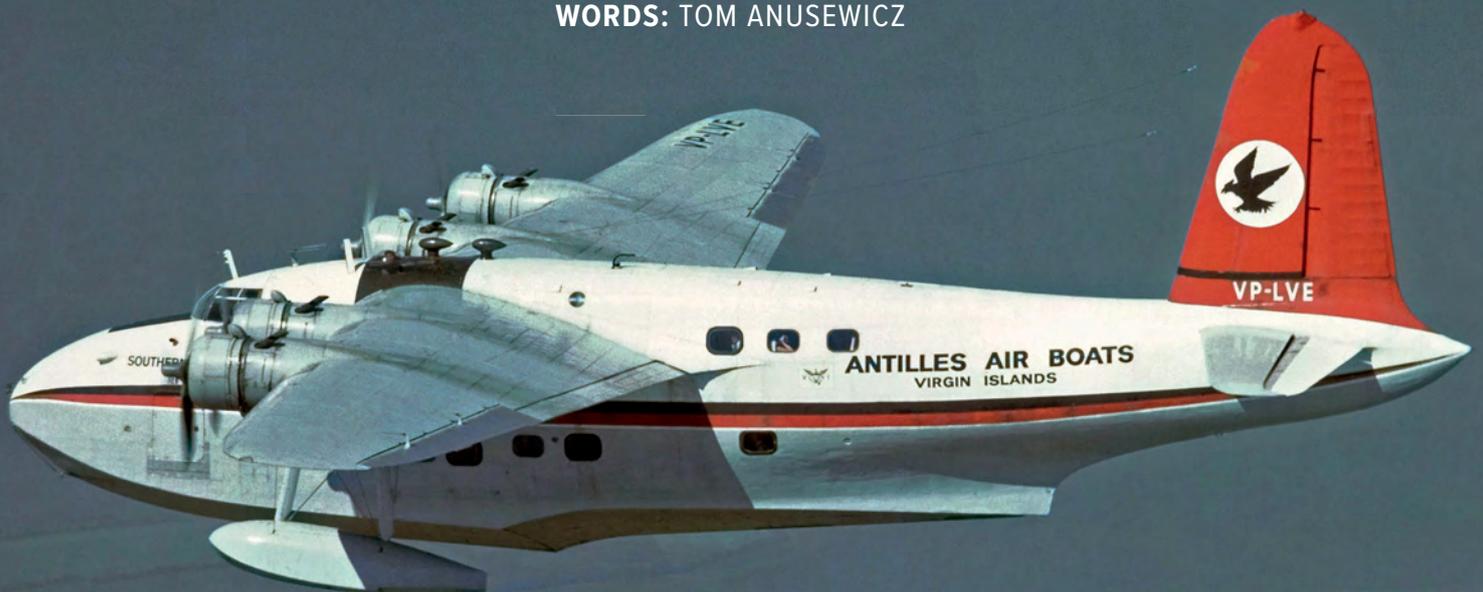




The Streetcar Line of the Virgin Islands

Beautiful flying boats serving sun-drenched Caribbean islands, and a dash of Hollywood glamour — Antilles Air Boats seemed to have it all. But legendary aviator Capt Charles Blair and his airline came to an untimely end

WORDS: TOM ANUSEWICZ



Sandringham IV VP-LVE *Southern Cross* over the Shannon estuary in August 1976, en route from Lough Derg to Charles Blair and Maureen O'Hara's house in Kerry. MALCOLM NASON

It was while I was serving in the US Coast Guard at its air station in San Juan, Puerto Rico, during 1968 that I was first introduced to Antilles Air Boats. I was a structural mechanic and crew member on the Grumman HU-16E Albatross, providing search and rescue efforts in the Caribbean. The hangar next door housed the last of the Sikorsky VS-44 flying boats and I performed some structural repairs on it in my spare time. The company liked having an aircraft sheet metal shop close by.

Every few weeks or so the HU-16E delivered supplies to another USCG station in Charlotte Amalie, capital of the US Virgin Islands, on St Thomas. We would land at the airport and assist the local staff by taking their new provisions back to the harbour. Veterans Drive was the main road that ran along the water's edge, with the coast guard base at one end and Antilles Air Boats at the other. Each time we went by the AAB seaplane ramp, I looked at the aircraft — mainly examples of the Grumman Goose — with great interest.

I returned to St Thomas in 1975. I travelled south from Massachusetts in the hope of securing a job with what was, at that time, the world's largest seaplane airline. By then AAB had already been flying between the islands for about 11 years. My first dialogue was with Capt Ron Gillies. After reviewing my limited aviation background, Gillies told me to return in a few days to meet

Capt Charles Blair and discuss employment. I knew Blair as a true pioneer in aviation and was excited to talk to him. I'd packed a duffle bag with some necessities, including a file with a few documents. When Blair asked if I had an honourable discharge from the coast guard, I handed it to him to seal the deal.

You can't tell stories of Antilles Air Boats without talking about the man who started it. Charles F. Blair Jr was born in Buffalo, New York, in 1909. His first solo flight was at the age of 19 while he was attending the University of Vermont, from which he graduated with a mechanical engineering degree in 1931. He then

joined Boeing Air Transport as one of the air mail pioneers flying out of Cheyenne, Wyoming. Blair was a new co-pilot on the Boeing 247, and while he was flying mail he was also in the naval reserves as

an aviator. It was just the beginning of an incredible career. In his book *Red Ball In The Sky* he stated, "One thing led to another, and in 1940, I found myself installed in the boss pilot's chair of a new overseas airline" — American Export Airlines — "that would give Pan American Airways such a run for its transatlantic money that within ten years it would become a leading carrier on the North Atlantic."

The Naval Air Transport Service was developed at the onset of World War Two, contracting airlines and their personnel for the war effort. American Export Airlines was

one of them. Blair found himself a naval aviator flying the Sikorsky VS-44 across the Atlantic to Foynes, Ireland. On one return trip in this remarkable flying boat, he passed up his refuelling station in Newfoundland and continued on to New York. Arriving there after 25 hours 40 minutes in the air, he was the first pilot to carry passengers and mail on a non-stop flight across the Atlantic.

After the war, Blair took charge of proving flights with Lockheed Constellations and Boeing Stratocruisers for American Overseas Airlines, as American Export Airlines was renamed in 1945. It merged with Pan American World Airways during 1950, and Blair assumed a new role as chief pilot at Pan Am.



He was also well-known for his long-distance P-51 Mustang flights. In modified P-51C N1202 *Excalibur III* he flew non-stop from New York to London in January 1951, travelling 3,478 miles in seven hours 48 minutes at an average speed of 446mph, and setting a record for a piston-engined aeroplane. With the same aircraft, at the end of May that year he flew from Bardufoss, Norway to Fairbanks, Alaska, involving a non-stop leg across the North Pole. For these achievements President Harry S. Truman presented Blair with the Harmon Trophy.

Leaving the navy in 1952, Blair transferred to the US Air Force during 1953, accepting a commission in the Air Force Reserve with the rank of colonel. The USAF was especially interested in his experience of navigation on long-distance and polar flights, as it sought to improve its ability to

“ Blair realised a downtown-to-downtown service should be provided and he was the person to do it ”

BELOW:
A portrait of Capt Charles Blair and Sandringham *Excalibur VIII* taken by internationally renowned photographer Fritz Henle, who was a friend to the Blairs and lived in St Croix until his death in 1993. FRITZ HENLE

BELOW RIGHT:
Two of AAB's Grumman Goose fleet, N8229 and N74676, photographed from a third off St Croix. This was actually a four-ship formation performed by some of the airline's ex-military pilots on 9 January 1978 to commemorate the death of the US Virgin Islands' governor Cyril E. King. TOM ANUSEWICZ





O'HARA, BLAIR AND 'THE DUKE'

Maureen O'Hara Blair always showed great interest in AAB, as did her friends. John Wayne was one who came to visit regularly. Maureen would say Charles and 'Duke' were "cut from the same cloth", commenting that both were "a man's man". In fact, Maureen fell for both. You might think Charlie would be jealous, but it was more Maureen being the jealous one as her husband and the 'Duke' became good friends and spent a lot of time together. One day, Charlie took him for a local flight in *Southern Cross*. Jim Flanagan was in the right-hand seat and asked Wayne if he would like to take the controls. He said, "Just because I played a pilot in movies didn't mean I was one". Jim sat silent and a little deflated. The 'Duke' couldn't really fly.



conduct worldwide deployments. To that end, Blair headed some notable sorties himself. He was at the helm of 1956's Operation 'Shark Bait', in which three F-84F Thunderstreaks became the first jet fighters to cross the Atlantic non-stop. In 1959, newly promoted to brigadier general, he led Operation 'Julius Caesar', the first jet fighter flight over the North Pole, which involved two F-100 Super Sabres deploying from RAF Wethersfield, UK to Eielson AFB, Alaska. For that he received the Distinguished Flying Cross.

All the while Blair carried on working for Pan Am, latterly captaining the Boeing 707 on preferred routes. But in 1961 he relocated his residence to St Croix, where his home was on a hill overlooking Christiansted and the crystal-clear waters of the Caribbean. Travelling from island to island took longer than he wanted. Driving to the airport, the flight and then driving from the airport to town was always time-consuming. From his home he could see St Thomas just 45 miles to the north. His years of experience with seaplanes and flying boats told him there was a better way.

Blair's first Grumman Goose was more for his own inter-island transport, but soon he realised a downtown-to-downtown service

should be provided to the public and he was the person to do it. The G-21A, furthermore, was the perfect aircraft. Grumman had manufactured more than 340, so they were readily available. Antilles Air Boats was founded in February 1964, and over the years it flew 23 different examples.

The airline's first Goose, N95467 (c/n 1161), came from Southeast Airlines in Miami, previously Cat Cay Airlines. Early operations saw passengers boarding a small boat and being brought out to the waiting Goose. The boarding process could be challenging in bad weather. In time, shoreline properties were acquired to allow the amphibian to come up the ramp for quicker and more reliable turnarounds.



I was asked to relocate to St Croix to become a mechanic at the Christiansted seaplane base, and duly boarded the next Goose for the 20-minute flight south. Upon arrival I met certain individuals who educated me on seaplane maintenance. Claude 'Bonny' Austin and Victor Pinheiro had a great deal of Grumman experience, both having been with British Guiana Airways before their arrival at AAB. Charles Freehling had spent

years with the USAF and brought his abilities and perspective to the position of chief inspector. Jim Flanagan came from the air force and Eric Crossfield the navy. Jim and Eric were my closest friends and allies, the three of us being recent veterans and about the same age. We worked the night shift to prepare each aircraft for the following day.

Many others worked in the AAB maintenance department, whether rebuilding Pratt & Whitney R-985 and R-1340 engines at the San Juan engine shop, re-covering control surfaces in the fabric shop or providing ongoing scheduled inspections along with unscheduled maintenance at the St Thomas and St Croix bases. Most personnel came from the islands, not only the US Virgin Islands but Antigua, Puerto Rico and elsewhere. AAB was well-stocked with parts and was always in direct contact with Dean Franklin in Miami, the man who strategically secured the Grumman amphibian parts supply. In those years you did not operate a Grumman seaplane without having Dean's 'phone number. Additional G-21s arrived, coming from Catalina Air Lines, Alaska Airlines and Guyana Airways as well as private owners. One Goose (N8229, c/n 1187) had flown for Gen Batista in Cuba during the early '50s. ➤

ABOVE:
John Wayne and Charles Blair returning from a flight in the Sandringham.

PAT BILLMAN

ABOVE LEFT:
Goose N323 was lost on 4 June 1978 after an engine failure, though on this occasion there were no injuries among the 11 on board.

TOM ANUSEWICZ



ABOVE: Against moody skies, an AAB PBY-5A takes off from St Croix. Three Catalinas were operated by the airline.

FRITZ HENLE

I could go on at length about the experience of the Antilles Air Boats pilots. They were as impressive as the aircraft they flew. Many pilots today start their careers at smaller airlines, building hours and moving up the ladder as time goes on. Blair, however, knew he had the opportunity to hire men with thousands of hours of experience to fly the Goose between the islands and their turquoise waters. His years in the navy and air force meant he knew many seasoned aviators. For the majority, being ex-military with a pension, spending semi-retirement in the US Virgin Islands seemed pretty good.

Brian Lincoln flew fighters in the Korean War as well as Vietnam, and became a wing commander at Nellis AFB, Nevada. He spent time at the Pentagon in Washington DC, where his job was to provide briefs

of war plans and contingencies for senior leadership up to and including the president. His last assignment before retiring in 1973 was director of operations for the US 5th Air Force in Japan, going on to become vice-president and assistant general manager of AAB.



During World War Two, Robert Scott was based in China and, flying the P-61 Black Widow, was recognised for shooting down the first enemy aircraft to be downed at night in the China-Burma-India theatre. He completed 114 missions in Korea and, as commander of the F-105 Thunderchief-equipped 355th Tactical Fighter Wing, 134 in Vietnam. Shooting down a North Vietnamese MiG-17 meant he was one of just two pilots to score aerial victories in both World War Two

and Vietnam, the other being Robin Olds. Scott had met Blair during his time as boss of the 510th TFS at Langley AFB, Virginia. Retiring as a colonel, Scott relocated to the US Virgin Islands to take on the role of AAB's vice-president of operations.

Bill Mable started flying gliders at the age of 14. When war broke out, Bill, now 21, found himself training glider pilots in the UK. At 24 he was assigned to the 4th Fighter Group at Debden, Essex, as the war ended. The next episode had him flying bombing runs in Korea. Bill also spent some years in the HU-16 Albatross with a rescue squadron at Westover AFB. In 1969 he answered an AAB advertisement seeking seaplane pilots. He primarily flew and trained others on the G-73 Mallards when they arrived in 1974.

Nick Castuccio, who joined AAB in 1971, was a US Naval Academy



graduate who flew jet fighters from aircraft carriers during the Korean War and the Albatross on search and rescue duties for the Air National Guard. He assisted designers with development of the automatic throttle control used extensively in automatic landing systems for both military and civilian aircraft.

In other cases, Blair's colleagues at Pan Am introduced their sons as young and capable recruits. Donald T. McDermott was a good friend, having flown with Blair at AOA and then Pan Am. His son, Don R. McDermott, arrived shortly after the start-up in 1964 and flew a little but then left,

returning in 1969 when the schedule allowed for more flight time. He was a natural seaplane pilot. 'Mac' flew the Mallard from its arrival and continued to fly for Virgin Island Seaplane Shuttle after AAB's demise.

As time went by and the daily schedule increased, the turnarounds became ever more important if AAB were to get as many flights in as possible under daytime VFR (visual flight rules) conditions.

Even though we tried to have an additional Goose in reserve, mechanical or other delays could disrupt the timetable. Those booked on the last flight to return home at the end of their working day may

have had an additional adventure. A service leaving St Thomas just before sunset for the 20-minute trip to St Croix had to take into consideration official twilight, allowing time to get to the ramp before dark. I remember on more than one occasion going out in the support boat with a lantern to assist the pilot with his landing.

1968 was a significant year for the company and its buccaneering founder. Charles Blair had met Irish-born actress Maureen O'Hara many years earlier on an aircraft he was flying across the Atlantic. It took a while before the movie star and the adventurous aviator became a couple, but then they were married on 11 March 1968.



AAB added the first of three Consolidated PBY-5A Catalinas when N5588V was purchased from Forrest Bird, a famed inventor and aviator from Idaho who had converted another PBY into his one-off, four-engine Bird Innovator. Sikorsky VS-44 N41881 *Excambian* arrived in St Thomas from Long Beach, California with its previous owner Dick Probert of Catalina Air Lines. The carrier had owned N41881, which it named *Mother Goose*, for 10 years and used it to make the crossing between Long Beach and Catalina Island 8,172 times with 211,246 passengers. Probert assisted with the ferry flight and subsequent crew training.

Excambian would not only allow more seat capacity between St Thomas and St Croix, but gave Blair the satisfaction of continuing his involvement with this special aircraft. Many years earlier, Sikorsky had hoped to secure further flying boat orders from Pan Am but Juan Trippe, the airline's founder and president, decided to look to the Martin company instead. Sikorsky also sought a government contract to build VS-44s for the US Navy but lost out to the Consolidated PBY. American Export Airlines, the new operator looking to compete with Pan Am, decided to go with Sikorsky. It had three built, naming them *Excalibur*, *Excambian* and *Exeter*. As chief pilot for AEA, Blair had flown all three of the VS-44s and established time and distance records in doing so.

Unfortunately, *Excambian's* service with AAB was brief. On 10 January 1969 it suffered the failure of its number four engine while

LEFT: Blair in AAB's first Goose, G-21A N95467. This ex-US Navy machine is airworthy today, owned by Addison Pemberton and based in Spokane, Washington.

FRITZ HENLE

BELOW LEFT: Sikorsky VS-44 N41881 *Excambian* was a short-lived member of the active fleet. KEY COLLECTION

RIGHT: Ready for its delivery flight to St Croix and with AAB titles applied, Sandringham N158J *Excalibur VIII* sits in Sydney's Rose Bay during September 1974. This aircraft would see only minimal use with the carrier.

ADRIAN M. BALCH COLLECTION

landing at Charlotte Amalie and ran aground. This was to be the VS-44's last flight. Blair hoped to put it back into flying condition, but it was not to be. N41881 sat on a cradle next to the terminal for years.

Two more PBYs, N2763A and N5584V, came from Alaska Airlines in 1970. Both had been converted by Steward-Davis as Super Cats, which included the upgrade to Wright R-2600 Cyclone engines along with other modifications. Within a year, N5584V was declared beyond economic repair after a gear collapse on landing at St Croix airport. The PBYs in time became less attractive to AAB, considering the operating cost for a passenger load of 25.

The Grumman G-73 Mallard entered service in 1974 with the addition of N7356 and N7338. Both came from Miami, one from Dean Franklin and the other from Chalk's Airlines. The Mallard, with 15 seats, gave AAB some much-needed extra capacity at a lower cost than the PBYs and allowed for quicker turnarounds, better scheduling frequency and greater reliability.

That same year there arrived the aircraft for which AAB is perhaps best-remembered. The last two Short S25 Sandringham

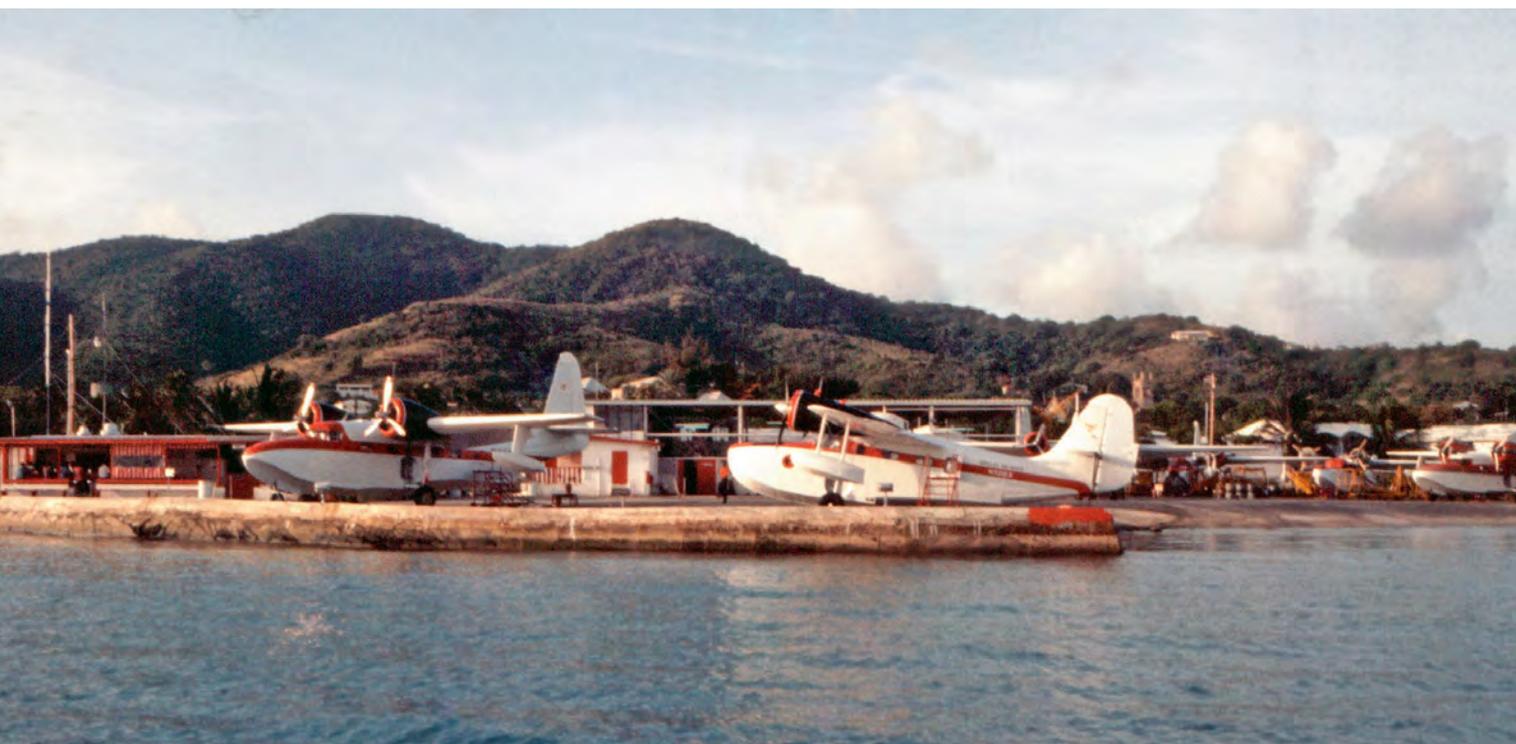


IVs of Ansett Flying Boat Services, VH-BRC *Beachcomber* and VH-BRF *Islander*, had provided the primary means of air transport from Sydney to Lord Howe Island. Once a new airport was established on the island the flying boats were no longer viable, not least given the expenditure required to operate these converted Sunderlands. They were acquired by AAB and prepared in Sydney for the long flight to the US Virgin Islands.

AAB needed the expertise to fly and maintain these majestic machines. Ron Gillies, who joined the company in 1970, was a former captain for Ansett with the distinction of having been a wartime Sunderland squadron commander at the age of 24. Ron was director first of maintenance and then of operations, but with the arrival of the S25s he became the vice-president of engineering, responsible for the Sandringham

BELOW: The busy AAB seaplane base at Christiansted, St Croix, with a mixture of Grumman Mallards and Gooses — never 'Geese' to the airline — on the ramp. TOM ANUSEWICZ

“ Without FAA certification there was no positive future for the Sandringhams operating in the US ”



operations. Ron's wife Noreen, a former WAAF plotter, also joined the AAB team, taking charge of the St Thomas terminal.

Blair was not finished with recruiting for his new venture as Bryan Monkton, another seasoned flying boat exponent, joined the ranks. A former Hurricane and Boston pilot, Bryan had amassed many operational hours on RAAF Catalinas, Martin Mariners and Dornier Do 24s. He had founded Trans Oceanic Airways with surplus Sunderlands, establishing the Lord Howe Island service. Monkton was as comfortable in the Goose as in a four-engine flying boat. Noel Holle was a flight engineer and mechanic on the Sandringham, and along with his wife Margaret, a flying boat stewardess, he joined the aircraft when they relocated.



Blair sent some of his trusted and experienced staff to Sydney to assist with arrangements for the ferry flights. Both aircraft made the journey across the Pacific with a stop in Honolulu before taking on fuel at various locations around the US mainland, ready for the final leg to St Croix. With temporary US registration N158J, VH-BRF was the first to leave Sydney's Rose Bay, on 15 September 1974. Ansett veteran Lloyd Maundrell joined Blair in the cockpit, while O'Hara went along for the ride. VH-BRC became N158C and set off on 28 November 1974, Blair, Monkton and Noel Holle comprising its crew. Both reached their destination without incident.

There were great hopes for the Sandringhams, but without FAA certification there was no positive future operating in the US. This would basically have involved the aircraft being rebuilt to meet US standards, which was financially unacceptable. As an alternative the former *Beachcomber*, now *Southern Cross*, took up British Virgin Islands registration VP-LVE in April 1975.

Southern Cross was used on several occasions — by Blair's executive decision — to transport those passengers who would have been stranded at the end of the day due to a lack of other airworthy aircraft and the onset of darkness. I remember Blair coming into maintenance to grab a few mechanics to assist with a quick Sandringham turnaround in St Thomas. On occasion I



FLIGHT OF A LIFETIME

On 2 September 1977, Sandringham VP-LVE *Southern Cross* touched down on Southampton Water. It had flown to the UK via Ireland to undertake a short programme of pleasure flights from Calshot, organised and advertised by Mike Coghlan of MM Aviation. It had been almost 30 years since Aquila Airways abandoned its flying boat operations from Southampton. During that time, traffic on Southampton Water — particularly small pleasure boat activity — had increased considerably, and for this reason the authorities ruled out any possibility of the aircraft operating from the old BOAC/Aquila berths in Southampton's Eastern Docks.

For the duration of its visit, VP-LVE was thus moored overnight at the former flying boat base at Calshot, allowing both crew and passengers to be taken out to the aeroplane in a small launch. Pilots for the flight on which I was lucky enough to be aboard were Ron Gillies as captain with Charles Blair in the right-hand seat. Following engine start, the Sandringham taxied for some 15 minutes to the allocated operating area to the west of Calshot, and much attention was required by the pilots to identify a suitable stretch of water, into wind and free of ship traffic, for a safe take-off to be made.

A five-day programme of pleasure flying was scheduled, but this was impacted by weather. Because the operating area was so far from Calshot, passengers for other than the first flight of the day were subjected to a long boat trip. Few, though, complained as what followed was a truly special flight which proceeded at low level over the south coast and around the Isle of Wight. My impressions? The interior was spacious, the seats more like armchairs than the standard '30in-pitch economy' one is used to, and passengers had the chance — no, were encouraged — to walk around the aircraft in flight. Windows in the main cabin were close to



The Sandringham makes its stately way across the countryside of southern England. Imagine the noise of the Pratt & Whitney R-1830 Twin Wasp radials as much as anything else... DENIS J. CALVERT

the waterline and gave a fascinating view of the wing floats digging in and kicking up spray during the taxi run. The pilots were happy to talk with those on board; they were clearly enthusiasts too, and one got the feeling that the whole UK visit had been organised because they wanted to, 'because it was fun'.

Although not evident at the time, this was the last opportunity aspiring passengers would have to purchase a ticket for a flying boat flight in UK waters. Talk was that a third successive return visit might be scheduled for summer 1978, this time using the company's second Sandringham (strictly a Sunderland, even if its FAA-issued C of A showed otherwise), N158J *Excalibur VIII*, which was then undergoing major servicing at San Juan. Sadly, this was not to be.

Denis J. Calvert



A simply gorgeous study of *Southern Cross* moored off Calshot in September 1977. DENIS J. CALVERT

Southern Cross during August 1976 in the idyllic surroundings of Glengarriff, County Cork, where Maureen O'Hara had her Irish home. ADRIAN M. BALCH COLLECTION



THE AAB LEGACY

Many flying boats were destroyed, but the survivors from AAB allow us to recognise the aircraft and the people that made a difference to this airline. *VS-44 Excambian* was restored to pristine condition and is displayed at the New England Air Museum in Windsor Locks, Connecticut, not far from its birthplace at the Sikorsky factory in Stratford. Both Sandringhams also found homes. Acquired by Edward Hulton in 1979 and flown across the Atlantic that May, N158J *Excalibur VIII* became G-BJHS — registered as a Sunderland — and was operated around Britain and elsewhere in Europe for the next decade. In 1993 it returned to the US and is now at Kermit Weeks' Fantasy of Flight museum in Polk City, Florida, unflown for some years. Ron Gillies ferried *Southern Cross*, again registered as N158C, from St Croix to Killaloe in October 1980. It flew from there to Calshot the following February. Since 1984 the aeroplane has been displayed in what is now the Solent Sky museum in Southampton as *Beachcomber* in its Ansett colours. Not to be forgotten, many ex-AAB examples of the Goose and Mallard are still flying today.

performed the duties of 'bow-man', a required crew position for large flying boats. Blair knew he did not have authority to fly within the US, but he elected to pay the petty fines rather than strand his passengers. The FAA continued to increase the amount of the fines until they became uneconomical to defy.

Other than that, VP-LVE saw limited employment on down-island excursions and summer service in Ireland and the UK. Its first such sojourn took place in July-August 1976, following a three-day trans-Atlantic flight from St Croix to Foynes. Operating from Killaloe on Lough Derg, using the licence of local carrier Aer Arann, the Sandringham made tourist flights to the southern and western coasts. It also spent time in Belfast and Poole, conducting further passenger-carrying sorties from Studland Bay, before heading home. The trip was repeated in August-September

1977, this time using Calshot as the British base.

A number of great seaplanes and flying boats graced the Caribbean skies in AAB's hands, but the Grumman were the mainstays of the airline. The Goose and Mallard fleets completed as many as 150 scheduled flights a day, moving 1,000 passengers between the islands. What started as a simple connection between St Croix and St Thomas grew into a route network including St John, Puerto Rico, Tortola and St Maarten. Through the 1960s and '70s AAB carried out more than 380,000 flights, carrying in excess of two million passengers. That is how the little company became known as the 'world's largest seaplane airline'. Today that honour goes to Trans Maldivian Airways, flying DHC Twin Otter floatplanes.

I continued to work as a mechanic, but in early 1978 I

was asked to take on additional responsibilities with regard to record-keeping and maintenance scheduling. With that I became the assistant director of maintenance. I was looking forward to the task at hand, but knew there would be challenges ahead.

The years did not pass without tragedy. Incidents and accidents did occur, some being catastrophic. On 2 September 1978 a Goose piloted by Blair lost an engine en route from St Croix to St Thomas and failed to reach the safety of the harbour. The aircraft, N7777V, was not able to sustain flight on one engine. It emerged in the National Transportation Safety Board report that Blair “attempted to fly the aircraft in ground effect”, about 20-50ft above the water, rather than following the correct procedures to make an open-sea emergency landing. The machine struck the water and cartwheeled, killing Blair and three passengers. The NTSB further determined that the safety culture at AAB was less than desired, and that the FAA’s oversight was insufficient.

“Maureen O’Hara Blair took on the role of AAB president and provided the leadership that was needed”

◆

Capt Charles Blair’s career took in more than 45,000 flying hours over the course of 40-plus years. He had spent a long time in an era when pilots often had to make each flight work without much in the way of regulation. Many people thought Blair could fly a refrigerator if it had wings. I believe he thought the same. He flew N7777V that day because he felt it was a perfectly good aircraft, and only a rule stated it was not.

2 September 1978 was a day that changed many things for many people. First and foremost, there was the loss of life and the difficulty for the families of those who perished. It was also hard for the employees and friends of AAB. Regardless of having to deal with certain problems which emerged in the company, we lost a great man.

In 1978, AAB had four Goose accidents, two of which resulted in six deaths. They should never have happened. The G-21 was a great aircraft and it was unfortunate

that poor decisions caused these results. No doubt the Goose lost its credibility with the local commuters.

Maureen O’Hara Blair immediately took on the role of AAB president and provided the leadership that was needed. The strong-willed redhead from Ireland was very much in charge and did an incredible job, aided by Nick Castuccio as general manager. Unfortunately, the financial forecast was not favourable. The grand, four-engine Sandringhams were sent to

the hangar in San Juan where they sat while their future was determined. They left the US Virgin Islands in 1979 and ’80. AAB was intending to introduce the Grumman Albatross, acquiring one in

St Croix and two more in Arizona, but certification was still awaited and they never entered service.

Maureen revisited discussions her late husband had started with Resorts International about a purchase of AAB. Resorts had already bought Chalk’s and felt it had the ability to keep AAB flying for years to come. But the new management’s aviation expertise came from non-seaplane entities, while water operations were always more expensive than those using land-based aircraft. Antilles Air Boats closed its doors in 1981.

This was a unique operation. Being there gave me the opportunity to work and fly on the very last flying boats and hull seaplanes on active airline duty. Among my colleagues were some outstanding people, aviators who — whether in war or peace — often found themselves in situations that left much to the pilot’s discretion, but still got their mission accomplished. That does not always sit well in times of more stringent rules and regulations to ensure the public’s safety. Even so, Antilles Air Boats was a very special airline. It has its place in history because it truly was, to borrow one period description, ‘The Streetcar Line of the Virgin Islands.’



For more information, go to the author’s website at www.antillesairboats.com.



Maureen O’Hara and Charles Blair in the cockpit of *Excalibur VIII* during a stop in Los Angeles on the Sandringham’s ferry flight to join the AAB fleet. SHUTTERSTOCK



The Boeing 314 replica in the Foynes Flying Boat Museum.

HALLOWED GROUND

The Foynes Flying Boat & Maritime Museum is the place to go to find out more about Charles Blair and Maureen O’Hara. It holds Blair’s personal aviation collection — together with the memorial to him, incorporating a model of Mustang *Excalibur III*, that was for many years displayed at Heathrow Airport — and a range of memorabilia relating to the career of O’Hara, who opened the museum in 1989 and was its patron until her death in 2015. Many other fascinating displays on the flying boat heritage of this Irish village and its role as one of the most important locations for trans-Atlantic air travel include the world’s only full-size replica Boeing 314 ‘Clipper’. Housed in facilities that include the original Foynes flying boat terminal and control tower, the museum re-opens for the 2020 season on 28 March. **Ben Dunnell**

For more information, visit www.flyingboatmuseum.com