

WORLD'S GREATEST AIR RACE – the 1934 MacRobertson (cont).

Story No. 3: Ray Parer's Fairey Fox Mk. 1.

This month's story is the third and last to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the 1934 MacRobertson Air Race, and completes our description of three different circumstances which prevented entrants in the race from competing or completing the race in accordance with the conditions set down by the Centenary Celebration Council, Town Hall, Melbourne, Victoria.

As you will recall, the first story told of an entry which did not reach the start line, and the second story of an aircraft which started but did not finish the race.

For this story, we have an aircraft which completed the course, but not within sixteen calendar days as set down in the race conditions.

The New Guinea Centenary Flight Syndicate sponsored Ray Parer and his co-pilot, Geoff Hemsworth, both pioneer aviators in New Guinea, to fly Parer's entry (race number 35) in the speed and handicap sections of the race.

Ray Parer has a unique place in aviation history being the only pilot to complete the flights associated with the 1919-20 England to Australia event and the 1934 Centenary Air Race.

In 1919, the Smith brothers in their Vickers Vimy G-EAOU had landed at Darwin to win the prize money associated with the event before Parer and his co-pilot had even left the ground in England in his Airco DH-9 G-EAQM. At least, in 1934, he set off with the other race competitors, but, just like his earlier venture, misfortune dogged him as this unfolding story will reveal.

For the 1934 MacRobertson Air Race, Ray Parer's aircraft was a Fairey Fox Mk.1 G-ACXO built in 1926, and cost him £200. As in 1919, finance was a problem. This time, the gold miners in New Guinea raised £1,400 for Parer, but his capacity to avoid other problems had not gone away. The Fox was not ready when he and his co-pilot arrived in England on 6th August, 1934 to prepare for the race, and, with other problems, including bureaucratic, they were almost not allowed to start in the race on 20th October, 1934.

Race regulations required all aircraft and crews to be at Mildenhall a week before the race start. The Parer team could not comply with this as their aircraft was not ready at Hanworth. They were granted an extra two days. Then Parer fell ill with an attack of malaria, but the authorities would not allow any further extra time. Leaving his sickbed, Parer went to Hanworth and flew the Fox to Mildenhall, by which time he seemed to have thrown off the effects of the malaria. There, they noticed the Fox's radiator was leaking. They chose to replace it with a new one, which arrived the day before the race started.

A crowd of some 60,000 people was at Mildenhall to see the start of the race with Parer leaving 13th out of the 20 starters. However, less than one hour into the first leg of the flight to Australia, and midway across the English Channel, the engine of the aircraft

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For further reading about Jacqueline Cochran's race number 46 (see Story No. 2 in September issue), we refer you to the following publications:

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EEA Aviation Foundation, 1991.
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The Centenary Air Race – Aviation Heritage , Volume 24 Nos 1 & 2.
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Flypast - Neville Parnell & Trevor Boughton, AGPS Press, 1988.
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The Great Air Race – Arthur Swinson, Cassell, London, 1968.

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Of Interest from the Past - The Centenary Racer – Keith Meggs, undated.
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Stephen F. Kuhl – Email 20 March 2005.
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Additional acknowledgments for Story No 2 - September newsletter.

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Women with Wings –Mary Cadogan, MacMillan London Ltd., 1992.
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The Royal Australian Air Force – Alan Stephens, Oxford University Press, 2001.
Catalina Dreaming – Andrew McMillan, Duffy & Snellgrove, 2002.
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Battling Parer – John Godwin, 1968.

of my first flight out in 1920". Parer was not correct with his statement of improving his flight time by four months – it was three months.

Even so, their 1934 flight time was 100 days outside the 16 days allowed to competitors to complete the flight and qualify for a gold medal.

Consequently, both Parer and Hemsworth were surprised later when the race's benefactor, Sir MacPherson Robertson, presented each of them with a suitably inscribed gold medal, which he hoped would bring them luck.

When Parer bought the Fairey Fox for the race, he had a second thought in mind. It would be useful in air transport operations in New Guinea to which they flew it after it was registered in Australia as VH-UTR. However, the harsh climate and operating conditions took their toll on the fabric covered aircraft, resulting in suspension of its Certificate of Registration in November, 1936.

During the Second World War, Ray Parer served with the R.A.A.F. in Australia, but, for health reasons, he could not fly. In October, 1942, he transferred to the reserve. He was not suited to "flying a desk". He returned to New Guinea and served on a small coastal vessel carrying supplies and troops around the north coast. After the war, he continued working in New Guinea, then came back to Queensland and managed two small farms.

He died in Brisbane in 1967. He was 73.

Geoff Hemsworth also later served with the R.A.A.F. On 5th May, 1942, flying a Catalina flying boat, he reported sighting a Japanese task force sailing south east of Misima Island in the Louisiade Archipelago, following which his aircraft was attacked by enemy fighters. No further signals were received from him and he did not return to base. Japanese records later revealed he and his crew became prisoners-of-war. There is no record of their fate. A naval battle ensued against the task force, an action which became known as the Battle of the Coral Sea.

Whilst the endeavours of all the parties in this trilogy of stories were unsuccessful in their individual attempts to win the 1934 MacRobertson Air Race, still recognised as the world's greatest air race, the spirit of all 64 original race entrants from 15 countries helped to make this international air race the sporting event of the 20th Century.

In an article some years ago, Anthony Coleiro said it this way, "I became a member of the Aviation Historical Society of Australia because my interest was ...aviation history. The focal point of this interest was and still is the 1934 MacRobertson Air Race". His co-writer, Keith White, was an eight year old when the race was held, and he still remembers the community excitement and interest engendered at the time. As he once read of the race, "In a few days, the world had shrunk to a third of its former size."

Finally, a question: after all that, what will the City of Melbourne organise to celebrate its bicentennial in 2034?

started misfiring. Parer's thoughts went back to 1920. They reached the French coast and landed as soon as they could find a suitable field. The trouble – the new radiator was leaking badly!

They worked on the engine and had it running smoothly whilst waiting for permission to proceed. Once on their way, the engine troubled them again and they had to put down again. It took them two more attempts before they finally reached Paris, where the engine was again repaired.

Continuing on their way, they crossed over the Alps into Italy, but they descended into trouble, for, apart from having an overheating engine, they had overflowed a prohibited area and were arrested when they landed in Pisa, where they were detained pending permission from Rome to proceed. Their security troubles were not over. When they reached Naples, they were delayed further before being allowed to go onto Brindisi, where they narrowly escaped detention again, and were allowed to proceed across the Adriatic Sea to Athens, all the time with a troubled engine and virtually limping along.

This time, their problem was fuel quality. A lot of effort by the Greek aviation industry at the time went into trying to solve the problem, which included fitting a new engine to the Fox. In the end, they spent 55 days in the country.

After near disasters in Cyprus and Syria due to poor landing grounds, they reached Baghdad, where they were delayed further due to the closed airspace over Persia, which took time to resolve. Hampered by sandstorms, magneto failures and getting themselves lost, they finally made Calcutta.

By the time they reached Burma, finances were again running low, but this time it was some eight days before more funds were available. This enabled them to proceed down the Malayan peninsular where they had more engine trouble, this time over impenetrable jungle. By hand pumping and joggling the throttle, Parer kept the engine going until they just made Mergui, some 75 miles away.

The trouble this time was water in the fuel system requiring draining of the fuel tanks. Before they reached Batavia, more trouble developed with a failed compass, a faulty magneto and more water in the fuel system. The Dutch assisted them and, finally, they were down to the last two legs before Australia.

Misfortune had not finished with them yet as black smoke from the engine forced them back to Lombok Island and more delay. For the last leg of their flight across the Timor Sea to Australia, the Fox's engine performed perfectly.

They flew onto Melbourne, which they reached on 13th February, 1935. Although it had taken them 116 days after leaving Mildenhall, their perseverance had prevailed, and, in the case of Parer himself, for a second time.

When they arrived in Melbourne, they "dived the Fairey Fox over what remained of the finishing line at Flemington racecourse 'just for fun'" as Parer remarked later, adding whimsically, 'I thought that there might be an award of some sort for the last competitor to finish. In any case I'm improving, as the time is a whole four months better than that