

Maureen O'Hara and the Gander Connection.

To many people familiar with the history of Hollywood, the death of Maureen O'Hara at age 95, on 24 October 2015, was simply the passing of a great Irish-American actress. But to some people in Gander, Newfoundland, she was not just the red-haired beauty who played in classics such as "Green is my Valley" or "Miracle on 34th Street". She was much more simply a friend.



Even her husband, Charles F Blair, or perhaps more so, had a connection with aviation in Newfoundland. As captain of a flying boat operated by American Export Lines, Charlie Blair had made the first non-stop westbound flight from Shannon to New York in June of 1942. He had not planned to fly non-stop - but the weather had closed in at Botwood, Gander and then Halifax, so he decided it was safer to continue on to New York. He had to let down almost to the water to avoid strong head winds, and in poor visibility caused by fog and rain he was concerned about hitting a drifting iceberg or

a ship. But all went well and the plane arrived safely at Port Washington with just 95 gallons of gas remaining out of the 3,820 gallons it had held when it left Ireland.

Blair's trips through Botwood were frequent in those days, where he learned to count on the help of Hughie Lacey, a meteorology assistant who was sent out from Gander as required. Charlie Blair was later the chief pilot with PAA on the Boeing 707. He and Hugh Lacey kept up a lifelong friendship, often renewed when Charlie Blair went through Gander on Pan American 707s. After retirement, he and Maureen started Antilles Air Boats out of St. Croix flying the Virgin Islands and San Juan.

Maureen and Charlie passed through Gander Lake several times in the 1970's in their personal S-25 Short Sunderland, four engine, double-decker flying boat, as they went back and forth to Maureen's home in Foynes, Ireland, landing in the Shannon River. Being a flying boat, it had to land in Gander Lake for fuel.



They always called on Hugh Lacey to make sure everything was made ready for their arrival in Gander. It was particularly important to have a trusted friend in Gander to make arrangements because Gander Lake in the 1970s was just about never used as an operating base.

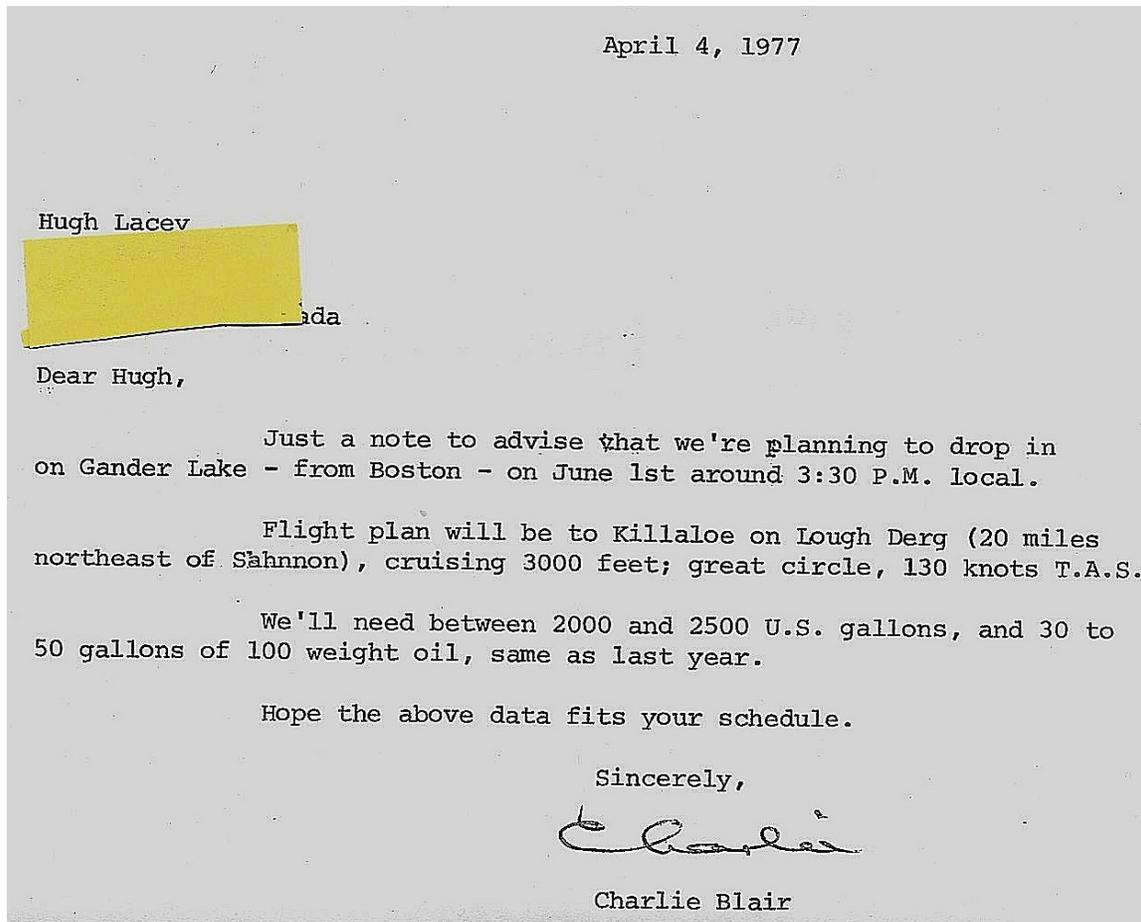
Neither the access road to the lake nor the former Royal Air Force marine-base were in good condition. The wharves were pretty much gone and the refueling raft once used by Shell Oil to refuel American PBY patrol planes and the PBN flying boats going to Russia had long since disappeared.

Getting fuel to a flying boat was therefore not easy, so Hugh Lacey and friends needed to use some good old Gander ingenuity. Hugh even made use of his own 16-foot birch and mahogany boat, bought in Botwood Stores.

They used inner tubes spaced 8-10ft apart to float the refuelling hose. The 5-gallon cans of lube were brought out in a rowboat, carried through the cabin door and passed out a hatch in the ceiling and carried out the wing to the engines.



Here is an extract from a typical request for assistance:



Maureen and Charlie stayed with the Lacey's on Nungesser on a number of occasions. But then again, Maureen did not play the role of Hollywood star when she was off-screen. Going around Gander in a very unassuming, private manner was her style, having really no reason to show who she was.

The extract below from the General Declaration for agriculture, customs, immigration and public health shows how she was described on the flight manifest, namely "flight

attendant”, a role that probably was as important to her as that of any movie character:

(Place)

FLIGHT ROUTING		
("Place" Column always to list origin, every en-route stop and		
PLACE	TOTAL NUMBER OF CREW 1)	
PORT WASHINGTON, N.Y. CAPTAIN	CHARLES F. BLAIR	U.S.A.
CAPTAIN	RONALD N. GILLIES	AUSTRALIA
CAPTAIN	WILLIAM WALLACE	IRELAND
CAPTAIN	J.C. KELLY-ROGERS	IRELAND
ENGINEER	NOEL HOLLE	AUSTRALIA
ENGINEER	JAMES FLANAGAN	U.S.A.
→ FLT. ATTN.	MAUREEN BLAIR	← U.S.A.
FLT. ATTN.	MARGARET HOLLE	AUSTRALIA
FLT. ATTN.	NOREEN GILLIES	AUSTRALIA

Keith Lacey, Hugh’s son, himself a professional pilot, carried on the friendship. In 1974 he flew with them from Gander to St. Croix via Boston in their flying boat, a 6-hour flight to Boston and then 13 hours to St. Croix. This was quite a flight, 19 hours at 500 feet. It was also first and only time Keith used celestial navigation, taking shots of the stars all night from a bubble on the top fuselage. Amazingly, when the sun came up, this small Island of St.Croix was pretty well on the nose.

Reg Batson from Gander (now retired from Air Traffic Control) also went with him. They stayed with Maureen and Charlie at their house in St. Croix and made several flights

on their Grumman Goose, Albatross and the Sunderland flying boats during their stay there.

Charlie died in a plane crash in the Antilles in 1978 but Maureen continued to honour his memory. Another Ganderite, Rod Goff had also worked with Charlie over the years and had gotten to know him. When Maureen O'Hara learned that Rod knew of him, she made a point of seeing him on a trip through Gander. Ed Pike from CBC was there, and had a camera, so he took a picture of the two of them, now a treasured photo.

Maureen O'Hara was not only a great actress – she was a friend of Gander and particularly of some of its citizens.