

Tuesday
September 5, 1978
Vol. 107, No. 212
48 Pages

The Hour

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Ex-Norwalker Dies In Ocean Plane Crash

By RUTH McDERMOTT

Memorial services are being held today in St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands, for Capt. Charles F. Blair, 68, noted flyer and former Norwalk resident who was killed on Saturday when the Grumman Goose amphibian plane he was piloting went down in the Caribbean Ocean, just off St. Thomas, with eleven aboard. Three others died with him.

The cause of the crash is under investigation but early reports said that the left engine exploded shortly after take-off and the plane crashed into the rough seas and sank shortly after impact.

Blair, who retired from the U.S. Air Force with the rank of Brigadier General, will be buried later this week at Arlington National Cemetery.

He was the husband of actress

Maureen O'Hara who at the time of the accident was in Ireland where the Blairs have a home on Bantry Bay. Capt. Blair was supposed to have accompanied her there but last minute business in connection with Antilles Airboats, Co. which he owned in St. Croix and one of whose airboats he was flying on Saturday, had delayed his departure. Mrs. Blair was also active in the company and edited the newspaper she started, called "Virgin Islander"

Also surviving are children Charles L. Blair, known as Lee, and Stephen Blair, residents of Westport with their mother Mrs. Flip Blair; Mrs. Susan Thorndike of Hawaii and Christopher Blair of Boston, children of a previous marriage; and step-daughter Mrs. Bronwyn Fitzsimons. Miss

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O'Hara's daughter by a previous marriage.

He also leaves his mother, Mrs. Grace Blair of Fletcher, Vt., whose 100th birthday this April was the occasion of a huge family gathering there which Capt. and Mrs. Blair attended.

Charles F. Blair was born in Buffalo, N.Y. and educated at the University of Vermont from which he received his degree, and the University of Michigan. A flyer all his life, he made aviation history in 1951 when he became the first person to fly solo across the North Pole, going from Bardufoss, Norway, to Fairbanks, Alaska in a single-engine Mustang, the Blair P-51 which, after being restored, was presented this year to the National Air and Space Museum at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. where it is now on display.

For that achievement he was honored with the Harman Trophy presented by President Harry Truman. He is also noted in the Guinness Book of Records as the U.S. flyer with the most flying hours to his credit.

Early in his flying career, Blair had helped the American Export Line start its American Overseas Airlines Co. and became its chief pilot. When AOA merged with Pan-American, Blair became a senior captain with that company. He trained U.S. Navy pilots during the war.

While still a captain with Pan-American, he was asked by the U.S. Air Force to become one of its officers. They were particularly interested in the navigational system, designed by him, that he had used on his North Pole flight. On his retirement, Blair was a Brigadier General with the Strategic Air Command.

It was while he was married to Flip Blair that the flyer and his family lived first in Stamford on the William Buckley estate and then in Norwalk. He lived on Esquire road. He founded the Antilles Airboat Co. ten years ago when he married Miss O'Hara and they settled in St. Croix. Charles and Maureen made a bit of their own aviation history when last year they ferried an old flying boat from Australia to St. Croix to be used as part of their company's fleet.

An ironic note is that Flip Blair had herself been a passenger in an Antilles airboat that crashed off St. John's this April. In that incident the pilot and co-pilot were killed on impact and the seven passengers spent four anguishing hours adrift at sea while a massive search effort was led by a despairing Capt. Blair.

It was a small boat owned by two St. Croix brothers, David and Dusty Pearsall, businessmen on the island, who finally spotted them in the dark of night and just a Saturday ago, Aug. 28, Flip Blair had held a grand reunion party at her Westport home, for the other survivors and the Pearsall men, all of whom had kept in touch with each other since the crash.

Following that reunion, David Pearsall had gone on a sailing cruise elsewhere but Dusty had returned to St. Croix and it was he who saved three of the passengers in the crash in which Capt. Blair was killed.

The bitter coincidence is that two members of the Blair family should have been involved in these accidents since the Antilles Airboat Co. itself in its ten years of operations has had a fine safety record for the hundreds of thousands of hours it has logged in daily flights.

Charles Blair had also contributed many articles on flying to aviation literature over the years.

Other survivors include two sisters, Marion Manginon of Columbia, S.C. and Midge Perkins of Evansville, Ill. and a brother, Robert Blair, an artist, of Buffalo.