

CHAPTER XXVII

FLIGHTS HOME TO AUSTRALIA

No narrative of the war service of the Australian Flying Corps can be quite complete without a recital of the flights, or attempted flights, home to Australia undertaken by some Australian airmen. During the demobilisation of the Australian Imperial Force in England after the Armistice, public interest in the preparations for the flight across the Atlantic¹ suggested to the Australian Government the offering of a prize for the first successful flight from Britain to Australia. The scheme was received enthusiastically by Australian airmen in England, and in March, 1919, the Commonwealth Government announced that it would award £10,000 to the first Australian airman who succeeded in flying from England to Australia. The principal conditions, announced in May, were:—

The flight must be accomplished in an aeroplane or seaplane from Great Britain to Australia in 720 consecutive hours, that is, thirty days.

The offer to remain open until midnight on 31st December, 1920.

The aircraft competing, and all component parts, must have been constructed within the British Empire.

The pilots and all the crew must be of Australian nationality.

The entries must be through the Royal Aero Club, London. One machine only might be used throughout the flight, though replacement of parts and repairs to motors might be made *en route*.

The starting-place must be Hounslow aerodrome or Calshot seaplane station, and the landing-place was to be "in the neighbourhood of Port Darwin."

¹ Capt. J. W. Alcock and Lieut. A. W. Brown flew the Atlantic in a Vickers-Vimy machine, from Newfoundland to Ireland, in a non-stop flight of 17 hours 27 minutes on 14th and 15th June, 1919. Both airmen were knighted. Sir John Alcock was killed in an aeroplane smash on 18 December, 1920, at Rouen, France.

The names of the airmen who essayed the flight to Australia, set out in the order in which they left England, were:—

1919.	Crew.	Machine.
Oct. 21.	Captain G. C. Matthews, Sergeant T. D. Kay. ²	Sopwith Wallaby (one 350-h.p. Rolls- Royce Eagle).

Crashed at Bali, in Java, 19th April 1920, and further flight abandoned.

Nov. 12.	Captain Ross Smith, Lieu- tenant Keith Smith ³ (navigator), Sergeant J. M. Bennett, ⁴ Sergeant W. H. Shiers. ⁵	Vickers-Vimy (two 360-h.p. Rolls- Royce).
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Arrived Port Darwin, Dec. 10th, and won the prize.

Nov. 13.	Lieutenant R. Douglas, ⁶ Lieutenant J. S. L. Ross. ⁷	Alliance (one 450- h.p. Napier Lion).
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Crashed at Surbiton, England, on the same date, shortly after leaving Hounslow aerodrome; both officers killed.

Nov. 21.	Lieutenant V. Rendle, ⁸ Lieutenant D. R. Williams, ⁹ Captain G. H. Wilkins ¹⁰ (navigator), Lieutenant G. H. Potts. ¹¹	Blackburn Kangaroo (two 250-h.p. Rolls- Royce Falcon).
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Engine-defect discovered after leaving Suda Bay, Crete, on Dec. 8th. Delayed there with repairs. Flight abandoned.

² Sgt. T. D. Kay (No. 750; No. 3 Sqn). Mechanical engineer; of Ballarat, Vic.; b. Spring Mount, Vic., 20 Sept., 1892

³ Lieut. Sir Keith Smith, K.B.E.; R.A.F. Aviator; b. Adelaide, 20 Dec., 1890.

⁴ Lieut. J. M. Bennett, A.F.M., M.S.M.; No. 1 Sqn. Motor mechanic; of Windsor, Melbourne; b. St. Kilda, Melbourne, 1894. Killed in aeroplane accident, 14 April, 1922.

⁵ Lieut. W. H. Shiers, A.F.M.; No. 1 Sqn. Electrical engineer; of Adelaide; b. Norwood, Adelaide, 18 May, 1890.

⁶ Lieut. R. Douglas, M.C., D.C.M.; Aust. Flying Corps (previously Machine-Gun Corps). Printer; b. Charters Towers, Q'land, June, 1894. Killed in aeroplane accident, 13 Nov., 1919.

⁷ Lieut. J. S. L. Ross; No. 2 Sqn. Telegraphist; of Moruya, N.S.W.; b. Moruya, 20 Oct., 1895. Killed in aeroplane accident, 13 Nov., 1919.

⁸ Lieut. V. Rendle; R.A.F. Assistant electrical engineer; of Taringa, Q'land; b. Taringa, 12 Nov. 1897.

⁹ Lieut. D. R. Williams; Aust. Flying Corps. Garage proprietor; b. Wodonga, Vic.

¹⁰ Capt. Sir Hubert Wilkins, M.C. Official Photographer to the A.I.F., 1917/19. Explorer; of Adelaide; b. Mount Bryan East, S. Aust., 31 Oct., 1888.

¹¹ Lieut. G. H. M. St. C. Potts; No. 3 Sqn. Electrical engineer; of Richmond, N.S.W.; b. Euroa, Vic., 19 Sept., 1897.

1919.	Crew.	Machine.
Dec. 4.—	Captain C. E. Howell, ¹² Air-Mechanic G. H. Fraser. ¹³	Martinsyde (one 275- h.p. Rolls-Royce Falcon).

Lost at sea off St. George's Bay, Corfu, on Dec. 9th. Captain Howell's body was recovered 4 fortnight later.

1920.		
Jan. 8.—	Lieutenant R. J. P. Parer, ¹⁴ Lieutenant J. C. McIntosh. ¹⁵	D.H.9 (one 200-h.p. Siddeley-Puma).

Landed Port Darwin, August 2nd.

A Frenchman, Lieutenant Poulet, in a small Caudron machine started from France on 7th October, 1919, on a flight to Australia, and was overhauled by Ross Smith on November 29th, near Akyab, Burma. Poulet had many difficulties with his inadequately-powered craft and abandoned the flight at Rangoon.

SIR ROSS SMITH.

The story of the flight from England to Australia by Captain Sir Ross Smith is told in his own words, abridged from an account published after he reached Australia. He had with him his brother, Lieutenant Keith Smith (of the Royal Air Force), and two mechanics who had served in No. 1 Squadron of the Australian Flying Corps in Palestine, Sergeants Bennett and Shiers. The machine was a Vickers-Vimy (two 360-h.p. Rolls-Royce engines), of the same type as the craft in which Captain Alcock¹⁶ and Lieutenant Brown¹⁷ flew across the Atlantic from America to England. It carried 865 gallons of petrol and had a cruising range of 2,400 miles.

Sir Ross Smith had one advantage over all other competitors in the flight to Australia, in that he had a year pre-

¹² Capt. C. E. Howell, D.S.O., M.C., D.F.C.; R.A.F. (previously Australian Infantry). Draughtsman; of Middle Park, Melbourne, b. Adelaide, 17 June, 1892. Drowned at sea, 9 Dec., 1919.

¹³ Air-Mechanic G. H. Fraser (No. 2025; Aust. Flying Corps). Motor mechanic; of Macorna, Vic.; b. Macorna, 12 March, 1881. Drowned at sea, 9 Dec., 1919.

¹⁴ Lieut. R. J. P. Parer, A.F.C., Aust. Flying Corps. Student; of Surrey Hills, Melbourne; b. St. Kilda-road, Melbourne, 18 Feb., 1894.

¹⁵ Lieut. J. C. McIntosh, A.F.C.; Aust. Flying Corps (previously A.A.M.C.). Architect; b. Lumsden, Aberdeen, Scotland, 1892. Invented a type of aerial bomb. Killed in aeroplane accident, 28 March, 1921.

¹⁶ Capt. Sir J. W. Alcock, K.B.E., D.S.C.; No. 2 Wing, R.N.A.S.; b. 6 Nov., 1891. Killed in aeroplane accident, in France, 18 Dec., 1919.

¹⁷ Lieut. Sir A. W. Brown, K.B.E.; No. 2 Sqn., R.F.C. (previously Manchester Regt.). Engineer, Westinghouse Coy., Manchester (Eng.) and U.S.A.; b. 23 July 1886.

viously flown over the route from Cairo to India with Generals Borton and Salmond in the giant Handley-Page machine used by No. 1 Squadron in Palestine during the final offensive. Sergeants Bennett and Shiers also accompanied him in this earlier adventure. From this flight and a further reconnaissance by sea of possible landing-places on a route through the Indies to Timor, Sir Ross Smith returned to England in September, 1919, and immediately negotiated with the Vickers-Vimy firm for assistance in the enterprise of the flight to Australia. Eventually the firm's approval was obtained, preparations were made with all speed, and the party was ready to begin the flight by the end of October. For a fortnight a start was delayed by exceedingly bad weather. Sir Ross Smith finally left England during a break in the autumn storms on November 12th.

"The day of our departure from England," says Sir Ross Smith, in the account referred to above, "broke with clear, frosty weather. Two hours later a ground haze drifted up, and the Air Ministry Weather Bureau forecasted bad weather, totally unfit for flying. But we had made up our minds, and decided to start. At 8.30 a.m. we started the engines, climbed into our seats, and took off from the snow-covered aerodrome. Shortly after reaching the French coast at Boulogne we ran into a big bank of snow clouds. We could not get underneath it, for it practically reached the ground. We therefore climbed above it, to a height of 8,000 feet. The cold was bitter, 25 degrees of frost, and for three hours our breath froze on our face-masks, and our sandwiches were frozen solid. It took us five days to cross Europe to Taranto in Italy. The circumstances were most trying, for the weather was execrable. The flight was made almost all the way through dense clouds, snow, and blinding rain. Only an occasional burst of sunshine cheered us on our way. The cloud belts were too thick to fly above them, and we were obliged to keep for the most part at dangerously low altitudes.

"We intended to fly from Rome to Athens, but at Rome we received certain information which made us doubtful as to whether it would be wise to adhere to our first route. So we flew to Crete, and stayed a night at Suda Bay. We met much rain, and clouds were troublesome, as we had to clear a high mountain range in the centre of the island, and feared

we might crash. However, we escaped this peril and made a non-stop flight of seven and a half hours from Crete to Cairo, arriving at the Heliopolis aerodrome on November 18th.

“On November 19th we left Cairo for Damascus. Our route lay over the old battlefields, Romani, El Arish, Gaza, and Nazareth. It revived many memories for me, for this land over which we were passing was the arena of my war service. At Damascus we were welcomed by a squadron of the Royal Air Force. Next day we got off in a break of the bad weather at about 10 o'clock, and headed for Baghdad across the Syrian desert, viâ Abu Kemal to Ramadie, making our landing on the old Turkish battlefield. Here we were taken care of by the 10th (Indian) Lancers, and invaluable to us was their help. For that night a simoon swept down and nearly put an end to our efforts. We lashed the machine to the ground and, assisted by a great crowd of the Indian Lancers, hung on to it through that wild night of storm. By morning the wind died down, and after six hours spent in adjustments and clearing away the sand we made another start. This was the 21st November, and our objective was Basra. We flew over Kut el Amara, the scene of General Townshend's surrender, and over the legendary site of the Garden of Eden. This was the first good flying day we had had since we left England.

“Next day (November 22nd), we were all feeling very tired, and as the machine needed a certain amount of attention we decided to spend the day overhauling at Basra. On November 23rd we left Basra for Bandar Abbas, on the Persian Gulf, and landed there after a flight of eight hours over desert and mountainous country. Next day we reached Karachi, and on the following afternoon Delhi. From Basra to Delhi we had travelled 1,600 miles, and spent twenty-five and a half hours out of fifty-four in the air. Everything had gone remarkably well, both with the machine and the engines. We spent a day in Delhi working on the machine. On November 27th we reached Allahabad, and on the 28th Calcutta. We had expected to rest a day in Calcutta, but as the machine was going so well and we were feeling so fit we decided to go on. We made Rangoon in two days, staying the first night at Akyab. Between Akyab and Rangoon we passed in the air the French Lieutenant Poulet in his small

Caudron machine. He had left Europe twenty-eight days ahead of us. We had a most hospitable and popular welcome in Rangoon, which we left, on December 1st, for Bangkok, in Siam.

"We intended to fly direct from Bangkok to Singapore, but as we were informed that there was a good aerodrome at Singora, about half-way, we halted there. The Siamese notion of a good aerodrome nearly brought us all to an untimely end. A square patch had been hewn from the jungle, the trunks and upper portions of the trees had been removed, but the stumps were allowed to remain. We made a safe and miraculous landing, missing the stumps by inches. On December 3rd fell the heaviest rain I had ever experienced, and it kept us tied up at Singora. We reached Singapore on December 4th. The racecourse had been prepared for us to land on, and proved suitable, though small. Next day we left Singapore for Kalidjati, near Batavia in Java. This was a distance of nearly 700 miles and the worst stage of the journey as regards landing-grounds. We travelled 200 miles down the eastern coast of Sumatra, which was so densely wooded that it would have been impossible to make a landing. Then we turned seawards to Batavia.

"At Kalidjati we were received by the Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies. The Governor-General, learning that aeroplanes were flying from England to Australia, had ordered aerodromes to be constructed at different points in the Dutch islands. These greatly facilitated our flight. On December 6th we arrived at Sourabaya after passing over most glorious scenery, but we found the aerodrome had been placed on reclaimed land, hard apparently at the surface, but soft underneath, so that on landing our machine became deeply bogged.

"The thirty days of the competition were now closing in, and anxieties increased. We extricated the machine with the greatest difficulty, and at one time I feared it would be impossible ever to start off from that aerodrome again. I had a roadway of bamboo mats laid down, 350 yards long and 40 yards wide. The machine was hauled from the bog by a swarm of natives to this improvised pathway. We made a perilous take-off, with bamboo flying in all directions from our propellers, and late in the afternoon of December 8th

we landed at Bima, in Soembawa. Next day we left Bima for Atamboea, in Timor, and flew east along the north coast of Flores and then south-east to Timor. It was only 350 (*sic*) miles from there to Darwin.

"Tired as we were, excitement kept us all from sleep that night. All going well we should land in Australia on the morrow. Before daybreak on December 10th we were down at the machine giving it the last test and overhaul before venturing on the wide stretch of sea. At 8.35 a.m. we taxied into a light breeze and took off with beautiful weather in our favour. As the hours rolled slowly by we strained our eyes towards Australia. A tiny speck upon the waters resolved itself into a warship, H.M.A.S. *Sydney*, in exactly the position we had asked her to be in case of need. The clouds and mist obscured all distant vision, and it was not until after 3 o'clock that I observed the first faint outline of land. We were then doing 83 miles an hour. The land speedily assumed more definite contour, and details became manifest. Darwin came into view. In a few minutes we were circling above the town. Then down, down, in a steep descending spiral—and we had touched Australian soil!

"The duration of the journey, with all stops, was just under twenty-eight days, but the actual flying time was 135 hours. The distance covered was 11,340 miles."

For this performance both officers were knighted, and the sergeant mechanics received the Air Force Medal and commissioned rank of lieutenants.¹⁸

LIUTENANTS PARER AND McINTOSH.

Travelling without mechanics, Parer and McIntosh flew from England to Australia after extraordinary adventures in a D.H.9 fitted with a 200-h p. Siddeley-Puma engine. The Australian military authorities in London, being advised by the British Air Ministry that the power of the craft was inadequate, forbade the projected attempt, but the two airmen disregarded this notice. They reached Darwin after a seven-months' journey, during which their narrow escapes from disaster amply justified the warning they received in London.

¹⁸ Sir Ross Smith and Lieutenant Bennett were killed on 14 April, 1922, during a test flight in the Vickers-Viking (amphibian) in which Sir Ross Smith was preparing to essay a flight round the world.

They left Hounslow on 8th January, 1920, but were delayed in France by bad weather during the remainder of the month. Not till February 21st did they arrive at Cairo. In leaving Italy they flew over the crater of Vesuvius. The heat waves from the volcano caused the machine to fall out of control for 500 feet, and only skilful piloting saved them from disaster. Over Taranto they lost their maps in a gale.

From Cairo they reached Ramleh in Palestine, and on February 27th set out from Ramleh for Baghdad. After two forced landings in the desert—after the second of which they camped in the machine for the night and were in some danger from a force of badly-armed Arabs—they reached Baghdad on February 28th. Minor repairs delayed them for a few days, and then on March 7th they made Karachi. A week later they landed at Calcutta. Here they waited till March 24th, in order to fly in company with Captain Matthews. Engine trouble delayed their arrival at Akyab till April 1st. They flew on to Rangoon on April 2nd. At Moulmein, trying to avoid a crowd which had rushed on to the landing-ground, Parer crashed the machine; by great good fortune neither the airmen nor any of the crowd of natives were injured. Repairs to under-carriage and propeller occupied nearly two months. On May 28th the airmen reached Penang. Here engine-trouble again delayed them till June 15th. They crashed again on the flight to Singapore, but managed to make that town in spite of slight injury to the machine. At Singapore Parer was obliged to replace his propeller (for the fourth time), and was able to do so through the courtesy of the Dutch Government in Batavia.

Leaving Singapore on July 20th the adventurers ran into a thunder-storm, and were obliged to return with a damaged wing. They left again next morning and landed at Kalidjati on July 22nd. At Grisee on July 24th they again broke their propeller. They made Sourabaya on July 28th, and after a final overhaul of their much-worn machine they successfully crossed the Timor Sea and landed at Darwin in the evening of August 2nd. As they touched land their engine stopped. The final sea-flight of nearly nine hours had exhausted their last drop of petrol.

CAPTAIN MATTHEWS AND SERGEANT KAY.

These airmen left London on 21st October, 1919, in their Sopwith Wallaby, and crossed Europe *viâ* France, Germany, and the Balkans. They made Mainz on the first day, but were here detained by snow and rain for nearly a month. At Vienna they were again delayed by bad weather for a week. After leaving that city they were obliged to land in open country, where, as Matthews relates, "we were surrounded by armed Jugo-Slavs, who took us prisoners and secured possession of our essential passports and identification papers. On the fourth day, taking advantage of the temporary absence of the guard, we grabbed our papers and bolted for the aeroplane, and got away easily, and in an hour located Belgrade. We landed at the Novisad aerodrome.

"The Serbian and French officers gave us a cordial welcome, but when we asked for petrol we were met with a look of blank consternation. After spending three weeks here, in the deepest despair, a French aviator arrived, and he was, with reluctance, induced to let us have sufficient petrol to take us to Bucharest, where we were compelled to land in a slushy field covered with two feet of snow. It was only possible to get away by rising before the snow thawed in the morning. We flew at an altitude averaging 13,000 feet while traversing portions of the Balkans in Serbia, Bulgaria, and Turkey, with the temperature 46 degrees below freezing point. In the afternoon we found ourselves in the vicinity of Adrianople. A temporary seizure in the petrol pump caused a forced landing in what from the air appeared to be a nice grass field, but as soon as the machine touched ground it sank to the axles in a quagmire.

"Sergeant Kay repaired the fault, but we could only get away by Kay hanging on the tail and making a flying jump for the fuselage at the take-off. It was then raining heavily—and almost dark, and in a few minutes we were enveloped in dense fog. Flying within fifty feet of the sea we were just able to distinguish the San Stefano lighthouse, and landed at Constantinople shortly before 5 o'clock, having been in the air almost ten hours, and the supply of petrol well-nigh exhausted.

“We spent three days in Constantinople and loaded up with petrol for the long jump across Asia Minor. But when giving the engine a final running trial we found a leak in the water jacket, and we spent ten days searching for an acetylene welder to make the repairs, but could not get one in all Constantinople. With the aid of chewing gum, powdered asbestos, and copper wire, we repaired the leak, and set off on the 1,700-mile flight to Baghdad. We were compelled to land in a ploughed field at Aleppo, where we were detained for a week. On the 550-mile stretch to Baghdad we were cheered by the first good weather of the trip. In Baghdad the damaged cylinder was replaced by a new one, and Bushire was reached in pleasant weather and without incident.

“Karachi, 1,200 miles distant, we hoped to reach in one flight, but after three hours we encountered a tremendous sand-storm, which we could not shake off. We fought it for twenty minutes, and were forced to land on the seashore, where the machine sank in the soft sand, the nose tilted, and the propeller, axle, and longeron were smashed. The wrecked machine was dragged up into a sheltered cove. I left Sergeant Kay in charge and set out to search for Bandar Abbas, which I thought I could reach on foot in about three hours. But I had to fight the burning sand and sun from 10 30 a. m. to 5 30 p. m., without either food or water, and reached Bandar Abbas exhausted. The British Consul headed a relief party to get Kay. He considered it would be impossible to reach the cove by land, so we went by boat. The launch left at 8 o'clock, but it, too, got caught in the storm, and was driven around the islands of the straits, where we were marooned for three days. When we got back to the wharf we found Sergeant Kay and others anxiously awaiting us. With some angle iron from a fence we repaired the longeron, and with an old iron bar spliced the broken axle. The rain and sun had warped the reserve propeller rather badly, and we were doubtful whether the shaken machine would stand the extra heavy drag. However, we decided to chance it, and it carried us safely through to the final crash at Bali.

“We were forced to land again at Jask, about three miles from Bandar Abbas, and in the take-off the spliced axle was

bent, and one of the wings broken. We were then in the blazing desert under a scorching sun. We dragged it three miles to the shelter of an Englishman's verandah, and there repaired it up again. The machine was then dragged back three miles to the Bandar Abbas aerodrome, and from there we reached Karachi in a non-stop flight. Despite the heavy drag on the engine by the warped propeller the next stages to Delhi, Allahabad, Calcutta, Akyab, Rangoon, and Bangkok were safely accomplished. At Bangkok Sergeant Kay had a severe attack of dengue fever, and was rather bad for two or three days. We toiled for three days on the engine at Singora, and the first trouble after leaving there was in the landing at Kalidjati, where one of the engine's ball-races was smashed to pieces. The Dutch authorities got a motor-car ball-race, and, with some ingenuity, Sergeant Kay fitted this to the Rolls-Royce engine, and got it working again. We started cheerily on the penultimate stage of the journey to Australia. Sourabaya was safely reached, but soon afterwards the warped propeller caused trouble, and in a forced landing at Bali the wings were smashed. This was on 19th April, 1920. All hope of completing the final stage of the journey to Darwin was then abandoned."