

# Charles Blair

- The Beacon (Gander)
- 16 Mar 2017
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It is fairly certain that millions of people know of Maureen O'Hara but not a lot of people have heard of her husband Charles Blair — except the people of Gander, of course.

When the Gander Town Council named a street after Charles BLAIR on Nov. 13, 1985, they were probably thinking of his record-breaking aviation achievements.

The first written account of Blair's connection with Newfoundland was on May 15, 1942 when he flew a flying boat [VS.44 NC41880] from Botwood to Foynes, Ireland. This first venture was a survey flight for American Export Airlines who had received approval from the United States government to operate trans-Atlantic flights from New York to Foynes with three Vought-Sikorsky VS.44/ JR2S flying boats. (Pan American was also involved with the wartime flying boat service.) Blair also flew the last scheduled flying boat, VS.44 NC41881, from Foynes to Botwood and New York on October 22, 1945. That was the last of 504 crossings completed by the flying boat service.

One day during the era of flying boat crossings a newspaper reported: Captain Charles Blair, in a VS.44 reported being fired upon by a German U-boat west of Lisbon.

Blair, an American, flew with the USAAF during the Second World War, and after the war picked up where he had left off. He was employed with American Overseas Airlines and later Pan American. Commencing in 1946, he made many stops in Gander as captain of the big airliners of that era.

During the summer of 1947, the American military was constructing a large base at Keflavik, Iceland. A tremendous amount of men and material had to be airlifted, and the military contracted airlines to do most of the work.

By this time, Blair had left the security of Pan American and had invested in Associated Air Transport. The company made several flights with a DC-4 (NC58021), but it could not

keep up with the demand. Blair knew the whereabouts of his old friend VS.44A NC41881, it was in South America. He arranged for a lease, had it returned and renamed it "Reykjavik".

Gander came into the picture again when Blair's flying boat was staged from Lake Minnetonka, Maine, via Gander Lake to Iceland in July 1947.

Blair is mentioned in both the Chronicle of Aviation and the Guinness Book of Aircraft Facts and Feats.

Both note the fact that on May 29, 1951, he made the first solo trans-Polar flight from Bardufoss, Norway, to Fairbanks, Alaska, flying a North American P-51 Mustang. He flew 3,375 miles in 10 hours 29 minutes; he earlier flew from New York to London in a record seven hours 48 minutes.

Maureen O'Hara and Charles Blair married in 1968 and made their home in St. Croix, one of the United States-owned Virgin Islands located approximately 200 kilometres east of Puerto Rico.

The two formed an airline company called Antilles Air Boats, starting with one Navy surplus plane. The company became successful, growing to a fleet of 27 aircraft with 125 scheduled daily flights, 165 employees and grossing \$5 million a year. The popular airline provided a good air service to the Caribbean and Blair was doing what he liked.

It's not a happy ending. Tragedy struck on Sept. 2, 1978 when Blair was killed in a flying accident. His amphibious aircraft developed mechanical problems and crashed into the sea. Maureen O'Hara continued to operate the airline and reportedly became the first woman to run a US commercial airline.