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**February 5, 1999**

**Admiral Donald D. Engen, Director  
National Air and Space Museum  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, DC 20560**

**Dear Admiral Engen:**

**I am very grateful to Robert Mikesch for presenting these letters to you in person. We write as the family of Charles Blair to urge you to bring back Excalibur III to Washington to be exhibited in your new facility at Dulles International Airport. The fact that Mr. Mikesch is willing to be our advocate adds great credibility to our cause of fulfilling my father's desire to have the plane displayed in the national museum.**

**We are also very lucky that Mr. Mikesch's book about Excalibur III, the first issued in the museum's series Famous Aircraft of the National Air and Space Museum, is available as testimony to both the incredible amount of work the museum has already put into the plane and the importance of the flights. The flight from New York to London was a successful push to break a time record - a time honored ambition of aviators, but it was also an exploration of the power of the jet stream.**

**The polar flight was more historic - it was the first single engine plane to be flown over the North Pole. This earned my father the 1952 Harmon Trophy for his development of a celestial navigation technique that could be used for high speed aircraft flying in polar regions. It was this flight that led to his induction into the Air Force Reserves. He joked that he went from being a Lieutenant, Junior Grade, one day (his flight training was in the Navy) to a full Colonel the next. He later was promoted to Brigadier General. This new phase of his life allowed him**

**to put his lifelong navigation training to the use of the country. It also gave him the opportunity to fly some of the fastest planes in the world.**

**I remember the start of the Atlantic flight. Most of all I remember the cold, cold hanger and the long delay in getting the plane ready to take off. It was the middle of the night. I was sixteen, cold and tired, and I hope I wasn't a pain in the neck. I admit I was somewhat oblivious to the import of what he was doing, and the danger. After the plane took off at 4:50 A.M. my mother and I reached home about dawn. I guess I must have slept through much of the reporting of the flight and was surprised to learn the next day at school that the whole school had followed the flight via announcements over the public address system. My father was famous and I had slept through it.**

**I have strong memories of the polar flight, but they are mixed in with other memories of that weekend. As Mr. Mikesh reports in the book, my father visited Captain P.V.H. Weems, a famous expert in navigation, in Annapolis to get his stamp of approval of the navigation plan for the flight. This visit somehow resulted in an invitation for me to attend June Week as the guest of a midshipman who worked in Captain Weems office. June Week happened to coincide with the planned date of the flight. So my memories of that flight are all mixed up with dances and parades and parties. I was treated royally. I stayed at an admiral's house on the academy grounds. My escort was wonderful. When we went to the balls everyone knew who I was and about my father's coming flight. It was great!**

**My most vivid memory, though, was of a group of us sitting around listening to the radio waiting to hear from Fairbanks that the plane had been sighted. What we heard was that the plane was a little late and my father had not been heard from. It was a scary moment for me and I'm sure one that made everyone there nervous (what are we going to do with this girl if something goes wrong?). Fortunately the wait wasn't long - he reported in a few minutes later. I did not know until I read Mikesh's book that there had been no radio contact from the time he left Norway until he reached Alaska. It must have been a hard ten and a half hours for my mother back in New York, but her oblivious daughter was having a ball.**

**Forgive me for indulging myself by relating my personal memories, but, I have done it to point out that this was big news in 1951 (we have boxes**

of news clippings from all over the world reporting on both flights) and I think they should still be honored today. We no longer read about epic flights like these which are planned and financed by one individual with a dream.

The letters from Chris, Lee and Maureen will tell you much more about my father's life and career, a career that I would venture to say probably had more breadth of aviation experiences than anyone in history. He flew the airmail routes in the mountains of the western states in the thirties. He pioneered seaplane routes across the Atlantic during World War II. He flew important military missions in supersonic fighters in the fifties and sixties. Mixed into this were many hours of flight testing new airplanes. He ran a non-scheduled airline after the war that transported hundreds of refugees to new homelands. All of this he fit into his regular airline schedule. He retired in the seventies and concentrated on running his seaplane commuter airline in the Carribean. I would wonder if there is anyone who has flown so many kinds of airplanes and who has spent as many hours in the air.

But his biggest adventures were with Excalibur III, and I hope you will decide to give a place in your new facility to honor this historic plane.

Sincerely,

Suzanne Bleu Thordike

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