



TASMANIAN AVIATION HISTORICAL SOCIETY Incorporated

TASMANIAN AVIATION GIANTS – THE HOLYMAN FAMILY AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL AIRWAYS – THE WAR YEARS 1939 - 1945

Tasmanian Aviation Giants – The Holyman Family

Australian National Airways – The War Years 1939 - 1945

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When Australia entered World War 2 in 1939 the Government of Australia requisitioned ANA's four DC-3s, leaving it to battle on with its assortment of lesser aircraft, including three DC-2s. However, ANA was soon operating a network of services around Australia on behalf of the war effort. It operated a large number of Douglas DC-2s, DC-3s and even at least one rare Douglas DC-5, mostly on behalf of the American forces in Australia.

One of the most dramatic examples of the conflict's impact on ANA occurred at Brisbane which was then just a quiet airport in comparison to today's operations. In 1941 the works manager, Ted Battery, was in charge of four engineers, but by 1944 this number had increased to 2,500.

The growth of ANA during this period was due not only to the airline's total commitment to the war effort but the efficient systems and first class engineering that ANA could supply on a far greater scale than any other airline. Throughout the war ANA provided aircraft, aircrew and a full range of engineering services to the RAAF and the United States services whilst still able to maintain services on its route network throughout the country, thus playing a valuable role in Australia's defence infrastructure.

This was a testament to the foresight and management of Ivan Holyman.

Within weeks of the commencement of World War 2, ANA aircraft commenced flying extensive surveillance flights using DC-3's and covering vast areas of waters around Australia with flights of up to ten hours being common. Ten pilots, ten engineers and a stores clerk of ANA's staff were immediately seconded to the air force, who at this stage had no experience of flying or maintaining modern aircraft.

The long-range flights were further expanded when, in 1940, pilots and engineers had their abilities further tested to carry out long-distance flights with precision. After one of these flights escorting a convoy of the AIF into the Indian Ocean using three DC-3's one of the pilots, Keith Virtue, suggested they should attempt on their return, to fly across Australia. Fellow pilots Squadron Leader Heffernan and Willis Reeve quickly agreed and so the three aircraft departed Perth in West Australia at 1.30 a.m.

The DC-3 "Kyilla" piloted by Virtue flew from Perth to Goondiwindi in Queensland in twelve and a half hours, creating a new distance record across Australia. Keith Virtue felt he could have made Brisbane, but it was too risky. A second aircraft piloted by Willis Reeve had mechanical problems and diverted to Adelaide whilst the third DC-3 flown by Heffernan



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successfully landed at Richmond with the fuel gauges on zero proving the concept of long precision flights was possible.



**File photo of DC-3 “Kylla” flown by Keith Virtue in twelve and a half hours
from Perth to Goondiwindi**

One of ANA’s problems during the conflict was that, although under aircraft wartime manpower regulations, ANA was a protected industry however, the airline lost many staff to the armed forces including pilots, engineers and administrative personnel. Additionally, some losses of aircraft occurred when the DC-2 “Pengana” lost engine power after take-off from Mascot en-route to Brisbane and had to conduct a forced landing in Cook’s River and a further DC-2, the “Bungana,” had an engine fire en-route to Adelaide. Fortunately, all crew and passengers were unharmed but the accidents forced two of the airline’s DC-2’s out of action for lengthy periods.

A third aircraft to be lost did not have the same impact on the running of the airline as did the incidents involving the two DC-2’s but was of substantial sentimental and historical significance. Holyman’s Airways first aircraft, the DH.83 “Miss Currie,” was on loan to the Royal Flying Doctor Service based at Brocken Hill. A pro German saboteur set fire to the hangar where “Miss Currie” was stored totally destroying the aircraft.



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File photo of the DH.83 Miss Currie that was destroyed by fire at Broken Hill

The engineering department continued to expand during this difficult period of retaining trained staff, maintaining its regular services, the accidents to the “Pengana” and “Bungana” and the absence of the DC-3 aircraft, on secondment to the RAAF. However, when Japan entered the war further complications arose.

With the Japanese invasion of South East Asia and the bombing of Darwin, Katherine, Broome and other northern Australian areas an invasion of the Australian mainland became a real threat. Australia’s economy and society were immediately put on a war footing with ANA and the Australian aviation industry becoming totally absorbed in the war effort. The airline faced constant problems with shortages of labour, spare parts, aircraft and fuel resulting with the inevitable reduction in the quality of passenger services, a reputation that haunted the airline in the post war era.

During the years 1941 and 1942, ANA flew innumerable flights, usually from Cairns and Townsville, to various ports in New Guinea including Port Moresby where Australian civilians were brought to in a variety of aircraft. In eight days during December 1941, 732 civilians were evacuated to Cairns. In January 1942 ANA engineers, at the request of US Army Air Force officers, undertook the task of overhauling American Flying Fortresses and Liberators. By war’s end it was estimated ANA engineers spent over four-million-man hours working on American aircraft whilst all the time maintaining the regular flight service, albeit with the inevitable slipping of safety standards.



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An American Flying Fortress. ANA engineers did a 500-hour inspection removed, overhauled and replaced the four engines in a period of only sixteen days.

In spite of all the pressures applied, ANA's safety record in the war years was by no means devastating, with only four serious accidents on scheduled services, partly due to lowered safety standards of wartime, with only two cases of damage that could be attributed to the war occurring. The first of these was the destruction of "Miss Currie" at Broken Hill the other case was somewhat more bizarre.

The second occurred in July 1942 after the DC-2 "Loongana" landed at King Island. In late 1941 and early 1942 the Army ordered explosive charges to be placed under the runways of selected coastal airports. One of these airstrips happened to be at Currie, King Island. Whilst the "Loongana" was being loaded, a soldier began fiddling with switches that controlled the demolition charges. Somehow the soldier activated the wrong switch, there was a huge explosion and the runway was destroyed. The DC-2 was showered with clods of earth that resulted in numerous dents occurring on the wings and fuselage on the aircraft which, fortunately, following some hasty runway repairs still able to take off and complete the flight but was out of service for some time whilst repairs were being affected.

A further war-time feat began in 1942 with the Courier Service flights began with aircraft provided by the Directorate of Air Transport (DAT), flown by ANA pilots, maintained by ANA engineers, whilst the co-pilots and wireless operators were from the RAAF. During the four



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years of its operation, most of ANA's senior pilots spent time flying the service and attained a high standard of reliability and punctuality. The aircraft were quite distinctive featuring the white star of the US Army Air Force as well as the Australian civil registration clearly visible on the aircraft's fuselage. Initially flying Brisbane to Port Moresby and return the service expanded to fly from Archerfield in Queensland to different New Guinea destinations and eventually, following the defeat of the Japanese in the Philippines, commenced a Service Brisbane-Manila-Brisbane. The service was credited with providing a secure way of maintaining communications between Allied Commanders in Australia and the allied forces in the front line throughout the South West Pacific.

After the conflict concluded ANA emerged with a remarkable record in the provision of essential services and commitment to Australia's defence. From December 1941 to June 1944, its civilian passenger aircraft flew 31,860 hours, carried about 68,000 passengers and large quantities of mail and freight. It's engineering department's total man hours on RAAF and USAAF aircraft was a combined sum of 7,760,706 hours. By June 1944, ANA personnel had increased from eighty employed before 1936, to nearly four thousand, two thousand being engineers and one hundred and twenty pilots.

By 1945 the airline proudly claimed that it had the largest internal route network of any airline in the world. ANA's post war planning was largely in the hands of a small group of senior executives with Ivan Holyman as managing director.

During the war there was a large increase in the number of women employed by ANA. In 1936 staff lists showed only seventeen women were employed by the airline whilst in 1944 there were approximately five hundred female employees. The largest group was still the air hostesses.