

AMERICAN EXPORT AIRLINES & SIKORSKY VS-44A



By Ed Martin

Sikorsky VS-44A Excalibur, NC41880, with AEA colors applied. (Photo from the Gerald Balzer collection, AAHS archives)

In the early 1900s American Export Shipping Lines was one of the largest shipping companies between the U.S. East coast and the Mediterranean. Four of their passenger ships were identified as the “Aces” due to their comfort and speed.

The crossing between America and Europe was one of the most heavily travelled passenger routes in the world. It was estimated about 1,000,000 passengers a year crossed the North Atlantic on the world’s greatest ocean liners, with about 180,000 in first class. Large quantities of mail and freight were also carried, an inviting revenue source for any airline.

With the growth of aviation in 1937 it was generally recognized that Pan American Airways was the unofficial U.S. flag carrier, and after its successful Pacific flights was ready to conquer the Atlantic. However, at that time American Export

Shipping Lines decided to enter the aviation arena and in April 1937 established a subsidiary named American Export Airlines (AEA) also known as AMEX. Juan Trippe, President of PAA was very concerned and challenged the right of a shipping company to operate an airline. The CAB ruled in AEA’s favor. Pan American was aggressively negotiating with Britain, Canada, Bermuda and Portugal in preparation for transatlantic flights between the U.S. and Europe. These were difficult agreements to obtain as Imperial Airways also had transatlantic desires but did not have suitable aircraft to cross the North Atlantic and Britain would not grant PAA landing rights until Imperial could start a similar service. Additional transatlantic competition was also in the offing from the German Zeppelins, Lufthansa and Air France. Pan American considered competition from a second U.S. airline unacceptable, and Juan Trippe put his considerable government contacts to work to protect PAA’s interests.

The British government had control over landing rights at Newfoundland and Bermuda that were Atlantic stepping stones when Pan American and Imperial Airways signed an agreement which effectively eliminated any competition without those landing rights. The agreement also provided that neither Pan American nor Imperial Airways could begin service until both airlines were able to do so. Imperial still had no aircraft capable of making the journey and Pan American had to wait.

The Montreal Agreement in 1935 between the U.S., United Kingdom, Canada and the Irish Free State ruled that all transatlantic aircraft would land at an Irish airport when travelling east or west. In December 1935 it was announced by the Irish government that Foynes, near the city of Limerick, with a sheltered harbor on the River Shannon in the west of



★ EXCALIBUR • EXCAMBION • EXOCHORDA • EXETER
FRANCE, ITALY, EGYPT, LEBANON, SYRIA, TURKEY, GREECE, SPAIN

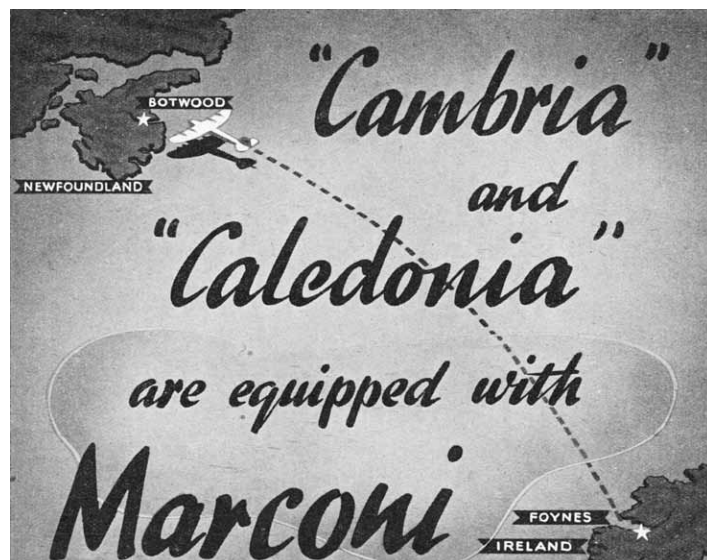


AEA Life Magazine advertisement announcing their transatlantic air service. (From the author's collection)

Ireland would be the first European terminal for proposed flying boat transatlantic service.

Foynes, a small town in southwest Ireland, became the wartime European transatlantic terminal for east/west flying boat operations and was urgently in need of facilities to support the new transatlantic airline service. During the war years Foynes would become one of the world's busiest air terminals. Foynes when established in 1837 by a commission from the House of Parliament in London (England ruled Ireland at that time) to survey potential for a seaport was a relatively new town by Irish standards. With a population of approximately 500 people and one hotel, the Monteagle Arms, that became the main airport terminal and also housed the radio and weather stations. Senior airport personnel were housed in the Dunraven Arms Hotel in the town of Adare, a distance of 13.65 miles while other airport workers had to travel to Limerick, a distance of 30 miles - quite a journey at that time, for accommodations. However, local home owners saw an opportunity to raise some revenue and rented rooms to airport workers, with larger houses becoming small hotels. Surrounding villagers began to do likewise. A local Nissan hut was also converted to lodging accommodations.

On July 21, 1936, Pan American placed an order with Boeing for six B-314 flying boats using the wing from the cancelled XB-15 bomber and four Wright Twin Cyclone engines. The anticipated delivery was late 1937.



Marconi Radio advertisement promoting BOAC transatlantic service. (From the author's collection)



Pan American S-42B Clipper III, NC16736, arriving at Foynes. Photo is signed by the crew. (Courtesy Foynes Flying Boat Museum)

In 1937 Pan American Airways and Imperial Airways commenced survey flights on the North Atlantic amid many challenges least of all weather, headwinds and in particular icing on the surface of the aircraft. Radio communications testing was also a large part of these survey flights with experimental messages being transmitted between Ireland and Newfoundland.

On July 5-6, 1937, both Pan American and Imperial Airways conducted survey flights. Imperial Airways Short S.23 flying boat, G-ADHM *Caledonia*, was stripped of all essential fittings and additional fuel tanks were installed giving it a range of 3,300 miles. Commanded by Capt. A.S. Wilcockson, *Caledonia* took off from Foynes, heading west for Botwood, Newfoundland. Pan American Sikorsky S-42B, NC16736 *Clipper III*, also stripped and additional fuel tanks installed with Capt. Harold Gray in command was headed east from Botwood for Foynes, in Ireland.

Both flights were successful and continued to their final destinations, Southampton and New York respectively. Eastbound PAA *Clipper III* had the advantage with the prevailing winds, and westbound *Caledonia* fought them. Nine



The composite Short-Mayo composite design with the Short S.21, Maia, G-ADHK, mother ship and the Short S.20, Mercury, G-ADHJ, mounted together. (Photo from the Gerald Balzer collection, AAHS archives)

more survey flights were conducted that year proving that the journey could be undertaken on a regular basis. It also proved the icing and headwinds could be overcome but a commercial payload could not be achieved with existing aircraft. Additional survey flights were made on the southern Atlantic route from New York to Bermuda, the Azores, Lisbon and Marseilles

Imperial Airways experimented with a Short Mayo Composite of two aircraft, a modified Short S.21 class flying boat *Maia*, G-ADHK, with the S.20 Seaplane *Mercury*, G-ADHJ, mounted on top. On July 21, 1938, the composite took off from Foynes and when out over the ocean the locking device was released and *Maia*, as the mother ship, dropped downwards while the four Napier Rapier 340-hp engines pulled *Mercury* away on its non-stop flight to Montreal. This two aircraft composite flight and many similar were successful but considered too dangerous for passenger transportation. Imperial also experimented with air-to-air re-fueling on the Atlantic route but this was also deemed a safety hazard and discontinued.

Lufthansa and Air France also made experimental survey flights on the North Atlantic although their aircraft could not make a non-stop journey.

On April 11, 1939, Pan American flew their first proving

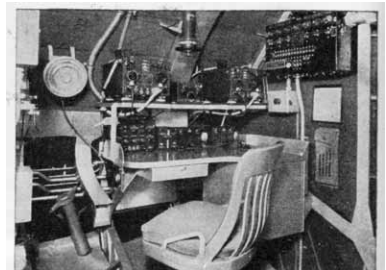
flight from the U.S. to Europe, followed on June 28, 1939, by the first mail flight. The first commercial passenger flight was completed on July 9 when the B-314 *Yankee Clipper* landed at Foynes.

In 1939 American Export Airlines also conducted three transatlantic survey flights with a Consolidated PB4Y-1 Catalina *Transatlantic* flying boat from Port Washington, New York, to Marseille, France, with stops in Horta, Azores, Biscarosse in France and returning via Foynes in Ireland with Captain Charles Blair in command. Many additional AEA successful survey flights were conducted. 1939 saw Pan American Airways start transatlantic service with the Boeing 314, but PAA was not happy to see AEA conducting survey flights. AEA immediately submitted applications to the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB) for authority to fly from the United States to Britain, France and Portugal although AEA had only one aircraft, the PB4Y Catalina.

Following the successful survey flights In 1939 American Export Airlines contacted the Vought-Sikorsky Division of the United Aircraft Corp. regarding a commercial version of the XPBS-1 flying boat. The XPBS-1 nicknamed *The Flying Dreadnought* was designed as a patrol bomber for the US Navy. Unfortunately, Sikorsky lost the Navy contract to the Consolidated-Vultee Aircraft Co. XPB2Y-1 Coronado and only one prototype of the XPBS-1 was built. Meanwhile AEA conducted survey flights from New Orleans to Panama and made an effort to purchase TACA Airlines based in Honduras and thereby gain Latin America routes. PAA again opposed this request and was successful in preventing AEA getting a foothold in important South American countries.

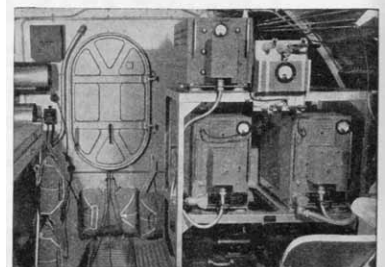
September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland and on September 3, Britain and France declared war on Germany. After WWI the United States had passed the Neutrality Act to limit U.S. involvement in future wars, this act now prevented U.S. Airlines from landing in Britain. American carriers were now limited to neutral ports - Ireland and Portugal had declared neutrality. Pan American flights on the southern route

BELOW: AEA's PB4Y-1 Catalina, NC18997, being flown with one engine shut down. (From the Gerald Balzer collection, AAHS archives) RIGHT: The Bendix radio installation in this aircraft. (From Bendix Radio News, July, 1939)



Official U. S. Navy photograph.

RADIO CONTROL POSITION. From this desk, the Radio Officer has complete control of all Radio Equipment, Direction Finding Apparatus and the Airliner's Interphone System which can be connected with the Radio Equipment to provide direct communication with land and ship stations from any flight position. Receivers are in duplicate.



Official U. S. Navy photograph.

REMOTE CONTROLLED BENDIX TRANSMITTERS. Each supply 100 watts output on any of 8 channels selected automatically from the operating position. Special Antenna Tuning Units give high efficiency. Power supplies for Transmitters and Receivers are on the lower rack. Transmitting and Power supply equipment is installed in duplicate.



AEA's PBY-4 Catalina March 3, 1939, at Boulder Dam during trials or shortly after delivery. (From Craig Morris collection, California)



The crew (L-R) Bill Wheatley, Mike Doyle, Ed Stumbman(?), Jack Kline and Gene Tibbs. Doyle would later serve as a flight engineer on the VS-44A Excalibur. (From Craig Morris collection, California)

via Bermuda abandoned Marseilles and beyond, terminating their flights at Lisbon. Foynes became the terminus on the northern route.

On April 1, 1940, the British Overseas Airways Corporation, BOAC, was created with Imperial Airways and British Airways merged under the new name.

Three years had now passed and American Export Airlines established in 1937 still had no routes mainly due to opposition from Juan Trippe.

In July 1940, with the approval of President Roosevelt, American Export Airlines, despite strong objections from Pan American Airways, received authority from the CAB for a seven-year contract for mail flights to Lisbon, Portugal. This was later modified to include Foynes as an Atlantic terminus. AEA immediately placed an order with Sikorsky for three of the XPBS-1s redesigned for luxurious passenger transport; now designated the Vought-Sikorsky VS-44A. The three aircraft were to be christened *Excalibur* (NC41880), *Excambian* (NC41881), *Exeter* (NC41882), in honor of the American Export Shipping Lines famous "Aces" vessels. The three aircraft later became known as *The Flying Aces*. Meanwhile the AEA's lone Catalina was scheduled to fly the new mail route to Lisbon until the Portuguese decided they did not want two U.S. carriers on the River Tagus and would not grant landing authority to AEA. The other carrier was Pan Am.



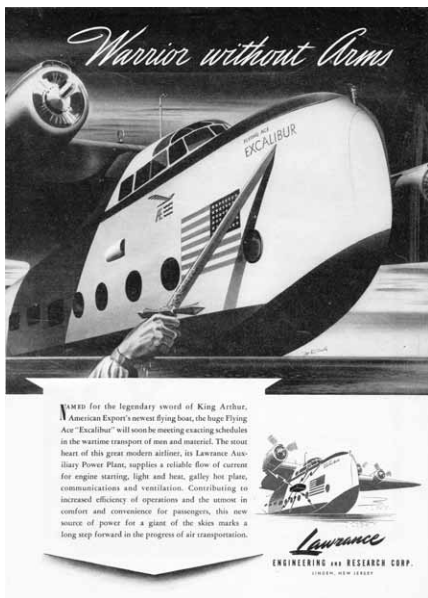
Sikorsky XPBS-1 BuNo 9995, undergoing testing by NACA. (Photo from the Gerald Balzer collection, AAHS archives)

The Sikorsky VS-44A was a unique amphibian aircraft with only three ever built. Designed as high-wing all-metal monoplane flying boat with a top cruise speed of 210 mph and a range of 3,500 to 5,000 miles non-stop depending on load conditions. The four Pratt & Whitney Wasp radial engines provided 4,800 hp for takeoff with a gross weight of 57,000 lbs. Interiors were more luxurious than any operating flying boat providing seats for 32 on day time flights and 16 beds for overnight passenger flights. Accommodations for the crew of five were also provided, including private quarters for the first transatlantic stewardess. AEA advertised the comfort, soundproofing, lack of vibration and all the comforts available to passengers, 40-in wide seats that converted into full length beds, reading lights, two men's rooms, lady's room - all with hot and cold water.

Pan American continued its strong objections to the looming competition arguing that a second operator would



Advertisement promoting AEA's "Flying Aces" from Aero Digest, July 1944)



LEFT: Another advertisement promoting AEA's VS-44s, in this case by Lawrance Engineering and Research, which provided the auxiliary power units in the plane. (From the author's collection) BELOW: AEA logo from a baggage label (From Daniel Kusrow collection, New York) RIGHT: AEA Chief Pilot Capt. Charles F. Blair, Jr. (AEA photo from the AAHS Archives)



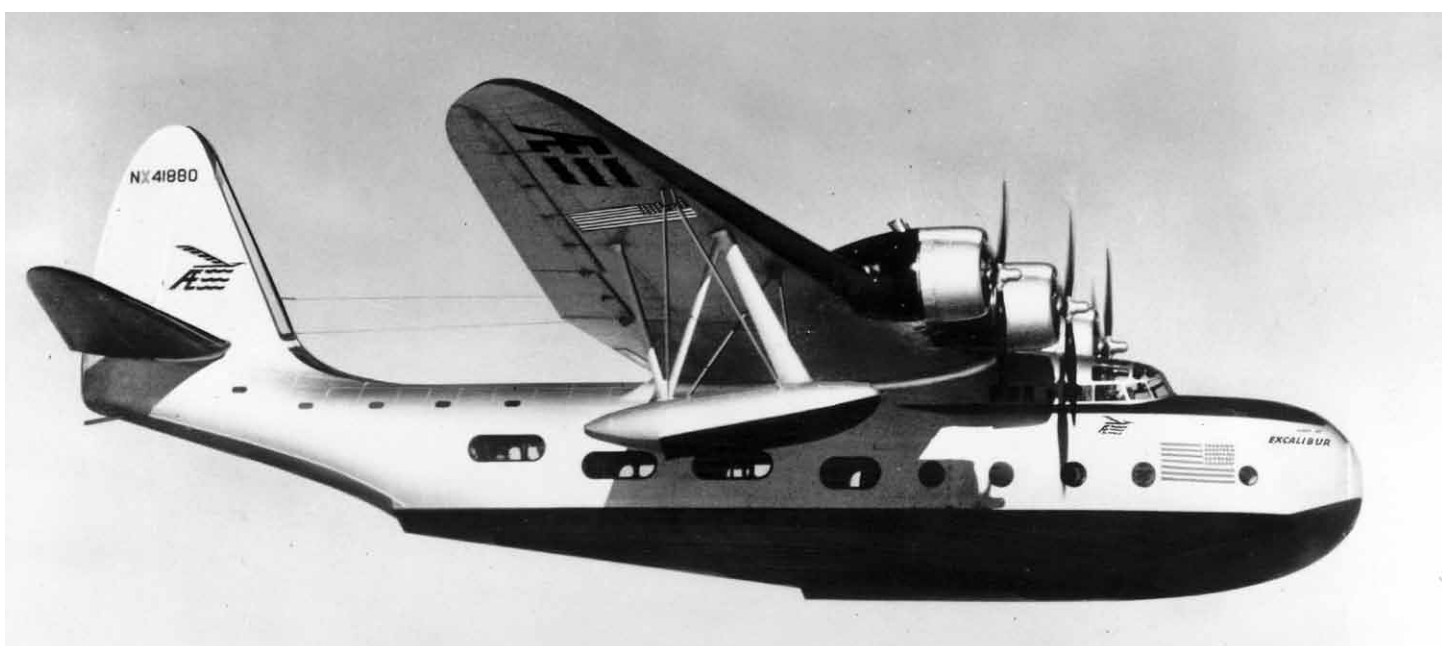
lead to losses for both carriers and strengthen the British Government's negotiating position.

The first VS-44A was christened on January 17, 1942, following a ceremony at the Sikorsky factory where Mrs. Henry Wallace, wife of the U.S. vice president, after several unsuccessful attempts, finally shattered the bottle of champagne and VS-44A NC41880 was named *Excalibur* after the legendary sword of King Arthur. The first test flight was delayed until the next day due to the lengthy christening ceremonies. American Export Airlines Chief Pilot Capt. Charles Blair (later husband of famed Irish movie star Maureen O'Hara) was at the controls and AEA Capt. Richard Mitchell as copilot. Captain Blair was an experienced pilot having served with the U.S. Navy VP-7F in San Diego and seven years as a pilot with United Airlines.

Successful flight tests were conducted at the Sikorsky factory in Connecticut, and CAA certification followed two months later at Jacksonville, Florida. The *Excalibur* was ready

for AEA's luxurious transatlantic passenger service. However, in January 1942, AEA signed a contract with the U.S. Naval Air Transport Service (NATS) to provide wartime transatlantic service. Due to wartime demand pilots were in short supply and Captain Blair was fortunately able to hire some of the American Volunteer Group (Flying Tigers) pilots that were returning from China.

In April 1942 *Excalibur* was repainted in camouflage for use with the U.S. Navy as a military transport. AEA logo was displayed on the plane's fuselage and it was operated and maintained by AEA crews, this allowed AEA to operate out of neutral ports. One month later on May 4, 1942, *Excambian*, NC41881, was delivered painted in U.S. Navy camouflage and *Exeter*, NC41882, followed on June 23, 1942, ready for U.S. Navy war-time service. NATS was established on December 12, 1941, under the Chief of Naval Operations to provide rapid air delivery of critical equipment, spare parts, medical supplies



Sikorsky VS-44A Excalibur, NC41880, with AEA colors applied. (Photo from the Gerald Balzer collection, AAHS archives)



Excambian, NC14881, shown in wartime navy camouflage paint (Left) and standard AEA colors in this postwar shot. (Photos from (left) AAHS archives, AAHS-D021026 and (right) Gerald Balzer collection, AAHS archive)

and specialist personnel to U.S. forces around the world. The Navy contracted with commercial airlines to provide aircraft and crews to operate flights to Pacific islands and European destinations, flying boats were especially useful to these destinations, delivering critical supplies and personnel. Return flights brought back sick and wounded plus needed raw material for the war effort.

May 26, 1942, AEA joined NATS operations when *Excalibur* was given the designation JR2S-1 by the navy and made her maiden flight in civilian markings on the North Atlantic route to Foynes. On June 20, 1942, regular round-trip service began. VIP and high-ranking military personnel were mainly carried on these flights and they travelled in luxurious comfort across the Atlantic. Personnel travelling on military aircraft had longer journeys while sitting in less comfortable surroundings with many refueling stops.

The first official westbound passenger carrying flight for AEA's *Excalibur* was on June 22, 1942, from Foynes to New York with Captain Blair in command, Copilot Bob Hixon, Flight Engineer Mike Doyle, Navigator Harry Lamont and Radioman Mike McFarlen. Bill Scouler was purser and responsible for cooking the onboard meals, Dorothy Bohanna, RN, was the first transoceanic stewardess for any airline. Harry E. Pember, in his excellent book, *Sikorsky VS-44 Flying Boat*, details the stewardess requirements for a transoceanic flight as follows, "Registered nurse with exceptional nursing experience, have at least 20 months of experience as a stewardess on domestic flights and pass a very rigorous physical examination. Three meals were served on the flight and the stewardess was responsible to certify to immigration officials that the passengers had no health problems." The standard fuel stop on the Foynes to New York flight was scheduled for Botwood, Newfoundland, as no passenger aircraft had the range to complete the journey non-stop.

Excalibur had a full complement of 16 passengers including several Ambassadors and British Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham en route to Washington D.C. for wartime discussions with the U.S. military. New passport restrictions were in effect with "Government Priority" personnel having preference to travel. Strong headwinds slowed the progress

of the flight and radio communications advised that Botwood, Newfoundland, and Shediac, New Brunswick, Canada, were fogged in. Continuation to Halifax, Nova Scotia, was the only alternative. Fuel was now a major consideration as Captain Blair requested flight engineer Mike Doyle to recheck available fuel and distance to travel. Rechecking the fuel burn from Foynes, Doyle responded that there was slightly more gallons available than miles to go. Captain Blair made the decision to reduce altitude to pick up a tail wind, bypass Halifax and continue to New York with all eyes on the fuel gauges. When the flight landed in New York 95 gallons remained in the fuel tanks.

The Sikorsky Archive News July 2017 describes the flight as following:

This record setting flight was not a planned event. American Export Airlines inaugurated passenger service between New York and Foynes, Ireland, on June 20, 1942, with an uneventful eastbound crossing that included a refueling stop at Botwood, Newfoundland. On the return trip to the new La Guardia Marine Terminal the crew faced strong headwinds and fog that socked in Botwood, their refueling point. Assessing their grim fuel outlook copilot Bob Hixon remarked at one point "glad this is a boat." To stretch mileage Captain Blair brought the VS-44A down to skim just above the waves. Flying in ground effect reduced the fuel consumption but increased the danger of marine collisions. When the flying boat touched down on Flushing Bay, in New York, AEA publicists could claim the first Foynes to New York non-stop flight. Only 45 minutes of fuel remained on board.

Admiral Cunningham with a smile said as he disembarked "Remarkable Voyage." Elapsed time for the record flight was 25 hours 40 minutes this would not be the only record set by AEA and Capt. Charles Blair.

The three Sikorsky VS-44As would become the longest range aircraft in the service of any airline and the only aircraft that could fly commercial schedules non-stop with a capacity



A rare photo of Exeter, NC14882, shown in standard AEA colors postwar. (Photos from the Gerald Balzer collection, AAHS archive)

Sikorsky VS-44A Specifications

General characteristics

Length: 79 ft 3 in
Wingspan: 124 ft in
Height: 27 ft 7.25 in
Gross weight: 57,500 lb
Powerplant: 4 × Pratt & Whitney R-1830-S1C3-G,
1200 hp each
Fuel capacity: 3,820 gals.

Performance

Cruise speed: 160 mph
Range: 3,800 miles

payload across the North and South Atlantic on flights in excess of 3,100 miles.

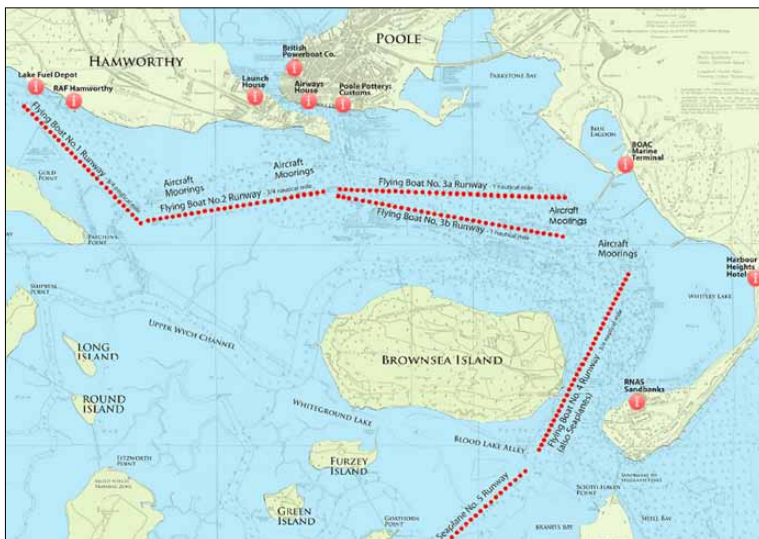
Prior to the outbreak of war, Southampton, England, was the final destination for transatlantic flights. Due to the proximity of military targets at Southampton on September 1, 1939, flying boat operations were moved to Poole Harbor in Dorset. Poole had a large harbor with excellent landing areas and railway connections to London. The United States was not yet at war and U.S. airlines, due to the Neutrality Act, terminated their flights at Foynes. BOAC established a Poole-Foynes-Poole Shuttle service to connect with transatlantic flights and provided land planes from Rineanna (later Shannon) Airport to other destinations in Britain.

During the winter months AEA was forced to fly eastbound from New York to Ireland on a more southerly transatlantic

route with a refueling stop in Bermuda, as Portugal would not grant permission to land in Lisbon except in an emergency. As winter transatlantic flying experience was gained this route also became non-stop. AEA had conquered the eastbound ice and winds of the North Atlantic Ocean.

Westbound flights also faced the dangers of icing and strong head winds that the VS-44A could not overcome. Additionally, many of the en route Canadian safe harbors were iced over preventing emergency landings. Winter flights from Foynes to New York were flown on a very southerly course to Bathurst, in British Gambia a non-stop distance of 3,100 miles. From Gambia the route continued to Belem on the Amazon River in Brazil, or Port of Spain, Trinidad, and if the load was light enough all the way to San Juan, Puerto Rico, and finally to New York. Westbound flights on the southerly route from Foynes over the Bay of Biscay were usually flown at night or well out in the Atlantic out of range of German fighters.

Sadly, on October 3, 1942, *Excalibur* crashed on takeoff at Botwood, Newfoundland, when flaps were inadvertently extended to takeoff position causing the aircraft to stall after liftoff. Eleven of the 26 passengers and crew onboard perished. Following the accident investigation procedures were changed and modifications were made to prevent this from happening again. Flight Engineer Mike Doyle who was a crew member on the Catalina and the first non-stop transatlantic record setting



Five runway channels are identified on the Poole map with mooring sites alongside. As there were no hangars, maintenance was carried out at the moorings or on available slipways. Local facilities were used for operations headquarters, crew and passenger accommodations were in local hotels. BOAC and the RAF flying boats were based at Poole. (Map from the Poole Flying Boat Celebration (PFBC), www.pooleflyingboats.com)



Visitors to Poole today will find blue plaques erected around the city by the PFBC, which mark historically significant locations. (From the author's collections)

ARR.	DEPT.	REG No.	TYPE	FROM	TO
1st	1st	G-AGEV	Sunderland	Lisbon	Poole
1st	1st	G-AGEW	Sunderland	Lisbon	Poole
1st	2nd	G-AGHV	Sunderland	Poole	Lisbon
3rd	5th	NC41881	VS-44	Botwood	Port Lyautey
4th	5th	NC186111	Boeing 314	Botwood	Botwood
5th	5th	G-AGHW	Sunderland	Poole	Poole
6th	6th	G-AGCB	Boeing 314	Lisbon	Poole
6th	8th	G-AGCB	Boeing 314	Poole	Lisbon
6th	6th	NC18609	Boeing 314	Botwood	Botwood
6th	8th	G-AFCI	Short S.26	Poole	Poole
6th	7th	G-AGEW	Sunderland	Poole	Lisbon
7th	7th	G-AGEV	Sunderland	Poole	Lisbon
8th	13th	G-AFCI	Short S.26	Poole	Poole
8th	8th	NC18611	Boeing 314	Botwood	Botwood
9th	10th	NC41811	VS-44	Botwood	Port Lyautey
10th	10th	G-AGCA	Boeing 314	Botwood	Poole
10th	16th	G-AGHW	Sunderland	Poole	Lisbon
11th	13th	G-AGCA	Boeing 314	Poole	Lisbon
12th	13th	NC41882	VS-44	Botwood	Port Lyautey
12th	13th	G-AGHX	Sunderland	Poole	Lisbon
13th	15th	G-AFCI	Short S.26	Poole	Poole
14th	14th	G-AGHV	Sunderland	Lisbon	Poole
14th	14th	G-AGER	Sunderland	Lisbon	Poole
14th	16th	G-AGHZ	Sunderland	Poole	Lisbon
15th	15th	NC18612	Boeing 314	Botwood	Botwood
15th	17th	NC41881	VS-44	Botwood	Port Lyautey
15th	18th	G-AFCI	Short S.26	Poole	Poole
16th	16th	G-AGEW	Sunderland	Lisbon	Poole
17th	17th	G-AGBZ	Boeing 314	Poole	Lisbon
18th	18th	NC18612	Boeing 314	Botwood	Botwood
18th	20th	G-AFCI	Short S.26	Poole	Poole
18th	20th	G-AGIA	Sunderland	Poole	Lisbon
19th	19th	NC41881	VS-44	Port Lyautey	Botwood
20th	20th	NC18611	Boeing 314	Botwood	Botwood
20th	22nd	G-AFCI	Short S.26	Poole	Poole
20th	20th	G-AGHV	Sunderland	Poole	Lisbon

Foynes Terminal Flying Boat Register for the first three weeks of September 1943. AEA flights are highlighted. (Courtesy of Mike Phipp, PFBC)

flight from Foynes to New York was part of the crew and did not survive the accident.

Due to war time travel restrictions transatlantic passengers on the AEA flights were usually high ranking military personnel, diplomats, royalty escaping occupied countries or celebrities travelling to entertain the troops. AEA flights transiting through Foynes from Fort Lyautey, Morocco, also carried refugees fleeing war-torn areas en route to safety in Britain or the United States. Readers might remember that the characters in the movie *Casablanca* starring Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman were trying to escape from Morocco. In 1939 the Irish Government imposed a news blackout, no journalists or cameras were permitted into Foynes. Many passengers traveled under false names and fake passports. All military personnel had to transit Foynes in civilian clothing although this requirement was later relaxed by the Irish Government. Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of the U.S. President, went through as Mrs. Smith, Bob Hope was Lester T. Humphrey Bogart and many other celebrities passed through with false names.

Note the VS-44A NC41881 *Excambian* arrived in Foynes

on September 3rd from New York/Botwood, passengers bound for Britain would obtain local accommodation and connect with the BOAC Sunderland G-AGHW arriving from Poole on the September 5 and returning to Poole the same day. Following crew rest *Excambian* then departed Foynes on the September 5 for Fort Lyautey in Morocco.

On September 9 *Excambian* was back in Foynes from New York/Botwood, passengers for Britain would obtain local accommodation and connect on the September 10 with BOAC Boeing 314 G-AGCA to Poole. On September 10 *Excambian* would again depart for Fort Lyautey. PAA had placed an additional order for six Boeing 314As, three entered the PAA fleet and three were sold to BOAC in 1941 (NC18607, NC18608 and NC18610. These were re-registered and named respectively as, G-AGBZ (*Bristol*), G-AGCA (*Berwick*), G-AGCB (*Bangor*).

September 12 *Exeter* arrived in Foynes from New York/Botwood. Passengers for Britain would obtain local accommodation and connect to BOAC Short S.26 G-GFCI arriving from Poole on the September 13 but not returning to Poole until the September 15. *Exeter* continued to Fort Lyautey on the September 13.

September 15 *Excambian* was back again in Foynes from Botwood. Passengers for Britain would obtain local accommodation or connect with BOAC Short S.26 to Poole. *Excambian* departed for Fort Lyautey on the September 17.

September 19 *Excambian* arrived in Foynes from Fort Lyautey and continued to Botwood/New York, after refueling and a possible crew change. Unfortunately passengers destined for Britain would have to wait for the BOAC Shuttle Short S.26 arriving Foynes on the next day but not departing for Poole until the September 22.

BOAC, in addition to the B-314s, also operated Catalinas and other aircraft on the Poole-Foynes shuttle and provided land plane connections at Rineanna-Shannon airport. Many connecting passengers to Britain would travel the 12.3 miles by BOAC coach and to avail themselves of this service in order to avoid staying overnight at Foynes.

The Foynes' September 1943 Register also details PAA activity at Foynes for NC18611, NC18609, NC18612 on various dates arriving from Botwood and departing back to Botwood on the same day. PAA also played a significant part in conducting wartime military contracts.



TRANSATLANTIC AIR SERVICE

1945 Summer Schedule

U. S. A. - Newfoundland - Eire - England and connections beyond
Service operated with The Famous Four-Engine "Flying Aces"

MILES	GREENWICH TIME	LOCAL TIME	3 ROUND TRIPS WEEKLY				LOCAL TIME	GREENWICH TIME	MILES	
0000	1000	8:00 A. M.	Dep.	NEW YORK, N. Y.	Lafayette Field (New York Terminal)	Arr.	2:45 P. M.	1945	3000	
1111	1915	4:45 P. M.	Dep.	BOTWOOD, NEWFOUNDLAND		Arr.	9:00 A. M.	1930	2301	
2112	0020	9:30 A. M.	Dep.	FOYNES, EIRE (Shannon Airport)		Arr.	7:15 A. M.	0045	0000	
2002	Direct Connection by British Overseas Airways, Flight Time 2 1/2 hours. FOYNES, EIRE (LONDON, ENGLAND (Gatwick Route))						Direct Connection by British Overseas Airways, Flight Time 2 1/2 hours.			
CONNECTIONS TO CONTINENTAL EUROPE, SCANDINAVIAN COUNTRIES AND MEDITERRANEAN AREA UPON APPLICATION										
Schedules shown above are not guaranteed, and are subject to change without notice. Departures from New York, London, and San Francisco to New York, London, and San Francisco.										

AEA timetable showing the distances, times and stops for three round trips weekly between New York and Foynes. Total travel time was about a day and a half. (From Craig Morris collection, California)



Excambian during an engine test run. (Photo from the Gerald Balzer collection)

As Captain Blair noted in his book, *Red Ball in the Sky*, “during wartime Foynes became one of the world’s busiest air terminals,” one particular day seven flying boats from PAA, AEA and BOAC were operating on the River Shannon. Due to weather or maintenance delays scheduling connecting Poole-Foynes transatlantic flights to/from Britain was no easy task, and scheduling personnel on-duty time was also a challenge.

Fort Lyautey was on the Sebou River in Morocco and the U.S. forces invaded and captured it on November 10, 1942, to gain a control in North Africa. Planning for the invasion had taken months under the direction of Generals Eisenhower and Patton. The fort had a concrete runway and hangars needed for the 76 army P-40s, which following the successful invasion were launched from the auxiliary aircraft carrier *USS Chenango* to be stationed there. President Roosevelt visited Fort Lyautey in January 1943 en route to attending the Casablanca Conference with Winston Churchill and paid tribute to those who fought there. One historical statement coming out of that conference was “Unconditional surrender”, showing the Allied determination that the AXIS Powers would be fought to their ultimate defeat.

In October 1944, an AEA S-44A with Captain Blair again in command set another transatlantic record of 14 hours 17 minutes when flying the plane on the tail of hurricane winds from New York to Foynes.

On December 31, 1944, AEA’s contract with NATS expired, *Excambian* and *Exeter* were repainted in original AEA colors and resumed commercial operations, however the U.S. Navy Priority Board had first call for all space to all destinations, with remaining space being allocated to non-priority passengers and freight.

With the conclusion of the war, American Export Airlines’ *Exeter* made a survey flight via Foynes continuing to Poole Harbor in Dorset on May 21, 1945. The intention being to make that port the terminal for their New York to Europe flights. *Exeter* returned to the United States on May 22, 1945.

Ten days later, American Export Airlines launched a three

times per week service across the North Atlantic between New York and Foynes with Botwood as an intermediate stop. Bookings were restricted to 16 passengers on the Botwood-Foynes leg so each passenger was ensured of a berth.

In 1945 the CAB announced new North Atlantic route availability to North and South European destinations and American Export Airlines received transatlantic operating rights to Britain, Scandinavia, Netherlands and Germany. Robert Serling in his book, *Eagle*, explains how Pan Am contested this route award in court and won. “It was ruled that a shipping company (American Overseas Lines), a surface carrier, could not control an airline and must divest its self and turn control over to another carrier.” American Airlines was interested in expanding into the overseas market, purchased a controlling interest

in AEA for \$3 million and approved by the CAB on July 5, 1945. This new division of American Airlines would become American Overseas Airlines (AOA), meanwhile the AEA name was retained and continued to operate the New York-Foynes route with the VS-44As.

Following the end of the war surplus land planes faster and more economical were now available and in September 1945 American Export Airlines acquired six surplus C-54 Skymasters and conducted a transatlantic survey flight that included various Scandinavian airports before returning to New York. The Skymasters were converted to Douglas DC-4s and configured for 38 passengers and a crew of seven.

On October 22, 1945, AEA Chief Pilot Captain Blair flew *Excambian* on the last passenger flying boat from Foynes to the United States.

During their short period of operation on the North and South Atlantic American Export Airlines and the Sikorsky VS-44 establish 11 different non-stop and speed records as noted in the book, *Sikorsky VS-44 Flying Boat* by Harry E. Pember.

On October 24, 1945, AEA/AOA launched land plane transatlantic service operating a Douglas DC-4 *Flagship England*, N90904, from New York to London, England via Boston, Gander, and Shannon Airport.

In late 1945 American Export Airlines retired *Excambian* and *Exeter*, the company name was officially replaced by American Overseas Airlines.

Footnote Museums

Readers interested in flying boat history are recommended to visit the Foynes Flying Boat and Maritime Museum, Foynes, Co. Limerick, Ireland, to board a Boeing 314 replica. See the 1940 wartime operation displays and original radio equipment, memorabilia from Brig. Gen. Charles Blair and his movie star wife, Maureen O’Hara, who was a museum patron until her death in 2015. Irish coffee is also available.

A visit to Poole Harbor in Dorset, U.K., to all of the wartime flying boat sites identified by blue plaques (PFBC),



Restored Sikorsky VS-44A Excambian, NC14881, on display at the New England Air Museum. (Photo courtesy of the New England Air Museum)

the Schneider Trophy Races and the birth of the Boy Scout movement on Brownsea Island in the center of the harbor is also well worth a visit.

A restored Sandringham flying boat *Beachcomber* owned and operated by Captain Blair in the Caribbean is open for viewing at The Solent Sky Museum in Southampton, U.K.

Finally, visit the beautifully restored Sikorsky VS-44A *Excambian* in the New England Air Museum at Windsor Locks, Connecticut. →

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AAHS Photo Archive CDs Series

The Society has recently started development of a series of photo CDs. These CDs contain high-resolution scans of negative, slides and prints from the AAHS Image Library. The resolution of these scanned images is sufficient to make an 8"x10" photographic quality print. Each CD focuses on a particular aspect of American aviation history - be that a particular manufacturer, type or class of aircraft.

As of this date, five CDs are available. Each CD contains between 120 and 140 images. The CDs that are available are:

- 1001 Douglas Propeller-Driven Commercial Transports
- 1006 Lockheed Constellations, Part I
- 1007 Lockheed Constellations, Connies in Color
- 1009 Lockheed P-38/F-5 Lightnings
- 1011 Curtiss Transports
- 1021 Boeing Propeller-Driven Commercial Transports
- 1031 Golden Age Commercial Flying Boats

These CDs are available to members for a donation of \$19.95 each plus shipping (\$2.50 U.S., \$5.00 International - add



\$1.00 for each additional CD). Donation forms are available on-line and on request, but a note along with your donation specifying your particular interest is sufficient. Proceeds go to support the preservation of the photo archives. Do you have a particular interest or suggestion for a CD in this series? Drop us a line or email the webmaster (webmaster@aahs-online.org). We are currently researching the possibilities of offerings covering the following areas: XP-55, XP-56, Northrop X-4, Bell Aircraft, and Early Lockheeds.