



## **Aorangi – The First Desoutter to fly to Australia from England**

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### **Introduction**

The Mark II Desoutter, “Miss Flinders” was flown from England to Australia by Jenkin and Jeffries, who departed England on 28 December 1931 and arrived in Darwin on 10 February 1932.

A year earlier, another Desoutter was flown from England to Australia by two New Zealanders, Harold Piper and Cyril Kay. They were both Flying Officers serving with the RAF in England and they decided to purchase an aircraft to fly home to NZ. The plan was to fly from London to Sydney, and then ship the plane across the Tasman to Auckland.

The Desoutter monoplane commenced production in 1929. Piper and Kay purchased the 10<sup>th</sup> one built, which was classified as a “Mark I” with a Cirrus Hermes engine. (Miss Flinders was a “Mark II” Desoutter, produced the following year, with a Gypsy III engine).

The plane was registered in England as G-AATI and they named it “Aorangi.”

### **The Trip**

The left Croydon aerodrome in London on 10 February 1930 and arrived in Darwin on 24 March 1930. They subsequently flew to Mascot in Sydney, arriving 03 April 1930. Two weeks later the loaded the plane on a Steamer and departed for Auckland.



FLIGHT photo

MARCH 23 1930

+ PORT DARWIN + AUSTRALIA +

AIRCRAFT WONDERFUL

UNDER ALL CONDITIONS

+ PIPER

Copy of a cable received from Flying Officers Piper and Kay.

# Yet another proof . . . . . . . of DESOUTTER supremacy

THE successful flight from England to Australia of Flying-Officers Piper and Kay, who left in February and arrived on March 22nd, provides yet another proof of Desoutter supremacy. For a flight of a few miles, or round the world, the Desoutter is equally "wonderful."

No wonder the Desoutter is being

acclaimed as the light aeroplane of 1930! No wonder the Desoutter is already the standard by which all other light aircraft are judged for performance, looks, comfort or reliability! The private owner's demands for 1930 are infinitely more exacting than those he made in 1929. Desoutter created those exacting demands. Only Desoutter can satisfy them.

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**The Trip – as published by “The Sun” Newspaper on 05 April 1930**

Upon their arrival in Sydney, Kay was interviewed by “The Sun” which published the following article on the 5<sup>th</sup> of April 1930.

**Storms, Forced Landings, Peril Among Savages, Beset Fliers**

**HOW THEY REACHED THEIR GOAL**

**CHAIN OF MISFORTUNE**

**PIPER AND KAYE**

**SAFE THROUGH DANGERS; THEY TELL THEIR STORY**

Faced with bad luck almost from the time they left England, Flying-Officers Piper and Kay put up a grim fight to reach Australia, Their experiences were of such a trying nature that each lost a stone in weight.

They were forced down eight times, and. on two occasions their engine cut out while they were flying over the sea. Each time, however, they' landed safely. Once they narrowly escaped a hostile tribe of Arabs.

It was in our minds for some time that we would like ,to fly to Australia and finally we decided to make a bid for it (said Flying-Officer Kay, telling the story for himself and his companion).

We selected a Desoutter monoplane, on account of Its comfort and the fact that It was equipped with a cabin. The machine obtained was of standard type, engined with a Cirrus-Hermes of 105 horse-power. The seats were so arranged that the back of the pilot's seat could be removed and the occupants change places while in the air.

Our preparations occupied two months. Although it was generally known in England that we were to make the flight, the actual day of departure had not been divulged. Consequently, when we did hop off on February 10 there were not more than a dozen persons present. This was what we wanted. We did not want a fuss.

Squadron-Leader Wilks, of the New Zealand Permanent Air Force, wished us luck on behalf of the Dominion.

We left Croydon Aerodrome at 6 a.m., on February 10. At that hour it was quite dark, and flares had to be used. Snow littered the flying field. We did not feel any too warm, for, in order to conserve our full power and keep down weight, we discarded our overcoats and wore a sports coat and scarf and flannel trousers.

I was at the joystick during the first portion of the hop. Both of us are pilots, and we took it In turn throughout the flight, as far as was possible, to fly in shifts of a couple of hours each. Mr. Piper was the engineer, and I was classified as navigator.

We did not have any special instruments other than a couple for navigation purposes. Our last vision of England was the township of Hastings, and we then set off on our 60-mile Channel crossing.



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A head wind was experienced over France, and this cut down our range considerably, with the result that our petrol ran out when we were about five miles away from the Lyons Aerodrome.

A forced landing was made in a very small field about 1 p.m. All the surrounding country was flooded, and we had a few anxious moments in putting the machine safely on the ground.

The authorities at the aerodrome warned us not to continue our flight, as severe snowstorms were ahead. So bad were conditions that air-mail services had been suspended for over a week. Nevertheless, we decided to take the risk, and took off.

The flight down the Rhone Valley was a nightmare. With blinding snow enveloping the entire landscape, we were compelled to fly at an altitude of about 50 feet. Even at this low altitude it was difficult to see the river below.

I was at the stick, while Piper was leaning out of the back of the 'plane and signalling to me with his hands the direction I should take. Fortunately, we got through all right, although I can tell you candidly that we were none too comfortable, and had a "breeze up."

After about an hour's flying, we landed at Avignon. It was still snowing, and conditions were far from comfortable. When we landed, the wings of the machine and all the struts were covered with ice.

#### **BLIND FLYING-THEN SUNSHINE**

Snow In the Induction pipes during the trip down the valley gave us a fright on several occasions. We would hear the engine "pop" and immediately have visions of a forced landing.

To add to our discomfort of flying at 50-foot altitude the country was of such a nature as to render an attempted landing little less than suicide. Our total flying that day was only about 200 miles.

The following day (February 12) we took off at daybreak and flew over mountains. Our altitude averaged about 7000 feet, and there were periods during this stage that we were flying blind. It was an awe-inspiring sight to see snow driving past us in white layers. The ground was invisible.

Our last spasm of blind flying lasted for about half an hour and then, imagine our relief, when we passed out into the sunshine and saw far below us the coast of France.

After the experience we had just passed through you may be sure we did not take long to lose altitude and have a look at the Riviera towns. The sky at this stage was more or less clear, the sun was shining.

Out across the Gulf was our next move, and after an hour and a half's flying over water we encountered the Italian coast near Pisa. We must have looked like some huge water fowl when we landed, for our 'bus sent up a cloud of spray as the landing wheels struck the water-covered aerodrome.

We were informed by Italian Air Force officers stationed at this aerodrome that they had not been doing any flying for a week on account of the soggy nature of the surface. It was a good aerodrome. Its only drawback was that it became waterlogged very quickly. Our mileage that day was about 450.

Despite the sticky nature of the ground we got off again all right next morning — February 13 — but to make certain we carried only a light load of petrol.

We effected a landing at Naples after flying over very rugged country at an altitude of more than 6000 feet.



Engine trouble over any portion of this stage would have been fatal to us.

We left about midday for Malta. Enroute we saw Vesuvius, and being in an inquisitive humour, we decided to have a look at that famous phenomenon. We passed directly over the crater, and at times were wreathed in smoke. We were at an altitude of 5000 feet when we passed over.

Passing down the coast, over water most of the way, we met a few rain storms when nearing Sicily.

We had a great view of the volcanoes on this Island, and it was with some reluctance that we left this wonderful vision and headed across the sea and were out of sight of land for half an hour.

Landing on the island of Malta, we had a splendid time with some comrades of the R.A.F. at their mess. We worked till fairly late on our 'plane, and were called at 3 a.m. A hurried snack and then a few finishing touches to our engine and then we took off. As the hour then was only four, we had a moonlight trip for a couple of hours over the Mediterranean.

#### **SOLID STRAIN OF WATER HOP**

We had chosen the long water hop over 412 miles. Daybreak saw the wind on our beam, and we had to allow 15 degrees on our compass to counteract drifts. Fortunately our reckoning was accurate, and at about 8.30 we had the distinct pleasure of seeing a small town on the coast of North Africa.

Investigations prove this to be Benghazi— the point at which we had aimed. We circled the town and effected a good landing. We were very glad to be down as the flight so long over water and aiming at a mere speck, figuratively speaking, proved a solid strain. Had we missed Benghazi there was nought but desert.

We had coffee with the commander of the Italian Air Force stationed there and again hopped off. We were warned not to attempt to fly over land on account of hostile tribes. Consequently, we followed the coast.

Again we had bad luck with the wind, for it seemed to veer round continually, so as to blow straight in our faces.

Some idea of the strength of it may be gauged from the fact that the hop to Mersa-Tobruk, a distance of 220 miles, occupied a shade over four hours.

The aerodrome was most peculiar. The surface was of very bad clay, and a small stream ran through the centre of it. However, we got down all right and were welcomed by officers of an Italian squadron stationed there.

There was no hotel in the town, so we were compelled to stay in a small house. It was a filthy place, willing hands cleaned it up a bit and made it habitable. Our dinner that night comprised four fried eggs and sardines— certainly a good mixture.

We turned in at 8.30. Up again at 5 o'clock, we were ready to leave an hour later, and then flew straight to Port Said. We circled the town and proceeded to Abukir. This hop is about 400 miles.

Again we had the pleasure of mingling with comrades of our own unit, for there is an R.A.F. base at this town. A happy evening was spent, and then again at dawn the Aorangi winged her way to Gaza.

We worked on the machine at Gaza until 1.30 a.m. and took off next day at 5 a.m. We had a desert crossing for about 500 miles, and our range was about 600 miles. We were to have followed the



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ground track. We flew over the desert and encountered great cloud banks, and ' were hampered by heavy rain.

We had difficulty at times in following the track, which is made by the armoured service cars.

We lost the track, and in an hour were over an Arab encampment. We were going to land, but on dropping low enough to view the ground we saw that we would do no good, and went back' 10 miles, where we landed.

We had a smoke and decided that the only thing to do was try and get back, as It would be hopeless looking for the track, and petrol was short.

We set a compass course, and in two hours, against a slight head wind, found the Aman R.A.F. 'drome.

There we learned how fortunate we had been, for we were told that the natives were very hostile, and that we were lucky to have escaped, with our lives.

We waited until next day to take off and this time found the track without trouble, and landed at Bagdad at 11.30 a.m. After filling up with petrol we pushed on to Basra, where we stayed the night, and next day went to Bush- ire In Persia. We got to Jask that night and were up before daybreak next morning. We were at sea when the engine cut out, and we turned back and glided some distance to. the beach.

A native chief Instructed half a dozen of his followers to push the 'plane back to the 'drome, five or six miles away over sand hills. They went so fast that we, had a hard job to keep up with them.

After two days delay we went on to Karachi, where we had a good reception. The Indians are very keen on flying, and we met a man there who has since made a successful flight to England.

Next day we set out for Jodhpur, but had gone only 100 miles across the desert when he ran into white fog or clouds, very low, through which we could not fly and had to turn back, landing at Hainadi.

#### **FLIGHT AGAINST DARKNESS**

Early in the morning we got away for Jahnsi, and then went on to Ailabahad, and next day to Calcutta. On the last of those trips we had to fly over difficult country, composed of mountains and jungles, and the compass was very handy then.

On the trip to Akyab, in Burma, we had a terrific fight against darkness, racing at 120 miles an hour.

We set out over the sea in fog and mist next morning, and we received a shock when the engine again cut out, but fortunately close enough to an island which we were able to make, without damage.

By signs we made the natives understand that we wanted to get back to the mainland, and after a frightful trip through the jungle, we were rowed back in. an open boat.

We were terribly blistered, and next day returned in a motor- boat, strung the engine on two poles, which had been prepared by the natives, returned to the mainland, and got back to Akyab, 15 miles away, where we were held up for three weeks awaiting spare parts.

Commander Price was extraordinarily good to us while there.



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We eventually got away to Rangoon and landed on the racecourse in heat which reminded us of an oven. We pushed on to Bangkok, across mountains and jungles, climbing to 7000 feet on account of the low clouds and mountains. That was one of the worst parts of the trip, for if we had come down there, probably we would never again have seen civilisation.

#### **AT SEA IN DARKNESS**

In order to leave Singora (Slam), we had to fill up potholes in the 'drome, which is composed of sand.

We had a good run to Singapore, having to follow the valleys on account of the clouds. We passed through several valleys to miss the head winds. Our next run was non-stop to Batavia.

Going over Sumatra we met the worst clouds and storms in our experience, and feared that we might be forced to land in mangrove swamps, which the clouds actually touched. There was awful lightning, and we were afraid that we might be struck; but eventually we reached the sea, and, having been an hour out of sight of land, reached Java, where we were met by Dutch officials. Next day we went to Sourabaya.

Our next stop was at Bima Aerodrome, and in leaving there we had a job to take off. We had not allowed for enough loss of daylight in the run for Timor, and when darkness came upon us we were still out at sea.

#### **LANDED ON BEACH**

After flying in the darkness for nearly fifteen minutes and meeting a rainstorm, and there still being no sign of land, we were feeling rather worried, but were overjoyed when we saw the surf line on the coast.

We landed on the beach. Running along the sand the 'plane struck a soft patch and turned on her nose, the propeller being buried. Remarkably enough, no damage whatever was done.

We were preparing to go to sleep when a native came up and said — "Hullo! Me help you." That's all he could say, but he gave us beer, cheese and beds.

It being impossible to take off from the sand we cleared a small space some distance away and dragged the 'plane up. We cleared the area by only a couple of feet in the take-off but reached the nearest 'drome only 10 miles away without further mishap.

Working very hard we were able to get away by daybreak and set a compass course for Darwin.

After having reached Australia, we made a forced landing at Tennant's Creek, where we sustained the first damage by accident on the trip, through striking an ant hill.

We had received good receptions everywhere since landing in Australia, but Mascot surpassed anything we expected. We like Sydney very much— it is a wonderful place and the people are marvellous. We would like to pay a tribute to the perfect organisation of the Shell Company, together with the Wakefield Oil Company, without whose help we could not have made this trip, particularly as we encountered such bad luck. We are staying at the home of your own Charlie Ulm.



**Aorangi at Darwin Monday 24 March 1930**  
(Territory Stories, <https://territorystories.nt.gov.au/10070/747735> )

### Postscript

The plane was sold in New Zealand and, it was registered as ZK-ACJ to the Waikato Aviation Company on Hamilton in December 1930. Later used on sight-seeing flying from Rotorua, owned by Rotorua Aviation Co, later Blackmore's Air Services at Rotorua.

On 8<sup>th</sup> November 1950, it crashed at Taneatua in the Bay of Plenty region (North Island) and damaged beyond repair.

Harold Piper became a test pilot for Short Brothers in UK from 1934, promoted to Chief Test Pilot before returning to NZ in 1952 where he flew agricultural aircraft.

Cyril Kay continued in the RAF and then the Royal New Air Force. He retired as RNZAF Air Vice Marshall C.E. Kay, C.B., C.B.E., D.F.C.