

Australian Heroes of Flight

At the birth of the twentieth century balloons and airships, which depended on being lighter than air, had flown since 1783. No-one had yet lifted off the ground in a powered machine that was heavier than air. It was to be another three years before Orville and Wilbur Wright would make man's first controlled, heavier than air, flight in North Carolina, U.S.A. America, however, was not the only country seeking answers about flight and a number of enthusiasts were to be found in Australia.

Laurence Hargrave, a scientist and inventor, experimented with box kites and powered models, and was lifted to a height of 4.8 metres by four box kites near Sydney in 1894. He was helped by **George A. Taylor**, an extraordinarily versatile man who, among other things, was an editor, journalist, astronomer, town-planner and radio engineer as well as an inventor. In 1909 Taylor was lifted off the ground in a glider in Sydney and during the day made 29 flights during which he achieved the maximum distance in a flight of 100 metres.

No-one is quite sure who made the first powered flight in Australia. Some give credit to **Fred Custance**, a young Adelaide mechanic. After assembling the Bleriot monoplane which had been imported by an Adelaide businessman, he taught himself to fly by reading the handbook which came with the aeroplane. On 17 March, 1910, near Adelaide, he flew the monoplane for 5 minutes 25 seconds during which time he flew around a paddock three times. This added up to a distance of four kilometres. The day after the Custance flight **Houdini** (real name Erich Weiss) made three flights in a Voisin biplane near Melbourne where he attained a height of 30 metres and flew more than three kilometres on a circular course. The Aerial League of Australia presented Houdini with its trophy in the belief he had made the first powered flight in Australia.

The first Australian-built aeroplane was built and flown by 28 year old **John Duigan** at his Victorian farm. On his first flight on 16 July, 1910 he was airborne for about seven metres. Then, on 7 October, 1910 he flew 180 metres at a height of three and half metres. Later he travelled to England to attend Avro flying school and gained his Royal Aero Club pilot's certificate in 1912.

There are many forgotten pioneers and heroes of Australian aviation such as **W.E. Hart**, a Sydney dentist who, on 29 June, 1912, won Australia's first air race and in 1916 went to the Middle East as a trainer with No. 1 Squadron of the Australian Flying Corps. He died in 1943, his exploits forgotten.

In 1919, brothers **Keith and Ross Smith** were the first Australians to fly between London and Australia. The Australian Prime Minister W.M. Hughes had offered a prize of £10,000 for the first Australian crew to fly between London and Australia in less than 720 hours (i.e. 30 days) before 31 December, 1919 in a British machine and they took up the offer. The brothers, with two mechanics as crew, flew a Vickers-Vimy biplane 18,500km in 27 days 20 hours (668 hours altogether) battling terrible storms sweeping

across Europe and monsoon weather on the last leg of the flight. They all nearly froze in the open cockpit and ice coated their goggles. There were a number of accidents during the trip which included having two hawks fly into and damaging one of their propellers. The brothers were both knighted. Two years later, in 1922 Sir Ross Smith planned a flight around the world. While in England he took off for a trial flight with Lieutenant Bennet in a Vickers-Vimy amphibian. They were both killed when the plane went into a spin and crashed. Sir Keith Smith joined the staff of Vickers Limited and became their Australian representative. He died in 1955.

Another pioneer and hero was **Harry George Hawker** who was the first Australian flyer to gain a world reputation. He learned to fly in London and in 1911 joined the Sopwith Aviation Company, becoming their top instructor. He made a series of speed and altitude records and was the first person (accompanied by K. Mackenzie Grieve) to attempt a crossing of the Atlantic Ocean, although they had to ditch 1600 km out to sea and were picked up by a Danish tramp steamer. He was killed on 12 July, 1921 when his machine caught fire while practising for an Aerial Derby at Hendon.

Even after the end of World War I most Australians had never seen an aeroplane. Yet, over the next decade aviation developed and advanced further and faster here in Australia, relative to population, than in any other country in the world due to the fearlessness and determination of the men mentioned in this book. Perhaps it was the innate 'Aussie' spirit that produced the thrill of adventure and excitement that seemed to permeate all the men who were prepared to take those flimsy timber, wire and fabric flying machines into the air. In doing so, however, they considered it a privilege to put their own lives at considerable risk and many paid the ultimate sacrifice. The one thing those pioneers did have in common was a creative imagination which could picture how the aeroplane could open up the world to communication and travel in a way no other invention could have done. Australia was a world away from the rest of civilization and the "tyranny of distance" had hampered this country's development for 150 years. The aeroplane changed all that and it was largely due to our heroic Australian aeronautical pioneers that travel around the world is so easy today.

HERBERT JOHN LOUIS ‘BERT’ HINKLER (1892-1933)

Another great and much loved Australian aviation pioneer and hero was **Bert Hinkler**. They called him “Australia’s lone eagle”. He was born in Bundaberg, Queensland in 1892, the son of a mill worker. As a boy he studied the flight of ibises and at the age of 19 flew his homemade glider, “Aviette”, to a height of ten metres on Mon Repos beach.

In 1912 Bert became a mechanic to ‘Wizard’ Stone, an American showman aviator and gave flying exhibitions in Australia and New Zealand. The following year he worked his passage to England to join the Royal Flying Corps and also worked for Sopwiths.

During World War I Bert worked his way up from mechanic to an observer-gunner with Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS). He served with distinction and won the Distinguished Service Medal in France. He also served as a pilot in Italy. After the war Hinkler again worked as a mechanic, this time in Southampton with AV Roe & Son. He was their Chief Test Pilot from 1921 to 1926. During this time he made a record flight of 1900km from London to Riga, Latvia.

In 1920 Bert decided to fly solo from England to Australia. He finally managed to obtain a plane and set out on 31 May, 1920. He set a new record for a non-stop long-distance flight on his leg from London to Turin, Italy, taking only 9 ½ hours for the trip. He was then forced to abandon the rest of his flight to Australia due to war in Egypt and Syria. He did, however, win the Britannia Trophy for meritorious flight by a British aviator that year.

Eventually Bert Hinkler was finally able to begin his record-breaking flight to Australia on 7 February, 1928. He made the flight in a frail, single-engine ‘Avro Avian’, a flimsy single-seater with fabric folding wings which many experts doubted could survive the perils of such a long journey. His successful 11,250 mile adventure, which ended in Darwin on 22 February 15 ½ days later, was the longest solo flight ever made and it broke five aviation records. The Australian government awarded Hinkler the Air Force Cross and made him an honorary squadron leader.

Bert Hinkler did not rest on his laurels but went on to further triumphs. In 1931 he flew from New York to London in a Puss Moth across the Atlantic Ocean via Brazil and West Africa. On this leg he achieved the first solo flight across the South Atlantic. Although he encountered terrible weather throughout the 3,200 kilometre flight and spent 22 hours flying blind, his wealth of experience saw him land only 160km from his planned destination.

On 7 January, 1933 Bert Hinkler again left London in an attempt to beat CWA Stott’s record of 8 days 20 hours from England to Australia. He was not heard of again after passing over France. Four months later the wreckage of his plane was found in the Italian Alps with Hinkler’s body beside it. He was buried in Florence, Italy with full military honours.

Bert Hinkler was an acclaimed early aviator of renown and a hero of Australia.

SIR CHARLES EDWARD KINGSFORD SMITH (1897-1935)

Charles Kingsford Smith has been called the world's greatest aviator. His almost superhuman flying skills and numerous record-breaking flights are legendary. One of the best known pilots for his time, he is credited with putting Australia on the map as a leading contender in the race to develop the potential of aviation. Against the thinking of the time he continued to push the boundaries to show that the aeroplane could change the way the world communicates – and he won!

He was born in Hamilton, a suburb of Brisbane, Queensland and at age 13 began his study of electrical engineering, graduating at age 16.

Charles, or “Smithy” as he was affectionately known, enlisted for World War I in 1915 and served at Gallipoli and in France. At age 19 he was selected to join the Royal Flying Corps and received his commission in 1917. He was an adventurous and daring pilot and survived an attack by two German fighters, shooting them down; however, his plane was riddled with bullets. Shot in the foot and later losing three toes, he was invalided back to London and awarded the Military Cross for outstanding bravery. He was only twenty years old and already a war hero.

After the war pilots were competing with one another in long-distance flights and Kingsford Smith was determined to make flying a major part of his life. He was deeply crushed in 1919 when, having decided with two friends to enter the race from London to Australia organised by the Australian government and which Hinkler ultimately won, his entry was disallowed on the grounds he lacked navigational experience.

It was when ‘Smithy’ went to the United States in 1920 that he first thought about flying across the Pacific. He took on stunt work and charter flights but returned to Australia in 1921. He joined the fledgling Western Australian Airways, the first Australian airline and worked there as chief pilot flying mail through the outback until 1924. In 1926, he returned to Sydney and there met **Charles Thomas Ulm** who, like ‘Smithy’, had served in WWI and later who had later become a qualified pilot. The two men determined to make Kingsford Smith’s dream of flying across the Pacific come true by attempting the trip together. To raise public interest and funds they flew right around Australia in ten days, less than half the time of the previous record. With the money raised they bought an old Fokker triplane, previously owned by another Australian flying hero, **Sir Hubert Wilkins** in his Arctic explorations, and modified it for the long flight. They called the plane “*Southern Cross*”.

On 31 May, 1928, Kingsford Smith and Ulm, with two Americans as navigator and radio operator, took off from Oakland, California and flew the *Southern Cross* across the Pacific to Australia in three legs with short stops in Hawaii and Fiji. It was an exhausting journey over a featureless ocean in a heavy, noisy aircraft with a cockpit open to the wind and storms that beset them. The men could only communicate by writing notes to each other. During the flight they lost their directional radio beam and had to fly

by dead reckoning, were blown off course by ferocious storms which tossed the little plane violently and one of the engines began to run rough. On 9th June they landed in Brisbane to a tumultuous welcome and the following day completed the final leg to Sydney completing their journey in 83 hours, 38 minutes flying time. They were met in Sydney by 300,000 people. It was the first flight across the Pacific. Today the *Southern Cross* is on display in a specially designed hangar near the overseas terminal in Brisbane.

In August, 1928, 'Smithy' was the first person to fly non-stop across Australia from Melbourne to Perth and in September he completed the first aerial crossing of the Tasman from Sydney to Christchurch and return.

He had always wanted to launch his own airline and he finally did so calling it Australian National Airways. The loss of one of his planes, *Southern Cloud* over the Snowy Mountains in May, 1931, was a crushing blow. Financial problems followed and the company had to be closed.

Kingsford Smith kept on breaking and re-breaking flying records. In 1929 he flew from Sydney to London in 12 days and 18 hours and later that year made the first round-the-world flight from London to Ireland then to New York, San Francisco and back to London again. At age 32 in 1930 he won another England to Australia air race of 16,000km flying solo in the record time of 9 days and 22 hours and in May, 1931 he made the first flight from Australia to England carrying mail and repeated the feat again with Christmas mail. He again broke the England to Australia record in 1933 flying the distance in just over 7 days and every time he flew to New Zealand he would continue to break records. In 1934 he made the first crossing of the Pacific from Australia to America.

By 1933 Charles Kingsford Smith held the most world records for long-distance flights in the world and the previous year had been knighted for his services to aviation. He had already been declared by Anthony Fokker "the greatest man flying in the world today".

By 1935 Kingsford Smith was feeling the strain of a string of disappointments including the collapse of his airline, the failure of a mail service between Australia and New Zealand and the scandal of what was known as the "Coffee Royal" affair when two other airmen died while trying to find Kingsford Smith and his co-pilot whose plane had crashed in north-west Australia on their way to England. They survived for ten days on rations and coffee but the rumour went around that it had all been a stunt and that they had caused the death of the two men. Gossip about the affair plagued 'Smithy' for the rest of his life.

In November 1935 'Smithy' was a tired man but decided on one more record-breaking trip from England to Australia with co-pilot J.T. Pethybridge. The plane and both flyers were lost, crashing into the Bay of Bengal somewhere off the coast of Burma.

Charles Kingsford Smith made a notable contribution to the rise of civil aviation with more record times for inter-continental and trans-ocean flights than all the flyers of other

countries put together. He is a true Australian hero and has been remembered by being featured on the Australian \$20 note and having Sydney's airport named after him.