

AUSTRALIA - PACIFIC RE-ENACTMENT FLIGHT.

"0815 hrs. September 25th 1926... Airborne" This could very well have been the log-book entry when Group Captain R. Williams and two additional crew members took off from Point Cook (Victoria) in a De Havilland DH50A single engined plane, and headed towards Sydney. This was the first leg of a projected flight around the near Pacific Islands, planned by the R.A.A.F. with the co-operation of the Australian Government with the aim of gaining experience in the handling of aircraft in almost unknown tropical conditions, and also to 'show the flag' at landing points along the route. The flight was to be via the east coast of Australia to Papua and New Guinea, Solomon Islands, New Hebrides, New Caledonia, Fiji, Samoa and then back to Australia, and due to the lack of suitable landing fields en route and the long distances that had to be flown over water, the aircraft was fitted with floats to convert it to a sea-plane. From the beginning, practically every leg of the flight was plagued with mishaps to the aircraft, and the bad weather conditions also caused delays so that the schedule fell badly behind time. The crew flew up the east coast of Australia and crossed from Thursday Island to Daru, then to Port Moresby, Rabaul, Kieta and on to the Solomon Islands. It was here that major engine trouble occurred, - a cracked sump and other mechanical trouble caused a revision of thoughts regarding the completion of the trip as planned, and with the possibility of typhoons the crew decided to return to Australia by the same route over which they had flown. On December 7th. the battered float-plane came to a landing in the waters of the bay near Point Cook after an absence of 10 weeks, during which time aviation history had been made. As well as creating aviation records the plane had carried the first airmail from Australia to the Pacific and return, and also the first airmail within the territory of Papua and New Guinea, from Daru to Port Moresby.

....."1237 hours. Airborne and climbing on course to Sydney!" This is the entry in a diary on September 27th 1976, recording the re-enactment of the flight which took place 50 years earlier. It was in mid 1974 that such a flight had been suggested by interested parties, and during the next two years a great deal of planning had to be done to bring the venture to fruition. The re-enactment flight was planned to cover the original route as near as possible and to return to Australia through Norfolk Island and Lord Howe Island, with scheduled landings at Sydney, Brisbane, Horn Island, Daru, Port Moresby, Kieta, Honiara, Port Vila, Noumea, Norfolk Island, Lord Howe

Island, Sydney; and Melbourne; - actually there were three additional landings to refuel at Mackay, Cairns, and Santo in the Solomon Islands. Australia Post organized a special mail to commemorate the event and provided a distinctive oval shaped postmarker depicting the original aircraft and a portrait of Group Captain Williams, commander of the first pioneer flight. Other postal administrations of countries and territories also co-operated by providing special stamp issues, postmarkers or cachets, which



A drawing of the DH50A plane.

were used on transient mails or on mails despatched from these points.

So September 27th 1976 saw the culmination of over two years of planning become a reality. The crew of two flying the 10 seater twin-engined Piper Navajo Chieftain aircraft VH-WGK, under charter to the Australian Airmail Society, with Tony Schwerdt and 'Nobby' Buckley, with a total of nearly 40,000 hours flying time between them, and the passengers comprised 6 connected with the Aust. Airmail Socy. and a representative of Australia Post; - a total nine, and all avid aerophilatelists.

The following is a summary taken from the diary of one of the participants in the flight, and traces the day to day progress along the route.

September 27th. Mid-day in the V.I.P lounge at Tullamarine Melbourne. As a token gesture Sir Richard Williams accepted the bags of commemorative mail from Australian Post and handed them to Capt. Tony Schwerdt for safe custody until various destinations were reached en route.

12.37: Airborne and climbing on course to Sydney. A clear day with snow on the dividing range, cruising at 9,000 ft. 220 m.p.h.

2.45: Landed at Kingsford Smith Airport, Sydney, refuelled.

3.40 we are airborne for Brisbane. weather closing in and a

5.55 we land at Brisbane in heavy rain. An overnight stay, a visit to the Tumbul Philatelic Exhibition, and an inspection of the Philatelic Bureau at the G.P.O. per courtesy of officials of Aust.

SEPT. 28th. 8.30 a.m. Airborne in beautiful weather. Two of our party leave us to fly direct to Honiara to finalize postal details for our flight. We cruise at 12,000 ft at 190 knots and land for the first time at 11.03 at Mackay. We stretch our legs and are airborne for Cairns.

at 11.35 which is reached at 1.25. After a brief stop for refuelling we take to the air again at 2.15 and have a wonderful flight over heavily timbered country to Horn Island, - the airstrip for Thursday Island is located here, - where we land at 4.45. There is a 'false alarm' that we will not be able to obtain our customs clearance and exit permits until the next day, but fortunately it is only a rumour and we obtain our permits etc. with a minimum of delay and at 5.25 are in the air again for Daru, a small island on the southern coast of Papua New Guinea. We land at 6.20 with the sun still shining, and customs clearance is carried out in a tin shed serving as a customs office. We stay overnight at the Daru Hotel which has excellent meals.

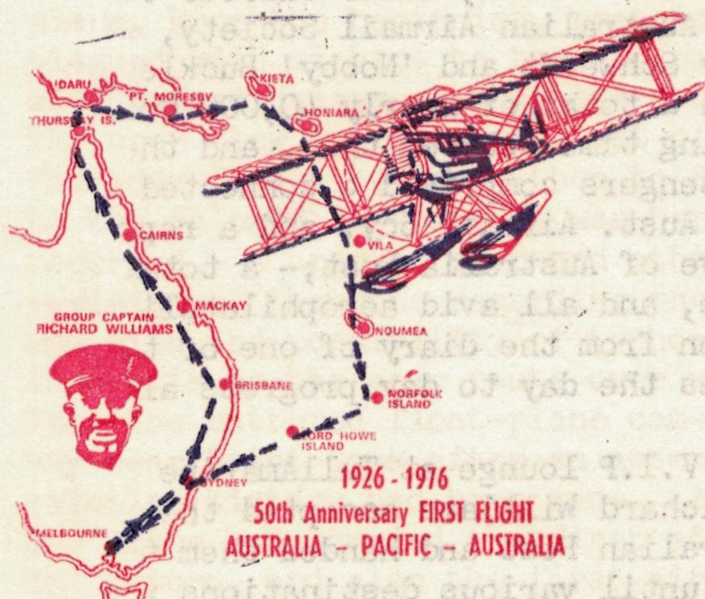
September 29th. We are at the Daru Post Office when it opens to attend to mails; the P.O. staff are most obliging and a special mail is collected, cancelled with a special postmarker to mark the 50th anniversary of the first survey flight in 1926. Some of our party visit a crocodile farm and have ideas of setting one up in Australia on their return!!

At 12.30 we are airborne in perfect weather, heading for Port Moresby where we land at 1.53. We are met by officials of the Postal Dept., and bags of mail are off-loaded to be back-stamped at the Port Moresby P.O. We pay

a visit to the Philatelic Bureau and meet members of the staff, - a very friendly lot who do an excellent job with the back-stamping of the mail. The rest of the day is spent in sight-seeing, but two of our party are 'off colour' due to the change in diet.

September 30th. A free day in Port Moresby, and we have a good look around and the cameras work overtime! The weather is good and the Davara Motel where we stay is in a pleasant sea-side setting.

October 1st. Mails are collected from the Philatelic Bureau and after farewells we are airborne at 9.25. A course is set for Kieta and we fly over the Kokoda Trail with most impressive scenery and very



high rugged mountains. We climb to 13,000 ft. and Tony reminds us that 'there are rocks in those clouds', but after crossing the range we have a very pleasant trip over reefs and scattered islands, and land at Kieta at 12.45. We stay overnight at a motel of the Davara chain, with a visit in the afternoon to the P.O. to uplift mail for onwards carriage. Members of the P.O. staff are very helpful.

October 2nd. Out to the airstrip running along the foreshore, and airborne at 9.50 a.m.; a marvelous day and we are seldom out of sight of land as we 'island hop' at about 1,500 ft. to get the most from a scenic angle. The beautiful lagoons and palm covered islands almost make us wish for a forced landing! At 11.40 the rugged island of Guadalcanal is sighted and we land at the Henderson Airfield, named by the U.S. Forces who fought so grimly throughout this area. We are greeted by our two party members who have flown direct from Brisbane, and Brother Vincent Shackleton with his camera, - he has a keen interest in aviation 'and allied attachments'. We stay at the Hotel Mendana in Honiara until the morning of Oct. 4th. and find much of interest; an excellent museum with outstanding artifacts, and considerable evidence still remaining of the Pacific war in the way of road-side plaques and signposts and the rusting remains of heavy army & air-force equipment. On the Sunday we take a bus trip up the coast for about 30 miles and visit the Fred Kona War Museum, - a large collection of war relics, old planes, guns and armament gathered in a park-like area. The hotel Mendana is right on the waterfront and the weather is perfect so that we all feel that we could stay here for ever. On Oct. 4th. the day is beautiful, and we collect the special mail bags from the P.O. where the staff have done all they could to help us, and head out to the airfield. Brother Vincent is there to see us off and to record our departure on film, and at 9.20 we are airborne and on our way to Port Vila in the New Hebrides. We cruise at about 10,000 feet and Tony says he is going to run the main fuel tanks dry to test their capacity before switching to the auxiliary tanks, so we are not to panic if the motors cough. All goes well, - the motors cough and we stay calm! Tony decides to land at Santo for fuel & at 11.30 make a landing on the strip which is under repair. We are greeted by a New Zealander, Jock Hannaford, the air traffic controller, and are cleared by customs to save time at Port Vila. At 1.15 we taxi for take-off, and with only a

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part of the airstrip in use the trees on the far end seem to be pretty tall and we take off at 'full bore'. We hear Jack on the radio: "Have you any branches in your wings?", but we haven't!

2.10 Port Vila ahead and we land eight minutes later. All transient covers are to be back-stamped here so they are off-loaded and handed to two postal officials. We travel about 8 miles to Port Vila and stay at the Hotel Rossi on the waterfront. After a snack we visit the Philatelic Bureau and meet members of the staff who are a real friendly lot. Two special postmarkers are in use for the commemorative mails, but the quantity of covers necessitates the use of ordinary postmarkers as well for back-stamping to get the job done on time.

October 5th. They are early risers in Port Vila, - all business begins at 7.15 a.m., even the Post Office is open and we call in to finalize things with the mails and to say goodbye to our friends. Out to the airport, cleared by customs, farewelled by 3 postal officials, and at 10.45 we are airborne and climbing, ... but there is consternation among the 'back-seaters' who say that there is spray coming from the fuel tank. Tony comes back and inspects things through the window, and reports an unfastened fuel tank cap, so obtains permission to land again. He completes a circuit and we are back on the airstrip, with fire-trucks and asbestos-suited crew racing along beside us as we land under full emergency conditions. The cap is fastened o.k. and we are off again, climbing to 8,000 feet in scattered cloud, but in good flying conditions.

12.45 p.m.: The stark rugged features of the New Caledonia coast show up through gaps in the cloud, and at 1.00 we land at the island's main airport, are cleared by customs, and then fly to the smaller aerodrome near Noumea, which saves a bus drive of about 20 miles. It is a beautiful approach to Noumea from the air, with the city built on a peninsula and countless bays and inlets. We are met by a Postal Official and some of us head for the Post Office to attend to covers etc. while others go off to our hotel. There is no special postmark in use here for the flight, but an appropriately worded cachet is applied to all letters originating from this point. A short but interesting over-night stay and next morning (Oct. 6th.) we are up bright and early and finalize the postal details, as the Post Office opens for business at 7.30 a.m. Out to the airport and we take off at 8.55 in beautiful weather; the airstrip is short and we are unable to take-off with a full fuel load, so have to put down at the main airport to take on full tanks of fuel. Cleared by customs and are in the air again at 9.50 heading for Norfolk Island. Height 12,000 ft.

11.40: Lunch with all the trimmings, and at 12.10 p.m. we sight Norfolk Island ahead; a most wonderful sight as the whole of the island is below

us and seems to be so small and compact and so beautifully green. We touchdown on the airstrip at 12.20 and taxi to the terminal building, mails are off-loaded as they are to be back-stamped here, and we are transported to the Norfolk Hotel. In the afternoon we visit the Philatelic Bureau at Kingston and meet members of the staff, including the 'philatelic girls' who service all the covers for new stamp issues as well as all mail requests for stamps etc. A special diamond-shaped pictorial postmarker has been provided to be used on all mails for the flight despatched from Norfolk Island, and transient mails are backstamped with the ordinary circular postmarker.

We all agree that the island is an ideal spot to have a good look around as there is so much of historical interest to see, so Tony gets in touch with his office in Australia and arranges to stay an extra day on the island. The ideal way to get around is by bus so we hire a nine-seater with the name of 'Bongo' on the side, and during our brief stay cover about 100 of the 106 miles of roads on the island. We are cautioned that cows and horses have first priority on the roads and may be found wandering around anywhere, but 'Bongo' is well trained and we have no encounters with the animal populace.

October 7th is a bit overcast but we have a day of sight-seeing and inspect many of the buildings and other features that have been portrayed on Norfolk Island stamps from time to time. October 8th. is a fine day; we call at the Post Office to pick up the bags of mail on our way to the aerodrome and the Postmaster presents each member of the flight party with a signed first day of issue cover of the N.I. Chichester stamp which he designed, - a valued souvenir of our short but never-to-be-forgotten stay on the island. We are airborne at 8.45 on our way to Lord Howe Island and have an uneventful flight. At 11.42 the sheer peaks of Lord Howe Island appear jutting out of the sea, and we land on the air-strip running across the narrow part of the island. We stay at one of the guest houses and pay a visit to the Post Office to service covers for the last leg of the flight. The island is a beautiful quiet spot and ideal for those interested in rambling and hiking.

October 9th: After an early morning 'walkabout' we pick up the mails from the P.O. and at 10.30 are out at the airstrip and ready for take-off. Tony gives the motors 'the works' and we take off as though from the deck of an aircraft carrier; - the

airstrip ends abruptly at the beach and we seem to fly off into space. The day is overcast and at 11,000 feet there is ice on the wings;- we sight a plane heading for Lord Howe Island but nothing else until the coast of Australia comes into view at 12.57. Ten minutes later we are lining up with the runway at the Kingsford Smith Airport and at about 1.10p.m. touch down on Aussie soil. We put our watches back to coincide with local time and disembark at the terminal building to have a snack.



However we find that having entered Australia via Lord Howe Island is an unusual procedure and we have to be cleared by Customs at the International terminal, so we re-enter the aircraft and taxi to the other side of the airport. There are over 1,000 passengers awaiting clearance from 3 overseas aircraft, but we are given the 'red carpet' treatment, (or

so it seems), and we are cleared very promptly. At 1.50 we take off for Melbourne in heavy rain, but the sun breaks through as we pass over Canberra at about 5,000 ft. and have a wonderful view of the Captain Cook fountain with its jet of water spraying high into the air. At 3.57 Melbourne is on the horizon and we touch down at the Tullamarine airport at 4.10. The plane is to fly on to Adelaide, so the mails are off-loaded and we say goodbye to our friend who has accompanied us from Australia Post. Only a brief stay on the ground and we are off again at 4.55, heading into the sun, and as we cross the Adelaide Hills a brilliant sun-set welcomes us home. At 6.45 we land at the Adelaide Airport and 'come back to earth' at the end of a trip of a lifetime. The planning and organization of the major part of the flight has been a credit to Nelson Eustis, a member of the flight party and secretary of the Aust. Airmail Society, but without the assistance and co-operation of everyone connected with the venture, it would not have been the outstanding success that it proved to be. It is interesting to note that prior to the commencement of the trip the flying time was estimated to be 40 hours and 30 minutes, and the eventual actual flying time was 40 hrs. 45 mins.

Official mail figures: Outward from Melbourne: 7,508, including 5894 'round trip items and 1614 for delivery en route.

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