



AS a teenager Barry O'Shea wanted to work in agriculture. However, he tells RON KIRWAN that instead of choosing a career in agriculture he was to take a different path which began in 1955 when he became a "gofer" in the sales and catering flight kitchens at Shannon Airport. More than 45 years have passed since he started his summer job and at the weekend Barry retired from the airport as general manager of Aer Rianta Shannon.



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A summer job that just took off

I'M a Corkman, and even though we are out of Cork since I was five years old, I still think of myself as a Corkman and I only shout for Cork. I get a lot of hassle at home over this because my children and my wife, Rosemary O'Shaughnessy, are all from Limerick, according to Aer Rianta Shannon's retiring general manager, Barry O'Shea.

My father worked for Dan O'Regan at the time. He had the concession for sales and catering and they didn't make any money that year. "Seventy people went and it was coming near to my time to go when there was a complete restructuring of the company. Consultants came into the airport and there was a new budget department established. A mem-

ber of that was moved to it. "The duty officers were reporting to me as well as the airport police and since then I have been involved in the operational side. It's a side of the business that has continuously developed."

Barry O'Shea continued as operations superintendent for the following 10

years. "If you had one month of Shannon not being here you could certainly slice off half of the island and say it is dead. There is no bigger focal point in the West of Ireland. Galway is another focal point but Shannon Airport drives the West of Ireland forward and I don't think Shannon gets due credit from the Government for

It makes it very difficult for Aer Rianta to do its job properly. The executive and the board put their views forward but at the end of the day you have to wait for the Government to decide—that's its prerogative.

He says the biggest challenge facing Aer Rianta

"A lot of Ryanair's proposals would be at the expense of the taxpayer. It's my view that the airports were put here by the taxpayer and if somebody can come up with a plan whereby it can be done better and the taxpayer is rewarded I would be in favour of that. But if it is to be done better to line somebody else's pockets,

Shannon's retiring general manager, Barry O'Shea.

"My father worked with Averys, the weights and measures people. He worked for the company all around Munster checking weighing machines. This included scales from the heavy machinery used in the creameries to the counter top scales in the shops.

"We moved to Tralee when I was five and I spent my primary school days there. I remember all my friends were from farming families and I was often with them on their farms and even after we moved to Limerick I planned to study agricultural science when I was finished secondary school at the CBS in Sexton Street.

"I joined sales and catering at Shannon Airport in July 1955 when I got a temporary summer job in the flight kitchen. I was working there as a gofer but at the time any kind of a temporary

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job was a godsend for someone just out of school.

"The temporary job became permanent in an unusual way, I suppose. In 1955 TWA catering went on strike in Paris and they moved all of their catering to Shannon Airport. All the temporary people were then kept on because all of TWA's flights were then going through here. And once you got through a winter in Shannon you became permanent, and then, unfortunately, my father died, and as the eldest of the three children my circumstances changed."

In 1956 Barry O'Shea transferred from the flight kitchen to the duty free liquor section where he spent the next four years before taking a six-month leave of absence and heading off to Germany to learn German and to work in one of the first supermarkets to open in the country.

"I liked the Germans. They thought me how to work hard and I was going to school at night as well. It was tough but I really enjoyed it," he remembers.

Arriving back to the duty free liquor section at Shannon in 1960 he found he was in line for redundancy.

"There were 90 people on the redundancy list and I was one of them as part of the last-in first-out system that operated at the airport.

"We were employed by Bren-

and there was a new budget department established. A member of staff was moved in to this new department from the time office and I got the gap in that and I became a timekeeper.

"I had to make sure that people clocked in and to do their wages and having gone to school at night in the Tech in Limerick I had an understanding of book-keeping and some idea of accounts. From there I went to the cashiers office in the airport and then I was seconded to the cashiers office at Shannon Development when they opened at Shannon Airport house."

Sales and catering was responsible for employing staff ahead of the legislation for the new Shannon Free Airport Development Company which had been launched to develop the industrial estate in Shannon.

Barry O'Shea continued as operations superintendent for the following 13 years, taking on new areas of operational responsibilities that came with the arrival of the Russian airline, Aeroflot, the setting up of the US pre-inspection base at Shannon Airport and the creation of Shannon Aviation Fuels.

He also broadened his horizons by helping to set up other airports for the UN and in government aid programmes to far-flung places such as Lesotho, the Maldives, Sierra Leone and Malta. He has particularly enjoyed working with the Russians in Moscow.

"I've been with the company 45-and-a-half-years and it's been absolutely fantastic. The time has flown as far as I'm concerned and I'm still amazed when I look around and see the changes that have taken place at Shannon.

"There was no main runway here when I started work. We used to come in the back road and down by the camps to go to work, down by the Honk Pub—and honk! honk! to get some of the fellows out of it.

"It was all prop jobs at Shannon then and when you see the developments that have place it's quite amazing."

He became the full-time marketing and aviation fuels manager for Aer Rianta in 1988 and in 1995 was appointed general manager of Aer Rianta Shannon in succession to the retiring Michael Guerin.

"It was a very difficult time to take over from Michael Guerin," he recalls.

"The decision had been made to end the transatlantic stopover and there was a lot of bad feeling and pessimism at Shannon and in the Region at the time. A lot of people were very concerned about where Shannon Airport was going to go in the future.

"I was concerned myself at the time, but I was never pessimistic about Shannon. In the 45 years I have worked for the company, there has been a crisis in some form or other every year. There was always a crisis at Shannon.

"We were always going to close down because there are so many people who see the half-empty glass and so few who see the half-full glass. I'm a half-full glass man myself and want everyone to see that we can build on the half that's full and don't have to be looking at the half empty side of it. Whoever is in Shannon Airport has to be optimistic. You'd die if you weren't an optimist here."

"There is an awful lot of politics surrounding airports and I think Shannon Airport in particular is extremely political. Shannon Airport is by far the most important piece of infrastructure in the West of Ireland and it's not given the credit that it should be given at times. People here have kept delivering through the

West of Ireland forward and I don't think Shannon gets due credit from the Government for what it means to the West of Ireland.

"Shannon Airport is still the balancing power between the east and west in so far as there is some balance to the West of Ireland. It has been the key focal point and I think it will continue because there is nothing else big enough to attract development to the West of Ireland.

"There is a perception that Aer Rianta is becoming more centralised but I never had any difficulty with the management or the board. I give due credit to our chief executive, John Burke, and can say they have never interfered with me in head office.

He suggests that the move to sell-off part of the airport management company may have contributed to the view that Shannon is losing out to Dublin.

"If there is a perception that we are becoming more centralised it is probably because of the IPO. It isn't an IPO for Shannon or Cork or Dublin. It's an IPO for Aer Rianta that tends to put forward a much more cohesive or focused image of the company.

"You can only sell Aer Rianta. You can't sell the bits of the company and over the past two years we have seen statements come out about Aer Rianta and its various parts, whether it be Aer Rianta International, the Great Southern Hotel group or the airports. All the parts are all brought back into the centre from a financial point of view and that seems to give the perception of a more centralised group. And I suppose that will happen more if the IPO ever comes to pass," he remarks.

"Strangely, we see the politicians expounding decentralisation and they are the worst centralists of all. All the power is in Dublin and they've let it all go there. If the politicians give some of that back, we could all follow that line and see some power brought back into the regions.

The future of Aer Rianta is very much a Government decision, he admits, and wishes that the Government would make its mind up so Aer Rianta can get on with doing its job.

"Aer Rianta is owned by the Government and it will have to decide about the future ownership of the airports. They haven't decided yet what will happen. We read in the papers that there seems to be different political views within the Government.

"And even within Fianna Fáil one gets the impression that there are different views. That is what I'm reading in the newspapers, the same as anybody else.

"You have different ministers making different statements and I don't think that's a good thing.

He says the biggest challenge facing Aer Rianta is how to fund its current capital programme which is estimated at £1bn over the next 10 years.

"People just don't realise what it costs to do something at an airport. The amount of money that is sucked in is phenomenal.

"There is £20m needed next year at Shannon Airport and there will be no ribbon cutting at the end of it. You never see the money spent and the real problem for Aer Rianta is where that money is going to come from. That's the real issue of the IPO.

"I know some people see it as a political issue and as privatisation but unless the Government gives Aer Rianta money, the company is going to have to get it from somewhere else.

"The Government has now allowed us to borrow more money but there is a limit to what you can borrow, and our borrowing have to be financed.



I would be concerned about open skies because it will be the big guy in the airline business that will win from this. They will bring everything to their own centres and the transatlantic focus will move from Shannon and from Dublin to London, Paris and Frankfurt. The big airlines will get you there and you can figure your own way back to Shannon or to Dublin

"Take £350m in borrowings and it's going to cost you £35m a year to service. We made £31m profit last year, so we are not making enough profit to pay for future borrowings. That's a recipe for disaster. We have got to find another way of funding Aer Rianta.

"Getting permission to borrow more only solves the short-term problems. We have got to find a mechanism whereby you can get funds in some different manner.

"If the Government was to agree to fund our borrowings we would need a programme that would guarantee us £100m a year for the next 10 years. But there are upsides and downsides to every economy and we all know when governments get into a crisis they start cutting funding. So there is no guarantee that, even if the Government wanted to, that they could find that sort of money for Aer Rianta every year for the next ten years.

Barry O'Shea is opposed to the bid by Ryanair to open up the airports to private operators, and says he believes such a move can only be at the expense of the taxpayer.

"Companies like Ryanair come up with lots of solutions as to how the airports should be run. They are entitled to their opinions but I would have a fundamental disagreement with them," he says.

rewarded I would be in favour of that. But if it is to be done better to line somebody else's pockets, then I'm against it."

He has also warned that an EU Commission move to bring open skies in between the US and Ireland can only be detrimental to Shannon and Ireland Inc as a whole.

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"Aer Lingus would die with that policy and I wouldn't see that being good for the country, the economy or for Irish tourism in the future.

"The UK has a link with

Europe through the Channel Tunnel. If we had a tunnel link you could look at the situation in a different light, where you could drive a car or truck the whole way across the continent.

"The problem with Europe is that is so centralised that it's even worse than here. What suits Brussels is the most important thing as far as the EU is concerned. What about Greece or Portugal or the West of Ireland for that matter.

Barry O'Shea has no plans for his retirement but will take some time out, play more golf and see what happens.

"I've had a fantastic career and I wouldn't trade it for anything. I will play more golf and if somebody asks me to do something that I'm interested I'll consider it. I meet my retired colleagues occasionally and they all say there aren't enough hours in the day.

"I hope that I have coped well with the pressures of the jobs I had and haven't offended too many people in the process. I always thought of it as part of the job and even on the most pressurised days I've enjoyed it.

"I often went home totally knackered after those days but when I sat down and thought about it, I always found that I could say I achieved something. They were the best days of all," he said.