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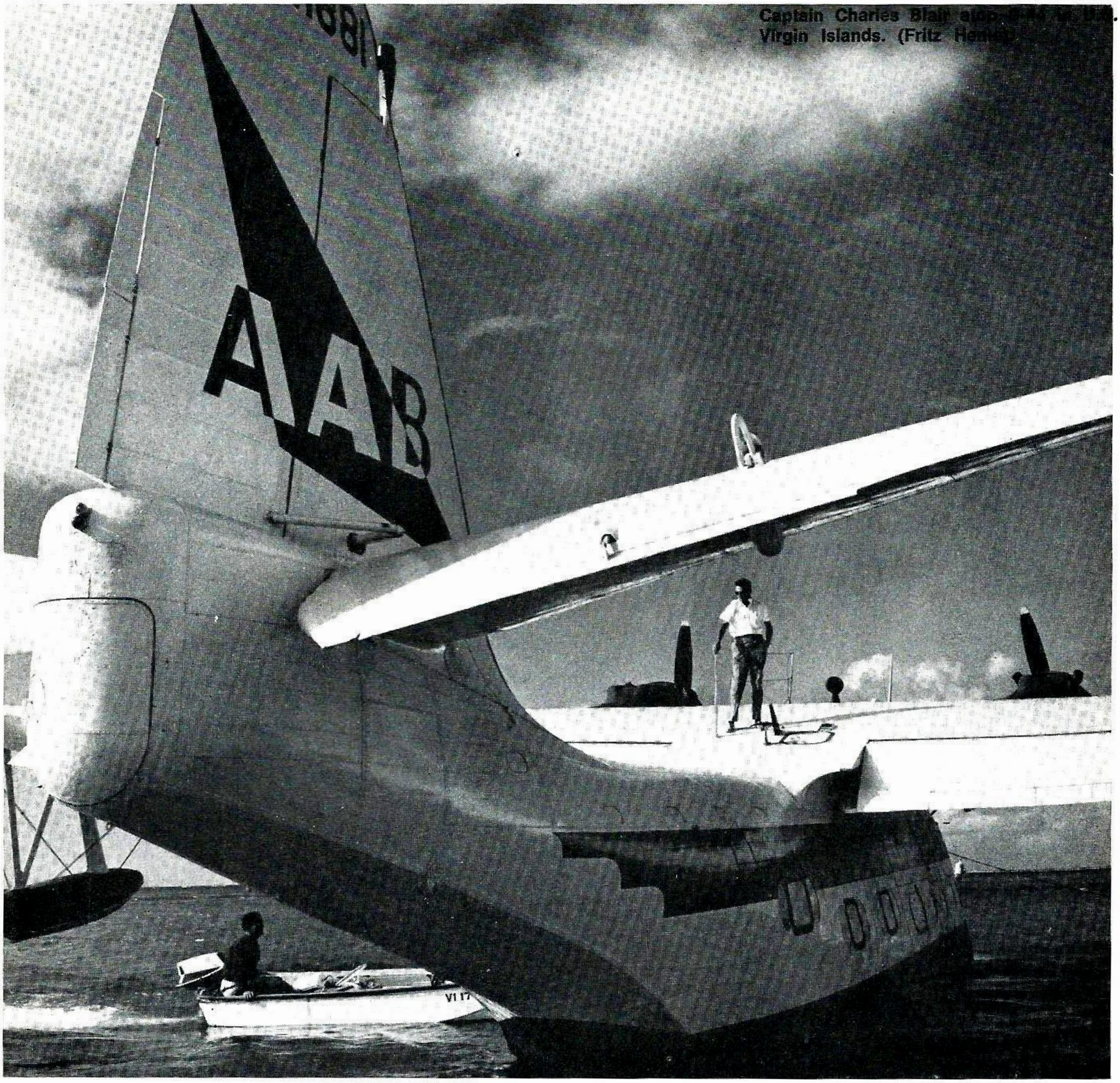
1973 ANNUAL

AIR CLASSICS

VOL. 9, NO. 3 MARCH 1973 PDC $1.50

SPECIAL BONUS FEATURE: HELL IN THE SKY • WWI COMBAT ART PORTFOLIO

LAST BIPLANE KILL OF WWII
CUBS AT WAR • TWILIGHT FOR THE SIKORSKY GIANTS
LACKLAND AIR MUSEUM
THE NATO TIGERS



Captain Charles Blair atop [illegible] in U.S. Virgin Islands. (Fritz He[illegible])

TWILIGHT FOR THE SIKORSKY GIANTS

A FORMER TRANS-ATLANTIC QUEEN, THE VS-44A TAKES HER THE ANTILLES LAST FARES AS AN ISLAND HOPPING TAXI IN

MARIJANE NELSON

One cold January afternoon in 1942, workers at the Sikorsky plant in Stratford, Connecticut, were startled by the roar of four 1200 h.p. Pratt & Whitney Twin-Wasp engines as a huge seaplane passed low overhead.

Charles F. Blair, the test pilot for the new Sikorsky VS-44A flying boat, recalls, "I was only supposed to do high speed taxi on the step the first couple of times I took the plane out, but it just didn't want to stay in the water!" A slightly sheepish grin accompanies the statement.

Crossing over the Sikorsky factory, Captain Blair gave the employees a good look at the result of their efforts —airborne!

On the previous day, the big flying boat—first of a fleet of three developed for American Export Airlines—was christened *Excalibur*. Igor I. Sikorsky,

speaking to the large group attending the colorful ceremony, emphasized that the engineers and designers expected great performance from the ship that "was built to travel the greatest distance at the highest speed with maximum loads."

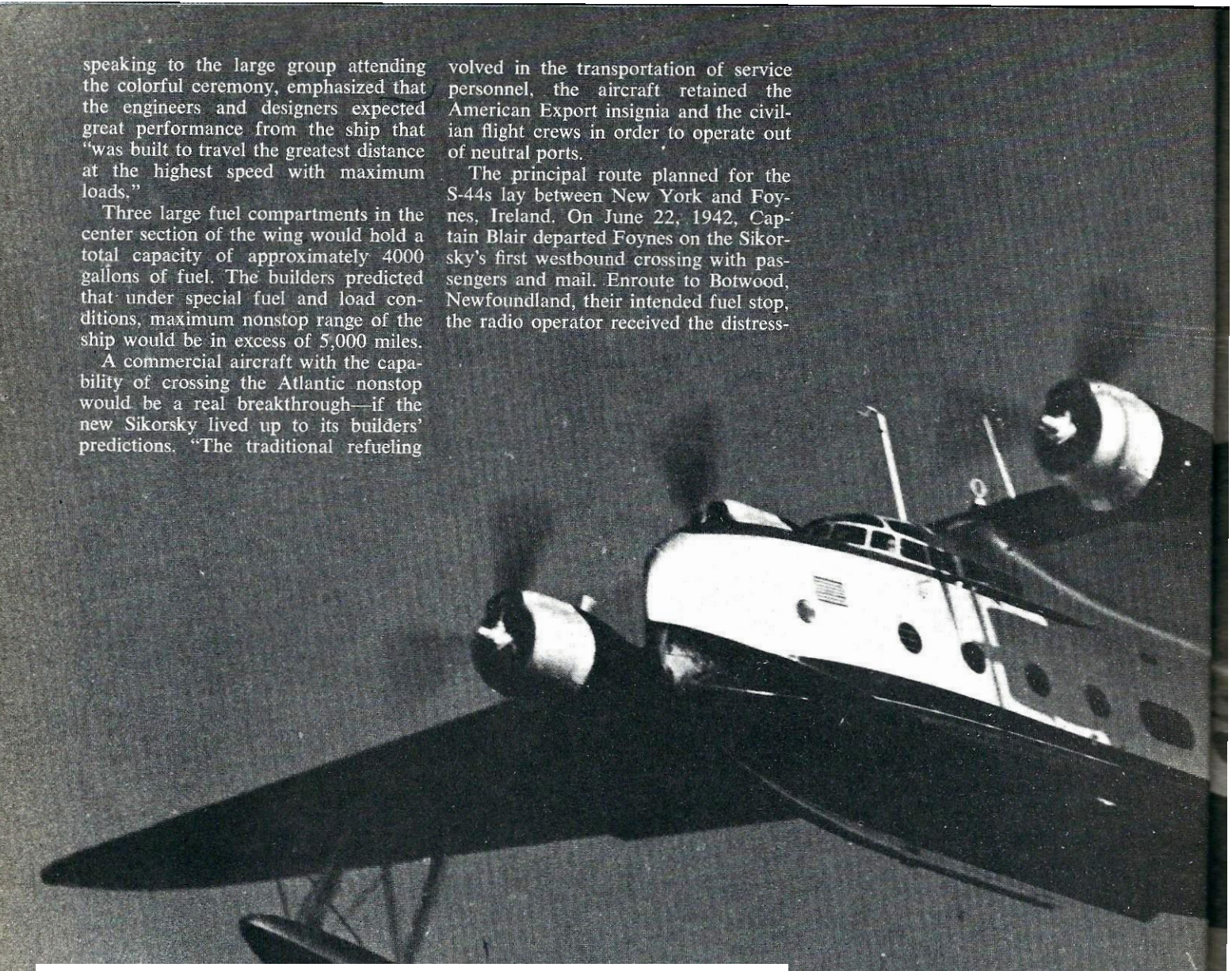
Three large fuel compartments in the center section of the wing would hold a total capacity of approximately 4000 gallons of fuel. The builders predicted that under special fuel and load conditions, maximum nonstop range of the ship would be in excess of 5,000 miles.

A commercial aircraft with the capability of crossing the Atlantic nonstop would be a real breakthrough—if the new Sikorsky lived up to its builders' predictions. "The traditional refueling stops at Newfoundland or the Azores were particularly unsatisfactory during the winter months, "Captain Blair explained. "Large swells in the harbor at Horta in the Azores sometimes caused delays of ten to twelve days for seaplanes traversing the Atlantic."

After two flight tests from Long Island Sound, Captain and his flight crew took Excalibur to the warmer waters of the St. Johns River at Jacksonville Naval Station in Florida. For two months they put the S-44 through its paces, complying with performance tests for the Navy and certification by the Civil Aeronautics Administration.

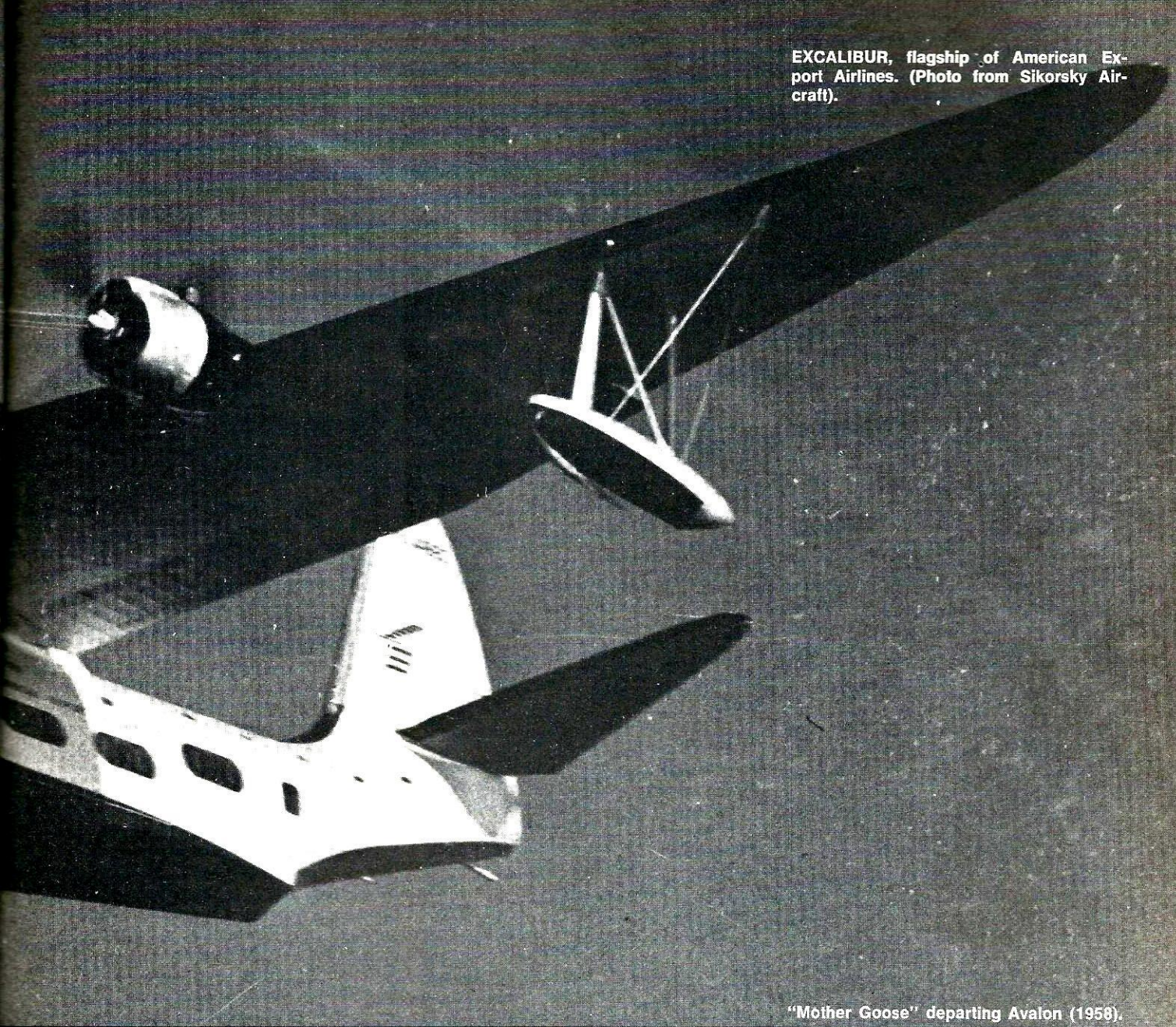
At the outbreak of the war, the new S-44s were requisitioned by the Navy, which eliminated one of American Export's big headaches, the denial of landing rights by the Portuguese, stifling the New York Lisbon mail run on which American Export was depending. Even though the new Sikorsky flying boats were Navy property, and would be involved in the transportation of service personnel, the aircraft retained the American Export insignia and the civilian flight crews in order to operate out of neutral ports.

The principal route planned for the S-44s lay between New York and Foynes, Ireland. On June 22, 1942, Captain Blair departed Foynes on the Sikorsky's first westbound crossing with passengers and mail. Enroute to Botwood, Newfoundland, their intended fuel stop, the radio operator received the distressing news that both Botwood's Bay of Exploits and their alternate at Gander Lake would be closed due to fog and drizzle. Electing to descend below the overcast to escape strong headwinds at the higher altitudes, the huge ship pressed on skimming between grey clouds and a dark and forbidding sea.



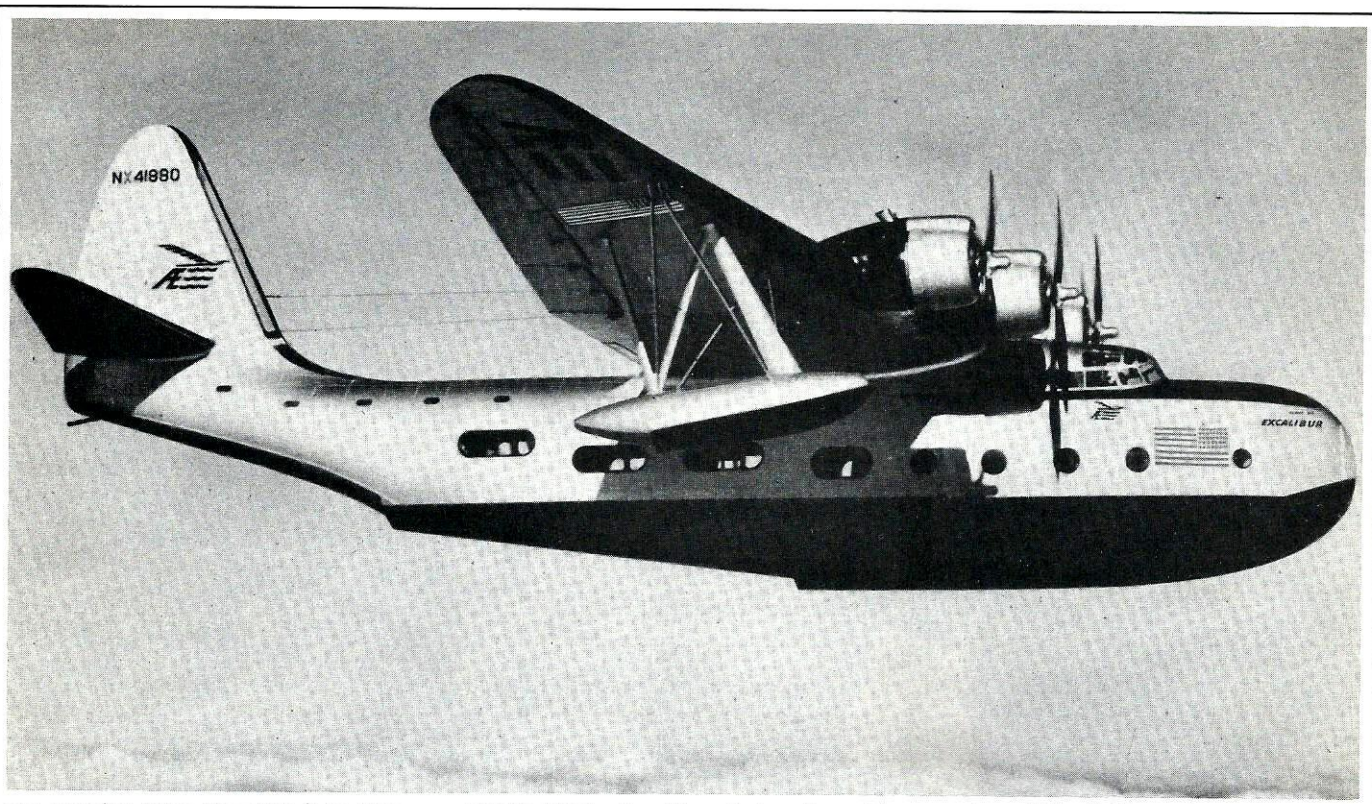
Excalibur arrived at La Guardia's Marine terminal in New York with a scant ninety-five gallons remaining in the fuel tanks but established a new record. For the first time an airliner carrying passengers and mail had crossed the Atlantic nonstop!

With a somewhat wry face, Captain Blair recalled that they'd also set another "record" for the S-44 on that flight: "It took us twenty-five hours and forty minutes to cover the thirty-one hundred miles from Foynes to New York – the Sikorsky's *longest* trip." Two years later in one of *Exclalibur's* sister ships, Blair made up for "lost time," establishing a trans-Atlantic speed record on a fourteen hour-seventeen min-



EXCALIBUR, flagship of American Export Airlines. (Photo from Sikorsky Aircraft).

"Mother Goose" departing Avalon (1958).



EXCALIBUR, flagship of American Export Airlines. (Photo from Sikorsky Aircraft).

ute crossing from New York to Foynes.

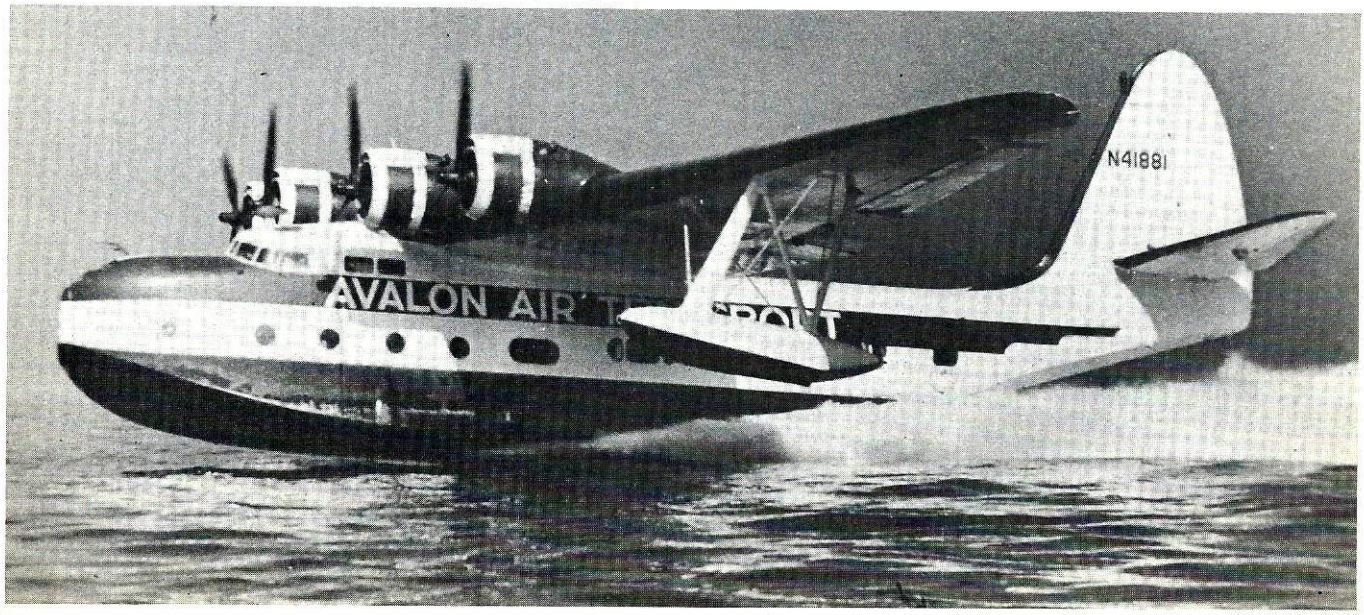
The return trip in winter was a different matter; the winter headwinds made a nonstop westbound North Atlantic crossing imprudent, forcing the American Export planes through a circuitous route—almost three times the distance of the direct route—to return to New York.

Recalling departures from such ports as Bathurst in British Gambia, West Africa, and the Port of Spain, Trinidad, on these long trips, Captain Blair commented, "The S-44 was a real submarine; it sat so low that the water almost reached the windows when we carried a full load. When we applied take-off power, the spray of water nearly submerged the ship! Take-off was critical—on hot days we'd use up about two miles getting off the water."

Excalibur, flagship of the fleet, had a brief existence. In October of 1942, during take-off from Botwood, Newfoundland, the wing flaps were somehow lowered to the full down position. As the pilot struggled to force the nose-heavy plane from the water, it porpoised and plunged to the bottom of the Bay of Exploits.

American Export Airlines (later American Overseas Airlines, which was merged with Pan Am in 1950, following a Civil Aeronautics' ruling which prohibited steamship companies from owning airlines) discontinued use of the S-44s in October of 1945. In the aftermath of the war, landplanes were in style, and the big seaplanes were replaced by DC-4s.

The Sikorskys were shuttled around: a Peruvian company had plans to use them on nonstop flights from Lima to New York. On July 13, 1946, one of the S-44s owned by Condor Airlines made the 3300 mile trip from Lima, Peru, to New York City in twenty-six hours, forty-eight minutes. But in spite of such outstanding performance, plans did not materialize and the planes next went to Skyways International, a Miami company which was looking into the possibility of establishing flights from Montevideo, Uruguay, to the west coast of Africa.



S-44 in service of Avalon Air Transport (1959 photo).

The two S-44s did not remain idle. Charles Blair arranged to use NC41881 for thirty days during the summer of 1947 to transport workers and equipment for a Minneapolis construction firm to the site of a new air base going in at Keflavik, Iceland.

"I made five round trips in the S-44 between Minneapolis and Reykjavik, Iceland, stopping to refuel on Gander Lake, Newfoundland," says Blair, "with one of the flights extending to Stockholm. These flights were in addition to my regularly scheduled runs with the airline, and I logged a total of 334 hours in that thirty days."

Captain Blair managed to relieve the stress of that busy period by making the take-off, then turning over the controls of the S-44 to his two co-pilots and retiring to a berth below the flight deck until mid-ocean when he came to the flight deck to establish position by celestial navigation, and later reappeared again to make the landing. When the thirty day lease ran out in August of 1947, Captain Blair returned NC41881 to the seaplane ramp in Baltimore.

While Captain Blair was splashing in and out of Lake Minnetonka in NC-41881, its sister ship (NC41882) was engaged in more hazardous activities in Montevideo. It was being used to deliver arms and ammunition to rebels who were trying to bring down the government of Paraguay. On one such mission, after failing to rendezvous with the rebel gunboats on the Paraguay River, the ship returned to Montevideo after dark. The pilot, who Captain Blair had checked out in the S-44 for daylight operations when the plane was ferried to Montevideo from Baltimore, was inexperienced at making night seaplane landings. With the plane far in excess of its legal landing weight, the pilot failed to level off when he tried to land on the River Plate, and the S-44 went straight to the bottom.

The lone surviving aircraft of the former trans-Atlantic conquerors—NC-41881—remained in relative obscurity during the next ten years.

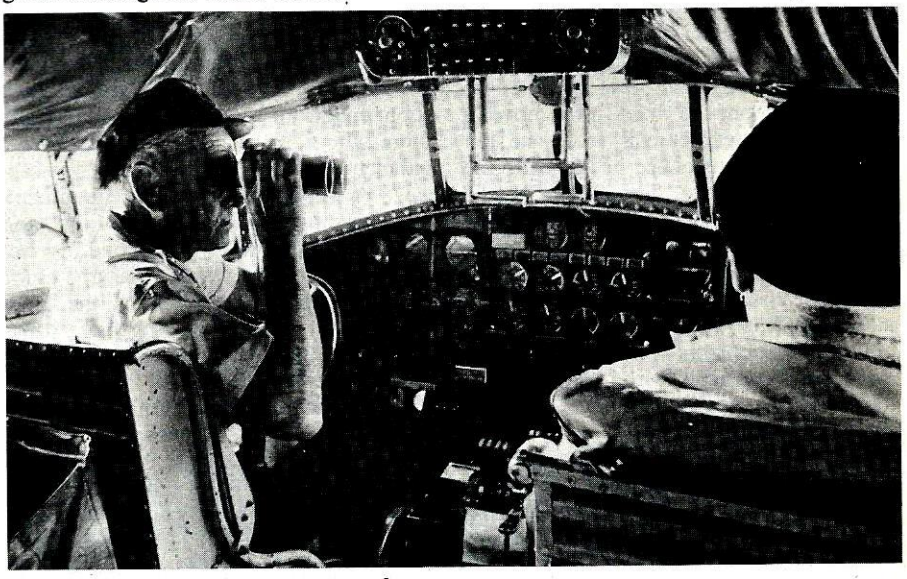
Dick Probert, now general manager of Catalina Seaplanes in San Pedro, California, has a clear recollection of his introduction to this one-of-a-kind Sikorsky.

In 1957 Mr. Probert (president of Avalon Air Transport at the time) was working in his office when he received a phone call from a man who identified himself as a representative of the owners of a Sikorsky VS44A flying boat. The caller explained that the owners wanted to sell it, and wondered if Avalon Air Transport would be interested.

"I made an appointment to talk to him," said Mr. Probert, "and had just turned back to my work when the phone rang again. It was the same person—asking to talk to someone about buying a Sikorsky flying boat! There was some confusion until I explained that "Catalina Amphibian Airlines" was merely a telephone book listing for our operation so that we wouldn't miss business from tourists who had never heard of the city of Avalon."

After meeting with the representatives of the group of Baltimore businessmen (who had purchased the S-44 after the plane had been seized by the city for non-payment of fees at Baltimore's Harbor Field), Mr. Probert was sufficiently interested to agree to go look at the plane. Avalon's nine-passenger Grumman Goose amphibians were hard pressed to handle the heavy traffic between Long Beach and Catalina during the summer months. The S-44 had possibilities.

The plane had been flown to Peru, where the present owners had tried to establish a South American trade outlet, and for eighteen months had been beached at Ancón Harbor, near Lima. The flight engineer—broke and stranded—greeted Dick Probert belligerently. He finally agreed to turn over the beaching gear and get the plane ready to go in exchange for a ride home.



Dick Probert (with binoculars) and co-pilot Lyle Krebs in cockpit of the S-44. (1959).

Probert, not knowing what to expect, had made no firm commitments. "I agreed to buy the plane for $100,000 IF we could get permission from the Civil Aeronautics Board to use a plane that size on our air taxi certificate, and IF I felt we could use it to an advantage in our Catalina service. Barring that, I offered to fly the plane back to Long Beach at my expense and help them find a buyer, sharing any profits realized."

It was the season for South American gremlins. Time after time two of the four Pratt & Whitney Twin-Wasp engines mysteriously coughed and sputtered, then quit in flight. The ailment was successively diagnosed as (1) bad spark plugs, (2) sticking valves, and (3) bad cylinders. None of the remedies worked.

Most men would have quit in sheer frustration, but Dick Probert had developed a begrudging admiration for the old sea monster, and he was determined to take the plane out of its exile in Ancón Harbor. The owners unhappily accepted Probert's "take it or leave it" offer to take the plane off their hands at half the original asking price, with the stipulation that the problem of getting it operational was all his as well.

Probert phoned his partner in Long Beach, and arranged to have their chief mechanic sent down right away. Describing the situation to the mechanic, Probert explained, "The engines run fine for about forty to forty-five minutes; you can just about set your watch by it. Then they start barking and backfiring and within one minute's time will quit."

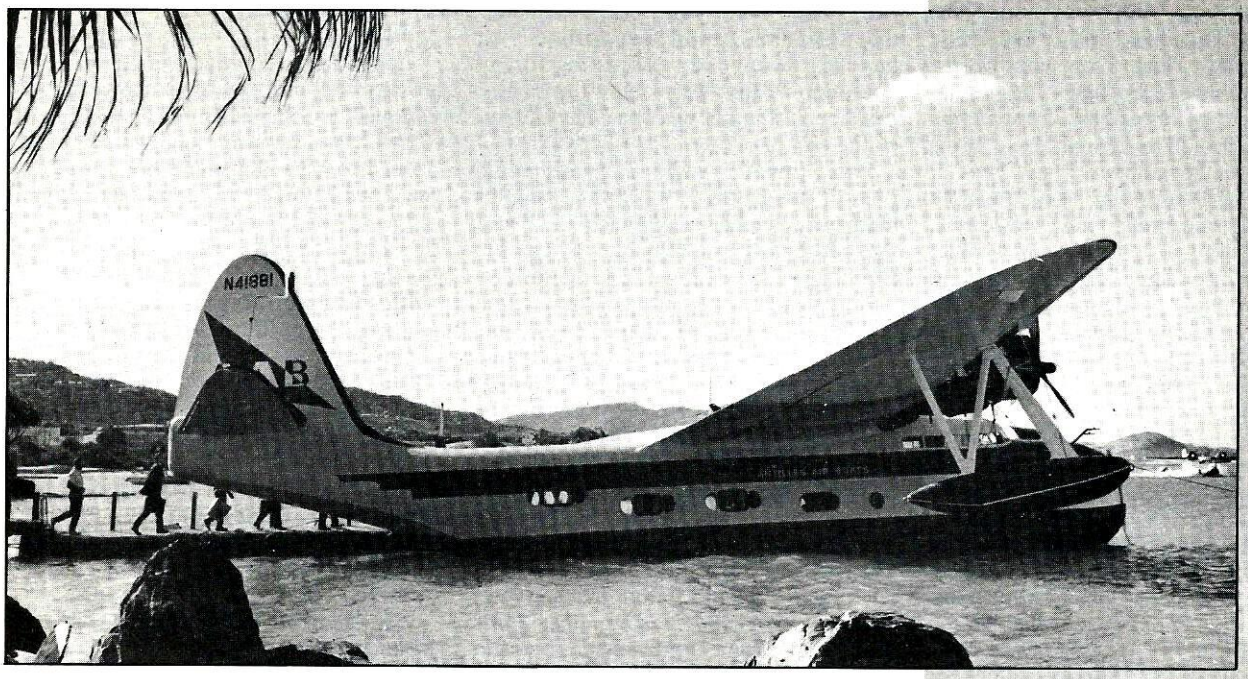
"Magnetos," intoned the chief mechanic.

It didn't seem plausible, but further investigation confirmed his diagnosis: the mags on the two bad engines were a different brand from the mags on the two good ones. The mechanic at the local overhaul shop testified that, indeed, "Brand X" magnetos did not thrive in the Peruvian climate; they did not even stock them.

Six weeks had been lost in solving the mystery, and Probert was eager to load his mechanic and flight engineer aboard and head for home!

With a shudder Probert recalls their departure from Ancón Harbor.

"The plane was heavily loaded, and for some reason the controls did not respond normally. Not being familiar with an airplane with that tremendous wing span, I put the wing down too far and hooked a float in the water. I didn't realize what had happened at the time because I was struggling to bring up the nose. When I did get it out of the water, I couldn't hold it out and had to yell for the co-pilot to grab the wheel and pull.



S-44 at Christiansted, St. Croix, dock—ready for boarding. (Fritz Henle).

We both pulled as hard as we could to get it into the air. Once we'd caught our breath and got things squared away, the engineer pointed out the right window. The float on that side had broken in half and rammed up through the wing!"

The flight engineer now admitted to getting someone to help him move a 300 pound safety canvas from the tail up to the bow, because he thought the tail was too heavy! The cause of the unconventional take-off explained, the only solution seemed to be to fly on to Acapulco, landing there for repairs. The float had gone through where the aileron ends and the flap begins, so the only usable controls were the elevators. Returning to Ancón in the heavily overloaded plane could only lead to complete disaster.

Murphy's Law ("If a thing is left so it can go wrong— it will") had taken effect. At Acapulco the men found a German expatriate who could help them repair the wing and get the controls back in commission. Probert successfully persuaded (i.e., bribed) a Mexican official to let them take off sans the right float. Fuel for the plane could only be obtained in drums. But the task of pumping the 1800 gallons from the drums to the tanks was eagerly accomplished by Mexican youngsters vying for the $5.00 prize promised to the "champion" who could pump a drum dry the fastest.

In four days the crippled S-44 taxied into Acapulco harbor to continue the flight homefl Probert, forgeting the missing float as he concentrated on the check list, proceeded to run up the right outboard engine. The plane tilted as the crippled wing splashed into the water.

"Hang on, fellows!" yelled Probert, adding power to the left inboard and outboard engines in an attempt to spin the plane about and bring the wing up out of the water. The wing continued to sink.

Shutting the plane down, Probert and his companions scrambled out onto the tip of the high wing. A passing boat soon pulled up to offer assistance to the men, who were striving to maintain the balance of their gigantic 124-foot seesaw. A rope, run through the plane's tiedown ring, was tied to the boat, and additional recruits were added as human ballast on the wing. Everyone clung to their precarious perch as the boat, pulling the heavy, wet wing from dropping back into the water, the wing top "sit in" continued for another hour as water drained from the damaged side.

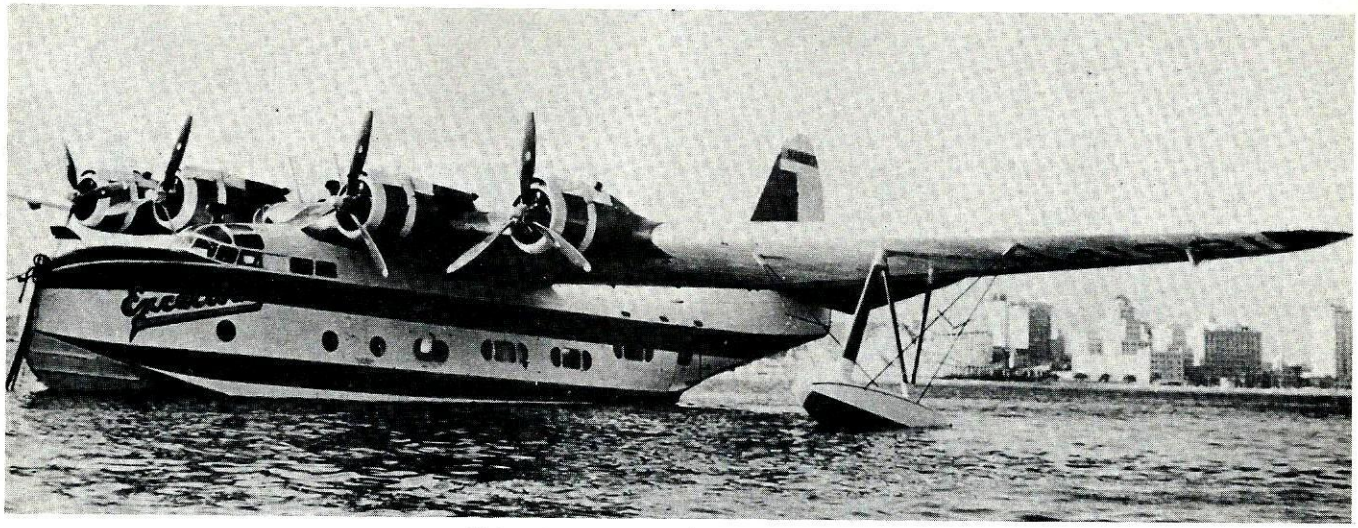
The S-44, saved from the watery grave of its sister ships, continued north along the coast. "We'd only been flying a couple of hours when all four engines quit," relates Probert. The fuel gauges weren't working, and during the hasty retreat onto the plane's wing in Acapulco, the flight engineer had left the gas valves on. The cross-feed valve allowed the gas to run from the high wing out the low wing, dumping an undetermined amount into the harbor.

Switching to another fuel tank brought the engines back to life, but the crew had no idea how much gas remained. Over Ensenada at 10,000′ the crew voted to press on. If they ran out of gas, at least there was a chance of gliding on into the States!

"We landed at Long Beach with 127 gallons of fuel left, which was about forty-five minutes' worth." Probert sighed. "After we got back I found out that my partner had put $100,000 worth of insurance on that airplane. If I'd known

S-44 taking of from harbor at Christiansted, St. Croix. (Blair home on hill in upper right—twin towers). (Fritz Henle).

Stewardess taking boarding pass from young Antilles Air Boats' passenger for S-44. (Photo by Fritz Henle).



that, I'd have let it sink in Acapulco Bay!"

The insurance policy took care of the $17,000 repair bill, and Probert set about remodeling the interior of the S-44 so that it would accommodate 47 passengers. During its trans-Atlantic flying days, the S-44 was designed to carry sixteen passengers in spacious comfort —two in each compartment. On the twelve-minute hop from the California mainland to Catalina, such luxury was neither practical nor necessary.

With the capability of carrying as many passengers per trip as five of the Gooses, the S-44 — dubbed "Mother Goose"—spent ten active years on the West Coast. In addition to the Catalina run, the flying boat provided transportation for the Navy to San Clemente Island, where the Polaris missile was being developed. She also "went Hollywood," making her film debut in *The Gallant Hours,* a movie about Admiral William "Bull" Halsey.

In 1967 Probert reluctantly decided to sell "Mother Goose." Once again landplanes were intruding on her territory. After an airport was put in on San Clemente, the Navy terminated their contract, and the Sikorsky was used only five months out of the year during the busy Catalina tourist season. Dick Probert, now sixty, was prohibited by regulations from flying a plane of that size in a passenger operation.

Reflecting on his decision against putting another pilot in command of the plane, Probert stated, "It was almost impossible to find pilots with big seaplane experience at that time. There were lots of Goose pilots, but flying the Sikorsky was a whole new game. It was a *big* plane, heavy on the controls. Docking in Avalon Bay, where it was necessary to taxi around numerous boats, actually required more technique than flying the plane."

In his book, *Red Ball in the Sky,* Charles Blair addresses this same problem: "Checking out pilots in landplanes

Sitting in Long Beach Harbor after her flight from South America, the Excalibur would be seen in the screen play about Admiral Halsey. The S-44 doubled for Halsey's Coronado in the movie. (Probert).

is never so much of a problem. But flying boats are different. For every take-off and landing, the pilot must build his own airport out of a new combination of winds and waves. Even the chore of tying up to a mooring can be a frustrating task."

Referring to his own search for pilots for the S-44s on the trans-Atlantic flights, Blair maintains, ". . . once landed, the big-winged ships needed good seamen at the helm. They required skillful handling in tricky winds, waves, and tides. A landlubber, accustomed to the easy-going simplicity of wheel brakes on dry land, could easily wreck a flying boat just fumbling around on the surface."

And so the Sikorsky prepared to move on once more, looking for a place where its services were still in demand.

Nancy Probert, the S-44's sweet "stew" logged more S-44 take-offs and landings than any other person in history during her tour of duty as cabin stewardess on the Catalina to Long Beach runs.

Old friends have a way of keeping in touch. Charles Blair, in addition to his job as a pilot for Pan Am, had established a rapidly expanding seaplane airline in the U. S. Virgin Islands. In January of 1968 he brought the S-44 to his Antilles Air Boats operation and put it into service on the busy St. Croix/St. Thomas route, with additional flights from St. Thomas to Fajardo, Puerto Rico, and an occasional trip to the small island of St. John.

When Captain Blair himself was away on a Pan Am flight, one of his pilots at Antilles took over the operation of the big flying boat. It was during one of these absences that the Sikorsky was slightly damaged during a mishap on the rocks of the narrow channel leading into the harbor at Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas. The airplane was due for an overhaul at the time, and this was not economically feasible, so it was retired from service.

NC41881—last of the great Sikorsky S-44 flying boats—is still very much in evidence. Renovated as a waterfront monument, she presides regally over the Gooses and PBY Super Catalina as passengers board and disembark at the Antilles' seaplane ramp in Charlotte Amalie.

Although NC41881 will never fly again, and history has closed the door on the huge flying boats, during their heyday the Sikorsky S-44s ruled the skies as only the biggest, the fastest, the newest airplanes can. Some of their outstanding accomplishments include:

(1) Trans-Atlantic Record, U. S. A.-Europe—3,329 miles in 14 hours 17 minutes (nonstop)

(2) First non-stop flight, New York-Lisbon—3,383 miles in 20 hours 14 minutes

(3) Fastest westbound Atlantic flight time, Europe-U. S. A. (with refueling stop at Botwood, Newfoundland) in 17 hours 45 minutes

(4) Fastest non-stop flight time between Europe-New York — 18 hours 5 minutes