1. CAT

After the airship was airborne, the crews’ mascot, a small tabby cat called Whopsie, was found on board. The cat had been rescued from the streets of Renfrew, brought to the airfield and had later been smuggled onboard by stowaway William Ballantyne. When she was discovered it was decided that the oldest airman, 42 year old George Graham, should have responsibility for the cat and Whopsie worked her passage throughout the rest of the voyage providing entertainment and comfort to the other crew members. On her arrival in the United States, Whopsie became a celebrity in the American press and one Broadway actress offered the crew US$1,000 for her but was turned down. – Whopsie was allowed to make the trip home on the R34.

1. TAKE OFF

In the early hours of 2nd July 1919 the biggest airship in Britain gassed to its limit, loaded to its full capacity and surrounded by handlers, was in her floodlit hanger ready to leave East Fortune for the first east-to-west aerial crossing of the Atlantic.

A heavy tractor pulled the massive doors apart and the R34 was slowly eased out by 700 members of the handling party. The weather forecast was favourable and at 1.42 a.m. Major Scott ordered the start. The engines were signalled to commence and the propellers roared into life. The ropes were released and nose-up the R34 very slowly gained height. The airship was heavily laden, even after a quarter of the main water-ballast was dropped, but with all engines working hard Scott maintained height on a course set to the west.

1. GONDOLA

Beneath the main body of the airship, suspended by long, wooden struts and braced rigging wires, the forward gondola appeared to be a single unit some 50 feet long. However, it was actually made up of two parts separated by a narrow gap, which was intended to prevent vibration from the engine affecting the wireless telegraphy equipment.

Incorporated in the forward section were a control room and a small wireless cabin, below which, during flight, trailed a long aerial. The control cabin was fronted with 'Triplex' safety glass. Here were the steering and elevator wheels, the gas-valve controls, the engine telegraph, the various navigational and wireless telegraphy instruments and the toggles controlling the emergency forward water ballast.

Connecting the control-cabin with the keel was a ladder, protected from the elements by a streamlined canvas cover. Another cover similarly enclosed the numerous control-wire connections that led up into the hull.

In the rear section of the forward gondola was the first of the engines, driving a single pusher propeller 17 feet in diameter.

Handling rails were mounted on each side and underneath the Gondola were two 'bumping bags' of compressed air positioned to help cushion landing shocks.

1. CREW

Under the command of Major Scott the crew consisted of 30 airmen who were experienced and dedicated servicemen, mainly riggers and engineers. The riggers’ hazardous tasks included continuous maintenance of the airship’s gasbags with patches of rubber solution. Singing and whistling were encouraged, because a change in tone indicated escaping gas. A dangerous aspect of their work required a walk along the spine of the airship to inspect the skin and gas valves. A rope was attached to them for safety, but most riggers were skilled in walking without the rope, leaning into the wind. The engineers had a difficult, dirty and noisy time of it. The temperamental engines, constantly troublesome, required ‘mothering’ to keep them operational-pumping fuel, cleaning and repairing. All wore heavy-duty flying suits which had been redesigned to include parachute harnesses and integral lifesaving collars.

Life on board settled in to a routine of agreed scheduled watches, meals and rest times The watch going on duty ate first, followed half an hour later by the men coming off duty. The schedule was breakfast at 7:30 a.m., with lunch at 11:30 a.m., tea at 3:30 p.m. and dinner at 7:30 p.m. The food was basic but filling. Beef, ham, eggs and potatoes were precooked. Plenty of bread, cheese, jam, fruitcake, chocolate and tinned milk supplemented the diet, while drinks consisted of Oxo, Bovril, tea and cocoa, along with plenty of drinking water.

The heroic crew of the R34 were: -

Major G H Scott A.F.C - Captain

Captain G .S. Greenland - Second Officer

Second Lt H F Luck- Third Officer

Second Lt J D Shotter - Engineering Officer

Major G G H Cooke DSC – Navigator

Major J E M Pritchard O.B.E. - Special Duties

Lt G Harris Meteorological Officer Second

Lt R F Durrant Wireless Officer

Lt Commander Z Lansdowne Representative U S Navy

Brigadier General E M Maitland Special Duties

Warrant Officer W R Mayes First Coxswain

Flight Sergeant W J Robinson Second Coxswain

Sergeant H M Watson Rigger

Corporal R J Burgess Rigger

Corporal F Smith Rigger

F P Browdie Rigger

J Forteath Rigger Corporal

H R Powell Wireless Telegraphy

W J Edwards Wireless Telegraphy

W R Gent Engineer

R W Ripley Engineer

N A Scull Engineer

G Evenden Engineer

J Thirlwall Engineer

E P Cross Engineer

J H Gray Engineer

G Graham Engineer

J S Mort Engineer

J Northeast Engineer

R Parker Engineer

W Ballantyne - Stowaway

5. STOWAWAY

The R34 even had its own stowaway. William Ballantyne, a 22-year-old Aircraftman second class was bumped off the crew at the last minute to make way for a US observer, but he decided to sneak onboard anyway, even if it meant risking a court martial. He hid up in-between the girders and the gasbags inside the hull of the airship. However, the cramped conditions and the fact that the smell of the gas had made Ballantyne nauseous, made him give up and come out of hiding. Had the airship been over land Ballantyne would have been put overboard by parachute, but as the next landfall was in fact America, he was to stay on board. When he recovered, Ballantyne was, as with traditional stowaways, made to work his passage as cook and often having to hand pump the petrol into the tanks. Ballantyne was not allowed to make the trip home via the R34, he had to find other means of transport as penance.

1. WEATHER

Once they were over the ocean, the clear skies changed to rolling mist. Moisture permeated everything; the crew would endure cold and dampness throughout much of the flight.The weather slowly worsened, and all the ships engines were engaged to full power as the wind speed increased and a storm began to approach. The wireless operators were finding that these weather conditions were causing electrostatic shocks from the equipment.

Halfway across the Atlantic the weather continued to deteriorate. It became increasingly stormy and the wind turned head on to the airship. The winds were blowing at about 50mph causing the ship to fight her way forwards and sideways. Concern was beginning to show as there were no gauges on the petrol tanks and use of the dipstick showed that there was only some 2,200 gallons of petrol left.

With further strong headwinds expected, the thought of getting to New York without stopping was looking more unlikely every hour. The crew was beginning to tire. At one point they were caught by a thunderstorm that came up behind them. Although the airship was badly shaken and fell several hundred feet, pitching violently, no one in the crew was hurt in the storm, although one man came close to falling out of a hatch in the rough conditions. Second Lieutenant Shotter, chief engineer, had been caught off guard, near the open drogue hatch in the bow. The airship’s violent motion propelled him along the keel toward the hatch, and only by jamming one of his feet around a girder did he manage to save his life. Emergency preparations were tentatively being made for emergency landing, but the ship continued on her voyage.

7. Major Pritchard

From the airship the crew sighted the landing point but below, there was confusion as no one on the field in the landing party had any experience of handling large rigid airships. An experienced officer was needed and Major Pritchard volunteered. He washed and shaved in hot water from one of the airship’s engine radiators, then two fellow officers helped him through one of the windows and he parachuted into the history books becoming first person to reach American soil by air from Europe.

Major Pritchard’s unique arrival had serious purpose. He took command and efficiently organized the landing party while the R34 made a circuit of the field. With engines stopped and propellers in the horizontal position, the R34 was carefully eased into the hands of the landing party.

1. LANDING

The airship had been in the air for 4 days encountering poor weather and engine problems. The crew was beginning to tire. Emergency preparations were tentatively being made in Boston for an emergency landing there but the ship continued on her voyage. A good tail wind encouraged Scott to head for New York. Each of the 80 fuel tanks were inspected and whatever fuel was left was collected and poured in to the main tanks to keep the engines running. On the 6 July 1919 at 9:45 a.m. the R34 landed at Mineola, Long Island, New York. It had completed the first east-to-west aerial crossing of the Atlantic, a journey that had taken four and a half days with approximately one hour's fuel left on touchdown.

Their reception in New York was rapturous, a band played ‘God Save the King’ as the crew emerged, but the music was drowned by the cheering crowd. Thousands had arrived to see the airship touch down.The people of New York lavished their generosity on the crew and they were bombarded with offers of invitations to formal functions during their stay. The crew met the American President Woodrow Wilson.

The engineering crew stayed with the ship ready to give the engines a long-awaited overhaul and a full check over in preparation for their return voyage home. It was found that that no repairs were necessary and the engines had performed well.

9. HOMECOMING

The ship was only in America for 3 days. On 9 July 1919, while at dinner, Scott received news of high winds approaching and he decided to leave at once. The crew were returned to the ship and provisions were loaded for her return voyage. The final preparation was to gas the ship, and this was carried out using thousands of cylinders of hydrogen gas. As with the flight to America, the R34 would be gassed to capacity again, and at 11:45 p.m. the airship lifted cleanly into the night sky. The cheers of the crowd reinforced the crew’s confidence. They knew what to expect and believed that their discipline, skill and attention to detail would take them safely home.

Very good progress was made during the night as the ship had the advantage of a strong tail wind, and her speed increased to 90mph Early on 11 July, the starboard engine of the two engines in the rear car failed. Repairs could not be made in flight and so the engine was stopped. Due to this event and not having any spare power in case of emergencies the Air Ministry diverted the ship from landing at East Fortune. It was to go directly to Pulham and on 13 July 1919 at 6:57 a.m. the journey finally came to an end. It had lasted three days and three hours. But, returning home on Sunday to an English airfield, rather than the planned Scottish one, the reception at home was muted, and certainly nothing like the lavish ceremonies that had been laid on in America. Pulham, with 400 men ready to bring her safely in, tried to make it a good homecoming. A small RAF band had been hastily assembled, joined by a number of reporters and spectators who had somehow managed to get to the remote spot in time for the airship’s landing.

1. R34 FIRST TRANSATLANTIC CROSSING

In 1919 the R34 was Britain’s biggest airship. She was 643 feet long and 92 feet high with a 79 foot diameter. Under the command of Major George Herbert Scott, who was later killed in the crash of the R101 in October 1930, the R34 successfully completed the first transatlantic return crossing by air. The purpose of the flight was to obtain information about flying conditions over the Atlantic and demonstrate the airship’s capabilities on a long voyage.

The R34 departed from East Fortune in Scotland at 1:42 a.m. on 2 July 1919 and landed 4 days later at Mineola, Long Island New Yok, America on 6 July 1919 at 9:45 a.m. It had taken 108 hours to complete the 3,130 nautical mile journey.

On 9 July 1919 at 11.54 p.m. the airship began its return journey and on 13 July 1919 at 6:57 a.m. arrived at Pulham Airfield after a flight of 75 hours and 3 minutes.

After the record making voyage the R34 flew a total of 51 more flights but was written off and scrapped in 1931 following an accident.

In the Museum of Flight at the East Fortune Airfield site the airship’s nose cone, in the shape of a heraldic crest, can be seen.