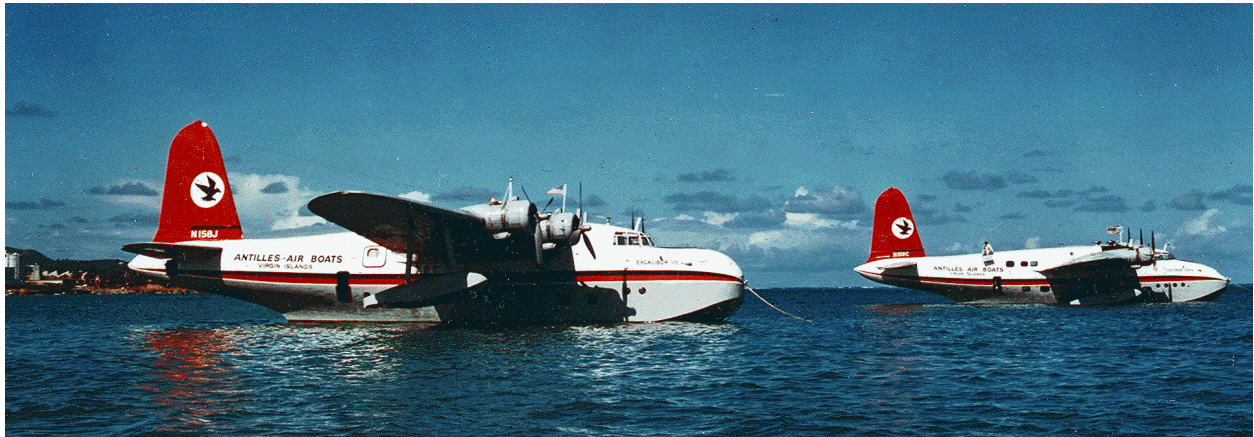


Excalibur and Southern Cross: The Last Scheduled Flying Boats



In the final years of the great passenger flying boats, two veteran Short Sandringhams operated scheduled passenger service throughout the Caribbean from their seaplane base in St. Croix, U. S. Virgin Islands. Operated by Antilles Air Boats under Captain Charles Blair, these aircraft represented the final chapter of an era that once connected the world through ocean harbors rather than airports.

Charles Blair was a legendary pilot and the husband of Maureen O'Hara, famed Irish actress. After buying the Sandringhams from Ansett Flying Service in Sydney, Australia in 1974, Maureen accompanied her husband and crew on the 12,700-mile flight to the Virgin Islands.

Originally, the Sandringhams were built as Short Sunderlands for the Royal Air Force during the Second World War. Following the war they were converted at the Short Brothers facility in Belfast, Ireland, into civilian airliners designated the Sandringham S.25.

Through arrangements with M.M. Aviation and Aer Arann, Captain Blair was able to bring Southern Cross to Ireland and to operate one hour flight-seeing flights over Ireland and England.

My husband, Dave Howard, and I were both pilots for Antilles Air Boats during the time they were operating the Sandringhams.

Captain Blair asked us to go with him to Ireland to do charter flights during the summer of 1978. We immediately started making preparations, the most exciting being the training flights in Southern Cross!

What promised to be an unforgettable summer in Ireland never came to pass.

Tragedy struck.

My husband died after crashing into the ocean when both engines on his Grumman Goose failed shortly after takeoff on his flight with passengers going from St. John to St. Croix. Captain Blair died a few months later after experiencing engine failure on the Grumman Goose he was flying while approaching St. Thomas.



Maureen O'Hara, who was already at her home in Ireland, returned to St Croix to grieve the death of her beloved husband, assuming leadership of Antilles Air Boats during their most difficult time.

I remained at Antilles Air Boats, flying as first officer on the Grumman Mallard seaplanes brought in to replace the Goose.

Today the surviving Sandringhams stand as reminders of the final age of ocean-going air travel — when flying across the Atlantic still carried some of the elegance and romance of a transoceanic voyage.

Southern Cross is on display at the Solent Sky Museum in Southampton, U. K., while Excalibur is displayed at the Fantasy of Flight in Florida.

For more information, see www.antillesairboats.com

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