

Part 3: The Glamour of Air Travel

Dramatization:

Captain Harold Gray of Pan Am *Clipper III* waited for the all-clear at Gander Lake, New Foundland. He turned to his navigator William Massland and said: "Well, here goes number 85." Massland replied "What? You mean to tell me that there have been 85 transatlantic crossings?" His pilot said "Not at all. There have been 85 attempts. Only 10 have made it." Massland held out his hand and wished his captain luck.

Frank Buckley: I remember well the first day they came into Foynes. We were all of course down the pier. Thousands of people down the pier to see this huge machine coming in from the east.

You could see her for about maybe 3 or 4 minutes before she actually arrived in Foynes. She was a very big, cumbersome kind of plane. So, the launches were out on the river. The river had to be searched for any floating debris which would cause damage to the hull of plane, you see? Which was made of aluminium. So the control launch would be out on the river... Our eyes were keen - off towards the East, because she was coming in from Southampton. She did one complete circle around Foynes - right around - came in the second time and landed the same as a seagull. It was really amazing.

She came down in towards the river and sank into it deeply. She only went maybe a foot or a foot and a half deep into the water completely. It was a beautiful sight to see her gliding in.

Narrator: The proving flights continued through 1936 and into 1937. At Foynes a new pontoon pier was constructed to accommodate the increasing amount of freight and the expected influx of passengers. B.O.A.C. started their regular scheduled flights to the Middle East and to Canada in the summer of that year with their Short *Empire*-class boats; the *Bangor*, the *Berwick* and the *Bristol*.

Frank Buckley: The wages was pretty good. The wages in Foynes at that time for an ordinary working man was 2 guineas a week. Well, I started and I was a youth as I said - I wasn't a man - my first week's wages was £5/15s which would be something equivalent to maybe about £400 now... it was a terrible amount of money. So I remember I came home to my mother and I gave her £5 and I kept fifteen shillings - I was a millionaire!

Narrator: On the 4th of July 1937 the Pan Am Boeing 314 *Yankee Clipper* inaugurated the U.S. leg of the transatlantic route with Foynes as the fulcrum of the New York - Lisbon flight.

Frank Buckley: The Americans were advancing in comparison with the British - they had the equipment. The British had the old Sunderland flying boat which used to do the coastal patrol for England. Whereas when the Americans went into civil aviation that had this big flying boat, the Boeing 314, which had a capacity of about 75 passengers and 11 of a crew. That was a big change from the British airways. BOAC planes could take about 25 people - about 8 of crew and 25 passengers. Then that increased to about 40 passengers, by rearranging the seating inside the plane.

Of course the Americans were well ahead. Now, there was always jealousy, naturally enough, between the American and British airlines. So, the Americans had the availability of these big planes which the British wouldn't have. The Americans had the 'deluxe' flying boat, the Boeing 314.

They'd be 180 feet long. Oh God, they would! And the wingspan, oh my God! - Here was the body of the plane - one wing would go beyond that house there! And the width of the wing then would be about the width of this room - 12/15 feet high. At the end of the wing was what they called the aileron. And by moving this, the aircraft could - like a bird - take off, land: they could extend it when they were coming in to land - bring about 3 feet extra and get a greater grip on the air as she was coming in to land.

Narrator: It was appropriate that this means of escape for many refugees from Fascist Europe should be opened on Independence Day. The fare was \$337, about \$4000 in today's terms, but it was a small price to pay for freedom.

Interlude: Music: *Pathé Newsreel*

Soundbed: Music: *In the Mood*, Glenn Miller Orchestra

Narrator: The route proved itself - more and more planes came to use the harbour, and through 1937 and 1938 the people of Foynes became used to these lumbering giants with their exotic cargo coming in to land. As well as being fast, flying was very fashionable in the 1930's, and most of the celebrities of the day passed through Foynes on their way to London, Paris or Berlin. One of the most regular fliers was the film star Maureen O'Hara. Indeed, she went on to become romantically involved with Charlie Blair, one of the American Export pilots.

Perhaps Foynes greatest claim to fame from this era is the invention of Irish Coffee. The story goes that a flight to New York was forced to turn back to Foynes because of bad weather. The aviator was tired and cold after 10 hours in the air non-stop. So he radioed ahead and ordered coffee with a little something in it to revive him on his return. After landing he was given his pick-me-up and asked "what's in that, Scotch?" to which the cook replied "No, that's Irish; Irish Coffee." And a new beverage was born.

--

[Click here to subscribe to this podcast.](#)

--