



TRANSATLANTIC: THE FLYING BOATS OF FOYNES

A DOCUMENTARY BY MICHAEL HANLEY

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 only 30 feet from the ground...

Archive: Herbert Morrison: ... It burst into flames! Get this, Charlie! Get this, Charlie! It's fire — and it's crashing! It's crashing terrible! Oh, my, get out of the way, please! It's burning and bursting into flames, and the — and it's falling on the mooring-mast. And all the folks agree that this is terrible, this is the, one of the worst catastrophes in the world. Ohhhhh! It's—it's—it's the flames, [indecipherable, 'enty' syllable] oh, four- or five-hundred feet into the sky and it ... it's a terrific crash, ladies and gentlemen. It's smoke, and it's flames now ... and the frame is crashing to the ground, not quite to the mooring-mast. Oh, the humanity ... all the passengers screaming around here...

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

Poem:

*For four years they came and went through cloudy skies and fair
And whether the night was dark or bright they landed here quite safe
To rest awhile at Boland's Meadow or over in sweet Adare,
Then away again they all would fly, we seldom knew to where.*

Narrator: Frank Buckley recalls his time working for B.O.A.C.

Frank Buckley: Michael Finucane was the local harbour pilot. Now, I was young, I wasn't 18 at the time, and he said to me "Frank, I've a little job for you" he said. "I want you" he said, "to look after the wages" - I was fairly handy at the figures - "I want you to look after the wages of the men working on the boats."

I was thrilled with myself, I felt a very important guy. Naturally enough to be able to read Morse Code and Semaphore was a great asset. I was fairly lively at the time and I had a liking for the thing. So I became the Chief Operator of the Morse Code and Semaphore. And, during the daytime, when we'd no planes we might go up to the - do you know the monument? - And we'd signal to another place with Morse Code signals and, we'd a special lamp that would signal Morse Code and talk to one another.

What amazed the British people was the ordinary working man, who was a member of the boat crews, was able to communicate with those people.

The plane might come into Foynes - if she came in early - I remember one morning in particular, a plane came in with a kind of suddenness. It flew overhead the pier in Foynes. I flashed up to her 'Will I lay the flares?' And he said ' It's not worth my while, I will have daylight in 10 minutes time, I'll fly around'. So he flew around until he had daylight and he'd be able to land without any lights. Ah Christ, t'were great!

Narrator: It was Sean Lemass of the Irish Dept. of Industry and Commerce that first forwarded the notion of an airport in Ireland. With his blessing the wheels were put in motion to establish an airbase on the west coast.

Frank Buckley: In 1936 we set up in Foynes at the Mont Eagle Hotel below, where the [Foynes Aviation] Museum is now and in Foynes Island. Now Foynes Island was very important, because up on Foynes Island there was a radio station.

Interviewer: Was it a weather station or...?

Frank Buckley: Radio. The weather people would be in the mainland here, but the communications would be with here, the control tower and Foynes Island. Now Foynes Island - up on top of it, it had a complete view of any side of Foynes where it [the plane] could land; it had full control of it, you know?

Poem:

*Paddy Walshe he was a coxswain, young Denny Lane was too,
For years they sailed the Shannon, reliable men and true,
We also had the Buckleys, Frankie, John and Joe,
Bill Kirwan brought the percolator, good coffee for to brew.*

Frank Buckley: So then BOAC decided at one stage to get some of their own launches. So they brought special boats over from England and from Bangkok - in from Bangkok, if you don't mind! - as they'd flying boat bases already out there.

So they brought them into Foynes and I was made senior coxswain with Dennis Lane, another local boy here in Foynes. We went up to Dublin, and we took the full week coming from Dublin. Right down through the canals with the boats down to Foynes, staying in various places down along the way... down though the Shannon - Ardnacrusha.

There were 44 people on the launches alone - forty four! That was a colossal amount of people, and you had people driving... I was driving the passenger boats and the control launch. Then you had special engineering boats, bringing the mechanics in and out. Then you had the rough-and-tumble work to be done; that was another boat - putting tail ropes on the plane, because every time the plane was tested, testing her engines, she was tied by the front, but she had to be tailed behind as well. So that when the engines would start she couldn't move forward, because she'd keep drifting away otherwise.

The captain just wouldn't go out and start his engines, because as soon as he started the engine she was moving forward. So he had to have a tail hook. And there was a rope put from the tail hook onto a mooring buoy. He would check his engines - he'd check one engine at a time... then he might check two of them together and he might check the four of them full blast together, to make sure he was getting the maximum volume out of everything. And then, eventually, he would be ready. And all he had to do was pull a lever and the tail rope opened and dropped down into the water.

Interlude: Music: *Saoirse* by Seán Ó Riada

Narrator: The proving flights began in July 1936. However, the difficulty of the undertaking shouldn't be underestimated.

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*

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.

Narrator: The ground staff of B.O.A.C. in particular became part of the community and that company invested heavily in the development of Foynes town and harbour, building among other things a 5-star hotel in Boland's Meadow and cottages for their staff on the waterfront.

Frank Buckley: I always found the Americans to be very uppish, somehow or another. I found that the British crews were more pleasant - isn't that strange thing, now? Usually it's the opposite, the Americans are very friendly. But I found they felt they were little gods. Oh I suppose they were little gods in a way, you know? It was a new mode of transport, there wasn't too many of them around at the time.

Narrator: Foynes, in its way, became a boomtown, and even something of a tourist attraction.

Frank Buckley: Oh, it was unique! We used to have people coming in from Limerick - excursion trains coming out. They'd come down and, of course they were fascinated to see these flying boats. Naturally enough, I was a young man at the time and you'd see a nice girl... you'd say 'Would you like to see the plane?' Of course they were in their glory - you'd take them out to see the plane... by Jeez it'd be a great day!

There was no public transport in the time before the War came on. We in BOAC had our own coach - free travel... they had minibuses and staff cars. Matty Kelly from Glin was in charge of that. The original caretaker was Jackie Baker in England with whom I became very friendly, and I visited him at his home in Bristol many times.

Boland's Meadow - there was 12 houses built there for the BOAC staff. The radio officers were Irish government - they were staying in various places in and around Foynes - Jim King's, O'Malley's - different houses in Foynes.

Husbands and wives and their families would come and stay, mainly in the summertime, because the accommodation wasn't available. But, they had a hall there, a recreation centre, where we used to hold dances every week, or every month.

Interlude: Music: *Moonlight Serenade* segues to...

Dramatisation: September 1939

Narrator: Appeasement had failed. On 3rd September 1939 the war that had threatened since the German Nazi takeover finally came. Many of the British seaplanes and their crews were called to military service, though BOAC remained a civilian air service. The American airlines also stayed on, as the US didn't enter the war until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941. The Irish government maintained a somewhat ambiguous neutrality throughout the conflict. British aircrew continued to work in Foynes.

Restrictions like rationing were introduced on the citizens of the Irish Republic, but Foynes still had the flying boats coming in and did not suffer many hardships for the duration.

Frank Buckley: The war was costing Britain £10 million per day. Well, Foynes got a good bit of that! In Ireland, there was rationing bread...- the bread was brown, butter was very scarce as well, tea - impossible to get.

Naturally enough, with the passage of time, you became exceptionally friendly with some of the crew members. This guy, Johnny King, was the flight steward on the aircraft. Now, the aircraft would come in, and there'd be everything inside of it - cooked chickens, tea, coffee, more than what they needed. Well, I was never short of tea during the war years, because my friend Johnny King used to get it for me.

But most of all, I'd say, it was an enjoyable time for working. There might be no plane today, so... BOAC staff, they loved fishing. They had America at home here, you know. Just picture it, their brothers and friends were in the Army and here they were in a neutral country enjoying the fruits of everything, you see. The head man, a Mr. Stewart Shaw, he'd say 'Well Mr. Buckley, will we go for a day's fishing?'

We'd go down the river then with our launches and our nets and everything else and catch plenty of fish. And, a big party on board. There'd be drink, as much drink as you'd want, the best of food, it was America at home. It was really great.

Oh you had to be available at all times... take for instance, tomorrow morning - the plane was due in at, say, 8.00am. I'd be lying there in my bed. The next thing was - do you know Margaret Shaughnessy there in the Museum below? Well, Margaret's grandfather was the 'call-out man'. I'd have allocated the crews for the plane due in the morning at 7.00am. Milo McMahon - Milo McMahon was this man's name - he was on night duty. He was below in a hut on night duty. And he'd be advised the plane is now due in at 6.00am - no one to meet it, you see.

So Milo would come up on his pony, gallop around, he'd call me "Frankie, Frankie, she's coming in early, she's coming in at six o'clock." It was so much in my brain, I could allocate the crews and the men to contact: "Go up and tell Gerry Barron, tell Mike Lane" - all different fellas - tell them the plane is due in, I want them on duty at five o'clock. Five o'clock in the morning. Calling out the people there at night-time, you know...

The plane might take off from Foynes going to Botwood. There might be enemy air activity in or out. The plane would come back. And people wouldn't be in bed two hours and poor Milo would come to me, he'd say "Frankie, Frankie, she's coming back! She's coming back! Who will I call out?" And I had to think then: "Call out so-and-so, this fella and that fellow" and Milo would go away and call them. Passenger boats, tow boats, the ferry boats; the necessary boats were called out then, and they were all out there for the plane when she landed. It was a great service you know.

Narrator: The civilian airlines of the Allies continued to fly, though perhaps the nature of the passengers had changed.

Frank Buckley: I never flew in any of those flying boats because they were all commercial for the Army. Everybody that came into Foynes, we knew they were high up in the Army or the Air Force or the Navy, but they all had to come in civilian clothes. They couldn't wear a uniform - even though we were a civilian airline; the government were subsidising and paying for everything. But it was a very essential service, because, you can picture, when they were coming in say, from America, and there was an attack or bombing raid in England, they were caught! So what happened? They diverted into Foynes. They might stay there for 12 hours, maybe 24 hours, until everything was clear again.

Narrator: Foynes became the link point in BOAC's Eastern route during the Desert War, and after Field Marshall Rommel's defeat continued to service Gibraltar, Cairo and the Near East. By 1943, BOAC had 14 'demilitarised' Sunderland's operating through Foynes harbour. One BOAC Flight Engineer based at Foynes at this time summed the whole thing up when he remarked "Sometimes I wonder what the hell we would have done without Foynes".

Frank Buckley: These were seconded over from the RAF - the Royal Air Force - over to BOAC.

Interviewer: I heard that Churchill landed in Foynes...

Frank Buckley: ...that's right, Churchill. As far as I can recall he didn't land at all. He was due into Foynes one morning, and news leaked out. You see he came in and the plane only had about an hour and a half to go to Southampton from here. So they took off from where ever they were coming from and so they decided, in case the news leaked out, well, the IRA or the equivalent might be around you see... so, never landed in Foynes.

The night operation, even though I was working there, was as exciting after 5 years as it was the first night.

First and foremost, one special launch would throw out 6 small boats that were water-tight. Each boat had an area of about 10 feet by 4 feet wide. And inside in that, there were 8 powerful lights. Each one had its own anchor. They would decide what way the wind was - if it was from the west, they'd form a straight line - they'd drop one here, another one 200 yards away, another one 200 yards beyond that, so there'd be about 1200 feet or more of a guide. It was perfectly dark at night - completely dark.

The special launch that I was driving was a very powerful launch, in the event of the aircraft getting into difficulties; my job would be to take the plane in tow. The six small boats would be towed out into the river - the anchor was dropped, and "Down she goes!" So, eventually anyway, in my launch, there was a special gun about 4 ½ to 5 inches in

diameter and there were two of those in the actual boat. And... it was completely pitch - you had hills on the left, on the Clare side and hills on our side as well. So the control launch would be down at the end, the plane would be at the beginning of the runway - we'll call it a runway - and he would indicate to me - flash a signal to me - "I am ready for takeoff." And at that point I would fire a rocket 2,000 feet up into the sky - now you can picture that it was twelve o'clock at night - complete darkness.

This powerful light lit up the whole countryside; Foynes Island, the mainland, so the captain of the plane would have a complete, clear view of where he was going ...it was really amazing.

Narrator: Allied surveillance planes like the Catalina also used Foynes.

Frank Buckley: Actually, it was one those that found the *Bismarck*, the famous German battleship, which was causing an amount of trouble to the Allied shipping. So, when a plane would take off it would have to come back for fuel and they'd lose her again. But the Catalina flying boat, she could stay in the air for 20 hours without refuelling. She could only carry about 6 passengers, but she was mainly used for surveying and things like that.

Narrator: The War in Europe ended on May 25th, 1945. As normal life re-established itself, times also began to change for Foynes. The shipping, absent due to the threat of German U-boat attack for the 5½ years of the Second World War began to return to the harbour. Technology had advanced radically during the war. Larger and more powerful aeroplanes had been built and operated successfully. The jet engine was invented by Frank Whittle. A new path in aviation was being opened up at the expense of the seaplanes. Foynes was one of the last casualties of war. Having flourished when all around it foundered, Foynes time had, finally, come. The last nail in the coffin was the development of Rineanna. A new land-based airport was established at the far side of the river. It was called Shannon International.

Poem:

*Over in Rineanna now they have land planes galore,
Though they stole the show from Foynes we wish them luck and more,
We're scattered now forever boys, at home and foreign climes,
But our thoughts sometimes wander back to those exciting times,
When flying boats rode anchor in the harbour of dear Foynes.*

Narrator: On the 29th of October 1945, the last scheduled Pan Am flying boat left Foynes Harbour and flew into the west.

Frank Buckley: It was a sad time really, there's no doubt about it. There was supposed to be a last plane, but I think some more planes came in after that. The facilities were still there -

it wanted nothing really. The launches were there, the water was unlimited... you could land - I can even remember one morning there was fog on the River Shannon at Foynes. And where did the plane land? Below at Glin. And my brother, God rest him, was living and married in Glin and it was he who went out in a boat and brought the passengers in a rowing boat off the plane. Ah, it was a great time... sentimental and... y'know?

Billy O'Neill - he worked with BOAC. He was in the operations side here in Foynes. Billy O'Neill, Kevin O'Connor. Billy O'Neill went out to Bathurst, or somewhere out foreign or out in Africa, I think. Foynes itself closed in 1946... Well, it was a sad day really.

Narrator: Pan Am's next transatlantic flight landed just across the river from Foynes at Shannon. It was a DC 4. The age of the big flying boat had ended.

Foynes today is a thriving port, which still stretches its influence across the world. The flying boats are gone, but not forgotten. Frank showed me the pontoon pier, which survives still; the old hotel in Boland's Meadow is now a hospital. The legacy of the flying boats is celebrated in the Foynes Aviation Museum and in a hundred small ways: the local pub is called 'The Flying Boat', and of course, there are men like Frank Buckley, who carry the memory of those days with them, forever.

Credits:

Written and produced by Michael Hanley

Contributor: Frank Buckley

Music: *Saoirse* (Freedom) by Sean Ó Ríada

Mise Éire (I am Ireland) by Sean Ó Ríada

An Tine Bheo (The Living Fire) by Sean Ó Ríada

Moonlight Serenade by the Glenn Miller Orchestra

In the Mood by the Glenn Miller Orchestra

Dramatisation: Joel Jennings

Archive clips courtesy of the BBC Sound Recording Archive, WLS Chicago

Poem: *The Flying Boats of Foynes* by Michael Finucane

Find out more: [Michael Hanley's Website](#)

Also available via iTunes: [iTunes link](#)