



15. Air Memories

Since its inception, aviation has engendered community and cultural engagement well beyond its direct requirements for facilities, labour and clientele. This session will explore the 'Air memories' of diverse communities and individuals, exploring the fuller human reach of aviation in Australia and beyond. Papers will ask who engaged with the new world of flight, from workers shaping novel logistics chains, to the crowds who attended airshows and queued for joy flights. How has aviation changed us, as individuals and communities?

Session Convenor: Tracy Ireland

1. The Wirraway Newspaper War

Derek Buckmaster- Independent researcher

The July 1936 decision by the "Aviation Syndicate" to select an American designed aircraft and engine for production in Australia triggered a "war" between pro-Empire and pro-Australia political factions and split the Lyons cabinet. This war was played out in the newspapers with prodigious alacrity. This paper gives an analysis of the contemporary newspaper stories supporting or opposing the "Wirraway decision" for an American design as well as the political factions and business interests behind the stories.

2. Pioneering Helicopters in eastern Australia

Jane Lennon- Australia ICOMOS, Hon. professor University of Melbourne

The first private helicopter company for charter work in Victoria was established in 1966 by CJ O'Connor, a decorated World War 2 bomber pilot. Initially, the work involved was making advertisements with aerial oblique cameras, traffic and snow patrols. His daughters

made the longest flight by helicopter with him in December 1966 from Melbourne Coolangatta. Then on 27 December 1966 while on a shark patrol for the Surfers Paradise Progress Association, he made the first ever helicopter air sea rescue. This resulted in a rapid development of technology for such rescues.

O'Connor pioneered helicopter work in Papua New Guinea (1968-82) and the ABC made a television documentary, "Balus" about his flights there. Returning to Queensland, he was involved in surveys, remote installations and television work. His journals reveal the transient nature of the places in which aviation history was made as the landscape soon changes, as with Narrow Neck at Surfers Paradise becoming hi-rise developments. Country airstrips for refuelling have gone or been redeveloped into regional airports. How do we conserve such transient heritage? Private journals and film record some of this but as the places evolve their forgotten stories and associations add layers to our ancient continental landscape.

3. Lady Pilots: Millicent Maude Bryant

Sophie Jennings- GML Heritage

Millicent Maude Bryant, my great-great-grandmother, was the first woman in Australia to obtain a commercial pilot's licence in 1927. Her tragic death in a ferry accident ten months later cut short her flying career. While recognised for her achievements at the time, she has since been eclipsed by others who followed in her flight path and her influence among her contemporaries is less apparent.

This paper considers how she came to flying, her legacy as a female aviatrix, and how we commemorate women's contribution to aviation. While her aviator's cap is held by the Powerhouse Museum, what of the intangible heritage associated with her legacy? What value or significance can be found in the air by tracing the path of her test flight?

4. Memories of an air disaster: Canberra and the 1961 Botany Bay crash

Rosemary Hollow- University of Canberra

On the evening of 30 November 1961 in a severe thunderstorm, an Ansett Airlines Vickers Viscount enroute to Canberra crashed into Botany Bay just after takeoff. All fifteen passengers and four crew were killed.

The enduring memorial for those who died came from the report of the Board of Inquiry into the crash: it recommended that all Australian aircraft should be equipped with weather radar by 1 June 1963. The recommendations of the report also resulted in closer cooperation between the now Bureau of Meteorology and air traffic controllers around Australia.

This crash remains significant in the history and memory of those who were part of the Canberra community in 1961. The fatalities included well-known members of the community,

and Christmas presents were found in the wreckage. Using media reports and oral histories from Canberrans directly affected by the crash, this paper considers where the disaster is situated in the history of Canberra and Australian aviation history. In contrast to the 1940 Canberra air crash where the death toll included three politicians, there are no public memorials or books published on the 1961 disaster.

This paper aims to address this imbalance, remembering the lives lost and sharing the memories of this significant Australian air disaster.

5. Balus i kam!*: The importance of aviation to Papua New Guinea's modern development and its lasting impacts

Megan McDougall- Heritage consultant, M. ICOMOS

Dr Martin Fowler- University of Melbourne

**PNG Tok Pisin meaning "the plane is coming", usually an expression of excitement and expectation. People even now in rural areas and regional towns across the country often drop what they are doing and rush to see who or what is arriving yelling "Balus i kam! Balus i kam"*

"The heavenly birds were the most potent harbingers of change yet to arrive on the island of New Guinea, given its mountainous and often near inaccessible terrain".

Perhaps more than any other place on earth, the arrival of the aeroplane in Papua New Guinea in the early 1920s provided a truly dramatic juxtaposition of traditional ("primitive") and modern ("civilised") life.

It was critical to the exploration and development of PNG:

- 1922 "Flying canoe" lands in Kaimari in the Papuan gulf with photographer Frank Hurley onboard.
- 1931 Gold dredges flown into Bulolo and PNG sets the world record for amount of airfreight in a year.
- 1933 A huge "Bird of Paradise", (aeroplane) carrying a few Australian explorers and businessmen, "discovers" the great highlands Wahgi Valley.
- 1942 The Japanese attack Rabaul. Subsequently war in the air proceeds over highlands valleys that have not yet been contacted.
- 1950s Goroka airstrip danced into existence by local warriors and women.

For the Melanesian people, the arrival of planes was a source of wonder, and mythology quickly became attached to the first encounter with airplanes and their occupants.

Aviation in PNG is explored through its tangible and intangible heritage- from historic photos, remote airstrips and wrecked planes through to expression in art, dance and costumes.

6. Spitfires Sprouting in the Burmese Spring: The Real-life Quest for Historic Fantasy Aircraft in Contemporary Myanmar

Jane Ferguson- The Australian National University

In 2013, a group of British aviation archaeologists began excavation in Myanmar of what they thought would be 140 mint-condition crated RAF Spitfire MkXIV aircraft. According to their story, at the brink of the end of the Second World War, Allies were stuck with these unassembled aircraft. With neither the funds to send them home nor wanting the craft to fall into enemy hands, they buried the crated planes in Mingaladon, Meiktila, and Myitkyina. Like legends of pirate treasure, the story of buried Spitfires carries with it fantastic aura and intrigue. For aviation fans, the pirate's gold is an iconic aircraft, meaningful in patriotic narratives for its role in the Battle of Britain.

This paper will discuss this story as a form of military history folklore, but also one stoked by the orientalist perception that Burma/Myanmar's decades of military regimes and purported isolation would indirectly "preserve" the crated aircraft in time. As this paper will demonstrate, Myanmar locals are not bereft of their own legends of buried war materiel and treasure, a point largely lost on British aviation enthusiasts in their quest for their holy Spitfire grail, but one which crucially enabled this quest to manifest itself.