

There and Back

photo – Jabiru



An Australian aviation adventure

by Owen Zupp

The flight levels can be a deceptive place to fly. Travelling at respectable speeds with a panoramic view, it is easy to become complacent about the beautiful landscapes that slide beneath and those early aviators who crossed the country.

As altitude dilutes the detail, miles click past seemingly without significance. Yet the pilot in us all still looks down to spot that river, or a dirt strip we visited in a past life. At some level we yearn to leave the stratosphere and regain the detail and sense of flight. For me, it convinced me to make the effort to fly 'there and back'.

2010 will mark 100 years since powered flight first took place in Australia. While the famous escapologist Harry Houdini claims the title of being first in March of that year, the lesser known John Duigan was the first native Australian to take an Australian-designed aircraft aloft, in mid-July. The significance of the centenary was not to be overlooked and served as a tremendous motivator to set the wheels in motion and undertake a flight to recognise this anniversary. But where to start?

From the outset, some primary goals were set with safety always the prime consideration. Firstly, the flight was to celebrate the centenary of powered flight in Australia and highlight what a major role this nation has had in the endeavour of

flight. This could be achieved by planning a route that visited as many aviation waypoints as possible while roughly circumnavigating the country.

Next, a suitable aircraft needed to be sourced that emphasised the accessibility of aviation today as it is no longer merely for the wealthy. The ideal aircraft was the all-Australian designed and built Jabiru J230 which possessed the appropriate bloodline, performance and price point to both perform the task and get the message of accessibility across.

Finally, if the flight was to generate interest, the opportunity existed to raise funds for a worthy cause. The Royal Flying Doctor Service was a natural choice as that organisation has been intertwined with so much about aviation in this great land since it was formed 1928.

Transitioning 'There and Back' from concept to reality was made significantly easier when Jabiru Aircraft volunteered to construct and provide a J230 specifically for the around Australia flight. From all quarters support began to flow in the form of flight planning software from Champagne PC to a satellite tracking system from Spidertracks. *Australian Aviation* magazine and editor Gerard Frawley led the media interest from the outset and this flowed onto assistance with equipment from Hawker Pacific and David Clark. I had always been prepared to personally fund the project, but this generous support not only offsets some of the costs, it also provides a tremendous vote of confidence

in the project and ensuring its success.

Planning then began in earnest and called for a route that blended history and geography. A departure month of May was selected as suitable based on a combination of work commitments and the ability to transit Northern Australia in the dry season. The departure point was even easier – Bundaberg. Home to my boyhood hero Bert Hinkler, it now boasts a new 'Hall of Aviation' named in his honour, which stands beside his English home that was relocated brick by brick. The two storey residence *Mon Repos* is named after the beach near Bundaberg where a young Hinkler first took to the air in gliders he designed and built. In a contemporary sense, Bundaberg is also home to Jabiru and represents an Australian aviation manufacturing hub.

From there, town after town were self evident for a particular contribution to aviation. Longreach and Winton for their ties to a fledgling Queensland And Northern Territory Aerial Services (QANTAS), and Cloncurry and Julia Creek for their similar links with the RFDS. Darwin was the first Australian landfall for so many pioneer aviators, while Brisbane and Adelaide Airports are the modern custodians of Kingsford Smith's *Southern Cross* and Ross and Keith Smith's Vickers Vimy respectively. Holyman Airways Hangar still stands at Launceston Airport and Lawrence Wackett's trainer resides at Bull Creek in Western Australia. Victoria boasts the home of the RAAF at Point Cook and the location of Houdini's first flight at Dig-

gers Rest and Duigan's at Mia Mia. New South Wales could claim the magnificent pioneering box-kite flights of Lawrence Hargrave at Stanwell Park to the south of Sydney and William Hart's early efforts to the city's west. The list is near endless.

Gradually the line weaved its way around the continent and criss-crossed the magnificent scenery that makes up this flying nirvana. From the coastal beauty of Bundaberg to Broome to the ever-changing outback of the Kimberleys and the rich greens of Tasmania's Tamar Valley, this country has such diverse beauty on show that it soon became apparent that it should be captured on film, thus adding another perspective to the journey and another task to organise in the preparation. Despite the diversity, the Jabiru's ability to fly up to 700nm between fuel stops meant that the flight can be undertaken in stages using standard tanks and standard configuration.

The overriding consideration with all of these varied aspects of planning must always be safety. In a single engine aircraft, terrain is a prime determinant of the route, while seasonal weather is a factor in timing. The type of emergency equipment required over the remote Kimberleys varies from that needed to cross Bass Strait. In addition to adequate rest and reasonable sector lengths, hydration, personal fitness and noise-cancelling headsets are all means of mitigating against fatigue. Cockpit organisation, alternate routes and ports, back-up communications and means of SAR notification are all best anticipated and catered for well in advance of the flight. Furthermore, during the execution of 'There and Back', a form of 'base operations' will provide an additional layer of flight dispatch support and flight following. Ideally, the message of aviation safety will be generated at every possible opportunity.

Film offers one medium to share the journey and at the end of each day some footage and images will be posted on the website at www.thereandback.com.au to show the highlights of the day that has passed. However, the opportunity to share the flight in real time is one of the benefits of modern aviation technology. Using a Spidertracks unit, the J230's position will be continually updated and mapped on the website. There may only be one person on board, but the internet will be sitting in the back seat.

Even though a journey like 'There and Back' may be flown solo, there is always a team that makes it work. My wife Kirrily, also a commercial pilot, has assisted with all and sundry tasks that need to be done while aviation enthusiast and businessman Rob Brus has been a fountain of ideas and solely responsible for the development of the website. Sue Woods at Jabiru Aircraft has been tremendously efficient and supportive.

Much has been achieved in the lead up



FINER POINTS The author (in the rear seat) points out the finer points of old world aviation to Alex Preddey, one of the next generation. (Mark Preddey)

to 'There and Back' and there is still much to do before the wheels leave the earth at Bundaberg in May. However, the planning is an equally enjoyable phase in many aspects. To share the enthusiasm with others who also treasure the role of aviation in Australia and to hear their ideas and thoughts on both the journey and the pioneers who have gone before is a pleasure. From museums and individuals to councils and community groups, there has been such a positive response to 'There and Back' that it's almost a shame to go solo.

From this enthusiasm I hope that the industry can continue to encourage the next generation who will take the reins in aviation. My parents told tales of barnstorming pilots landing on local farms and taking folks for their first flights in frail machines with open cockpits. Airfields were far more developed by my childhood, but the ability to interact with planes and pilots was far more common. Airfields were littered with new Pipers, Cessnas and Beechcraft, while DC-3s and Beavers fired up their radials, and the Mustangs in civilian garb roared skyward to tow targets for the military. There was all manner of wings to climb upon and instrument panels to gaze at through hands cupped on perspex. But things are a lot different now.

As I transit the various ports of call, it's my hope that as many folk as possible will turn out at the various airfields to 'talk aviation' and show that it's alive and well in this land of immense aviation heritage. The pioneers who have gone before, such as Hinkler, Kingsford-Smith and Bonney, launched Australia on a path in aviation that saw it fighting well above its weight. As a consequence, one of the most remarkable things about my flight is that it is relatively 'unremarkable'. It is well within the reach of anyone with the interest and moderate means. An aircraft like a Jabiru can be registered in 'VH' or 'RA-Aus' categories and virtually sips the fuel as the distance slides beneath. Such aviation is accessible.

'There and Back' is a celebration of our centenary of powered flight. It is about a mode of transport in Australia that overcame the relative tyranny of distance from both the Empire and within its own borders. Today, such journeys are no longer a struggle in the old sense, yet it is important to recall the sacrifices that have been made and support those who continue their good work such as the Royal Flying Doctor Service. Sometimes aviation is about crossing oceans and sometimes it is the short intense joy of a first solo. For the moment, my challenge is to simply go 'There and Back'. ■

DEPARTURE POINT There and Back will depart from Bundaberg Airport, the home of Bert Hinkler and the new 'Hall of Aviation' named in his honour. (Owen Zupp)

