

# Meet the real Charles Blair

By ROBERT C. MIKESH

**A**rrivals and departures of the Goose seaplanes in the Virgin Islands go mostly unnoticed by local residents. Should a World War II P-51 Mustang fighter buzz any of the islands, it would be sure to capture the attention of nearly everyone. Be assured, if the P-51 were bright red, with a barber pole marked tail, Antilles Air Boat operator Captain Charles F. Blair would be at the controls.

This event will not happen however, for the Mustang fighter described here has recently been restored by the National Air and Space Museum of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and is currently on exhibit in an annex to that museum. The airplane was once owned by Captain Blair, and because of the airplane's historic accomplishments — especially while in the hands of Blair — it is now part of the National Aeronautical Collection.

The name Charlie Blair is a well known and highly regarded name that is linked to his seaplane commuter airline, so vital throughout the Virgin Islands. This current prominence, however, overshadows the more historic events he created during the war years, and more importantly in 1951 with his epic flight across the North Pole in his bright red Mustang. More than one aviation historian describes Blair as having created more aviation history than Charles A. Lindbergh. The world needed a hero when Lindbergh flew the Atlantic in 1927, while in the case with Blair, he was upstaged by two wars and nearly went unnoticed when he created history with several outstanding, record breaking flights.

To meet challenges he set for himself, Blair purchased an already civilianized Mustang fighter from Hollywood stunt and race pilot, Paul Muntz. This small, single engine plane was a far cry from the then mammoth passenger carriers he flew for Pan American Airways across the Atlantic. The plan Blair had was to beat the round the world speed record he knew could be improved upon. With the outbreak of the Korean War, his plans had to be changed, however. It would not be sound judgement to fly into or across foreign countries in a fighter plane in a war jittery world. Instead he would better the transatlantic speed record from New York to London, a route he flew almost weekly as an airline captain. This time he would be alone in his tiny fighter. He covered the distance in January 1951 in seven hours and forty-eight minutes, setting a record for piston engine driven airplanes that he retains today.

A bigger challenge was still to be met by this un-



assuming man and his little red airplane. In addition to being a very experienced pilot with 435 Atlantic crossings at that time already to his credit, (now in excess of 1,600), Blair was very knowledgeable in air navigation. Recognizing the advantages of taking the shorter distance between continents by way of the polar route, he developed a new way of navigating in the northern regions of the globe where the magnetic compass was useless or at best, unreliable. His method would utilize sunlines at precomputed points and times as a means of maintaining his direction across the white wilderness. To prove his theory he would make the first flight by himself in the Mustang that now carried the name he gave it — *Excalibur III*.

His airplane was modified so that the entire wing space was a gas tank. In addition, an oversized tank was placed behind his seat giving enough fuel for twelve hours of flying, while the standard P-51 could cruise about one third that time.

On May 29, 1951, Blair departed Barufoss, Norway, and headed northward toward the top of the world and on across to Fairbanks, Alaska. Many considered his flight to be foolhardy in a single engine airplane over the 7,500 miles, alone, and with no possible intermediate emergency landing fields. This seasoned pilot knew his equipment, was certain of his navigation theory, and could foresee the advantages that could be gained for his country and for the aviation community. His method of navigation was proven when he crossed his point of land fall at Point Barrow, Alaska, directly on course within one minute of his planned time. This lonely flight took ten hours and twenty-seven minutes. With him was the first official airmail to be flown across the polar route. On landing, his reported comments were that "the trip was easy — but I don't plan to do it again."

A few months later, President Harry S. Truman at the White House presented Captain Blair with the International Harmon Trophy for his accomplishments in the field of aviation for 1951. This prestigious trophy is on exhibit in the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., while the certificate presented to him by the President hangs scarcely noticed among his many certifi-



cates and awards above Captain Blair's desk in his home at St. Croix.

The polar flight had more meaning than its pure accomplishment. To the cold war world, it showed the possibility of an enemy attack from across the northern reaches. Our military air forces were not equipped to navigate in this area, and Blair's knowledge became quite important for countering this shortcoming. He accepted a reserve commission as an Air Force Colonel, later to become a Brigadier General, although his military service began as a naval aviator before World War II. Now assigned to the "Think Factory" and with modern jet fighters at his disposal for navigation experimentation, General Blair was instrumental in developing an automatic system that would track celestial bodies and provide a new means of navigation. With this, he became the first to lead jet fighters across the Atlantic on the direct, great-circle route, requiring only one in-flight refueling. As the equipment was further developed, he returned again to cross the North Pole, showing that fighter aircraft could operate and navigate in this once forbidden area. For this he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Thurlow Award for outstanding contributions to the science of navigation. These developments led by Blair did much to strengthen our defense capabilities for possible attacks coming from across the arctic regions.

These were not the first of Blair's accomplishments. Little wonder that he is successful in the seaplane business today, for it is with this type of flying that his fame began. When American Export Airlines (AEA) was started in the early 1940's, Blair joined the new company as chief pilot, after a number of years flying for United Airlines. AEA was acquiring the newest flying boats for transatlantic cargo and passenger service. These were the Sikorsky S-44's and Blair was with these ships from the drawing board, and flight tested them for the company. With the start of World War II at that time, these boats provided a critical link across the Atlantic to the combat theaters. Blair served through the war in this vital capacity carrying high ranking military and diplomatic passengers as well as top priority cargo.

It was on one of these flights that Blair set his first notable record for flying boats. On one west bound flight from Foynes, Ireland, to New York he flew the first non-stop airliner with passengers and mail across the Atlantic — a magnificent first, but like all his feats, war news overshadowed it. What prompted such a flight was weather at each intended point of landing that made it advisable to continue to the next. With shrewd management of fuel, and selection of the best aircraft performance altitude, Blair safely extended this flight to the waters of New York Harbor, their destination. This made their arrival nearly one



Landing in London in January 1951, Captain Blair set a new transatlantic speed record in this P-51.

day earlier than scheduled.

This is but one example of the type of flying on which Captain Blair built his reputation through the war years with flying boat operations. When AEA, renamed American Overseas Airline, was absorbed into Pan Am, Blair continued the Atlantic crossings in the big Boeing Stratocruisers and later in the jet Boeing 707's. His reputation for flying skill that prevailed through his many years with passenger carrying service and 40,000 flying hours, stayed with him to this retirement from Pan Am in 1969.

What started out to be a hobby of owning his own Grumman Goose to fly around the Virgin Islands during his time off between Pan Am scheduled flights, has expanded to a vital link in commuter service between the islands. He manages this seaplane airline from his home base in St. Croix, which is no small task. Despite the demands of business, almost daily he puts himself on the flying schedule for some portion of the company's 120 daily flights.



Boarding passengers are greeted by Blair who always has a ready smile and a friendly word. The few that recognize the handsome, soft spoken pilot, know him mainly as the manager and principle owner of Antilles Air Boats. But the flight is far more comfortable for those that know of the many skillful and historic accomplishments that go to make up the real Captain Charles F. Blair. ❶

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