

The Irish Constellations...

A Lucky Break for BOAC?

By M. D. WEST

The dream of an Irish Transatlantic Airline

The 1922 treaty between the new Irish Republic, Eire (Irish Free State), and Great Britain left most of the industrial economy concentrated in British administered Northern Ireland.

Politician Sean Lemass of De Valera's Fianna Fail party wanted a national airline, partly as a symbol of a progressive Eire. Aer Lingus was launched in 1936 with De Havilland biplanes. Two brand-new Lockheed 14s were imported from America in 1939 and in 1940 Aer Lingus received the last prewar DC-3 to be delivered in Europe from the Fokker agency for Douglas. An advanced modernist terminal at Dublin's Collinstown Airport was being constructed in 1940. The war prevented Aer Lingus from serving anywhere but Manchester, England, so the almost unused Lockheeds were sold off to Guinea Airways in Australia in 1940.

The development of the flying boat base at Foynes from 1937, its busy wartime use and the construction of the nearby Rineanna (Shannon) landplane airport impressed Sean Lemass, who began planning a postwar Irish transatlantic airline from 1943....this was incorporated as Aerlínte Eireann, 100% owned by the Irish State through the Aer Rianta Teoranta holding company. Aer Lingus, the separate short-range airline, postwar was 30% owned by British European Airways (BEA) and 10% by British Overseas Airways Corp. (BOAC) and 60% by Aer Rianta). Aer Rianta ordered three L-749 Constellations from Lockheed on May 7, 1946. By September 1946 the Constellation was demonstrated to Aerlínte officials Scott



EI-ADE, St Enda, flew first Dublin-Rome service November 17, 1947, (Photo from Captain McCloskey)

and Kennedy by Lockheed pilot James F. White in Holland during KLM crew-training flights. A contract for two more Constellations was signed with Lockheed on October 26, 1946, at the Savoy Hotel in London.

BOAC's struggle to obtain Constellations

BOAC, like its ancestor Imperial Airways, was obliged to use British aircraft but its other prewar ancestor, British Airways Ltd, had no such restriction and had become a committed Lockheed customer before its 1940 merger into BOAC. During WWII, BOAC built up a large fleet of Lockheed 18 Lodestars,



Sean Lemass (center, moustache), Aer Lingus Irish Air Lines Lockheed 14 in background in early 1940



EI-ACR St. Brendan. (Photo by Bill Bluett courtesy of the Cork County Library)



Aer Linte Capt. Frank Williamson by the newly delivered flagship St Patrick, EI-ACS. (Photo by Bill Bluett courtesy of the Cork County Library)



Aer Linte executives and wives flown to Shannon on an Aer Lingus DC-3 greet St Bridget, EI-ADA. (Photo by Bill Bluett courtesy of the Cork County Library)

mainly for its African routes but also on the risky route to Sweden and was well aware of the potential of Lockheed's game-changing Constellation. Britain's aircraft industry would not develop a landplane airliner capable of reliable North Atlantic operation until the Britannia in 1957.

In 1946 the British Treasury restricted BOAC to a dollar purchase of \$3.75m plus \$1.04m conversion costs, that allowed them to obtain five L-049 Constellations for its Atlantic routes for total. These were actually military surplus C-69s from the War Assets Administration. (Amazingly, BOAC never bought a Constellation direct from Lockheed!)

The initial Constellation purchase caused an outcry from some sections of the British Aviation press. *Aeroplane Spotter* magazine quoted Walt Whitman out of context:

"The earth, that is sufficient,
I do not want the constellations any nearer,
I know they are very well where they are,
I know they suffice for those who belong to them....."

BOAC gets involved

BOAC seems to have become enthusiastic about the Aerlinte project in 1947. BOAC personnel were heavily involved in the recruitment and training of Irish employees. The BOAC/

Imperial veteran Capt. O.P. Jones became Aerlinte's chief pilot in May 1947. However, he resigned and returned to regular BOAC line flying in August 1947 just before the Aerlinte Constellations arrived! BOAC's Irish-born Capt. J.C. Kelly-Rogers had been appointed technical manager of Aer Lingus and Aerlinte and technical adviser to Aer Rianta, and would later become assistant general manager (technical) in March 1948.

The arrival of the first three Constellations

The first Aerlinte Constellation was handed over on August 26, 1947, followed shortly thereafter by the other two with the final aircraft being delivered on September 16. The crews were initially trained by TWA at Wilmington, Delaware. They departed La Guardia airport on their delivery flights on September 19. The story that they flew the Atlantic in formation seems unlikely but EI-ACR, "St. Brendan," (Capt. Tom Hanley), EI-ACS, "St Patrick" (Capt. Frank Williamson) and EI-ADA "St Bridget" (Capt. Richard Westlake) arrived at Shannon on September 20 at 0743, 0755 and 0807 GMT, respectively, so they may have been in the circuit together. The best British Aviation photographer, Charles E Brown, had been brought over to record the arrival and the RAF Museum to have the photos archived. "St Bridget" flew on to Dublin



EI-ADD, St Kevin, on temporary steel mesh ramp Rome-Ciampino, Italy. (Photo from Captain McCloskey)



BOAC's G-ALAL Banbury, ex Aerlinte St Patrick, at Heathrow in 1950. (Photo from R.A. Scholefield)



BOAC's first L-049 Constellation, Bangor II, G-AHEJ, at Montreal in 1946 with a backdrop of RAF Liberators and RY-3s.

the same day and on Sunday, September 21, it was displayed to about 12,000 Dubliners at Collinstown Airport and again photographed by Brown. The next day it rejoined "St Brendan" and "St Patrick" at Shannon for more crew training. EI-ADD, "St Kevin," arrived at Shannon on October 9 and EI-ADE, "St Enda," a few days later.

From November 17, 1947, the Constellations were used between Dublin and London replacing the unpressurized, tail-wheel DC-3 and Vickers Viking. A non-stop Dublin – Rome service commenced on November 28, but this route was abandoned on January 15, 1948, due to poor load factors. Charles E. Brown also photographed the Rome launch.

Proving flights to the U.S., Postponement, Cancellation

In late 1947/early 1948, Aerlinte's J.F. Dempsey supervised the establishment of Aerlinte sales offices in New York and Boston with a service launch date of St Patrick's Day March 17, 1948. A program of some 14 Atlantic route-proving flights carrying invited guests took place that winter. Dempsey was still in New York when the newly elected coalition government postponed the imminent service launch in February. The project was then permanently cancelled on April 19, 1948. The Fine Gael political party's John Costello considered the transatlantic project a waste of public money on a luxury service for rich folk and Aer Lingus had incurred a big loss in 1947. One of the last chances people had to ride in an Aerlinte Constellation was a charter flight from Dublin with EI-ADE, "St Enda," to Liverpool-Speke (now John Lennon Airport) for the Grand National horserace on March 20, 1948.

Disposal of Aerlinte's Constellations

On May 11, 1948, BOAC purchased the Constellations for £315,000 each (they had cost £250,000 each). Curiously, the last recorded use of an Aerlinte Constellation to London was on June 5. BOAC also purchased the Lockheed established maintenance unit at Shannon and the engine repair unit at Dublin with the equipment being transferred to the U.K. The closures caused around 200 Irish job losses with much adverse

publicity. The U.S. sales offices were closed. However, the final accounts for the project showed a considerable surplus for the Irish Government, which caused moans in the British press that BOAC was subsidizing Irish aviation. The Irish Constellations lingered at Shannon for some months before entering service on BOAC's routes to Australia and the Far East.

In the early 1950s BOAC would gradually acquire more L-749 Constellations on the second-hand market including several in complex deals with Capital Airlines.

In 1949 the British treasury permitted BOAC to buy six brand new B-377 Stratocruisers from Boeing with payment in dollars. This fleet was later expanded by taking over another four Stratocruisers on the production line ordered by the Scandinavian airline SAS. The deal was made possible because SAS accepted payment in Pounds Sterling. (The first director of SAS was an ex-BOAC executive, Dennis Handover, who had resigned from the board in a wartime row over Government interference in BOAC management.)

The likelihood of Aerlinte's success in 1948 if they had not sold the Constellations has been debated in subsequent years. The nature of the economy at the time suggests the sale was prudent. Transoceanic air travel was for the rich minority until the mid-1950s. Persevering with an independent Aerlinte would have cost the Irish government a lot of money. Could it be that perhaps BOAC just assessed the future clearly and positioned themselves to "pick up the pieces?" It would be interesting to discover the reason for ordering the fourth and fifth Constellations prior to service launch. Why was the contract for the aircraft signed in London? Why did Capt. O.P. Jones resign just before the first aircraft was delivered? All questions that could point to BOAC correctly reading the "tea leaves," or simply having some unbelievable Irish luck.

A decade later, Aerlinte made a cautious, and this time successful, transatlantic start-up with Super Constellations leased from Seaboard and Western, later using Boeing jets purchased in modest quantities (720s, then 707s and 747s). An Irish transatlantic service under the Aer Lingus brand continues today with a handy U.S. customs/immigration pre-clearance facility available at Dublin and Shannon.

Half a century later the largest airline in Europe, Ryanair is based in Eire, but its success has nothing to do with being on the transatlantic airways. Its growth is due to its low-fare model on short-medium length flights in a deregulated market and its CEO Michael O'Leary recently vowed, "We continue our journey to becoming the Amazon of travel." →

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In 1947/1948 the British/Irish Pound was equivalent to four U.S. Dollars.