

CAPT. CHARLES F. BLAIR MEMORIAL

LONDON HEATHROW AIRPORT

The scarlet one quarter-scale model of a P-51 Mustang fighter "flying" over the roof gardens atop the Queen's Building at London's Heathrow Airport recalls the day 30 years ago when the original aircraft "Excalibur III" landed after setting the New York - London piston-engine record of 7 hours and 48 minutes, a record that still stands •

It was flown by the late Capt. Charles F. Blair , who for 29 years until his retirement in 1969 was a senior Captain of Pan American World Airways. The original aircraft was presented by Pan Am to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., where it has been restored and is on permanent display in the National Air and Space Museum.

The P-51-10NT Mustang began its service life in the U.S. Army Air Forces on July 25, 1944, when its Air Force serial number was 44-10947. At the end of World War II, it was bought by the legendary A. Paul Mantz, famous as a flier in movies and as a race pilot, and operated under the registration NX1202.

After successfully racing the machine, Mantz sold it to Capt. Blair, who had an improved Rolls-Royce Merlin V-1650-9 engine installed, increased its fuel tankage and had other works carried out.

For a short time, N1202 as it was by then, was named "Stormy Petrel" before being changed to "Excalibur III" after the big four-engined Vought-Sikorsky VS-44 flying boats that he test flew and pioneered into service with a company that was subsequently acquired by Pan Am.

After its epic flights from New York to London and across the North Pole, the aircraft's rightful place was to be put on public exhibition. Pan Am bought the aircraft off Capt. Blair in May 1952 and on November 6, 1953 the airline formally presented it to the National Air Museum in Washington, D.C. *

. An extensive restoration programme was carried out at the Smithsonian's preservation and restoration facility between April 13, 1962 and October 19, 1977, consuming a total of 5,679 man-hours, which did not include work by outside contractors.

With that work completed, "Excalibur III" was ready for exhibition at the Smithsonian's new National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C.

January 30, 1981

PLAQUE

THE CAPTAIN CHARLES F. BLAIR MEMORIAL.

Directly in front of you in the garden is a replica of the famous P-51 Mustang, "Excalibur III". Powered by a Rolls-Royce Merlin V1650 engine, it was flown by Charles F. Blair on January 31, 1951, nonstop from New York to London's Heathrow Airport in 7 hours and 48 minutes, a record for piston-engine aircraft that still stands. Later, on May 29, 1951, he made the first solo crossing of the North Pole in the same Mustang, flying nonstop from Bardufoss, Norway to Fairbanks, Alaska. The actual "Excalibur III" is on permanent display in the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C

A senior pilot for Pan American World Airways for 29 years until he retired on August 1, 1969, Captain Blair was also a Brigadier-General in the U.S. Air Force Reserve and held the Distinguished Flying Cross. In 1952, he received the Harmon International Aviation Award as the "world's outstanding aviator" from President Harry S. Truman; and in 1959 he was the recipient of the Thurlow International Award of the Institute of Navigation for "outstanding contributions to the science of navigation".

This memorial was made possible by contributions from Captain Blair's friends and fellow employees at Pan Am, and unveiled by his widow, Maureen O'Hara Blair, on January 30, 1981.

BLAIR MEMORIAL UNVEILED AT LONDON'S HEATHROW AIRPORT
FOR 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF RECORD SETTING FLIGHT.

A memorial to the late Capt. Charles F. Blair, who 30 years ago tomorrow landed at London's Heathrow Airport after setting the New York - London piston-engine record of 7 hours and 48 minutes, was unveiled today by his widow, motion picture star Maureen O'Hara Blair.

The memorial in the form of a one quarter-scale model of Capt. Blair's famous scarlet-coloured P-51 Mustang fighter "Excalibur III" - the original of which is now restored and part of the collection of the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. - was subscribed to by his friends and fellow employees at Pan American World Airways.

.Until his retirement in August 1969, he had been a senior Captain for 29 years with Pan Am and American Overseas Airlines (which Pan Am acquired in 1950), and had established himself as a pioneer aviator in both U.S. military reserve and civil flying. '

The memorial is located in the roof gardens atop the Queen's Building at Heathrow Airport on a site leased to Pan Am by the British Airports Authority.

Mr. Norman Payne, Chairman of the British Airports Authority, introduced Mrs. Blair, who unveiled the memorial. Afterwards, it was blessed by the Roman Catholic chaplain at Heathrow, the Rev. Brian Laycock.

Among those attending the ceremony was Capt. Blair's eldest son, Mr. Christopher Blair, for whom his father had dropped a note to Santa claus as he flew over the North Pole during another record setting flight with "Excalibur III".

THE LATE CAPT. CHARLES F. BIAIR.

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Capt. Charles F. Blair, an aviator for 50 years until his untimely death in 1978, was a man of many achievements in civil and military flying and a man of many honours.

During the 1950s and 1960s, he was a regular user of London's Heathrow Airport as a senior Captain of Pan American World Airways, from which he retired in 1969.

Heathrow was also the terminal point of his historic New York - London dash in his own scarlet P-51 Mustang fighter, " Excalibur III", when on January 31, 1951, he set up a record on the route for piston-engine aircraft of 7 hours and 48 minutes that still stands.

Born in Buffalo, New York, in 1909, Capt. Blair soloed originally in 1928 before going on to gain a B.S. degree in Mechanical Engineering at the University of Vermont in 1931.

He ran two simultaneous careers in military reserve and civil flying, during both of which he pioneered flying techniques - especially in the area of navigation - that advanced the state of the art.

Capt. Blair's civil flying career proper began in August 1931, when he entered the U.S. Navy Flying School at Pensacola, Florida. He graduated the following year as a Navy Aviator and was commissioned an Ensign in the U.S. Navy Reserve.

He resigned from the Navy Reserve in 1952 to seek a commission with the U.S Air Force Reserve, while working with the Strategic Air Command fighter wing at Turner Air Force Base, Georgia, and was commissioned a colonel U.S.A.F.Res. in April 1953. He was promoted to Brigadier-General on July 23, 1959.

Capt. Blair's civil flying career started with United Airlines in 1933 and he was promoted from co-pilot to Captain in 1936.

He joined American Export Airlines, later to change its name to American Overseas Airlines, in July 1940 as Chief Pilot. This company was acquired by Pan American World Airways in 1950. Capt. Blair's service with the two companies was credited as 29 years with Pan Am.

In all, Capt. Blair achieved more than 45,000 flying hours - equal to well over five years continuously in the air - and 1,575 Atlantic crossings as a Pilot in Command.

He founded Antilles Air Boats Inc. in 1964 in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Capt. Blair was also author of the book "Red Ball in the Sky" and co-author with Arthur J. Wallis of "Thunder Above", which was turned into the movie "Beyond the Curtain".

AWARDS

Harmon International Aviation Award for "the world's outstanding aviator", presented at a White House ceremony in 1952 by President Harry S. Truman. Award made following flight of P-51 "Excalibur III" nonstop from Bardufoss, Norway, to Fairbanks, Alaska, in 10 hours 27 minutes on May 29, 1951, which was the first solo flight across the Arctic and North Pole. It was designed to prove the accuracy and practicability of a system of navigation he had developed for flying in Polar regions. He was also awarded the gold medal of the Norwegian Aero Club (Norsk Aero^ Klubb), only the 16th time in 43 years anyone had been so honoured.

Thurlow Award for "outstanding contribution to the science of navigation", in June, 1959, from the Institute of Navigation.

This followed a period from 1957 to 1960, when Capt. Blair worked with the Office of the U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering on a new, light-weight, all-weather, low-cost navigation system.

U.S. Distinguished Flying Cross, 1959, for commanding an operation to test the feasibility of deployment routes between the Far East and Europe over the North Pole for jet fighter bombers, and also to test automatic Doppler navigation system performance.

He was also the recipient of the Gold Medal of the Adventurers Club.