

AUSTRALIA'S QANTAS AT WAR

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# AIRLINE

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**ITALY'S CANT FLOATPLANES**  
**NORTHROP TRIMOTORS**  
**FOKKER'S FOUR-ENGINE FAILURE**  
**BRISTOL BRITANNIA**  
**METRO AIRLINES**



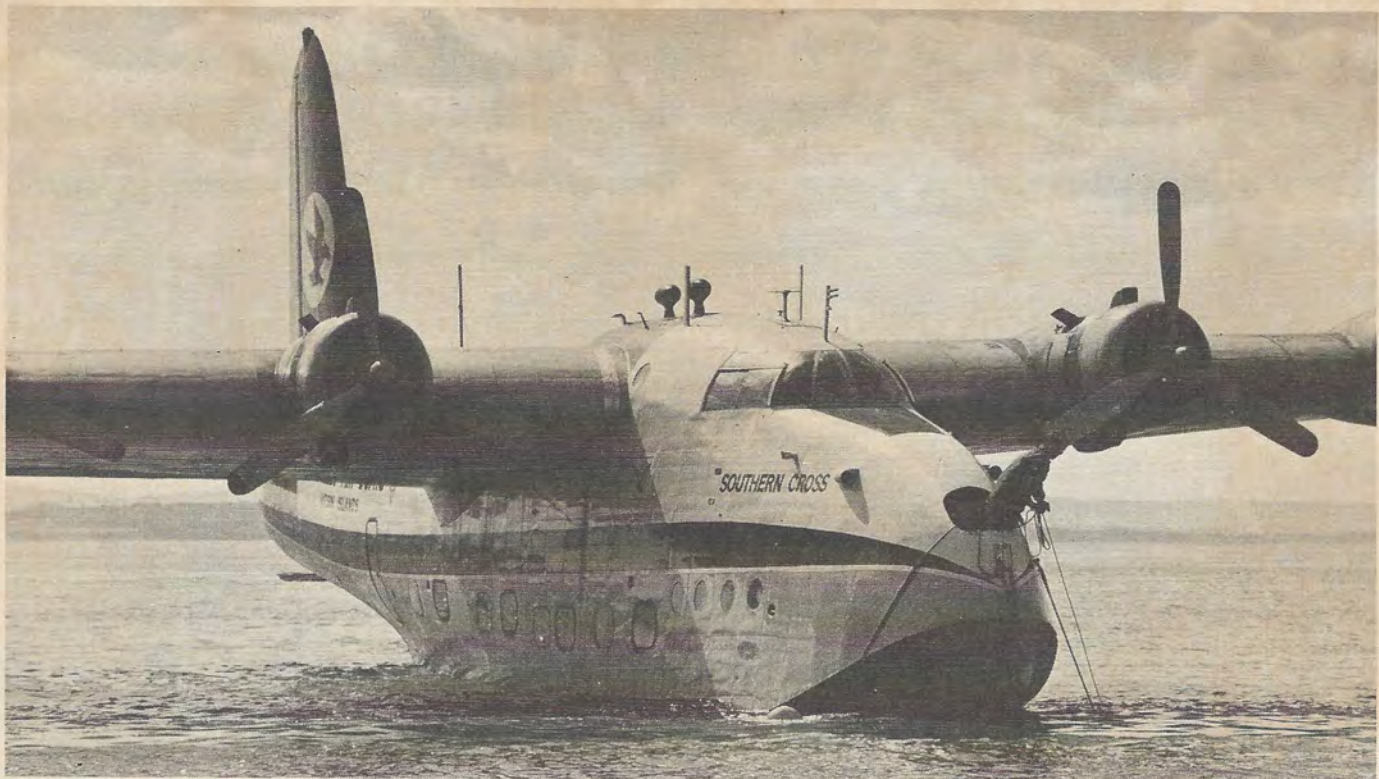
Early in September, the Southampton area of England was treated to a nostalgic return of a past era when one of the last two Short Sandringham flying boats returned to the South Coast. Flying from the old RAF flying boat base at Calshot, the aircraft spent a week giving a series and well-filled pleasure flights before returning, via Ireland, to its home in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Carrying the registration VP-LPE, it is one of a pair of Sandringhams owned by Antilles Air Boats Inc., "The Downtown Seaplane Airline" set up by former Pan-Am 707 pilot Charles

# STILL EARNING ITS KEEP

By Denis J. Calvert and Peter Gilchrist

**A great flying boat airliner returns to the country of its manufacture.**





*The Sandringham at rest in the open sea. It made its take off run between the south coast mainland and the Isle of Wight.*



*A small launch brought the paying passengers from the beach to the Sandringham. Passengers were careful lest they lose their footing and wind up very, very wet.*

*This nostalgic view from a port side window during the taxi run was a treat to the passengers, many whom had never seen a flying boat let alone experience the unique sensation of flying in one.*

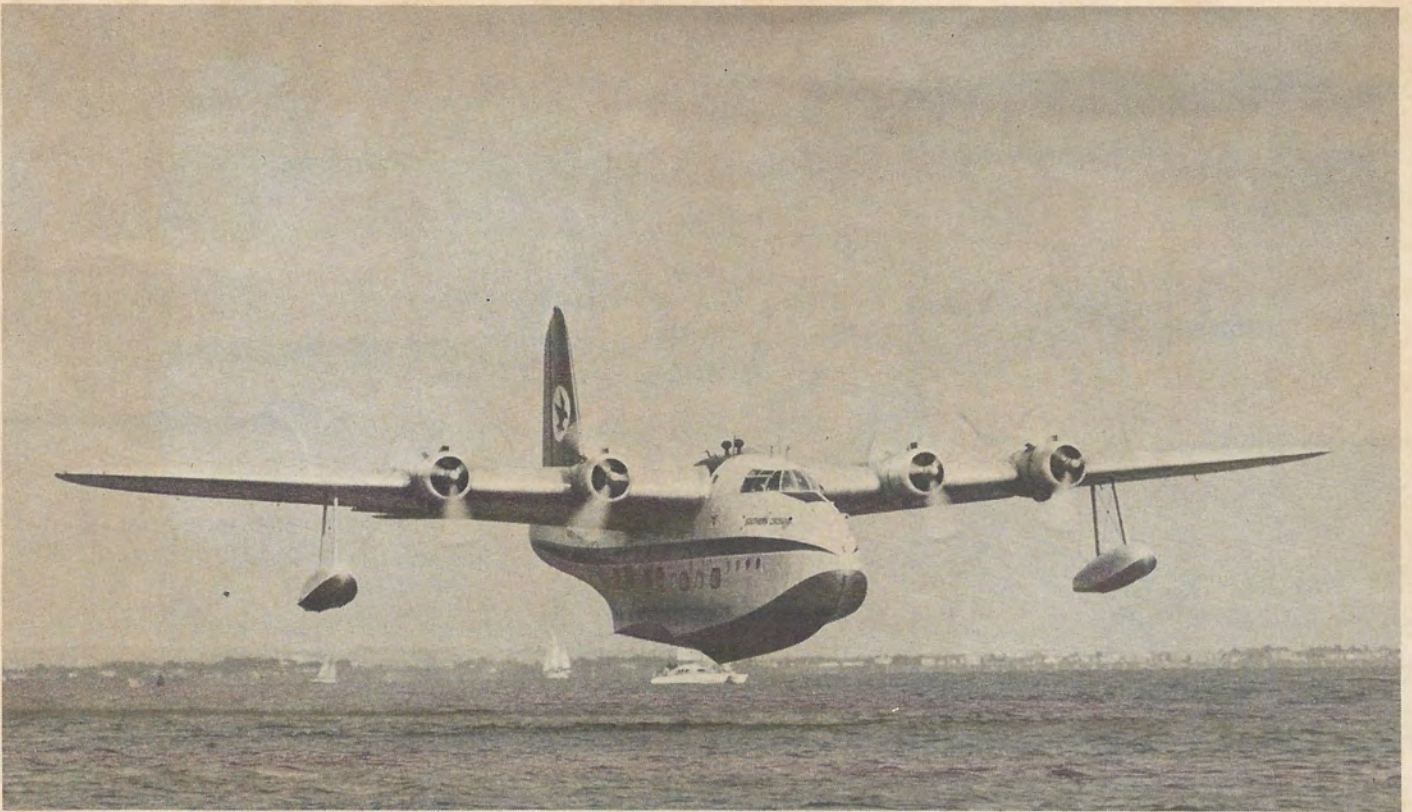
Blair, who is President of the company.

Now named *Southern Cross*, the aircraft has had a colorful history spanning the thirty-five years between its first flight in 1943 and the present day. It was actually built as a wartime Sunderland III maritime reconnaissance bomber and saw service from the RAF flying boat station at Wig Bay in Scotland carrying the military serial JM715. During 1945, the original 1065 hp Bristol Pegasus engines were replaced by Pratt & Whitney R-1830 Twin Wasps of 1200 hp and other modifications were done to bring the aircraft up to Mk.V standard—the final production version of the Sunderland. After the war, it spent a further couple of years in RAF service before being

returned to Short Brothers & Harland in Belfast, where it was converted to a 30-passenger Sandringham 4.

Its civilian life began with Tasman Empire Airways in New Zealand. It was delivered there in 1947 as the last of four Sandringhams ordered to replace two aging Empire-class boats on their Auckland-Sydney service. The aircraft was then registered ZK-AMH and named *Auckland*. Unfortunately, TEAL found that the new fleet suffered considerably from overheated engines and they were withdrawn from the service in February 1948. Following an inquiry and a complete overhaul at Rose Bay, they were put back on the route on 17 June but they were never totally successful and were eventually





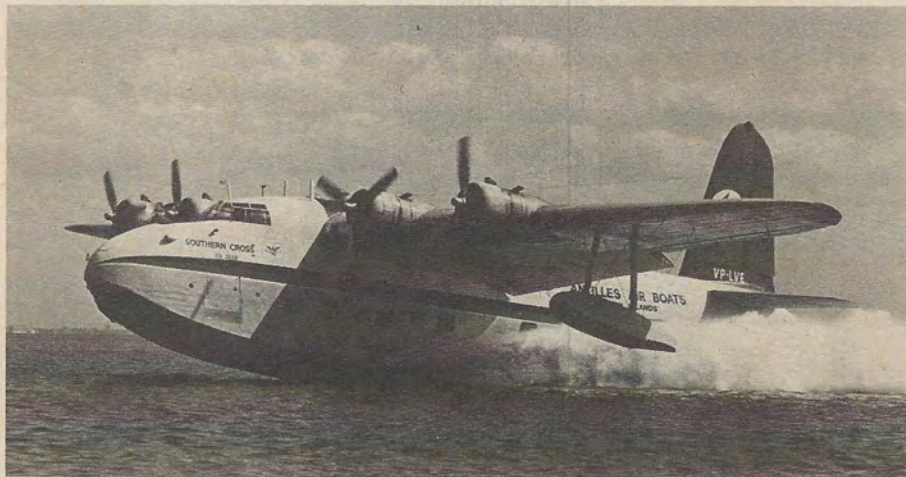
*With its four radials throbbing, the Sandringham takes to the air. The flying boat enjoyed a brisk business during its stay in England.*



*A view of the flight deck of the Sandringham during one of the pleasure flights. Flying the left seat is Captain Ron Gillies, whose experience in flying boats goes back to wartime RAF service. Captain Blair is in the right seat.*

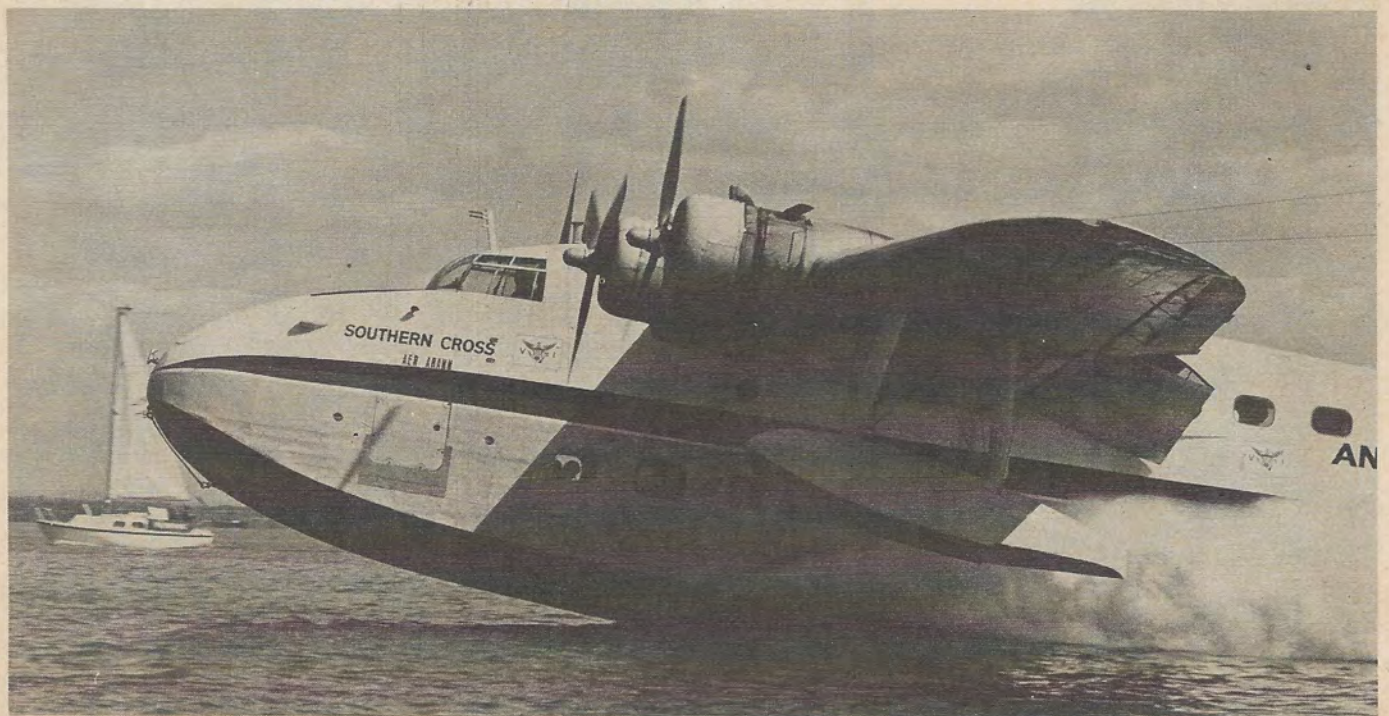


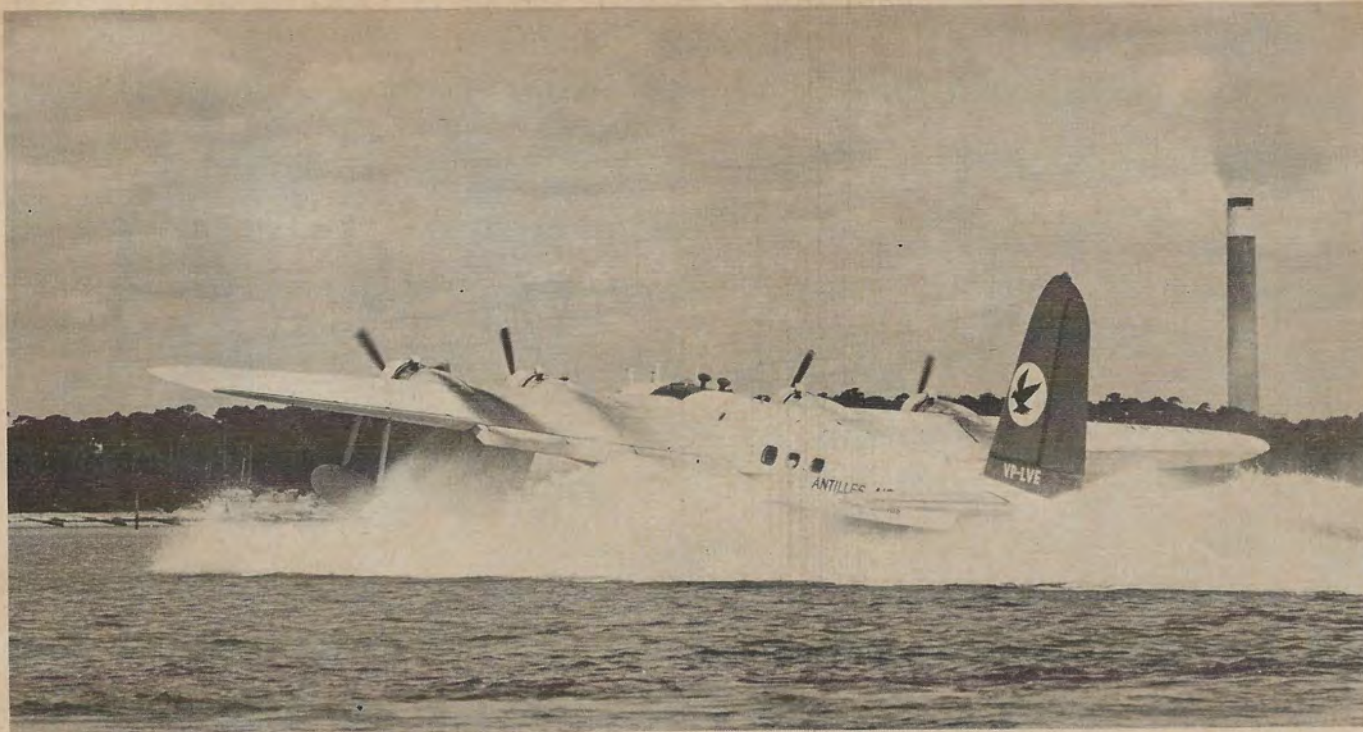
*This landing run, taken with a motor driven Hasselblad, shows the Sandringham at the moment of touchdown . . .*



*. . . the hull of the flying boat glides across the surface of the water and starts to dig in . . .*

*. . . as the spray grows higher and the Sandringham begins to slow quite rapidly . . .*





... until the Sandringham comes to a virtual halt and nearly disappears in a cloud of ocean spray.

For the return trip to the States, on which the first leg was Ireland, Capt. Blair was flying the left seat.

Scenes like this were typical in Britain during the 1930s but the SOUTHERN CROSS is now the last survivor of that pioneering age.



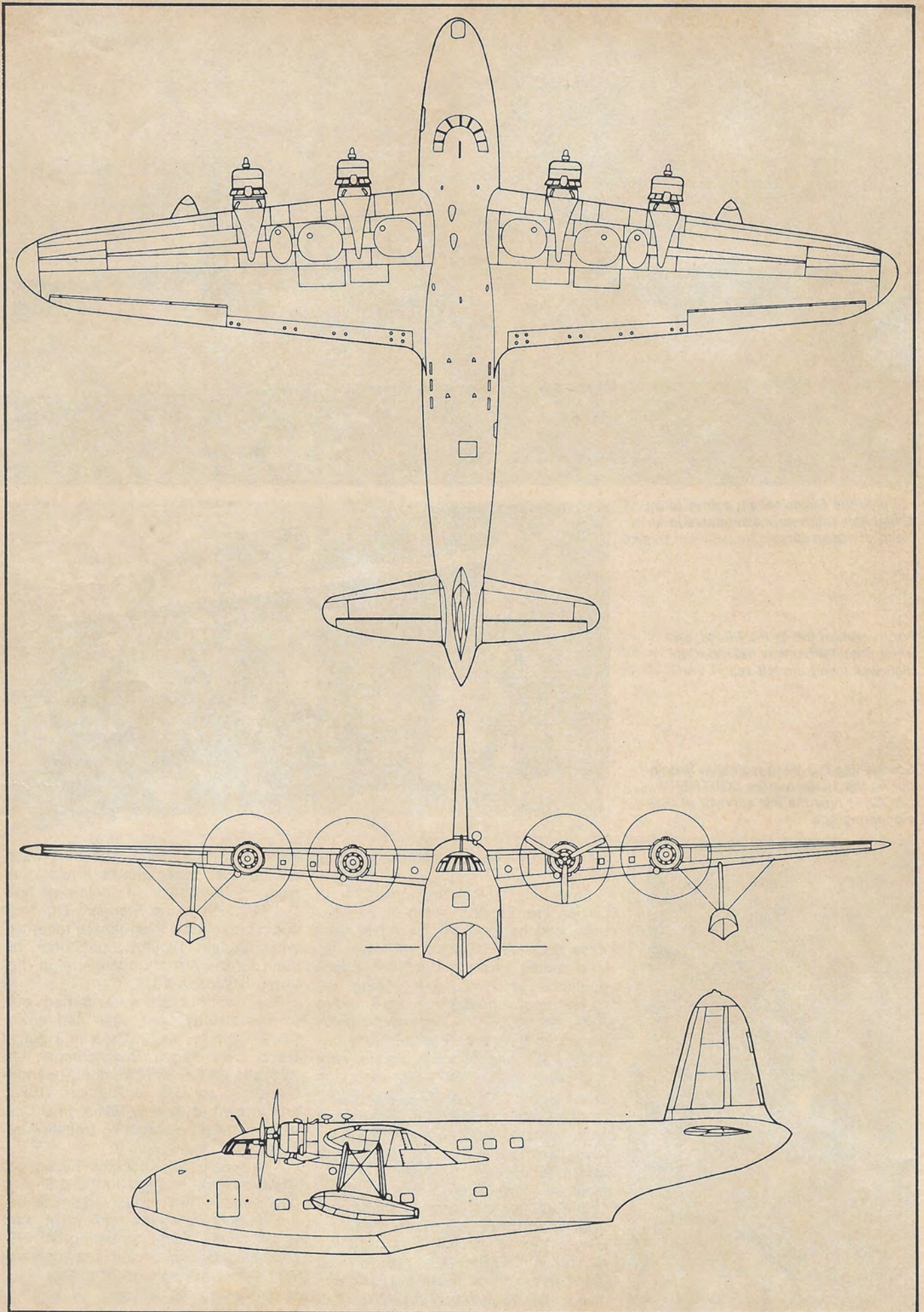
replaced by new Solent 4s a year or so later.

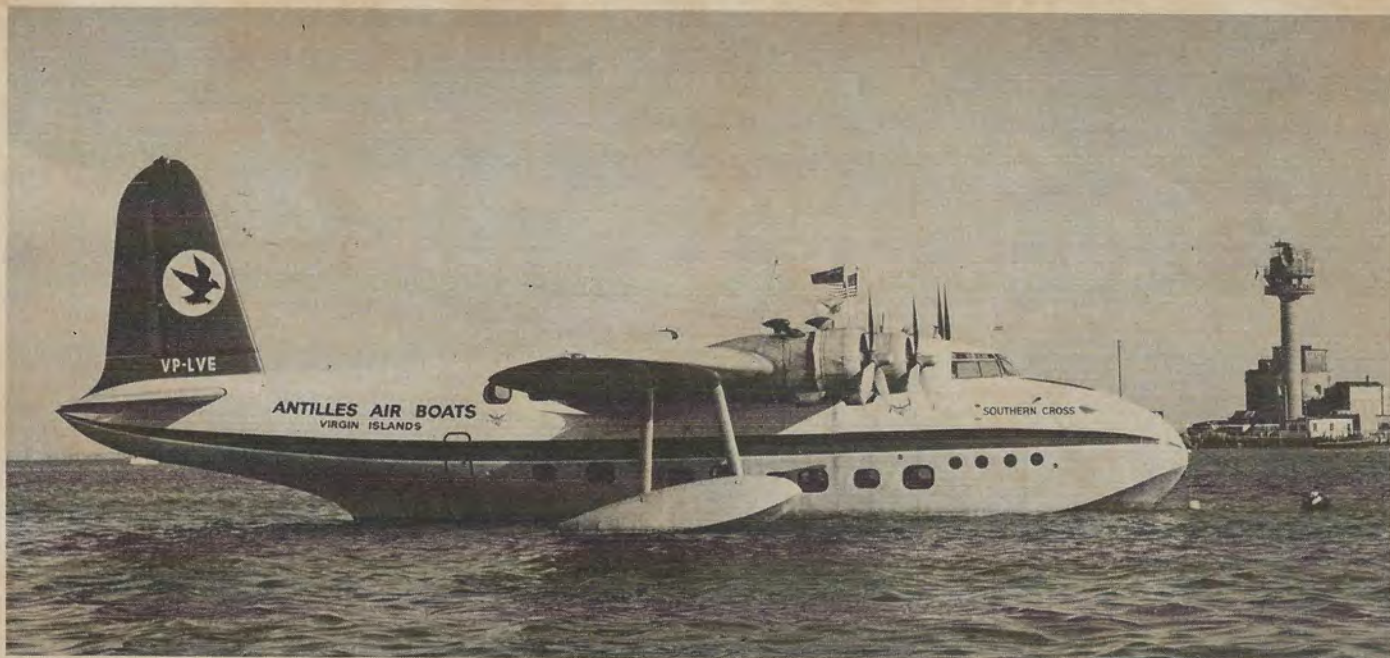
From this difficult beginning to its civilian life. ZK-AMH went on to Australia and began work for Ansett Airways on their Sydney-Lord Howe Island route. Ansett bought two Sandringhams in 1950, 'AMH being re-named *Beachcomber* and registered in Australia as VH-BRC. The two aircraft continued the service successfully until, in 1963, *Beachcomber's* sister ship was blown ashore from her moorings in the lagoon at Lord Howe Island. The damage was not extensive, but repairs were virtually impossible on this relatively isolated island, so the aircraft was stripped of all the usable equipment and towed out to sea and scuttled. Fortunately a replacement aircraft was found in the hands of the Royal New Zealand Air Force, who had Mk.V Sunderlands which were used on patrol duties. One of these (ML814) was given the registration VH-BRF and

flown to Sydney for conversion; after a little over nine months it was put back into service in the colors of Ansett with the name *Islander*. The two aircraft continued their service together until Captain Blair bought both of them for the Antilles operations in the Virgin Islands in 1974.

The two aircraft were ferried out to Australia by Capt. Blair and flown the 9,900 miles to St. Croix in a number of easy stages. *Beachcomber* left Australia on the 28 November, bearing the temporary U.S. registration N158C and arrived at its new home on 9 December after a virtually trouble-free flight.

The Antilles operation is based on Christiansted, St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands. They proudly claim to be the largest seaplane airline in the world, their fleet consisting of 19 Grumman Goose amphibians together with the Sandringhams and two Mallards. During the last year or so four





*A close-up view of the Sandringham at anchor off Calshot. Note the well-used appearance of the aircraft's skin. Also note how close the entrance door is to the water. The insignia is that of the Virgin Islands.*

*Although the aircraft was moored overnight at Calshot, restrictions placed upon operations of the aircraft within the sea area under the jurisdiction of the local harbormaster forced the take offs and landings to be made on the open sea some miles away. This unenlightened action entailed a long 15 minute taxi for the first take off of the morning. For subsequent flights, the passengers were taken out to the aircraft in a long boat trip.*

*With flags flying, the SOUTHERN CROSS poses for a picture that will not be forgotten by the many passengers who took a trip back in time on the last of a great series of airline flying boats.*

ex-U.S. Navy Grumman Albatross amphibians have been purchased to add a slightly higher capacity type to the hard-pressed Goose route network. Only one of these is flying at the present time, the others being stored at the "minimum corrosion" facility alongside Davis-Monthan Air Base in the Arizona desert. These will be progressively brought into the workshops and modified for civil use as needs dictate.

The airline itself was formed in 1964 as an air taxi operator and has grown continuously since then. Today the company flies over 120 scheduled inter-island seaplane services daily from Christiansted. These services take in St. Thomas (Charlotte Amalie), Tortola (West End and Road Town), St. John (Cruz Bay), St. Maarten (Phillipsburg), San Juan Puerto Rico (Isla Grande) and Fajardo Puerto Rico (Puerto Real). The nature and location of the islands

on the route network ensure that a high proportion of passengers carried are island-hopping tourists, but the airline claims a significant number of daily commuters. Their most popular single trip is between St. Croix and St. Thomas; although of only fifteen minutes duration, this one route accounts for 175,000 fare-paying passengers every year.

The most pressing single problem at the moment is to find profitable work for the two Sandringhams. They really need longer distances than the inter-island services can offer and there is hope that they will shortly be more fully utilized on charters to the eastern seaboard of the United States. The FAA is in the process of granting U.S. certification of the type and when these negotiations are completed Capt. Blair hopes to extend the range of services far beyond the island chain that has



become their home. At present, one of these two aircraft is not being used at all; it is now at Isla Grande, on San Juan Puerto Rico, undergoing major reconditioning for the impending route changes.





ANTILLES AIR BOATS  
VIRGIN ISLANDS

