



Beside the tail of their recently acquired Cessna 210, seen above, are Illawarra executives (L-R): Keith Robey, Doug Fawcett and Col Wren.

## The Illawarra Way

By STANLEY BROGDEN

**Illawarra's diverse operations include a Cessna run from Bankstown to Mascot to make the world's shortest regular route.**

NOW that Jimmy Woods is out of business, the 10 miles between the Sydney airfields of Bankstown and Mascot provide Illawarra Airways with the proud distinction of operating the world's shortest regular air service. This courier run is one of Australia's most interesting little operations, more particularly as nobody but Keith Robey really believed it would be a success — even his employer, Doug Fawcett. Neither did TAA, which provides the main reason for the operation.

Away back in the late 1940s, when he was instructing with the Royal Aero Club of NSW, Keith Robey always thought there would be good sense in providing such a service. For the Club used to ferry its students between the two airfields in a Dragon. When Illawarra Airways and Illawarra Flying School were well under way in 1959, he set about persuading Doug Fawcett and then, more difficult, TAA. He pointed out that the whole Bankstown area was blossoming with factories going up quicker than daisies in a paddock. (You can see that for yourself if you do the courier run.)

On May 4, 1959, the service was opened with an Auster. In the first month only 1100 lb. of freight was carried, but this has grown to 36,000 lb. a month.



Electricity Commission personnel return from power lines inspection in the 210 with Illawarra instructor Pat Henman.



One half of this goes by Cessna 172, the rest by road. For many of the freight pieces are too big to carry in a Cessna 172 and are not in such a hurry in any case. The passenger aspect (fare £1 each way) is not so important, for there may be one passenger, three passengers, or none. The average is only several a day.

The service began with the establishment of a freight depot for TAA at the Illawarra Bankstown hangar office. Getting TAA to agree to that was the problem. Ansett-ANA has a road freight service from Bankstown, but it has suffered by the competition. Keith Robey at first operated his own road service, but this is now contracted to a local firm, though TAA's name appears on the vehicles. The air services are 9.55 a.m. from Bankstown, 10.30 a.m. from Mascot, and 4.30/5 p.m. The road services are at 6/7 a.m. and 6/6.30 p.m.

The Illawarra-TAA freight depot is now the biggest of its kind in Australia. There you can see flowing through the organisation parts for and from Rex, DH, Piper; radio sets for AWA repair shops at Mascot; goods of every sort for the surrounding factories, which actually provide most of the business and certainly offer the developmental prospects. A growing business is in the Air Express Bag system operated by many business houses, such as Rothman's, H. G. Palmer's, etc. This is a purely private mail service run by the organisations themselves, with definite hours for closing and despatch. Other cargo items include everything from snakes to bulldogs.

This little service is not operated under a regular DCA airline licence, but under a DCA concession permitting a charter service on regular schedule. In practice, this is the same thing, saving a great deal of legal phunphoonery, for even DCA is human, much as some charter operators doubt it.

You can often see Mrs Robey flying the courier run. Keith taught her to fly 10 or more years ago and she is one of his best pilots, as well as helping in the office. Mrs Robey's light weight can be useful when the 172 is really packed with freight — there are sometimes two 172s used to cope with the rush on some of the schedules.

The run should be used by more passengers than it is, though de Havilland's probably use it as much as anyone. I found that by taking the 172 from Bankstown to Mascot and then a taxi into the city, I could get from Bankstown to the Hotel Australia in many minutes less time than by using a taxi direct from Bankstown to the city.

Keith believes the Bankstown-Mascot courier service is ideal for eventual helicopter operation. He says this will be the first time a route has been pioneered and operated with fixed-wing types in preparation for a



The winch gear and modified canopy (to allow for seating of winch operator) on an Illawarra Mustang aircraft used for Army drogue towing operations. A close-up view of these items is shown in the photograph below of the same aircraft.

rotary-wing operation. He needs the right helicopter, of course, with some economics, but he is positive this will happen as he can secure all-the-year-round operation. Flights are made at 1000 feet or so, which allows little scope for interference by the weather.

The background to all this comes from the 1930s, when Robey Senior was inoculated by Keith's youthful passion for aircraft and helped to form the Australian Air League's air scholarship scheme of those days.

In those days you got an A licence after five hours solo. Keith had about 100 hours up by mid-1942, when he finally made the RAAF after an operation on his nose, and was quickly put into running Ansons up and down the Victorian coast. By the war's end, however, he was co-piloting Liberators in the SWPA with No. 21 Squadron. The sorrow of his life is that the war ended when he was posted to the Pacific Ferry Unit in California and was so keen to get home he just didn't enjoy his \$10 a day allowance as he should.

Having had no instructing experience, Keith talked the Repat. people into paying for 40 hours of it with the Royal Aero and then went to work for Sid Marshal before becoming a Club instructor at Mascot in 1947. He stayed there until 1951 and by that time had about 5000 hours up.

At that time Wally James was running an organisation now forgotten called South Coast Airways between Wollongong and Sydney. Keith went to Wollongong to run a one-Tiger instruction school, but soon decided he liked Sydney better. He persuaded Wally James to come into Bankstown to instruct, the ground servicing being done by Doug Fawcett, who supplied Wally James with a Lodestar. The Fawcett Lodestars were a paying proposition on freight and later on one was famous as the first big crop spraying aircraft in New Zealand.

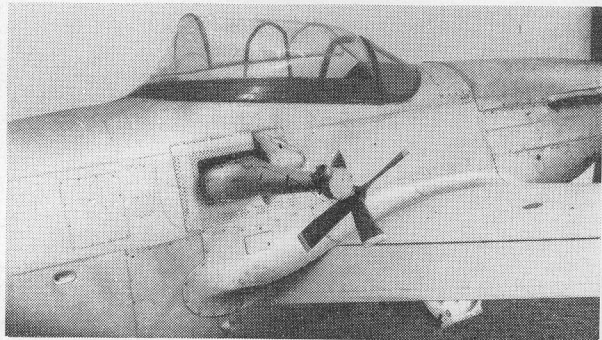
However, Wally James was really interested only in the airline. Doug Fawcett bought out the instruction side, which comprised Keith Robey, one Tiger Moth and a belief that there was a future for a commercial flying school at Bankstown. At first the organisation was known as the South Coast Flying School, but somebody at DCA thought up Illawarra Flying Club as a better name. The Club was changed to School in late 1951.

In March, 1952, the Tiger was followed by an Auster III and then an Aiglet, and Brian Larkins came in as second instructor, followed by Sam Dodd, who still does part-time instruction there.

It should be mentioned that Keith Robey has no financial interest in the organisation which he manages. Doug Fawcett is the owner, with Fawcett Aviation Pty. Ltd. doing all the maintenance for the Flying School and the Airways operation. Keith is general manager and CFI.

The Flying School has always been something of a Club also, for there is a very good club room for the students to use in the Illawarra hangar. No club charges are made, but the firm encourages the sense of friendship. The members run their own finance, raise money among themselves and have their own bank account to do what they want with the funds they raise among themselves.

For two years the School struggled on without much great success until the RAAF in April, 1953, began its



ABOVE: Illawarra freight clerk Warren Cashion checking over a load for despatch by 172 to Mascot. BELOW: Mrs Senja Robey, about to take the courier to Mascot.



National Service Training. The RAAF did not want to use commercial organisations; Keith had to coax them into it, helped very greatly by DCA. With a fleet of four Tiger and three Austers, he had more to offer at that time than the Aero Club, which the RAAF realised at last. So the trainees were divided among the Aero Club, Kingsford Smith and Illawarra. Keith ran two courses a year, both of 16 students, each lasting 4½ months, and at one stage had to take over most of the Aero Club's RAAF students also. Income was about £5000 from each course.

Such a pleasant operation could not last. It was too good to be true, with the RAAF students filling the week days and the civil students the week-ends to give seven-day utilisation. And there were also Air Training Corps cadets to train on week-ends under RAAF contract.

In 1957 the contract ended. The fleet then was five Austers and a Tiger. The Austers were powered with Gipsy Majors instead of Cirrus Minors, the change being done in the Fawcett shops. The problem of equipment was considerable, as the import restrictions made it difficult to secure modern aircraft. The situation was so bad that Keith and his boys sat down with the Fawcett engineers and produced specifications for an ideal aerobatic, all-metal trainer. The Auster they considered not good enough. To produce the design for what was known as the Fawcett 120, they handed over the specs to an Italian who had just arrived in Australia, Luigi Pellarini. What came from his board was not unlike a 172, but smaller. It had four seats, tricycle undercarriage, and was powered by a Gipsy Major at that stage. More than 5000 man hours went into the construction by hand of that prototype. But by the time it was tested in about 100 hours' flying, import restrictions were being lifted and it was apparent that Cessnas would make the local job an uneconomic proposition to pursue.

The 120 is still in the hangar, minus engine. It would have needed a more modern engine. Robey and Fawcett regard it with some nostalgia, as might be imagined. Of its flying qualities, Keith Robey has a very high opinion.

The RAAF business lapsed as the nation changed

its defence policy. The School then had five instructors. New private business had to be found. A little charter work was being secured when another saver came, this time from the Army.

The Army having decided to get into the air and No. 1 Aviation Co. having been formed, the unit was pretty well based on Illawarra. Aircraft were provided for co-operation work; another Illawarra aircraft was used in the Northern Territory for the Army survey, first flown by an Army pilot and then by an Illawarra pilot.

All this was soon changed, but the Army contact remained. The military badly needed drogues to be towed in the air for artillery practice. When the RAAF gave up its towing unit, equipped with Beaufighters, Illawarra had to fill the gap. Two years were needed to perfect a drogue technique. Luckily, the firm had a Mustang and when Ken Oram, then the Army Major running military aviation, came with his problem trials were begun. They tried snatching and all sorts of ideas, but finally the single-seat operation was proved useless.

The three Mustangs operated by Illawarra now had two seats, with the winch operator as the second man sitting behind. He has six drogues in paper parcels, so he can quickly provide another immediately the first is hit. Two of the Mustangs, entirely used for drogue work, fly about 200 hours a year.

The other Mustang is now fitted for high altitude radar work and will also be used, Keith hopes, for high altitude photography. He says no other aircraft in the country is fitted for work at 30,000 feet, which is the height needed by Army Survey for their operations.

Two of the Illawarra pilots, Ken May and Brian Wetless, are specialists in this drogue and allied work. They do this in between their regular instruction labors. They do this in between their regular instruction labors. They do this in between their regular instruction labors. They do this in between their regular instruction labors. They do this in between their regular instruction labors. They do this in between their regular instruction labors.

Illawarra also specialises in banner-towing with an Auster. The technique the firm has perfected may surprise — the banner is picked up in reverse by the aircraft from a stand and loops upward into position.

The Illawarra fleet now includes six Cessna 172s, each of which average 1400 hours a year; one Cessna 182, which flies 800 hours; the most recent addition, a new Cessna 210; two Austers and three Mustangs. The story behind the switch to Cessnas goes back to 1958-9 when there was a rumor that the Rex people planned to form their own flying school to get their range of aircraft in the industry's eye. With the need for more modern equipment in mind, Keith Robey went to Rex and proposed that if Rex would drop their plan for a school, Illawarra would rationalise on Cessna aircraft. Three 172s were ordered for delivery in March, 1959. This was not the first Cessna the school had operated; its sole 172 and been wiped off by an Army pilot during the military period.

Keith had several changes of thought about the type for the school work. At first he wanted the 150, until he felt that the four-seater would cost little more in the long run and would be useful for charter, which the two-seater would not. That is how the business worked out. The 172s are mostly engaged in instruction, but also run the courier and do some charter, while the 182 is almost entirely engaged in charter operations. The 182's ability to use 1500 ft. fields is a great help.

Illawarra flew 7800 hours in 1961, of which 1200 were charter. The odd jobs create such work that often on a Saturday there is an Illawarra aircraft taking-off every half-hour, like an airline, what with Auster banner-towing and Mustang work for the CMF off Botany Heads. The Sydney control area can often have half-a-dozen Illawarra aircraft on its books at one time.

The next step is into IFR with a twin aircraft, which Keith thinks could be an Apache with a 180 hp engine or an Aztec. His TAA contacts will help this, and for TAA represents Illawarra throughout Australia. And TAA gives agents full commission on Illawarra bookings. Neither Doug Fawcett nor Keith Robey will consider the twin, however, until the work offering for the 182 and the new 210 builds up to the point at which it is very obvious that a twin can be successfully introduced. The twin will not be used entirely for charter. Keith wants some of the DCA Pilot Scholarship work, for which a twin will be needed.

The attitude taken on the twin is typical of the Robey/Fawcett combination. There is always a very businesslike attitude to the entire operation and every problem is discussed pragmatically until the solution is thrashed out. I got the feeling in Illawarra that here was a properly run business. END.

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