

My Trans-Atlantic Flight on *Southern Cross* 31 May to 1 June 1977

Please let me introduce Captain Charles F. Blair Jr who was in command of our flight across the Atlantic in June 1977. From 1942 to 1945 Captain Blair flew flying boats into Foynes, Ireland, coincidentally the destination on our flight. Foynes' sheltered inlet made for a good operation area for flying boats and was the last port of call on Ireland's western shore. As a result, Foynes became one of the biggest civilian airports in Europe during World War 2.

Captain Blair was the first pilot to make the transatlantic flight from the U.S. to Foynes carrying passengers and mail. On July 8, 1989, his widow, Maureen O'Hara Blair, cut the opening ceremony ribbon for the Foynes Flying Boat and Maritime Museum. She also presided over the Grand Reopening and Expansion of the Flying Boat Museum in 2006. Maureen had been asked to be the museum's patron. She accepted and served in this capacity from its opening until her death in 2015.

Maureen O'Hara Blair donated her late husband's flying boat, a Vought-Sikorsky VS-44A, *Queen of the Skies*, to the National Museum of Naval Aviation and it was subsequently given on permanent loan to the New England Air Museum in Connecticut.

Captain Blair's Short Sandringham flying boat VP-LVE *Southern Cross*, the subject of this story, has been the centre piece of the Southampton Hall of Aviation since 1984. The plane has been restored to appear as it did for an earlier owner, Ansett Flying Boat Services, with registration VH-BRC and the name *Beachcomber*.

The Seaplane terminal located at The Charlotte Amalie Harbor Seaplane Base was dedicated in his honor. Captain Blair and Maureen O'Hara Blair are buried together at Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia

THE FLIGHT

The flight I made in 1977 aboard *Southern Cross* from Port Washington, New York, to Foynes (Lough Derg), Ireland, via Gander, was probably the most exciting thing I have ever done. It came about, rather cheekily I recall, when I phoned Captain Blair at his home in St. Croix, US Virgin Islands. In 1974 he had purchased the two Ansett flying boats for his amphibious seaplane operation Antilles Air Boats, so I asked if I could come on the forthcoming trans-Atlantic flight.

Very surprisingly he said, yes, if you put in money for petrol. My heart sank, because I knew how thirsty those Sandringham flying boats were, so of course I asked how much did he have in mind. He replied, USD300, which astonished me at how cheap that was, so I said, "thanks, you're on!"

A quick visit to the Qantas Staff Credit Union and the requested cash was in my hand! I should add that my phone call to Captain Blair wasn't from an unknown person as I had got to know he and his Hollywood actress wife Maureen O'Hara well during my frequent visits to Rose Bay when Charles was buying the two 'boats'. In fact, I spent a couple of days taking them sightseeing around Sydney and its environs which we all enjoyed.

To cut a long story short, courtesy of my Qantas staff travel concession I was soon winging my way to New York where I was to join *Beachcomber*, now renamed *Southern Cross*. I was picked up at Kennedy Airport by the daughter of one of Charles' oldest friends who I stayed with that night, and the following afternoon went with them out to Port Washington to watch the Sandringham fly in from St Croix. Photos of the event can be found later in this article.

After their arrival at 6pm that afternoon Captain Blair was presented with a commemorative plaque by the North Hempstead Town Supervisor Michael Tulley Jnr at the Port Washington Town dock. Port Washington was the US terminal for the trans Atlantic air service until the Boeing flying boats were replaced by landplanes after the war..

That evening a group of the Captain Blair's friends and crew who were flying to Ireland the next day gathered together for a photo to record the historic event. Included were Jack Kelly Rogers, a retired Imperial Airways pilot who flew Winston Churchill from Bermuda to England during WW2. Another passenger on the flight was John Grierson who set up Britain's air transport system during the war. Also on the flight were Gene and Shirley Neville who were neighbours of the Blairs in St Croix.

One family I well recall was that of Noel Holle, who I had met often during my many photographic expeditions to the Rose Bay flying boat base in Sydney. Following the withdrawal of the two 'boats' from the Lord Howe Island run in 1974, Noel had accepted a job with Antilles Air Boats as chief mechanic/engineer. He was accompanied by his wife Margaret and their three sons, Steven, Matthew and Daniel who were making the trans-Atlantic crossing for the second time, having travelled to Ireland with their family the year before. Alongside Noel was ex Ansett pilot Ron Gillies who had also joined Antilles Air Boats following the end of the Ansett service in Australia. The last member of the flying boat's crew was Flight Engineer Jim Flanagan.

The next day, June the first, was departure day. The *Southern Cross* was towed close to the town's dock to be refueled in preparation for the first leg of the flight from Port Washington to Gander, Newfoundland. Captain Blair declared that we were ready to leave just before midday and we were taken out to the flying boat by launch. It wasn't long before the engines started and we were off, leaving the water shortly after 1pm.

After departure we flew up the eastern seaboard of the United States, over Boston and Martha's Vineyard (home of the Kennedys) over Sydney and Halifax, Nova Scotia, and into Canada and finally on to Gander Lake, Newfoundland which we reached just as the sun

was setting. Throughout the flight Maureen, together with Margaret Holle and Noreen Gillies, acted as 'hosties', keeping us well fed (KFC) and watered.

During the eight-hour flight from Port Washington to Gander, I spent many hours at the windows watching the passing scenery. Unlike modern airliners which traditionally fly between 35,000 and 40,000 feet, the old Sandringham, being unpressurised, flew at altitudes ranging from 1500 and 5000 feet. As Maureen said "You're not flying so high that all you see is soapsuds beneath you. You're flying in that area between God and the wonderful land he created".

At Gander we stayed the night at a lakeside motel before taking off the next day at the crack of dawn for the long Atlantic crossing to Ireland. Most flights today from Gander to London take around 6.5 hours, the crossing on the flying boat took 14.5 hours. For me, that long flight was nothing but pure excitement, I'd have been happy had it taken a week!

Of course, there was nothing to see but the turbulent Atlantic Ocean beneath us during the crossing so I spent the time talking to some of the passengers plus climbing up to the flight deck numerous times to see how the aircraft was behaving. We were extremely fortunate that for the duration of the flight weather conditions were good and no one suffered from 'mal de mer'. While on the flight deck, I often saw Captain Blair taking sun sights with his sextant from the astrodome located in the ceiling behind the pilots.

One passenger I particularly enjoyed talking to was Captain Jack Kelly-Rogers, the noted British pilot whose aviation exploits are legendary. Captain Kelly-Rogers was 22 when he joined the RAF but in 1937, he quit the air force for the growing commercial sector of aviation. He joined the fledgling British airline, Imperial Airways, soon to become British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC) where he became chief pilot of the airline's fleet of Empire flying boats carrying passengers to Australia, South Africa and America.

Captain Kelly-Rogers also made the first scheduled west and eastbound airmail flights across the Atlantic by a European operator, landing at Foynes, Ireland. In 1940 he flew the Empire flying boat *Corsair* out of the narrow Dungeness River in the Belgian Congo where it had been marooned for 10 months. That same year he flew the first passenger flight to and from the United States and was the first overseas pilot to land at LaGuardia Airport.

But perhaps Captain Kelly-Rogers is best remembered for the historic 1942 flight on the BOAC Boeing 314 flying boat, *Berwick*, carrying the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill from the United States to England. During the flying boat's four-hour flight from Washington to Bermuda, Churchill was allowed to briefly take the aircraft's controls, after which he asked Captain Kelly-Rogers "What about flying from Bermuda to England? Can she carry enough petrol?" Kelly-Rogers replied: "Of course." Initially Churchill was to have travelled from Bermuda to England by sea but changed his mind at the last minute.

So it was that in January 1942 Churchill and Kelly-Rogers set out from Bermuda bound for Plymouth Sound where they arrived safely after the long flight across the Atlantic. As Churchill debarked, Kelly-Rogers said: "I never felt so relieved in my life as when I landed you safely in England". After the war Captain Kelly-Rogers joined Aer Lingus where he worked until 1965. In retirement he devoted a major part of his time to rescuing and collecting items of Irish aviation interest and was primarily responsible for the creation of the Irish Aviation Museum, being its first and only honorary curator.

Returning to our present 1977 trans-Atlantic flight aboard *Southern Cross*, eventually the Irish coast and Shannon Airport came into sight, and shortly after that the town of Limerick and then Lough Derg, which we circled before landing just on dusk. Crowds of people from the nearby town of Killaloe thronged the edge of the lake and dozens of small craft came out to meet us as we picked up the mooring in the failing light. Fortunately, despite the poor light, I managed to take several photos of this exciting event, several of which accompany this article.

So that was the end of the most thrilling flight of my life. The next day Jim Flanagan and I took off in a hire car for a few days sightseeing, ending in Belfast where I flew to London and back to Sydney.



Winston Churchill talking to Captain Kelly-Rogers during the secret flight from Bermuda to Plymouth Sound in January 1942.



Captain Blair and his wife Maureen O'Hara (in the white jacket) are seated next to Captain Jack Kelly-Rogers and seated on the floor at the front is ex Ansett Captain Ron Gillies, Flight Engineer Jim Flanagan at centre and at right Antilles Air Boats chief mechanic Noel Holle, formerly of Sydney-based Ansett Flying Boat Services. Directly behind Noel in the red top is his wife, Margaret. The author is at top left.



This photo, issued in 1944, shows Captain J.C. Kelly Rogers, the BOAC captain who piloted the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill on his first transatlantic flight.



Stephen with Captain Jack Kelly-Rogers during our trans-Atlantic crossing on *Southern Cross* on 1 June 1977.



Flight Engineer Jim Flanagan (left) and Gene Neville, Captain Blair's neighbour in St Croix.



Maureen O'Hara Blair and Stephen during our trans-Atlantic flight in June 1977.



The scene on arrival at Lough Derg on the evening of 1 June 1977. The three people on the right of the flag are Matthew, Daniel and Noel Holle.



The serene scene at Lough Derg, Ireland, shortly after our arrival on 1 June 1977.



Ex Ansett pilot Captain Ron Gillies acted as co-pilot during the Atlantic crossing. Captain Blair is out of shot taking sun sights with his sextant from the astrodome.



Friends of the Blairs wishing us farewell at Port Washington on the afternoon of 31 May 1977.



An evocative shot of our departure from Port Washington on 31 May 1977.



Departing Port Washington on 31 May 1977.



***Southern Cross* taxiing to her mooring after alighting at Lough Derg on 1 June 1977.**



Maureen O'Hara & Stephen at Rose Bay in late 1974



Captain Blair checking his chart during the Atlantic crossing on 1 June 1977.



A lovely portrait of Maureen taken during the Atlantic crossing on 1 June 1977.



Stephen and Maureen chat over lunch aboard *Southern Cross* on 1 June 1977.



Shirley and Gene Neville, Maureen and Steven Holle aboard *Southern Cross*.



Gene Neville with Steven (back) and Matthew Holle.



from left: Steven Holle, Shirley Neville, Robert Blair (Charles' artist brother), Matthew Holle and Gene Neville.



From left: Steven Holle, Matthew Holle, Daniel Holle, Jamie Fitzsimons, Andrew Fitzsimons and Captain Blair. Photo courtesy of Matthew Holle.



Gene Neville, Jim Flanagan and Noel Holle.

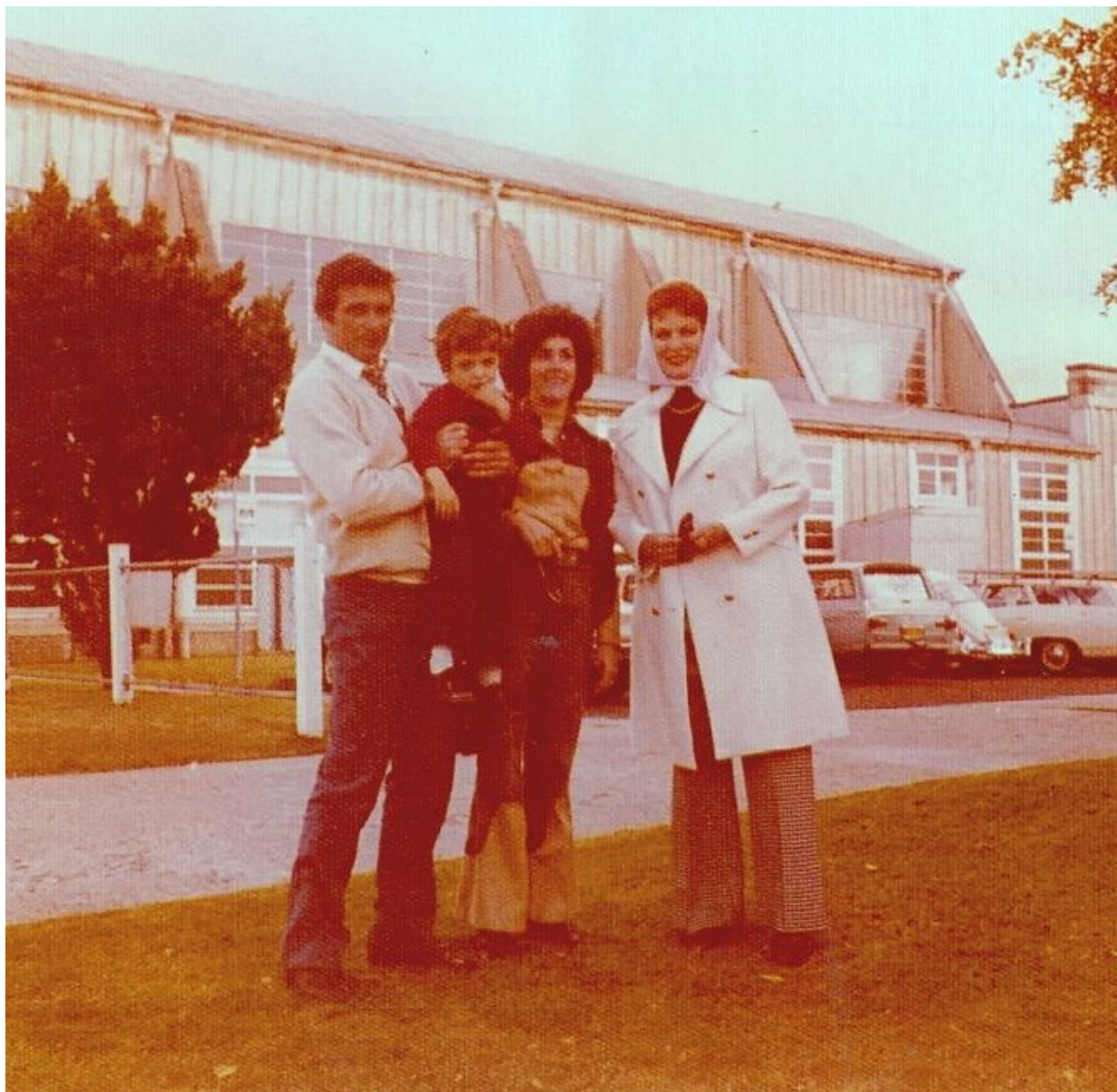
Photo courtesy of Matthew Holle.



Steven and Matthew Holle
Photo courtesy of Matthew Holle



**from left: Charles Blair, Maureen O'Hara Blair, Matthew Holle, Margaret and Noel Holle at Maureen's home at Glengarriff, Ireland.
Photo courtesy of Matthew Holle.**



Noel Holle, Daniel Holle, Margaret Holle and Maureen O'Hard Blair at Rose Bay in late 1974.



Maureen O'Hara Blair in her "specially reserved" seat aboard *Southern Cross*.