

THE FIRST ROUND-AUSTRALIA FLIGHT, 1924

by N. M. Parnell

In the first half of 1924, there were a number of epic long distance flights which captured the attention of the world. The Douglas World Cruisers, led by Major Martin, were making their way around the world in a westerly direction, while a Vickers Vulture amphibian, under the command of Squadron Leader McLaren RAF, was flying in the opposite direction. A Frenchman, Lieut. d'Oisy, was making a flight from Paris to Tokyo in a Breguet XIX and two Portuguese were crossing the Atlantic.

In April 1924, a Fairey IIID seaplane detached from No. 5 Squadron RAAF left Point Cook, Vic., on a flight around Australia which was considered by many authorities to be the most hazardous flight by Australians since the one from England by Sir Ross Smith and his companions in the Vickers Vimy. The feat was classed by the contemporary press as "the finest in the history of aviation", and the fliers, Wing Commander S. J. Goble, CBE, DSO, DSC, and Flying Officer J. McIntyre, CBE, AFC, were awarded the 1924 Eritannia Trophy for their achievement. The object of the trip, undertaken at the direction of the Defence Department, was to open up seaplane routes and landing places along the coastline.

A previous survey over part of the route had been made by Captain. Andrew Lang in a Curtiss Seagull flying boat lent by Mr. Lebbeu6 Hordern to the Commonwealth Government. All the photographs, maps and information gained in that survey were presented to the Defence Department by Mr. Hordern, and in preparation for the Goble-McIntyre flight, 137 petrol and oil dumps were established along the coast, some at sites so remote that the supplies had to be taken in by lugger.

The aircraft used, Fairey IIID A10-3, was a seaplane of conventional wood and fabric structure, having equal-span wings of 46 ft. 14 ins. and a 375 hp Rolls Royce Eagle VIII engine. It was sturdy and reliable, possessing an engine which would keep going for days on end with the minimum of maintenance. An auxiliary petrol tank with a capacity of 40 gallons was fitted on a stretcher in the W/T (centre) cockpit, and this necessitated the removal of the radio. An additional radiator was fitted under the fuselage aft of the engine. The petrol capacity, with the extra tank, was increased to 147 gallons and the water, for cooling, from nine to 12 gallons. The floats were opened. and the interior coated heavily with Biturine, an extra lining of fabric was fitted, and then the outside of the floats had three coats of marine paint and one coat of marine varnish applied. All of the modifications were carried out under the supervision of F/O McIntyre.

After being delayed a day by heavy seas off Point Cook, the flight started at 6.00 a.m. on Sunday, 6th April, 1924, With W/C Goble, in command, as the navigator and F/O McIntyre as the pilot. Three-quarters of an hour later they had to force-land at Corner Inlet, north of Wilson's Promontory, to repair the auxiliary fuel tank. Taking off again ten minutes later, they ran into a 30 knot gale accompanied by heavy rain'. McIntyre had to descend from 2,500 feet to 250 feet and continue at that height all the way to Eden, N.S.W., which was reached at 11.40 a.m. It was originally intended to fly direct to Sydney but the Fairey had used more fuel than had been anticipated. On landing, one of the floats was slightly damaged by the waves. Fuel was di on and they left Eden At 1.26 p.m. for Sydney.

During the flight the compass exploded, showering McIntyre with glass and alcohol. The last 90 miles were flown within 100 feet of the sea, through blinding rain, and several times the plane nearly collided with the cliffs near Bull'. However, a safe landing was made at Rose Bay at 4.00 p.m. The compass was taken to the PikAP Experimental Section at Randwick to be re-baired.

With the rain coming down by the bucketful, it was impossible to refuel the aircraft and the takeoff was delayed until 12.48 p.m. on the 7th. Had weather was still hampering the fliers and ten minutes after takeoff the compass burst. Passing Newcastle, they flew at 500 feet, in a 50 knot gale from the east, Heavy rain forced them down to 50 feet where the sea was only just visible, and the flying conditions were making the Fairey almost uncontrollable. McIntyre endeavoured to make Port Stephens, but being shrouded in mist and rain and with islands in the vicinity, a landing there was too risky. A short break in the weather gave them a glimpse of the Myall River, where they immediately put down. The gale blew all night. It took several lines, anchors and an all-night watch to keep the aircraft on the river. The float which had been damaged at Eden began to leak slightly. After putting a patch and red lead on the float, McIntyre and Goble left the Myall River at 12.43 p.m. on the 9th.

Rain was still coming down heavily and the altitude all the way to Southport, Qld., varied between 100 and 500 feet, but a safe landing was made at 5.20 p.m. After another night of heavy rain, Southport was cleared just before noon and a fairly pleasant flight was made to Gladstone, which was reached at 3.45 p.m. on the 10th. Coral in the harbour and mud and logs in the river forced McIntyre to land at Facing Island some ten miles away. The petrol was brought over in a launch by Capt. Payne, the marine pilot at Gladstone, and from 8 p.m. till 2 a.m. the crew worked up to their necks in water straining the fuel through chamois leather. Sleep was absolutely impossible due to sandflies and mosquitoes, so they floated the Fairey outside the reef and made a bonfire on the beach with some empty cases and half a gallon of the taxpayers' petrol.

They departed from Gladstone at 6.37 a.m. on the 11th, with good visibility and no rain, fauna for Townsville. Touchdown there was at 11.50 a.m., and as they taxied to the beach they were escorted by a large shark, about 14 feet long, which circled the aircraft.

It was discovered that a compass being sent from Melbourne would not arrive until the 13th, so pending its arrival the Fairey was taxied up the river and hoisted onto the Burns Philp wharf, and the time was spent in patching up the floats and coating the seams with carbon expanding paint. McIntyre was suffering from the unwanted attentions of the mosquitoes and sandflies; his knees and ankles were swollen to twice their normal size and for several days after leaving Gladstone he could not don his boots. He also had a septic finger which had to be surgically treated before leaving Townsville.

The compass arrived, was fitted, and a start was made for Cooktown at 7.30 a.m. on the 14th, The weather was fair but the air was rather bumpy. While making a circuit of Cairns harbour, the Fairey lost 500 feet in the turbulence, and the antics of a herd of goats which stampeded at the sound of the aircraft were clearly visible from the air. Cooktown was reached at 10.30 a.m. A strong wind was blowing over the hills and made the air extremely turbulent, but a safe landing was made on the Endeavour River.

McIntyre's finger had to be lanced again -- by a woman doctor, to his embarrassment. Heavy rain fell that night and a gale blew, making it necessary for Goble to stand watch over the aircraft. McIntyre, who spent the night in bed, said later that he had "a clear recollection of Goble in pair of shorts and very little else, sheltering under a woman's umbrella in three inches of rain." Similar conditions -- heavy rain and low cloud -persisted next day.

At 7,30 am, on the 16th, the rain cleared slightly and they took off for Thursday Island. In Princess Charlotte Bay they passed the S.S, "Eastern" which greeted the fliers with several blasts on the ship's whistle. From this point the conditions deteriorated; all the way to Cape Sidmouth they flew through heavy rain. Goble could hardly see McIntyre in the front cockpit, and the Fairey was becoming very difficult to control; once the wheel was wrenched from McIntyre's hands. They force landed on the open sea and after discussion decided to try to climb over the clouds, but this proved hopeless as the clouds were a solid mass. They then headed out to sea and flew a compass course up the Coast. Reconnaissance of the coast was negligible as it was sighted only a few times. On arrival at Thursday Island they found a big squall hanging almost over the town, and had to dive around it to make a landing.

Arrangements had been made by the mechanic, Corporal Gurr, with a local pearler, Mr. Hocking, to use his boat slipway for repairs. For the next five days the rain fell continuously. The enforced halt gave the crew a chance to have the machine overhauled and to have it patched up generally. The floats were found to be leaking again, and would have to be replaced, This necessitated lifting the 2i-ton aircraft to slip the new floats underneath. As there were no cranes or derricks on the island, two special sheerlegs, 50 ft. long and eight inches square, were erected. It took days to get them into position; then the aircraft was lifted by block and tackle and the new floats fitted. It was impossible to swing the new compass in the pilot's cockpit and to correct the deviations as there were no turntables available and the tides were too strong. Ad Goble had the master compass, he tied a pair of siring reins to McIntyre's arms and guided him from the rear cockpit.

Thursday Island was put astern at 6.40 a.m. on the 23rd, 17 days after leaving Melbourne, and the Fairey was no longer in pristine condition. With the guns, ammunition, drinking water and extra spares, it was considerably above the manufacturer's maximum allowable weight...as for the weather, it was noted that while a strong surface wind was blowing, the clouds higher up were moving in the opposite direction.

At about 8,30 a.m. the engine started misfiring; two valves were sticking badly and considerable vibration was experienced. An hour and a quarter after leaving Thursday Island, the wind changed to the south, making a .reduction in speed and a change in course. necessary. At 9.20 a.m. the wind veered to SSW and then at 10.40 a.m. to SE. Visibility was hazy and the sea had an eight-foot swell. McIntyre was answering well to the reins and the flight was continued at 500 feet all the way across the Gulf of Carpentaria. When land was sighted it was found that they were only 12 miles off course after a flight over 410 miles of open sea -- surely a rare feat for those days. They headed for Elcho Island where touchdown was made at 11,50 a.m. The beach was soft, sandy and well sheltered from the SE winds.

It was impossible to go on to Darwin without adjusting the valves and faulty carburation, and this work was carried on until late at night. Some of the more adventurous aborigines came down and watched them. They ran the engine up in the darkness; it was still coughing and spitting badly, and one native who seemed to know a lot about seaplanes remarked "My crikey, mine tinkit dis feller gottem bad bellyache." But when Goble climbed up to the cockpit and fired a red Verrey light into the sky, the natives took to the bush with wild screechings and were not seen again.

At 10,27 a.m, on 24th April they left Riche Island for Darwin and carried out a climb test of the Fairey IIID with a full load. The aircraft reached 4,500 feet in under 15 minutes, but as the wind was dead against them at that height they dropped back to 2,000 feet. Many native fires were seen along the way and alligators were observed diving into the rivers as the aircraft passed overhead. After reaching Cape Cockburn, the course was altered across Van Diemen's lull to Goulburn Island where landfall was made at 2.30 p.m. On landing at Darwin they shook hands with each other; Goble said later "because we both had the gust up vertically, and we were frightened the engine might conk out," At Darwin the seaplane was hoisted onto the wharf with a railway crane, and all through the 25th the carburettors and magnetos were overhauled. By 8 p.m. on the 26th, after they had been tested. and adjusted, the aircraft was ready for the next stage.

Early on the 27th the seaplane was lowered into the water and at 1040 a.m, they took off for Broome. Visibility was good. Cape Londonderry was reached at 1.20 p.m. (328 miles in 3 hr. 10 min., an average of 103 mph) and Mission Bay at 1.45 P.m. where a landing was made in a choppy sea.. The guns were loaded as they were not sure whether the natives were friendly. However, they were met by the Father Superior of the Spanish Mission and all was well. He plied them with biscuits and wine, and they were feeling rather heady as they returned to refuel the plane. By 6 p.m. it was completed and the missionaries provided kangaroo tail dinner .and the natives staged a special corroboree.

Goble and McIntyre stayed in the Fairey overnight to ensure floating off with the tide, but although they had anchored some 200 yards from the daytime high water mark the night tide was too low, and the natives had to be hurriedly called from their beds to help push the seaplane into deeper water. McIntyre used the engine to assist the natives as they pushed and pulled the aircraft around. The port float was strained and was leaking badly. Bound for Broome, they took off at 10,00 a.m, in a choppy sea .with one float half full of water. The engine was running very well, and Broome was reached at 2.49 p.m. The harbour was very exposed, and with a tide of 36 feet was not of much use as a seaplane base.

There they picked up Leading Aircraftman Gottschalk, who was to prove invaluable later. The three left Broome at 840 a.m. on the 29th in a very rough sea, and arrived at Port Hedland at 11.20 .a.m. With the floats taking in water, they decided to stay there the rest of the day because the next sheltered harbour was Carnarvon, two stages further on. Onslow, the next stop, had an open beach. Leaving Port Hedland at 8.42 a.m. the next day, they reached Onslow at 11.30 a.m. and beached the Fairey IIID on the sandy shore for refuelling. There were supposed to be no rocks in the area, but as the tide went out it was found that the floats were rubbing on jagged rocks. Refuelling was immediately stopped and the plane was moved half a mile down the beach. With full tanks, they left for Carnarvon at 2,25 p.m.

They reached Carnarvon at 5.55 p.m.; the Gascoyne River was *very* narrow and full of sandbanks due to low tide, so McIntyre had to land on Finarcks Bay and taxi up the river, On the way they were met by a launch with members of the local sailing club, The secretary, whose first thought was for refreshment, held up a bottle of whisky in one hand and a bottle of beer in the other and yelled "What are you going to have?" However, as they were stuck on a sandbank at this time and still three miles from the beaching place, the seaplane crew decided to wait until they were safely on the beach..

At daylight on the 30th, they were ready to leave for Fremantle but the engine had dropped from 1,650 rpm to 1,500 rpm, insufficient to lift the heavy seaplane off the water. An examination disclosed that two valves were burnt out; it was impossible to take them out without stripping the engine and Gottschalk decided to try to grind them in the cylinders. This took two days, but after testing the engine; it still did not develop enough power *one*. required a top overhaul,

Two mechanics with a spare engine left Perth on Monday, 5th May, by train to Mullewa and then by truck to Carnarvon, where they arrived on the night of Thursday, 8th May, Mr. Faulkner of the North West Department got a small crane on to a bridge against which the seaplane was moored; work began at daylight on the 9th and by 3 p.m, the engine was fitted, tested, and ready for the air. Considering the lack of facilities, Gottschalk did an excellent job, He, Goble and McIntyre were ready to *go* on the 10th, but the night tide did not arrive and the Fairey was left high and dry. Another night had to be spent at Carnarvon,

At 9,10 am, on the 11th, they lifted off at last, in fair conditions, There had been no rain at Carnarvon for many months and Goble assured people there that wherever the seaplane went they always got rain. The jest soon came true, for 70 miles south they ran into a NW monsoon and continued to remain 220 miles to Geraldton between 100 and 500 feet in blinding rain., They landed in a rough sea At 10,25 a.m. Local residents gave them hot coffee and biscuits, and the Mayor waded out up to his neck in his best Sunday suit to lend a hand. Children were rather enthusiastic; McIntyre caught three of them doing acrobatic stunts on the elevator wires, He promptly pulled them off and put them ashore,

After leaving at 1.25 p.m., the petrol was switched from the main tank to the auxiliary tank. Forty minutes later, flying downwind in the rain at 100 feet, the engines suddenly cut out. Frantic pumping by both Goble and McIntyre got pressure in the main tank and the engine started just before the plane reached the water, A landing was made in the open sea, and it was found that someone (the children?) had removed the binding wire from the drain cock on the auxiliary tank and the petrol had emptied into the sea. Taking off again was rather a hair-raising affair. The lower wings were awash and Gottschalk's 14 stone weight did not help, but McIntyre managed to lift the plane off, They landed on the Swan River, Perth, at 2,15 p.m. on the 11th May.

' After an overnight stop they left at 10.35 a.m. for Albany; they had a fairly good run and landed in Princess Royal Harbour, a "beautifully sheltered spot for seaplanes," Here they were met by hordes of uncontrollable children, who swarmed all over the machine as soon as it was beached, yelling and screaming at the tops of their voices, After the experience at Geraldton, police protection was hurriedly sought,

On the 13th a start was made for Israelite Bay at 11.42 a.m. Weather forecasts had indicated SW winds but these turned to a strong NE wind, and in 52 minutes they had covered only 32 miles. It was decided to return to Albany and the same 32 miles were quickly covered in 18 minutes. On the following day a depression in the weather arrived and the *Fairey IIID* had to be moved to a more sheltered spot, At this stage the main worry was that there had to be an off-shore wind at Israelite Bay; with an on-shore wind the seaplane might get caught in the surf and break up. The next day, although conditions at Albany were unfavourable, a start was made at 10.48 a.m. A moderate flight was made to Mary Ann Haven, where heavy rain forced them down to 100 feet. Visibility was nearly non-existent and the sea very rough. On landing at Esperance Bay the harbour was much too rough and the beach too exposed, so there was no alternative but to continue to Israelite Bay. Although the aircraft was making an airspeed of over 100 mph, the last 20 miles took 42 minutes. It was impossible to see either water or coast, so they circled a group of islands in the Eastern Group, gradually climbing until a break appeared in the direction of Israelite Bay. They immediately put the nose down and sped in for a landing, just making the beach before the break in the weather disappeared.

Israelite Bay was a telegraph repeating station, with a total population of four people, who did everything possible to help. The wind held from the west all night and they were able to get away the next morning at 9.27 a.m. Melbourne time. The wind was then from the SW, the sky overcast, and very heavy seas were running. Most of the coastline there is sheer cliff so they stood well out to sea, making directly for 'Eyre, from where a sandy beach extended to Eucla. They had been flying between 800 and 1,000 feet between Israelite Bay and Eyre, but to avoid the clouds they climbed to 3,000 feet on reaching the coast. The airspeed immediately dropped, so they descended into the cloud again to get the benefit of the wind,.

Eucla was reached at 10.35 a.m. Residents had telegraphed Goble and McIntyre to land there, but as the surf on the beach was too rough, they flew around for a few minutes and dropped a letter with a streamer ; (a strip torn from the tail of McIntyre's shirt) explaining why they could not land. -

From Eucla the sand gave way to cliffs again, so they stood out to sea and steered a course to Cape Adieu, through clouds and drizzle. Fowler's Bay was reached at 12.41 p.m. It was intended to land there to refuel, but because of the exposed harbour they carried on to Ceduna (Murat Bay) where emergency supplies had been laid down. They arrived there at 1.30 p.m. Having made such a good passage across the Great Australian Bight, it was felt that the previous day's rough spin was more than offset. Murat and Denial Bays were full of rocks, particularly at low tide, and residents there saw more flying than at any other place visited as McIntyre kept flying from one part of the bay to another trying to find a safe place to beach the seaplane. It was eventually anchored on a mud bank half a mile from the shore. The airmen were cold, wet to the necks, and their teeth chattered; they thought they might get a small nip at the local hotel -- but it was ten minutes past six, and under South Australian licensing laws nothing could be bought, .. but a good Samaritan slipped them something "off the hip."

Mr. Betts (agent for Vacuum Oil), Mr. Northam (schoolmaster) and Mr. Reid (manager of Betts and Co.) helped the refuelling next morning, carrying petrol half a mile over the mudbank. The *Fairey* took off at 11.45 a.m., and after three-quarters of an hour ran into drizzling rain.

