

Refurbishing a Queen

By Sue Litchfield

During Melbourne's enforced lockdown and busy with a house restoration (now in its tenth year - the restoration, not the lockdown!), Sue Litchfield's 2020 has been strangely productive. Flooded with aviation memories prompted by the 50th Anniversary of the opening of Tullamarine Airport in July, Sue pushed all things aside and seized the opportunity to record. This is the incredible story of her participation in the extensive refurbishment of a very special Dak she worked with, back in PNG.

In my recurring dreams, I have flown a lot of different aeroplanes. In reality, not so many - Cessna 152s, 172s, 180s, PA28s. However, prior to attaining my Private Pilots Licence, I was somewhat unexpectedly swept up in the world of aircraft restoration.

As I recall it, Tullamarine Airport in the '70s and '80s was, of course, much less active than it is today - though, perhaps, not less than this year. But in the carpark (which was of the outside variety) at the time, in front of what is now the Qantas Terminal, an historically significant DC3 set a scene on static display - dramatically suspended from a huge arch, high above the ground. Here she hung, right up until mid-1987, at which time it was decided that she be brought back from her idle state for restoration maintenance, with the energetic ambition of returning her to the skies.

And so! The Hawdon Restoration Committee was formed.

An advertisement in the Australian Airways staff magazine, *Network*, caught my eye, calling for staff members, both past and present, to volunteer on the restoration. Well! I had lived in New Guinea for eight and a half years, once upon a time working as a hostess on VH-AES. I couldn't believe my luck - and there was no gender stipulation! I couldn't get there quick enough.

Affectionately known in the beginning as *Shanghai Lil*, VH-AES flew an extensive and intriguing career, rolling off the

Douglas plant assembly line in Long Beach, California in 1942 for immediate service in the military. Thankfully, she remained intact throughout her wartime escapades and, shortly afterwards, turned her nose for Australia, signed over to the Department of Civil Aviation on arrival to Archerfield in 1943. When the newly-formed Trans-Australia Airlines began operations, she was renamed *Hawdon*, after Joseph Hawdon the explorer, and began flying services in Queensland.

Sometime in 1944, she was scheduled to operate a flight out of Mascot with mail, freight and a supernumerary crew member. Already rolling, the Captain was forced to abort the takeoff when he found he could not pull back on the control column. One of the gust-lock cleats was still exerting its grip - passed over in the pre-flight checks. She came to a sad, sliding halt in a ditch at the southern end of the field, extensively damaged, but repairable.

In 1946, now based at Essendon and, at times, operating out of Laverton, *Hawdon* flew TAA's inaugural Melbourne-Sydney-Melbourne passenger route. Onboard were 21 passengers, with a crew of two pilots and an 'air hostess'. I have read that, after WW2, quite a number of nurses were recruited for this role. They certainly preferred you to have a nursing background.



VH-AES on static display, Tullamarine Airport, Melbourne



'Hawdon' being prepared to be lifted into place for display outside the TAA Passenger Terminal. Dec 1979 (N. Louis Collection, courtesy aussieairliners.org)



Melbourne Laverton Airport, September 09, 1971. This was the first re-enactment of the airline's inaugural flight, between stints in PNG. (R. N. Smith Collection, courtesy aussieairliners.org)

The uniform, to begin with, was military in style, and the selection process thorough. There is no doubt that standards began to relax in the years that followed - by the 60s, at interview stage, one was expected to demonstrate a 'short walk' up and down the interview room (checking out the legs!). Horror of horrors - imagine today, young ladies being asked to do that!

Withdrawn from service in 1959 - then prepared for it again when she didn't sell - Hawdon was re-registered, re-named Moresby, and unceremoniously consigned to Papua New Guinea. We flew many an interesting flight, covering a lot of PNG. Manus Island was a regular stop; back then a place much less controversial than it has been in recent times. Honiara, in the Solomon Islands, always an interesting experience, as were flights into West New Guinea - Sukarnopura, as it was then - under the rule of President Sukarno of Indonesia. At one point, during the early '70s, our ship was re-registered again and operated under the name Wewak for a while, but this was changed back for display at the end of the decade.

While Port Moresby bore the brunt of a lot of political unrest from time to time, we found the local people of PNG to be mostly welcoming of expats, and we lived in happy harmony with them. We also got to know quite a few colourful ex-pat characters, not only pilots but people from all professions. We were all big frogs in a little pond. It has since occurred to me that I had never heard any mention of Pat Toole, the first female commercial pilot in PNG, particularly from the pilot fraternity. She was there before I was, and I only wish I could have spoken to her in more detail. On a side note, though, I do recall hearing that His Royal Highness Prince Charles, when on a visit to PNG, was highly amused at the Pidgin English word for helicopter - 'Mixmaster-bilong-Jesus-Christ'. I am hanging out for Kathy Mexted's book, *Australian Women Pilots*, which contains stories of Pat's remarkable life.

The Restoration

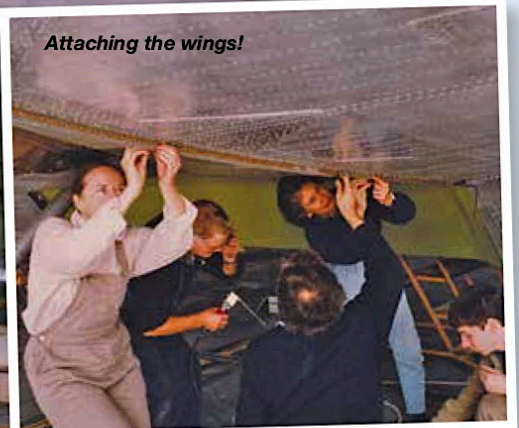
By January 1988, VH-AES was brought down from her perch and positioned in the Qantas maintenance hangar, a massive and impressive structure. Here, she was in good hands. Hawdon Enterprises engaged a number of the best engineers in the business for the



A bit more work



A general workshop scene



Attaching the wings!



The Big Cleanup

restoration, and proceedings had already begun when I turned up for my first day. A small number of ex-DC3 pilots I had met in PNG (one being the husband of ex-AWPA member and PNG pilot, Bronwyn Searle), now all captains with various Australian airlines, had also volunteered to work on her in their spare time. Nancy, a buyer for maintenance supplies, was already ensconced, and further along in the proceedings, another Nancy, an ex-hostess, joined us. The work began in earnest.

The aesthetic restoration required hard and consistent yakka, with paint-

stripping, anti-corrosion treatment and the polishing of every square inch done mostly by hand; occasionally by pneumatic buffer. The re-attachment of the wings was a particularly momentous day. Then, every item had to be returned to the interior - once it had been painstakingly polished to perfection. Seats reupholstered, seat belts restored etc.

There were the pleasant moments of merriment that come with working in a team environment. At the time, there were only male toilets at the base; any of the guys, catching one of the Nancys



Checking the fuel during the Air Race - Blue, Sue and Big Dick. RIGHT: The beautiful Red Beech 18, as seen from the back of AES. INSET: The Beech 18 peels off

or myself heading off in that direction, would cheekily yell out, "Leave the lid up, Nance/Sue!" We were flattered; we had been accepted by the blokes. Another day, I must've sat in a spillage of paint stripper. I had become accustomed to smelling like a work-shop/hangar so pressed on, regardless. On the drive home I could feel something biting! - later discovering that it had come through my overalls, onto my derriere. All in a day's work, no complaints from me!

Quite a number of other volunteers and staff came and went during the nine months it took to complete our project - about twenty in total. All their work was valuable and it was an incredible joy for all concerned to see the work coming together. Slowly but surely she was returned to her former silver glory. At the time, Air Force One was a big silver bird, too, and I recall we used to have large tubs of 81XX, a cutting and polishing compound, sent out from the US. I can still remember the smell of it in my nostrils.

At the guts of the restoration, hours were involved in the overhaul of the two Pratt and Whitney piston engines. The metalworkers department was called upon. Cockpit instruments were repaired or replaced; the electrical and hydraulic systems attended to. The final touch was the work of a professional signwriter - a small blue and red stripe down each side of the fuselage, plus the appropriate decals. Now she was looking truly splendid.

Nancy and I were present the day the engines were fired up for the first time. The air was alive.

A small problem arose with the starboard engine as it leapt into action - Peter

Ross, to the rescue! A very clever engineer, I have a photo of him with the prop in motion; cowling peeled back, his hands inside making adjustments. Problem solved.

We had been working to two main deadlines, and VH-AES was back in action for both of them. The first was a commemorative re-enactment of the first passenger service, MEL-SYD-MEL for TAA, completed on 9 September 1988. Six of the original pax were discovered and gladly participated, attracting quite a lot of media attention. The second was the 1988 Bicentennial Around Australia Air Race, which ran from the 18 Sep - 1 October that same year. It was all very exciting! Since I had found myself on the boss's A-team, I was rewarded with participation.

The Air Race

Classified as the largest Air Race Australia has ever held, and with International entrants, the grand event commenced in Narromine, heading in an anti-clockwise direction. On to Toowoomba, Rockhampton, Longreach, Mt Isa. Alice Springs to Tennant Creek, Katherine to Darwin. All down the west



Chief of Airstaff, Ray Funnell, with the PC9 being interviewed by the press

coast, then back east via Kalgoorlie, Forrest, Ceduna, Adelaide, Hamilton. It was run VFR on a handicapping system, and, as it turned out, only the last leg - from Melbourne to Canberra - was cancelled due to weather.

Trans Australia Airlines - 'Hawdon' in the original livery at Melbourne Avalon Airport, February 27, 2013 (G. Canciani, courtesy aussieairliners.org)



With 126 aircraft involved (three were to withdraw), it was indeed a diverse field. The RAAF were well represented, with the Chief of Airstaff in his impressive PC9 (fastest in the race), a Caribou, an HS748 and another DC3 (so we had a 'pair of Daks!'). The rest of the field was made up of various twins and singles; an old-time RFDS Drover, a red Beech 18 (second-oldest aircraft to Hawdon) and more. Two of the AWPA's experienced air-racers, esteemed Perth members Helen Henderson and Shirley Adkins (who is sadly no longer with us), entered in a Mooney and did well.

The course was set to cover in excess of 11000km. My part was picking it up in Alice Springs and all the stops onwards. Being of West Australian origin, I particularly loved the Darwin to Perth sector, down the wonderful West Coast. From the exquisite turquoise waters of Lake Argyle South, down through Carnarvon into Wendy Mann-airspace - Geraldton - and then Perth.

The overall winner was Perth mining engineer, Ted Rear and co-pilot, in an Aerostar (another esteemed Perth AWPA member, Robyn Stewart, has flown this type). In second was the RAAF's HS748, and third was Ross Smith in a C185F.

Other Projects

Prior to Hawdon, my all-consuming passion had actually been restoring antique furniture - I love the concept of re-working and recycling, so my enthusiasm for the restoration of our bird makes real sense. Now, I can say I've worked on other aircraft as well. Around the time of the Hawdon, we were momentarily summonsed to help out with a job on a Lockheed Hudson located at Moorabbin Airport. A handful of us were sent, and my task for the day was to clean up and de-grease the bomb bay doors and mechanisms in preparation for the mechanical work.

I had another small part in the painting process of one of Ted Rudge's (Rudge Air) Doves. He had secured one of the old Ansett hangars and, being the generous person he was, he made room in it for VH-NWN, a Cessna 180 that my ex and I had at the time. Apart from his generosity, I think it is fair to say that he was a reasonably good pilot. Ex-NZ Airforce turned airline captain, he had a catastrophic engine problem on take-off out of Essendon one day and



Sue Litchfield in front of one of Tristar's Cherokees at Moorabbin Airport

landed on the rooftops of five houses nearby! There were no fatalities, albeit injuries sustained. The hostess on this flight was quite a colourful character, and was known to comment at a later time, "A person is supposed to see their life flashing by [when faced with their impending demise]... all I could see flashing by were #*%&*!^ trees."

Not only did they survive the crash, but also a spontaneous knife fight which broke out in the waiting room of the emergency department they attended at a certain, very busy western suburbs hospital!

I finally realised my dream and gained my PPL as a late bloomer, in 1993. I joined the AWPA and was a very grateful recipient of the 1974 Memorial Grant, which I put towards obtaining my Night VFR. Part of this exercise included a nostalgic fly over the top of Tullamarine. Which reminds me, I am also shortly to honour a generous Encouragement Award from Rosemary Arnold, Australia's first helicopter pilot and member of the Whirly-Girls International, which will enable me to get back in the air once again.

All photos by Sue Litchfield, unless otherwise noted

Many thanks to Bob Smith, for supplying a number of the stunning photographs featured in this article. An avid aviation photographer since the 60s, he always managed to make it airside to get the shot - despite never having worked in aviation himself. In an endeavour to ensure the stories of our Australian and New Zealand aircraft are never lost, he started AussieAirliners.org, an online treasure trove of historical photographs and meticulous research by Bob and his affiliates at the Historical Aircraft Restoration Society (HARS), spanning decades. An invaluable resource for aviation and history buffs alike, visit the website for further stories, details and delights, and to order your own prints of Bob's work.



Registered VH-SBA, for TAA Sunbird Services - 'Hawdon' in the standard livery at Lae Airport, PNG, date unknown (R. N. Smith Collection, courtesy aussieairliners.org)

