lived in Port Washington during the 1940s.
That evening a group of the Captain Blair's friends and crew who were flying to Ireland the next day gathered for a photo to record the historic event. Included were retired Imperial Airways pilot, Jack Kelly Rogers, John Grierson who set up Britain's air transport system during the war, Gene and Shirley Neville who were neighbours of the Blairs in St Croix, and Dennis Carey, brother of Governor Carey of New York, who the previous night had decided to come along.

While most of the passengers were unknown to me, one family I recall well was that of Noel Holle, who I had met often during my many photographic expeditions to the Rose Bay flying boat base in Sydney. Noel had previously been Chief Maintenance Engineer for Ansett Flying Boat Services and following the withdrawal of the two flying boats from the Lord Howe Island run in 1974, had accepted a job with Antilles Air Boats as Chief Mechanical Engineer.

Noel was accompanied by his wife Margaret and their three sons, Steven, Matthew and Daniel who were making the trans-Atlantic crossing for the second time, having travelled to Ireland with their family on *Southern Cross* the year before. Alongside Noel was ex Ansett flying boat pilot Ron Gillies who had also joined Antilles Air Boats following the end of the Ansett service in Australia. The last member of the flying boat's crew was Flight Engineer Jim Flanagan, an American pilot and aircraft mechanic.

The next day,1 June, was departure day. The *Southern Cross* was towed close to the town's dock to be refueled in preparation for the first leg of the flight from Port Washington to Gander, Newfoundland. Captain Blair finally declared that we were ready to leave just before midday and we were taken out to the flying boat by launch. It wasn't long before the engines were started and we were off, leaving the water shortly after 1:30pm. In total *Southern Cross* had 21 crew and guests on board.

Taking off from Manhasset Bay, Captain Blair dodged a gathering thunderstorm moving towards us from the direction of Manhattan. There were dark, low clouds, and occasional rain, as we flew eastward along Long Island Sound, but within a few minutes the weather started to clear.

Like most of the passengers I was glued to the windows enjoying the passing scenery below. Unlike modern airliners which traditionally fly between 35,000 and 40,000 feet, the old Sandringham, being unpressurised, flew at altitudes ranging from 1000 and 5000 feet. As Maureen famously said "You're not flying so high that all you see is soapsuds beneath you. You're flying in that area between God and the wonderful land he created".

By the time we had passed Montauk Point, all of eastern Long Island, on our right, and Connecticut on our left, were clearly visible. Flying at 1,000 feet above the sea, we passed Block Island and Martha's Vineyard (home of the Kennedy family), then we climbed to 5,000 feet in a clear, cloudless sky as we passed over Cape Cod, heading for the Canadian Maritime Provinces.

The cities of Nova Scotia, Yarmouth, Halifax, and Sydney passed below us. We crossed the Gulf of St. Lawrence and soon the fjords on the south coast of Newfoundland came into view. The craggy, bleak, beauty of the fjord can look very forbidding in a harsh light, but in the rays of the setting sun they were beautiful.

We could see across a vast expanse of Newfoundland wilderness on this spectacularly clear evening as we approached Gander Lake from the southwest. A few minutes after sunset, and six hours after leaving Port Washington, Captain Blair was taxiing us toward the mooring on the north shore of the lake, which is several hundred feet below the runways of Gander's renowned transatlantic airport. Gander was a well-known fuel stop to everyone who flew the Atlantic before the advent of the jet.

It was a very short night at Gander. We had a few hours' sleep at the Albatross Hotel. Hugh Lacey, an old friend of Captain Blair who had been fueling and taking care of his flying boats all the way back to his earliest flights across the Atlantic, was on hand again, supervising every detail of our overnight stop at this famous jumping off point for Ireland and Europe.

Noreen Gillies and Margaret Holle were the flight attendants, with able assistance from Maureen. All the guests were lavish in their praise of the libations, snacks and meals, but we still needed hot breakfasts for the early morning take-off. Captain Lacey, a Canadian airline pilot and the son of Hugh Lacey, picked up our hot breakfasts at the airport commissary catering, and delivered them to us before take-off. Noreen and Margaret kept them piping hot in our galley oven.

We took off from Gander Lake at sunrise and 15 minutes later Newfoundland disappeared behind us as we started our crossing of the Atlantic. Our destination, Ireland, was 12 hours away.

Not long after leaving the coastline of Newfoundland, a large, double headed iceberg came into view on our port side, which we all photographed. After that there was nothing to be seen except the rolling swells of the Atlantic Ocean beneath us, so I spent the time talking to some of the passengers and climbing up to the flight deck several times to see how the aircraft was behaving. We were extremely fortunate that for the duration of the flight weather conditions were good and no one suffered from 'mal de mer". While on the flight deck, I often saw Captain Blair taking sun sights from the astrodome located in the ceiling behind the pilots.

One passenger I particularly enjoyed talking to was Captain Kelly-Rogers, the noted British pilot whose aviation exploits are legendary. Jack Kelly-Rogers was 22 when he joined the RAF, but in 1937 he quit the air force for the growing commercial sector of aviation. He joined the fledgling British airline, Imperial Airways, soon to become British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC) where he became chief pilot of the airline's fleet of 28 Empire flying boats, carrying passengers to and from Australia, South Africa and America.

Captain Kelly-Rogers also made the first scheduled west and eastbound airmail flights across the Atlantic by a European operator, landing at Foynes, Ireland. In 1940 he flew the Empire flying boat *Corsair,* out of the narrow Dungu River in the Belgian Congo where it had been marooned for 10 months. That same year he flew the first passenger flight to and from the United States and was the first overseas pilot to land at LaGuardia Airport.

But perhaps Captain Kelly-Rogers is best remembered for the historic 1942 flight on the BOAC Boeing 314A flying boat, *Berwick,* carrying the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill from the United States to England. During the flying boat's four-hour flight from Washington to Bermuda, Churchill was allowed to briefly take the aircraft's controls, after which he asked Captain Kelly-Rogers "What about flying from Bermuda to England? Can she carry enough petrol?" Kelly-Rogers replied: "Of course." Initially Churchill was to have travelled from Bermuda to England on the British battleship *HMS Duke of York* but changed his mind at the last minute.

So it was that in January 1942 Churchill and Captain Kelly-Rogers set out from Bermuda bound for Plymouth Sound where they arrived safely after the long flight across the Atlantic. As Churchill debarked, Kelly-Rogers said: "I never felt so much relieved in my life as when I landed you safely in England". After the war Captain Kelly-Rogers joined Aer Lingus where he worked until 1965. In retirement he devoted a major part of his time to rescuing and collecting items of Irish aviation interest and was primarily responsible for the creation of the Irish Aviation Museum, being its first and only honorary curator.
Returning to our 1977 trans-Atlantic flight, as we approached mid-ocean, *Southern Cross* climbed to 3,000 feet. We entered a partial cloud mass and lost our view of sky and sea. But still the weather was genteel, and there wasn't a ripple of discomfort in our spacious flying boat.

After 2,000 miles of flying without a trace of air pockets, we finally crossed the coast of Ireland over the beautiful beach at Kilkee, passed Foynes, Shannon, and Limerick, and finally reached the little village of Killaloe on Lough Derg, our newly created transatlantic flying boat terminal.
We landed there at 8:57 p.m. local Irish time, more than an hour before sunset, and 12 hours after leaving Gander Lake. Crowds of people from nearby towns thronged the edge of the lake and dozens of small craft came out to meet us as we picked up the mooring in the failing light. Despite this, I still managed to take several photos of this exciting event, some of which accompany this article.
Irish Customs cleared us quickly, and we were taken ashore by Kevin O'Farrell, an old friend of the Blairs. Everyone on *Southern Cross* was sad that the journey had come to an end, and they all agreed it was the best flight they had ever made.

So that was the end of the most thrilling flight of my life. The next day Flight Engineer Jim Flanagan and I took off in a hire car for a few days sightseeing, ending in Belfast where I flew to London and back to Sydney.

This article was written by Stephen Berry, with a little help from Mathew Holle and Maureen O'Hara Blair.



Winston Churchill talking to Captain Kelly-Rogers during the secret flight from Bermuda to Plymouth Sound in January 1942.



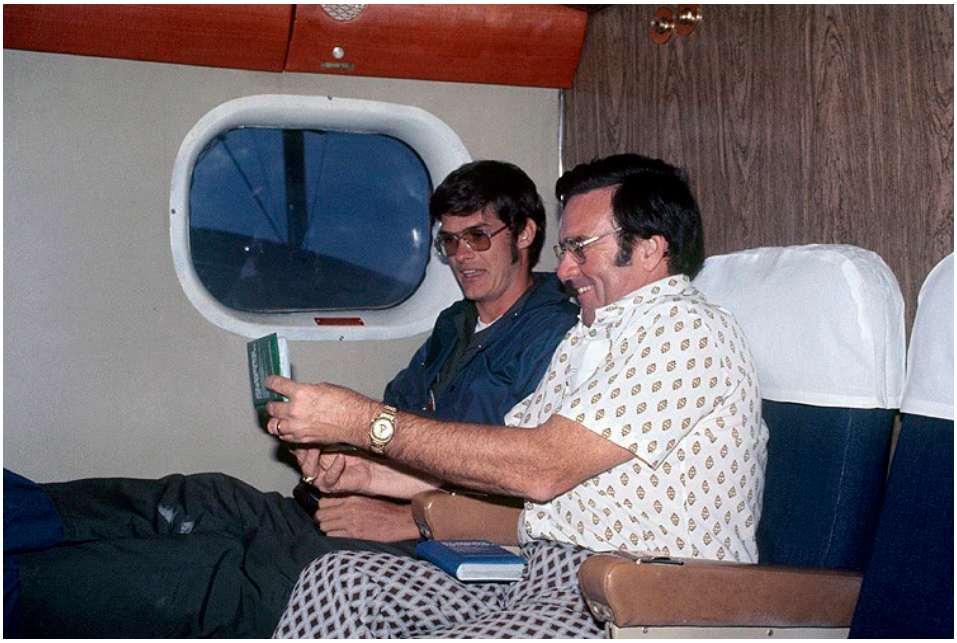
Captain Blair and his wife Maureen O'Hara (in the white jacket) are seated next to Captain Jack Kelly-Rogers and seated on the floor at the front is ex Ansett Captain Ron Gillies, Flight Engineer Jim Flanagan at centre and at right Antilles Air Boats chief mechanic Noel Hollie, formerly of Sydney-based Ansett Flying Boat Services. Behind Noel at far right is his wife, Margaret. The author is at top left.



This photo, issued in 1944, shows Captain J.C. Kelly Rogers, the BOAC captain who piloted Prime Minister Winston Churchill on his first transatlantic flight.



Stephen with Captain Jack Kelly-Rogers during our trans-Atlantic crossing on *Southern Cross* on 1 June 1977.



Flight Engineer Jim Flanagan (left) and Gene Neville, Captain Blair's neighbour in St Croix.



Maureen O'Hara Blair and self during our trans-Atlantic flight in June 1977.



The scene on arrival at Lough Derg on the evening of 1 June 1977.



Photo taken shortly after arrival at Lough Derg, Ireland, on 1 June 1977.



Captain Ron Gillies acted as co-pilot during the Atlantic crossing.
Captain Blair is out of shot taking sun sights with his sextant from the astrodome.



Friends of the Blairs wishing us farewell at Port Washington on the afternoon of 31 May 1977.



An evocative shot taken as we climbed away Port Washington, Long Island on 31 May 1977.



Shortly after takeoff from Port Washington, Long Island on 1 June 1977.



Southern Cross taxiing into her mooring after alighting at Lough Derg on 1 June 1977.



Maureen O'Hara Blair and Stephen at Rose Bay, Sydney in late 1974



Captain Blair checked his chart during our Atlantic crossing on 1 June 1977.



A lovely portrait of Maureen during the Atlantic crossing on 1 June 1977.



Stephen and Maureen chat over lunch aboard Southern Cross on 1 June 1977.



from left: Shirley and Gene Neville, Maureen O'Hara and Steven Holle aboard ***Southern Cross*.**



Gene Neville with Steven Holle (back) and Matthew Holle
Photo courtesy of Matt Holle

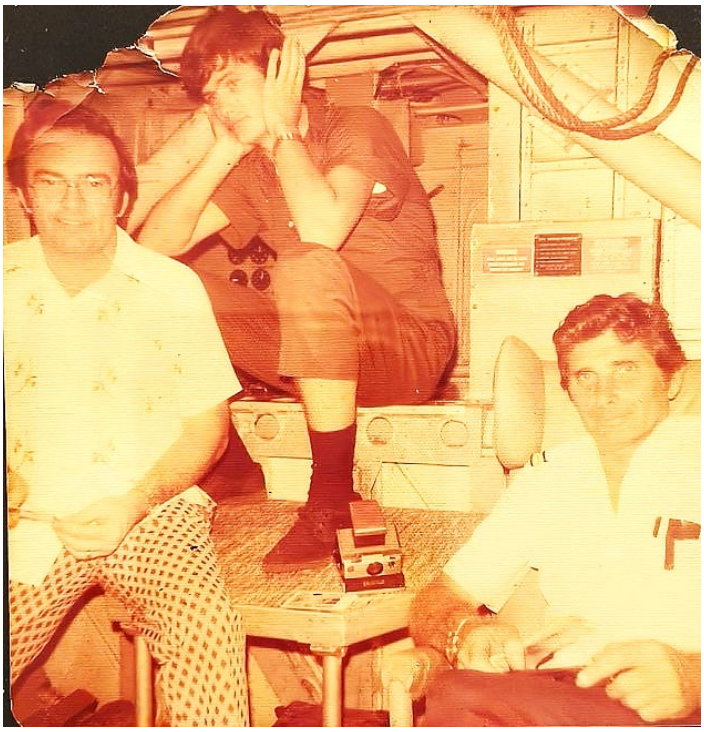


from left: Steven Holle, Shirley Neville, Robert Blair (Charles' artist brother), Matthew Holle and Gene Neville. photo courtesy of Matt Holle.


from left: Steven Holle, Matthew Holle, Daniel Holle, Jamie Fitzsimons, Andrew Fitzsimons and Captain Blair. Photo courtesy of Matt Holle.



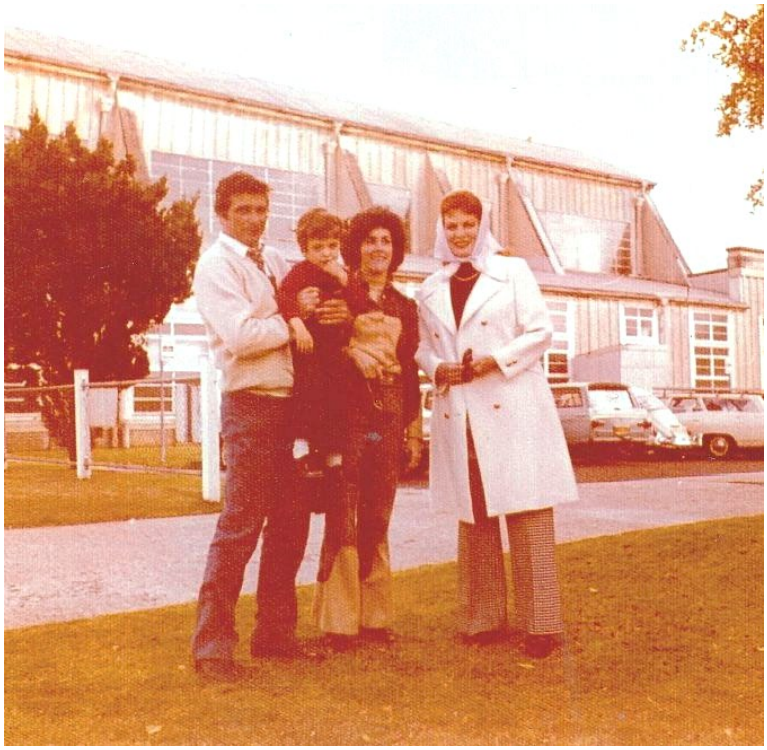
Steven Holle and Matthew Holle
photo courtesy of Matt Holle



from left: Gene Neville, Jim Flanagan and Noel Holle.
Photo courtesy of Matt Holle.



from left: Captain Blair, Maureen O'Hara Blair, Matthew Holle, Margaret and Noel Holle at Maureen's home at Glengarriff, Ireland.
Photo courtesy of Matt Holle.



From left: Noel Holle, Matthew Holle, Margaret Holle and Maureen O'Hard Blair at Rose Bay in late 1974. Photo courtesy of Matt Holl