

The Sikorsky was in this configuration when it was a contract aircraft for the Navy during WWII. Photo by PH1 Boyle from a photograph in Capt. Blair's collection.

*A page in the aviation scrapbook
of Captain Charlie Blair*

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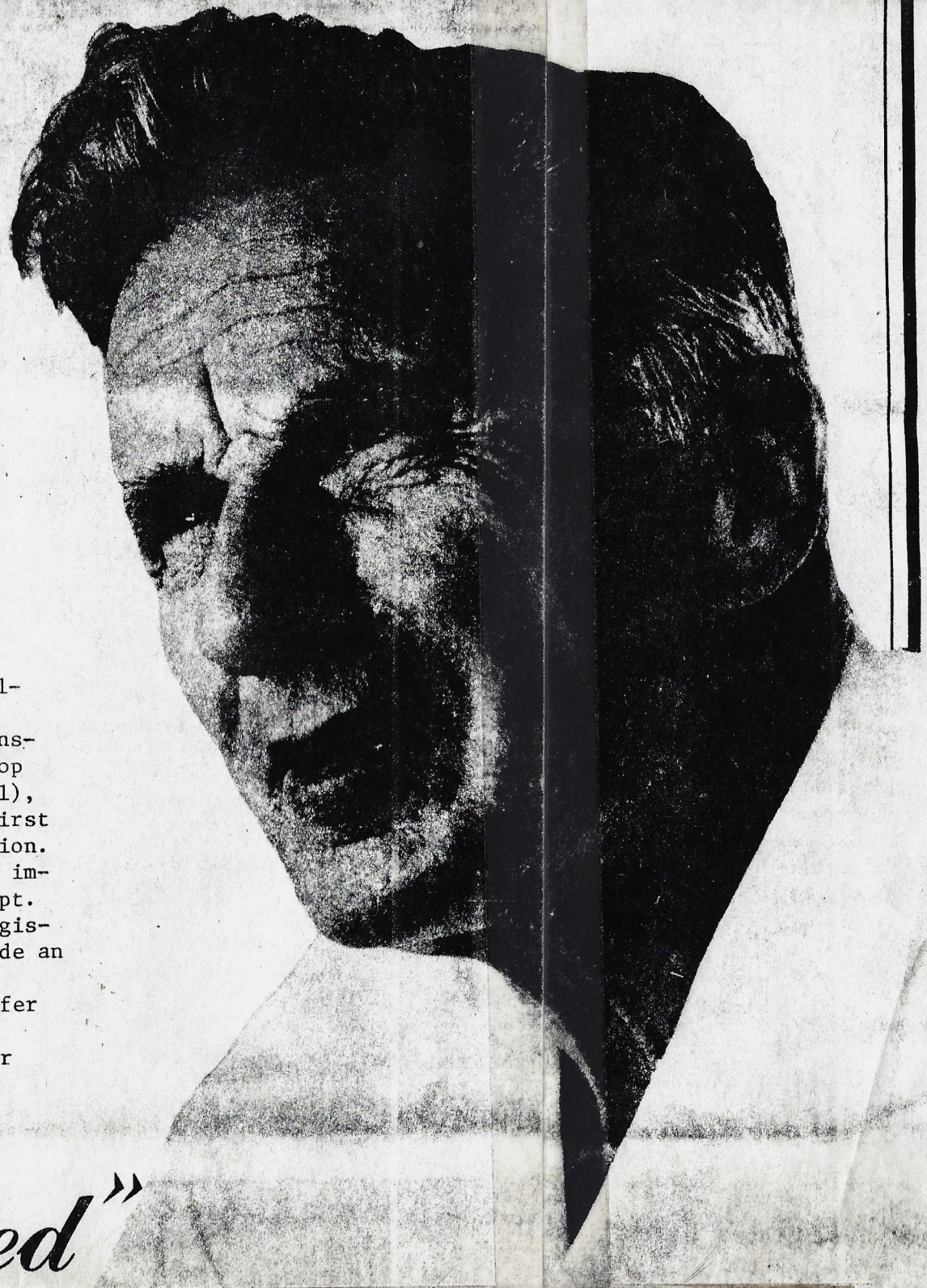
To those of us who find jumbo jets, with their in-flight movies and "coffee, tea or milk" stewardesses commonplace, or for those who think that a little over three hours on a jet from San Juan to New York is such a long trip...well, sit back and relax and hear the story of Charlie Blair and his flying boat.

Captain Charles Blair (in actuality Brigadier General Charles Blair, USAF (Ret)) is one of the last of his breed—as is his flying boat, the Sikorsky VS-44.

The Sikorsky has its peer group: the Consolidated PBY-2 Coronado and the famous Boeing China Clipper of the Pacific. Capt. Blair, too, has his peer group: Eddie Rickenbacker, Jimmy Doolittle and Charles Lindbergh.

When you step into the presence of either Capt. Blair or his flying boat, you realize immediately that you're stepping in the shadows of historical giants. The flying boat is 90 feet by 50 feet by 20 feet and weighs over 20,000 pounds; Capt. Blair's shadow is no smaller! As you talk with the man you feel the excitement as he relives the 25 hour nonstop transatlantic hop in a flying boat (the first nonstop flight for an airliner with passengers and mail), and one of the great flights of history: the first long-distance solo flight across any polar region.

But why are Capt. Blair and his flying boat important today? Well, it began in 1976 when Capt. Blair, president of Antilles Air Boats (and registered owner of NC41881, the Sikorsky VS-44) made an offer to the director of Pensacola's Naval Air Museum, Captain Grover Walker USN (Ret); an offer which he could hardly refuse. The offer: the Sikorsky as "a gift to your museum." The offer was discussed via message and letter up



“End of a Breed”

the chain-of-command through both the Chief of Naval Operations and the Secretary of the Navy. It was agreed that the flying boat was a worthwhile addition to the museum and Secretary W. Graham Claytor, Jr. stated: "On behalf of the Naval Air Museum, I accept, with great pleasure and personal appreciation, your offer to donate the Sikorsky VS-44 flying boat."

Before the actual acceptance, Harvey Lippincott, Corporate Archivist for United Technologies Corp. (Sikorsky) gave it his approval as a museum quality piece. It was determined that the VS-44 had been entered in competition for a Navy long range patrol bombing flying boat in 1938. However, according to Lippincott, "Consolidated won the competition with the PB2Y-1 Coronado, largely on the basis of price."

But Lippincott goes on to state that, "Sikorsky later put their design into the civil market, and American Export Airlines purchased three, to fly between the US and England."

After further research, Capt. Walker of the museum felt that "the VS-44 never became really significant as a naval aircraft. The NC41881 and a sister plane were either leased or purchased by the Navy from American Export Airlines and utilized to transport personnel and cargo during World War II. Capt. Blair, chief pilot for American Export, at the beginning of the war, became one of the 'contract' pilots who flew the VS-44s for the Navy." And, as both Lippincott and Walker further state, "after the war the two aircraft were

returned to American Export, which later became American Overseas Airlines and still later was taken over by Pan American Airlines in the late '40s."

It is this information that led Capt. Walker, in his letter of recommendation to accept the aircraft, to say: "the VS-44 does qualify as a former naval aircraft, but the real significance of this aircraft lies in the fact that she is the last available example of the giant seaplane transport era of the '30s and therefore should be preserved for future generations to view and appreciate."

Rear Admiral William R. Flanagan, COMNAVFORCARIB, was called upon to aid in obtaining the flying boat for the museum (the Sikorsky flying boat was on a pad in St. Thomas). RAdm. Flanagan immediately responded that "my staff and I will assist in every way possible to insure a safe trip for the 'old bird'." Special slings were acquired from the Naval Museum and with the aid of civilian workers at Antilles Air Boats, sailors from Roosevelt Roads and Seabees from MCB-4, the flying boat was dismantled and began its journey from St. Thomas to Pensacola, Florida.

The story of the man and the plane are intertwined since Capt. Blair's test hop in it in the early '40s. After the war Capt. Blair worked a full-time position as senior pilot for Pan American Airlines, he was also beginning a second career as an airline owner/operator. This was in this spare time!! He began ferrying people back and forth from the U.S. to Europe and Africa.

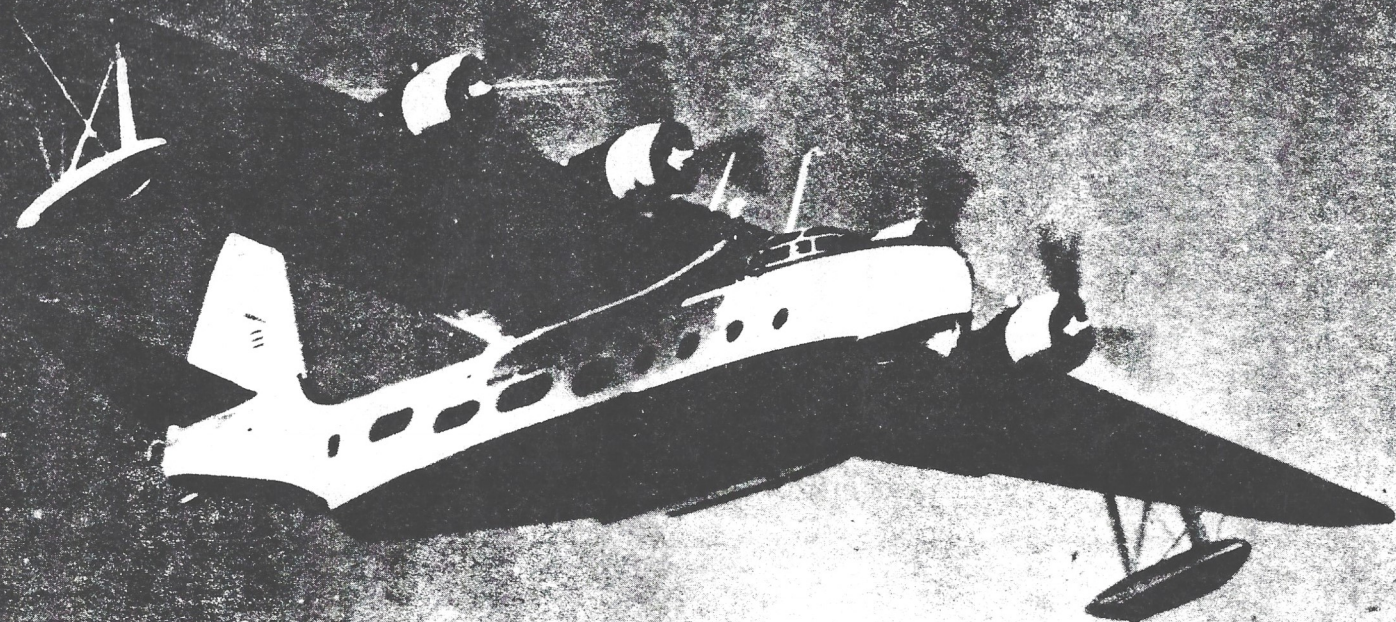
His need for a flying boat was such that he ended up leasing and finally buying from Pan Am "his" old Sikorsky. It's been with him ever since.

Capt. Blair's military career began in 1931 when he completed flight training at Pensacola and a tour of duty as a naval aviator. In the '50s after his solo hop across the North Pole in a P-51 Mustang (which hangs in the Smithsonian), Capt. Blair worked in a "consulting" status with the Air Force, accumulating 35,000 hours in the air in just about everything that flies. Among his awards are the Harmon International Trophy, Thurlow Award and the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Capt. Blair still flies today. In fact, he makes over 1200 flights a year with his own airlines and takes pleasure flights with his wife, actress Maureen O'Hara, to Ireland once a year. Capt. Blair, who is author of "Red Ball in the Sky" which describes some of his airborne exploits, states that "he loves to fly, but he doesn't like to watch movies"...and so, while he and his wife have flown together all over the world, he has yet to see one of his wife's films.

Asked why he was donating the Sikorsky to the Naval Aviation Museum, he said "it would be a good resting place for the plane...I have a lot of personal feelings for that plane and I've spent a lot of time with it from the initial testing...I just don't want to see it reduced to junk."

The Sikorsky VS-44 flying boat NC41881 will be looked upon with awe by those of future generations...no less can be said for Charlie Blair.



The Sikorsky VS-44 in its heyday, as a commercial aircraft with American Export Airlines. Photo courtesy of the Naval Aviation Museum.