



**TASMANIAN AVIATION HISTORICAL SOCIETY Incorporated**  
**100<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY: "THE SEAGULL ON THE TAMAR"**  
**COMMEMORATIVE NEWSLETTER MAY 2021**

## ***100<sup>TH</sup> ANIVERSARY OF THE FIRST FLIGHT FROM SYDNEY TO TASMANIA***

### ***"THE SEAGULL ON THE TAMAR"***

***20<sup>th</sup> MAY 1921***



***A restored Curtiss Seagull Flying Boat, Omaka Heritage Museum, New Zealand***

### **THE HISTORY OF THE FLIGHT**

100 years ago on Friday May 20<sup>th</sup> 1921, at approximately 1:30pm, a "Seagull" landed on Launceston's Tamar River.

This was no ordinary seagull but a Curtiss "Seagull" flying boat flown by Australian World War 1 aviator Captain Andrew Lang. Incredibly this aircraft had departed Sydney on March 13<sup>th</sup> and had just completed what was then described as not only the first photographic aerial reconnaissance flight in Australia but the first flight from Sydney to Launceston. The venture



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was funded by Sydney millionaire Lebbeus Hordern, a member of the ultra-wealthy Hordern family, who enjoyed yachting, fast boats, fast cars and photography. His quest for speed and adventure led to an interest in flying. So, he ordered a Maurice Farman Hydro Aeroplane (seaplane) from France, which arrived in Sydney by sea in April 1914. He then commenced flying lessons with Maurice Guillaux, however, before Lebbeus could make much progress in his training the Great War intervened. Lebbeus sailed to England to join the Royal Flying Corps, but having failed his eye test eventually joined the British Royal Field Artillery. He saw active service in France, where he was wounded and later gassed and was subsequently invalided home to Sydney in early 1918.

In April 1919, Lebbeus formed the Aerial Company Ltd to operate two war surplus landplanes. However, his real interest was in maritime aircraft, so he ordered two American built Curtiss M14 Seagull single engine flying boats and, from Britain, a Shorts Felixstowe F3 twin engine flying boat and a smaller Short Shrimp sporting seaplane.



***A Maurice Farman Hydro Aeroplane that Hordern (left) purchased in 1914.***

He then decided to sponsor an aerial survey expedition to thoroughly investigate conditions for the operations of maritime aircraft along the eastern coast of Australia from Tasmania to Cape York. Photographs would be taken and mooring places investigated with information gained used in establishing commercial air routes between capital cities, a possible use for the Felixstowe flying boat. All information gained would be made available to the Australian Government as he considered that the information would be important to the defence of Australia.



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The first stage of the survey would be from Melbourne to Launceston via the east coast, Wilsons Promontory and Flinders Island, then returning to Sydney via King Island, Melbourne and the east coast. The second phase of the survey would be to the cities and the ports north from Sydney to the tip of Cape York. The whole venture was to take four months.

Well, that was the plan.

### THE AIRCRAFT

The aircraft selected for the survey was one of the Curtiss Seagulls.

The Curtiss Seagull was an American-built single engine light commercial flying boat with an open cockpit and would normally accommodate a crew of two. The Curtiss Seagull was a civil version of the Curtiss MF flying boat trainer produced from 1918, the civil variant having a 119 kw (160 hp) Curtiss C.6 six cylinder-in-line engine in place of the V-8 unit in the military variants.

The MF was one of the long-line of flying boats produced for the US services following the entry of the United States into World War 1 when flying boats were required for patrolling American coastal waters to prevent German submarine operations.

Of the two examples of the aircraft Hordern purchased, Seagull (c/n MF.419/28), was registered in 1921 and became the aircraft that undertook this flight.

<b>Country of Origin</b>	United States of America
<b>Description</b>	Light commercial flying boat, bi-plane
<b>Power Plant</b>	One 119 kw (160 hp) Curtiss C.6 six-cylinder in-line liquid-cooled petrol engine
<b>Wing-span</b>	15.2 m (Upper Wing), 11.8 m (Lower wing)
<b>Length</b>	8.8 m
<b>Height</b>	3.65 m
<b>Max Speed</b>	123 km/h (76 mph)
<b>Range</b>	451 km (280 miles)
<b>Stalling Speed</b>	78 km/h (48 mph)
<b>Rate of Climb</b>	91 m/min (at sea level)
<b>Weight</b>	867 kg empty / 1237 kg loaded



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**THE CREW**

Experienced war time aviator Captain Andrew Lang, an automotive engineer, journalist and motoring reliability competitor, was employed to pilot the Seagull. At this time Lang was writing under the pseudonym "Napier Lion". Lang wrote an extensive series of articles on the survey flight which was serialised in the *Sydney Mail*.

Lang was to be accompanied by former Flying Corps mechanic Alexander James Hill, who would serve as deck hand, cameraman and aircraft maintainer.

Frederick Laidler later joined the expedition at Eden in the role of aircraft engineer.



**The Crew- Captain Andrew Lang (Left) and Alexander James Hill (Right)**



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**THE SUPPORT SHIP**

The 30-ton auxiliary yacht, "*Acielle*", was purchased to act as a mother ship. She was to carry fuel, aircraft spares and aircraft maintenance personnel. She would also provide accommodation and catering for the aircrew, as well as carrying a photographic laboratory including a dark room, so that aerial photos could be developed and printed en-route.

The "*Acielle*" was named after the initials of Hordern's commercial air operating company, ACL (Aerial Company Ltd), and was a 70-foot Tasmanian built wooden ketch fitted with a 45 hp engine giving her a cruising speed of eight knots.

The "*Acielle*" was to go ahead to investigate suitable alighting and moorings for the Seagull which was following. In the event, it did not turn out like that as the aircraft often arrived ahead of the yacht sometimes by quite a bit.

The skipper of the "*Acielle*" was Captain Charles W Snook who had served as a pilot in the Royal Flying Corps in France. Unfortunately, he was brought down on the wrong side of the lines and became a POW. He returned home in 1920 he formed the commercial aviation company, Australian Aircraft Pty Ltd.

The "*Acielle*" also carried a Bosun, a marine engineer and a cook.



**Captain Charles W. Snook and the Ketch "*Acielle*"**



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**THE FLIGHT**

The aircraft departed Sydney on Sunday March 13<sup>th</sup> 1921, heavily laden with crew, fuel, an extra anchor and photographic equipment. The flight was made in short stages, the first night being spent at Jervis Bay NSW where problems kept the expedition for nine days before moving on to Moruya, the Twofold Bay at Eden. Problems with both the aircraft and yacht, together with a severe storm that almost caused the loss of the aircraft, the expedition was still at Eden a month after leaving Sydney.

It was not until mid-afternoon April 13<sup>th</sup> that the Seagull lifted off from Twofold Bay and headed for Lakes Entrance. Due to strong head winds and the late start the Seagull only made it as far as Marlo where Lang managed a landing on the Snowy River, just prior to last light after a flight of three hours. The aircraft was anchored just off the jetty and Lang and Hill dined at the Marlo hotel with the Victorian Premier Harry Lawson. Further stops were made at Bairnsdale, Lakes Entrance and Welshpool. Progress was slow with weather causing further delays, but when the weather permitted at these stops local flights with passengers were undertaken including one with the Victorian Premier.

Minor repairs were undertaken at Welshpool to repair the port wingtip after a collision with a cray pot and some very small patching's for the wings. Engine repairs simply consisted of the fitting of an American Berkshire magneto in place of the British unit.

After leaving Welshpool the flight tracked across Bass Strait to Deal Island, where the aircraft delivered mail to the lighthouse keeper, then it was off to Lady Barron on Flinders Island. Mail and press news from Flinders Island bound for Launceston was loaded with the Seagull becoming the first aircraft to carry mail from Flinders Island.

The flight from Lady Barron to Launceston was not without its drama. The night before the departure heavy rain fell at Lady Barron resulting in the Seagull taking on about five gallons of rainwater. This extra weight, albeit minimal, in addition to the normal load, together with strong winds, heavy rain and mist for the duration of the sector made for a harrowing flight. At approximately 1:30pm on Friday the 20<sup>th</sup> of May 1921 the Seagull touched down on the Tamar River and taxied toward the Cataract bridge to be greeted by Captain Snook and the remainder of the support crew.

On arrival in Launceston Captain Lang emphatically proclaimed to the gathered crowd:

*"The airplane is a marvel. I do not think I have flown anything that has such a weight-lifting capacity. The aeroplane weighs two tons, carries 32 gallons of petrol, a 28lb anchor, a camera magazine and our own essentials. One thing a flying boat on a trip like this is, that the more one sees of it and the conditions that we have to work, the more*



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*convinced one becomes that unless the pilot and the rigger has had experience of the sea and boats the trip would have terminated long before this owing to the loss of the aircraft. The machine we were using was not designed for the ordeal which she has just passed. For a craft her size, in all probability this trip has established a world's record for the period and conditions of weather that the machine had to stand up to without being housed."*

Whilst in Launceston the aircraft spent some time in dry dock undergoing overhaul and hull repairs before being moved to anchorage in the North Esk river opposite Alexander Wharf, what is now Seaport. She shared her anchorage with another new arrival in Launceston the bucket dredge "Ponrabbell II" having just arrived from Scotland after being purchased by the Marine Board to dredge silt from the wharf areas.

Following completion of maintenance and several test flights the Seagull departed Launceston on the 19<sup>th</sup> June 1921 on her return flight to Sydney via Georgetown, Cape Barron Island, Deal Island, Welshpool, Lakes Entrance, Eden and Huskisson arriving in Sydney on the 4<sup>th</sup> July 1921.

The planned return flight via King Island was abandoned. Once again bad weather delayed the flight. Eventually they arrived at Welshpool on June 24<sup>th</sup> Lakes Entrance on the 26<sup>th</sup> then on to Eden. The next morning shortly after they became airborne from Twofold Bay the Seagull suffered an engine failure, however, as they were over water Lang simply alighted on the open sea waited whilst repairs were affected and resumed the flight. The engine failure was the only significant mechanical problem during the whole flight.

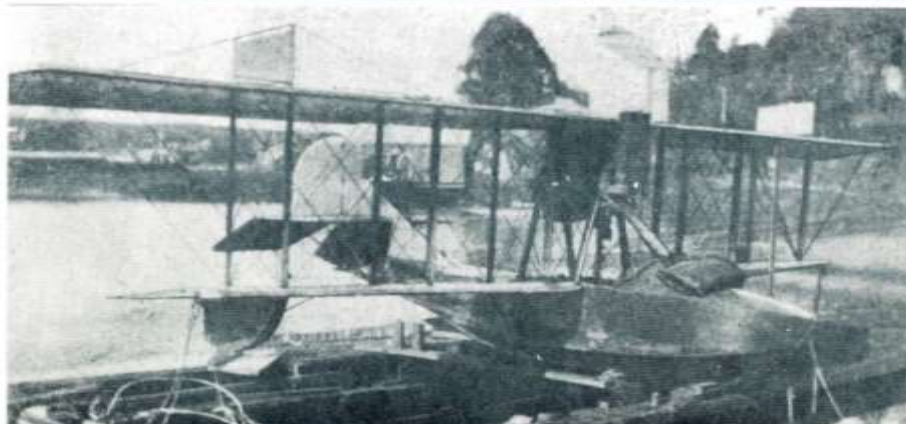
Arriving in Sydney on July 4<sup>th</sup> the whole venture had taken 16 weeks and 1 day, four times longer than planned. The round trip covered just short of 1700 miles with a flight time of approximately 36.5 hours at an average speed of 46.5 mph or 75 kmh. In comparison today's jets take approximately 1hour 30 minutes (or 3 hours return) flight time between Sydney and Launceston.

Due to the late return from Tasmania, the northern leg of the survey was postponed and eventually cancelled. However, in 1922 Lang and Hill with the Seagull and the Short Shrimp floatplane were shipped to Papua New Guinea for use by the renowned photographer Frank Hurley on his 1922 expedition.

But that's another story.



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**Middle Photo:(L-R), Andrew Lang, (Pilot), Frederick Laidler (Aviation Engineer), Jack Watson (Ship Engineer), Alex Hill (Aircraft rigger and cameraman), Frank Chandos (Aceille cook) and Charles Snook (Aceille Captain)**

**Bottom Photo: Seagull in dry dock in Launceston for maintenance and repairs**





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The route map published in the "Sydney Mail", September 1921



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**The Seagull moored on the Tamar River at Alexander's Wharf in Launceston after completing the first flight from Sydney to Launceston.**

**In the background is the "Ponrabbel II", the Tamar River dredge.**

**Photo by H. J. King**