

TRANSATLANTIC: THE FLYING BOATS OF FOYNES

Part 1: The Golden Age of Aviation

Introduction: She'd come down into the water the very same as a razor blade... barely touch it - you'd hardly see the impression it would make. That was usual, but other times they might hit it very hard... ah yes, they were great days, there's no doubt about it.

Poem:

*I'm sure you still remember the famous flying boats,
B.O.A.C., P.A.A. and American Export.
With crews - some were small, some tall, some dressed in blue,
And in a shade of silvery grey, Export hostess and crew.*

Narrator: The town of Foynes is situated 15 miles west of Limerick city at the mouth of the River Shannon. Today it is a quietly prosperous port that at first glimpse belies its significance in the history of aviation. 60 years ago the flying boats, the first large commercial aeroplanes ploughed their heavy paths through the rough weather of the transatlantic run to set their passengers down here, on the doorstep of Europe, gateway to a new world. In a time of economic depression and growing international conflict, Foynes welcomed the world in the embrace of the Shannon estuary.

"It can't be done!" That was most people's reaction to the idea of flying the Atlantic. After the First War, aircraft could just not perform to the levels needed to traverse the most treacherous ocean in the world. But the glory and the economic rewards for those who succeeded were huge. So, many tried. And many failed. But some made the impossible happen, among them Alcott and Brown, Charles Lindbergh, and James FitzMaurice, the first Irishman to cross the Atlantic by air. These brave souls paved the way to the future, though it was still a decade away.

It was Germany who set up the first transatlantic service with her great airships, the *Hindenburg* and the *Graf Zeppelin*. These lighter-than-air craft had a troubled history - they were slow and at the mercy of the elements, but for ten years they flew the Atlantic route with the grace and dignity of a cruise ship. That all changed on May 6, 1937. Coming in to moor in New Jersey, the *Hindenburg* caught fire a mere 30 feet from the ground...

Radio commentator: ...it burst into flame - get this Scotty! Get this Scotty! - [garbled] ...it's terrible. Oh my, get out of the way please. It's burning and bursting into flames and its falling on the mooring mast. All the folks agree that this is terrible, that this is one of the worst disasters in the world. Oh! [garbled] four - five hundred feet into the sky and it's a terrific sight, ladies and gentlemen, the smoke and the flames... now the frame is falling to the ground, not quite to the mooring mast. Oh the humanity! All the families see it. I'm sorry, I can't go on.

Narrator: Thirty-six people burned to death in front of the world's press. The airships never flew again.