

Returning to the Flying Boat Era My Visit to the Foynes Flying Boat & Maritime Museum

By Marijane Sipple

“Some journeys take us to new places. Others bring us home to the stories that have lived in our hearts for a lifetime”

I first learned about the Foynes Flying Boat & Maritime Museum in Ireland when Tom Anusewicz featured it on the Antilles Air Boats website. I was thrilled to discover that such a museum existed and immediately added it to my bucket list of places I hoped to visit someday.

As my 87th birthday approached, I realized that if I was ever going to make the journey, I needed to do it while I was still able to travel.

I sent an email to Margaret O'Shaughnessy, Director of the museum, asking for recommendations on accommodations and local transportation. She graciously replied with several helpful suggestions that made my trip planning much easier, especially her recommendation to fly into Shannon Airport and not Dublin!

I was delighted to learn that Maureen O'Hara Blair had played an important role in the museum's planning. When Maureen married Charlie Blair, owner of Antilles Air Boats, she stepped away from her acting career and moved to St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands. There she shared Charlie's enthusiasm for operating his seaplane airline and found many ways to help him.

After Charlie's tragic death in 1978 and eventual sale of Antilles Air Boats, Maureen returned to her native Ireland, and I lost track of her activities. Margaret—who has been with the museum since its beginnings—told me that she and Maureen became friends in 1987 when the museum was being established. Their friendship continued until Maureen's death in 2015.

Maureen became a patron of the museum and officially opened it in 1989. She remained devoted to the museum throughout her life, attending special events and returning each year to celebrate her birthday on August 17th.

Captain Blair often spoke of Foynes when we were preparing to fly the Sandringham there in 1978. During his distinguished career with the U. S. Navy, Charlie Blair made 405 Atlantic crossings and established numerous aviation records. Foynes was one of the most important terminals on those historic routes. In October 1945 he piloted the last scheduled flying boat departure from Foynes, marking the end of an extraordinary chapter in aviation history.

Standing in the very place where so much flying boat history had been made was a deeply meaningful experience. It allowed me to connect not only with the remarkable story of transatlantic aviation, but also with my memories of Charlie and Maureen Blair, my husband, Dave Howard, Antilles Air Boats, and my own fascination with the great flying boat era.

I landed at Shannon Airport on June 1 on a beautiful sunny morning. I had made reservations to stay at the Dunraven Arms Hotel in the picturesque village of Adare, just 12 miles from the Foynes Flying Boat Museum. I learned from Margaret that the hotel was more than 200 years old and the flying boat crews and their VIP passengers had stayed there because there were no suitable accommodations in Foynes.

I wondered if it was still as elegant as it had been during the flying boat era. I soon found out. A driver was waiting for me when I emerged from Customs, and before long I arrived at the Dunraven Arms. The young woman who checked me in proudly told me the hotel was now 234 years old. It was absolutely beautiful. The location was also perfect. I could

simply walk out the front door and stroll anywhere in the village. I immediately fell in love with Adare.

The following morning, I took a taxi to Foynes. The drive along the quiet country road was delightful, winding through lush green countryside that often looked like an enchanted forest. As we approached the museum, I was greeted by a striking bronze sculpture of a B-314 flying boat atop a stone globe. It was a fitting introduction to the remarkable aviation history preserved within the museum.

Margaret O'Shaughnessy was on vacation in Spain, but she had arranged for Natalie Hewson to meet me. Natalie served as my guide throughout the museum, answering my many questions and sharing stories that brought the exhibits to life. She was both charming and exceptionally knowledgeable, making the experience even more memorable.



Natalie explained that Charles Lindbergh had been commissioned by Pan American Airways to survey potential sites for transatlantic flying boat operations. He recommended Foynes on the River Shannon because of its deep, sheltered waters, helping establish it as the principal European terminal for Pan American Airways. Foynes also became an important base for British Overseas Airways Corporation and American Export Airlines.

Flying boat travel was a luxury that few could afford. Airfares were extraordinarily expensive, and passengers included wealthy business executives, celebrities, affluent tourists, diplomats, and government officials. During World War II, because Ireland remained neutral, senior Allied military officers traveling through Foynes wore civilian clothing while passing through the country.

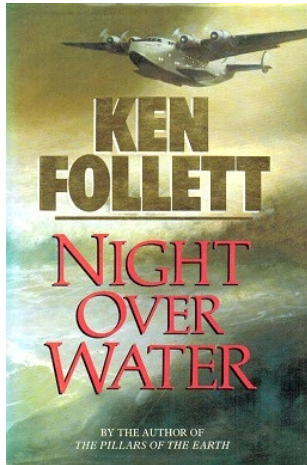
Natalie also described some of the challenges of early transatlantic flying. Aircraft could spend hours en route to New York only to encounter deteriorating weather conditions over the Atlantic and be forced to return to Foynes. Reliable long-range weather forecasting was still in its infancy making such frustrating turnarounds an unavoidable part of flying boat operations.

One of the museum's most enjoyable stories concerned the creation of Irish coffee. In 1943, after one such weather-related return, Chef Joe Sheridan added a measure of Irish whiskey to hot coffee to warm the weary passengers. When one traveler asked if it was Brazilian coffee, Sheridan famously replied, "No, that's Irish coffee." Natalie later suggested we take a break in the adjoining O'Reagan's Restaurant so I could enjoy a cup for myself. After tasting my first authentic cup, I understood why Irish coffee became famous around the world.

The centerpiece of the museum is the world's only full-size replica of a Boeing 314 Flying Boat. None of the twelve Boeing B-314s built have survived. It was famous for its onboard luxury, which included a dining room and honeymoon suites. In July 1939, Pan American's luxurious Yankee Clipper completed the first direct commercial passenger flight from the USA to Europe with a landing in Foynes—a major milestone in aviation.



As Natalie showed me the interior of the B-314, scenes from *NIGHT OVER WATER*, the book by Ken Follett, came vividly to mind. His story is about a B-314 making a dangerous transatlantic flight at the beginning of World War II. Its historical accuracy and details about the plane are remarkably accurate; only the passengers are fictional.



I had my worn paperback copy of *NIGHT OVER WATER* in my backpack, planning to re-read it on my trip. Unfortunately, I found I could no longer read the small print. Since returning home I have ordered a hardback edition with large print. I found the perfect bookmark for it in the Foynes gift shop—a postcard showing the cross section of the B-314 with a description of the layout, which I was now familiar with after Natalie's tour.

I was happy to see there was an elevator as well as the stairs leading to the control tower, where I had hoped to see the controllers' view of the Shannon Estuary. Unfortunately, the control tower was closed at the time of my visit. What a different view it must have been in 1933 when Charles Lindbergh landed his Lockheed Sirius Floatplane there and selected Foynes as the ideal location for a transatlantic flying boat base.

It was a fitting tribute to Maureen O'Hara Blair to open an exhibition in her honor. Maureen's grandson donated much of her personal memorabilia to the museum after her death in 2015. Maureen had been dedicated to the museum from the start as it was an opportunity to share Charlie's special love for flying boats.



Creating the exhibition must have been a daunting task. The exhibition includes everything from her "Lifetime Achievement" Oscar to the horse buggy she used to take John Wayne on a wild ride in *THE QUIET MAN*, which was filmed in Ireland.

John Wayne wasn't just Maureen's leading man, but a lifetime friend who sometimes came to visit the Blairs at their home on St. Croix in the winter. He was down-to-earth and friendly to all the employees who worked at the seaplane ramp. Sometimes I knew he was back before I saw him because I heard his distinctive voice.

Maureen's beautiful dresses and costumes from some of the 60 movies she starred in were elegantly displayed, along with information about when they were worn.

I especially enjoyed the small theater showing scenes from some of these films. The furniture was from her home and made me feel as though I was sitting in her living room watching the scenes from her life.



When the film ended, the wife of a couple sitting near me said, "That is wonderful! I want to see all her movies again."

The husband replied, "I still don't understand why there is an exhibit for a movie star in a flying boat museum." I reminded him that Maureen had been a patron of the museum. I told them about the three flying boats Maureen and her husband operated at Antilles Air Boats, and how all three were on display in different museums, keeping alive the memory of flying boats. I said, "Maureen wasn't just the patron of this museum—she is the patron saint of flying boats!"

I made reservations to stay at the Park Inn at Shannon Airport the night before my departure. I was on my way to have dinner at the airport coffee shop, but it was raining outside. The clerk at the front desk suggested I try their restaurant upstairs.

I found a seat by a window with a good view. When the waitress handed me a menu, it was serendipitous! The photo on the menu said I was at “Blair’s Bar & Bistro” with a photo of Charlie and Maureen and a short “History of Captain Charles Blair.”

