

Flight of the 'Kookaburra'

A brief history:

There are many stories from the pioneering days of Australian Aviation – including tragedies – which are not well known. Charles Kingsford-Smith, Charles Ulm, Harold Litchfield and Thomas McWilliams were forced down and missing in what became known as the “Coffee Royal Affair”. A longtime friend (and sometimes rival) of Kingsford-Smith, Keith Anderson, along with mechanic Bob Hitchcock undertook what would be a fatal attempt to rescue the crew of the famed Southern Cross, departing Sydney on 4 April 1929 in a Westland Widgeon.

They were forced down with a faulty engine and successfully landed in the Tanami Desert, however were unable to take off again and they both perished of thirst. Several searches were undertaken and their bodies were subsequently buried on site, later exhumed and buried in their home towns of Perth and Sydney where large funerals were held to honour the men. The 'Kookaburra' was left to the elements and effectively forgotten in one of the most remote parts of Australia.

Dick Smith:

On his second attempt in 1978, Australian adventurer Dick Smith later re-discovered the site of the forced landing and what remained of the aircraft after being ravaged by wind, fire and time. The remains of the aircraft were later preserved and now lay in a display in Alice Springs.

Keith Rule and John Benson from the Hunter Recreational Flying Club (HRFC) researched this episode of our history and organised a group of RAAus aircraft and pilots to pay tribute to the 'Kookaburra' crew. John was able to contact Dick Smith to discuss our plans with him.

Members of the HRFC were invited to meet Dick at his Gundaroo property. After landing on his private airstrip, the members met Dick in his exquisite flying club-house. He was very generous with his time and provided details which would prove crucial to the success of the venture we were planning to undertake. We are very grateful for his time and advice. Dick was also keen to show us his Westland Widgeon, a restored sister aircraft of the 'Kookaburra'. Viewing this aircraft confirmed the bravery of Anderson and Hitchcock. While a stunning craft, it was completely inadequate for searching the remotest and harshest regions of Australia.



(Photo – Dick Smith (Far right) and his Westland Widgeon)

The departure – Day 1 and 2 – to Broken Hill

After several months' preparations, on 27 April 2021 four aircraft and eight pilots departed Cessnock Airport for a 3600 nautical mile adventure:

Kookaburra 1 – Tecnam Sierra – Leighton and Steve

Kookaburra 2 – Sling 2 – Don and John

Kookaburra 3 – Tecnam Sierra – Alan and Alan (the “Alans”)

Kookaburra 4 – Jabiru J230 – Geoff and Keith.



(Photo – Ready to depart YCNK)

Flying from Cessnock in beautiful weather (which we enjoyed for almost the entire journey) we landed at Cobar for fuel before continuing to Broken Hill. On day two at Broken Hill we organised a local tour which revealed the story of the earliest act of war/terrorism in Australia on New Year's Day 1915 when Turkish sympathisers fired on a picnic train killing 4 and wounding 7 men and women.

Day 3 – to William Creek

While originally planned, weather and fuel considerations did not allow us to follow the flight of the 'Kookaburra' to Port Augusta, but we intercepted the course later in the day. We refuelled our aircraft at an excellent facility at Leigh Creek, enjoyed a break before pressing on to William Creek via the Maree Man (any description would not do it justice...) and Lake Eyre where the Formation-Endorsed Tecnam pilots revelled in perfect conditions for formation flying over incredible scenery. The group continued to be in awe of the sights below us in every part of our trip.

Overnighting at William Creek was a treat. Welcomed like old friends by all the staff – almost all pilots - the quality of the accommodation, food and facilities combined with a quick tour and long discussion with the owner, Trevor Wright means this should be on every aviator's 'must-do' list.

One of our crews decided to overnight in Oodnadatta. They reported receiving a warm welcome at the Pink Roadhouse and spent time exploring the town.



(Photo – The mysterious Maree Man)



(Photo – Formation over Lake Eyre)

Day 4 & 5 – To Kulgera and Bond Springs (Alice Springs)

Kulgera roadhouse provided the first unsealed airstrip of the trip. We wished all sealed strips were as smooth! The strip and roadhouse are on opposite sides of the Stuart Highway, and needing fuel with just two fuel bladders between us we thought we were in for a long day carrying fuel. As usual, country hospitality shone through and the roadhouse staff were only too pleased to provide a ute for us to run back and forth to the strip.



(Photo – Approaching Alice Springs)

On to Bond Springs. Flying in the afternoons in the outback usually means some thermal turbulence and today was no different. From the air the landscape around Alice Springs is spectacular and the colours contrast with the sky in a unique way.

Landing on the wide, smooth red earth runway we were met by Noel and John of the Bond Springs Aero Club. Again, a tremendous reception was received and the members of the Club could not do enough to help us, particularly when trying to arrange fuel and source a part for the Jabiru. They were remarkably helpful and made our stay much less stressful than it might otherwise have been.



(Photo – Bond Springs)

Two nights and one interesting day were spent in Alice Springs, giving us time to recuperate and enjoy a meal (and maybe a drink or two) with members of the BSAC. Some of our group had family in Alice Springs who made sure the entire group was well looked after.

John and Don were given a tour of the Alice Springs Airport and were impressed with a close-up view of more than 130 large passenger aircraft sitting out the pandemic. Don also visited the Royal Flying Doctor centre and spoke highly of the way they presented their history.



(Photo – Resting...)

I think for all, the highlight of Alice Springs was visiting the 'Kookaburra' memorial located at the Central Australian Aviation Museum.

This purpose-built display houses the remains of the 'Kookaburra', including the engine and details the history of the flight, forced landing and subsequent recovery of the bodies of Anderson and Hitchcock, as well as the re-discovery and recovery of the aircraft.



(Photo – the wreckage of the 'Kookaburra')

Day 6 – To Tennant Creek and Dunmarra

A quick fuel stop was made in Tennant Creek – we would be back here on our return leg – then on to Dunmarra.

Dunmarra Roadhouse has a grass strip and impressive aircraft refuelling facilities. Today however there was an equipment malfunction, so we taxied up to our accommodation (how cool is that?) and the owner, Gary Frost, organised fuel in drums and a forklift to deliver it.

Gary is also a pilot and treated us like family. The accommodation and meals were great, the roadhouse dog was very friendly – when she was awake. This is another place you should fly into if ever you get the chance.



(Photo – Dawn at Dunmarra)

Day 7 (The BIG one) – Overfly the ‘Kookaburra’ site in the Tanami Desert then to Barkly Roadhouse

This was the reason for our journey, so plans were finalised the night before for our tribute to Anderson and Hitchcock. In loose formation until about 20nm from the ‘Kookaburra’ landing site, then in close “V” formation before transition to the “missing man” as we crossed the site. This was a solemn moment as we considered the hardships the men endured before their deaths within days after landing there.



(Photo – In formation about 20nm from the ‘Kookaburra’ landing site)



(Photo – Missing Man tribute fly past of site)

For the record – the fact they landed successfully in this place AND repaired their engine is testament to their airmanship and ability as it is scrubby turpentine with very few clear areas. Few could have achieved it – then or now.

The fourth aircraft remained at a higher altitude to capture the moment on camera.

As prearranged, each aircraft then went in turn to circle the site before setting a course back to Tennant Creek to again refuel before heading to Barkly Roadhouse. We were on our way home.

Barkly Roadhouse has a gravel strip from which you can taxi to an avgas bowser and parking area. This is only a few hundred metres from the comfortable accommodation.

Our route home was as near as possible to the reverse of the route taken by Qantas aircraft which left Brisbane in search of the ‘Kookaburra’. This crew found the missing aircraft on 21 April 1929 due to the fire which had been lit by Anderson and Hitchcock in an attempt to create a runway. They dropped water but noted seeing an apparently deceased Anderson laying under the wing of the ‘Kookaburra’.

Day 8 – Barkly Roadhouse to Longreach via Cloncurry

None of us tired of the vista provided by the outback. Our perspective from our favoured altitudes must surely be one of the great privileges of being an RAAus pilot.

As we circled Cloncurry to allow separation from a departing Dash 8, the RPT pilot was envious and said he would rather be flying a Tecnam or Sling as opposed to his ‘bus’. After a fairly turbulent flight, I was only slightly tempted to swap with him.

Longreach presented the obvious opportunity to explore the Qantas museum, after which we departed for Charleville.



(Photo – Departing overhead Longreach)

Day 9 – Longreach to Charleville

Charleville is definitely a hidden gem. Apart from everyone we met being super-friendly, the town is well kept with many attractive historical buildings. The aviator’s gateway to Charleville is Pete who we met in the airport café after refuelling. It is worth flying in here just to experience Pete’s friendly nature and hospitality, and to meet his dog, Dan.

The airport has excellent facilities and tie-down points (heavy cables which make life so much easier).

Charleville has a number of attractions which we did not get to see this time around, including a newly opened WWII “Secret Airbase” Museum and the “Bilby Experience”. I suspect a return trip is on the cards.



(Photo – One of the Tecnams secured for the night)

Day 10 & 11 – Charleville to Moree

With staggered departure times we continued south. The faster Sling 2 left earlier and was forced to divert to Walgett and then headed to Narromine due to cloud enroute to Moree. The other crews were able to continue to Moree while monitoring low cloud and we were pleased to see the Moree airport come into view. Once the aircraft were tied down (we appreciated the anchoring cables here too), a taxi ferried us to our accommodation which we were delighted to discover had a good restaurant, thermal pools, spas and a sauna on-site.

While we planned to depart for our final leg back to Cessnock the following day, the weather decided we needed to spend more time in Moree. It was a tough decision (did I mention the thermal pool, spas and sauna?) but the correct one. We all know how dangerous get-there-itis can be, so another day soaking up the minerals in the pool was an attractive option.



(Photo – Getting ready at Moree)

Day 12 – Back to Cessnock

With our group reduced to three aircraft, we considered the predicted weather at length and found a likely window for our return via the Murrurundi Gap. Being faster, the Jabiru timed their return well and encountered no issues, but with low scattered cloud quickly becoming broken and deteriorating, the Tecnams opted for our alternate strip, landing at Quirindi to re-assess the weather. After several hours the conditions improved and we were able to safely navigate the Murrurundi Gap and continue to Cessnock.



(Photo – Murrurundi Gap)

What is next?

Now a close-knit group, the pilots on this journey are considering the obvious question – “What Next?”. We don’t know the answer to that yet, but there is clearly a gleam in the eye of each pilot who I was privileged to share this experience with and I am certain there will be more adventures planned before too long.