

A MISSING AIRCRAFT

by Frank Roberts

It was Easter Sunday morning, 1951, and the Shannon-based BOAC bus brought a number of people to Mass at Limerick's Augustinian Church.

They joined a congregation celebrating the feastday, in common with the rest of the Christian world.

But the celebrations were muted. The men who came from Shannon wore the flying gear of Air Sea Rescue, and prayers were said for the safety of 53 people missing over the Atlantic since Good Friday, but hopes were by then beginning to dwindle. The missing aircraft was a giant U.S. Globemaster with more than 50 airmen aboard - some of them high-ranking personnel - and was bound for a U.S. air base in England.

The emergency had begun at 4 a.m. on Good Friday morning when contact with tower officers ceased. The search mounted at many airfields, with Shannon as the advance base, was then the greatest air-sea rescue operation in the history of aviation.

From Shannon and Aldergrove and from ten other bases in Britain, Tripoli and Newfoundland 53 planes wove a web of vigilance over 35,000 square miles of the Atlantic.

I was the *Irish Press* staff reporter at Shannon, and I wrote in that Easter's *Sunday Press* that after 40 hours of combing the vast search "a charred duffle bag and a valise - both picked up by surface vessels - were the only tangible finds. No survivors of the missing Globemaster have yet been found".

There was a good deal of optimism at Shannon the early hours of Saturday morning when a twin-mission B29 and an SB-17, each carrying a 20-seat lifeboat, ready for parachuting into the water, took off for the spot where a superfort based at Tripoli, had reported sighting a raft, flares and a yellow life belt. But their search proved fruitless.

The plane disappeared in circumstances similar to those surrounding the recent Air India disaster, which claimed 329 lives. The Air India jumbo vanished from the radar screen at Shannon control after making a routine call. The Globemaster, when on course off the south-west coast of Ireland, made a similar call to a base in England, after which nothing more was heard from the giant transport with its



A group of journalists covering a story at Shannon Airport.

complement of experts in addition to the flight crew.

After long tours of duty the crews at Shannon and Aldergrove were rested on Saturday night, but night searchers were still taking off from the U.S. airfield at Manston, England, and other bases. Plans were made to intensify the search in an all-out effort from places as far apart as Iceland, Ireland, the Azores and North Africa.

A U.S. Air Force public relations captain at Shannon told me: "This operation will continue to maximum effort. If there are more than 50 planes in the area today there will be over 60 tomorrow".

As darkness fell that Easter Saturday night local people were walking along the west coast lighting piled-up stacks of timber and turf as a guide to possible survivors trying to reach safety in lifeboats or rafts.

A party of 20 Royal Air Force men, after eating large steaks, settled down to rest in a corner of the airport lounge still wearing their flying kit. Some were in the bus that went to the Augustinian church next morning. As the bustle of the day's operations died down 23 rescue aircraft crowded the parking accommodation and civilian aircraft were being parked at the end of the taxi strips.

Two hundred weary flight personnel had bedded down some way or another after, in many cases, more than twelve hours' flying.

An Air Force Anson, from Baldonnell, took part in the search from the beginning.

Col. H.D. Kehm, U.S. military attache in Dublin, said: "That Irish Anson is a mighty fine gesture. I know it takes a powerful nerve to fly a plane like that on a mission like today's. The U.S.A.A.F. and the American people will be grateful".

Col. O.W. Lunde, U.S. Air Attache in Ireland, said: "I know I am speaking on behalf of all Americans here when I say that I am deeply impressed by the help and co-operation of everybody at Shannon". He denied reports published in Danish newspapers that the Globemaster was believed to be carrying several tons of atomic material. "You don't carry atomic equipment like hay", he said.

The search, costing about £13,000 an hour, continued right through Easter Sunday but the pilots had nothing to report on return to base. It was continued for several more days before being abandoned.

The mystery of what happened to the huge transport plane remained unsolved.

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