



TASMANIAN AVIATION HISTORICAL SOCIETY Incorporated

TASMANIAN AVIATOR - CAPTAIN ALBERT AUBREY KOCH, MBE

Historical Archives of Tasmanian Aviators – Captain Albert Aubrey Koch, MBE

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Tasmanian born, **Albert Aubrey (Aub) Koch**, MBE (2 October 1904 – 21 June 1975) was a pioneering Australian military and civil pilot. He trained at Point Cook in 1926 and following graduation, accepted a Short Service Commission in the Royal Air Force (RAF) as there were no places available in the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) at the time. After four years of service in Egypt and Palestine, he returned to Australia and was commissioned into the Citizen Air Force, flying with No. 1 Squadron at Laverton, where he gained flying instructor qualifications. Soon after, he was employed by Guinea Airways as an aircraft captain and spent five years in Papua and New Guinea (PNG), gaining fame as the rescuer of the Archbold expedition. Koch was transferred to the RAAF Active Reserve upon going to PNG. He joined Qantas a year before World War II broke out, employed predominantly on the Singapore route. He was unfortunate to be the captain of the only Qantas aircraft known to be shot down during that war, when the Short Empire flying boat *Corio* was lost off Timor (*Circe* disappeared in 1942, possibly also shot down, and *Corinna* was destroyed by enemy action on the water at Broome, Western Australia). Post war he was recruited by Lester Brain on the formation of Trans Australia Airlines (TAA), specifically to be Senior Pilot on the DC4 Skymaster. At 45, he retired from active flying to become Inspector of Safety and Accidents, TAA. Koch married Clarice Grant in 1933. They had two daughters and two sons. This is his story.



Captain Koch in his TAA uniform

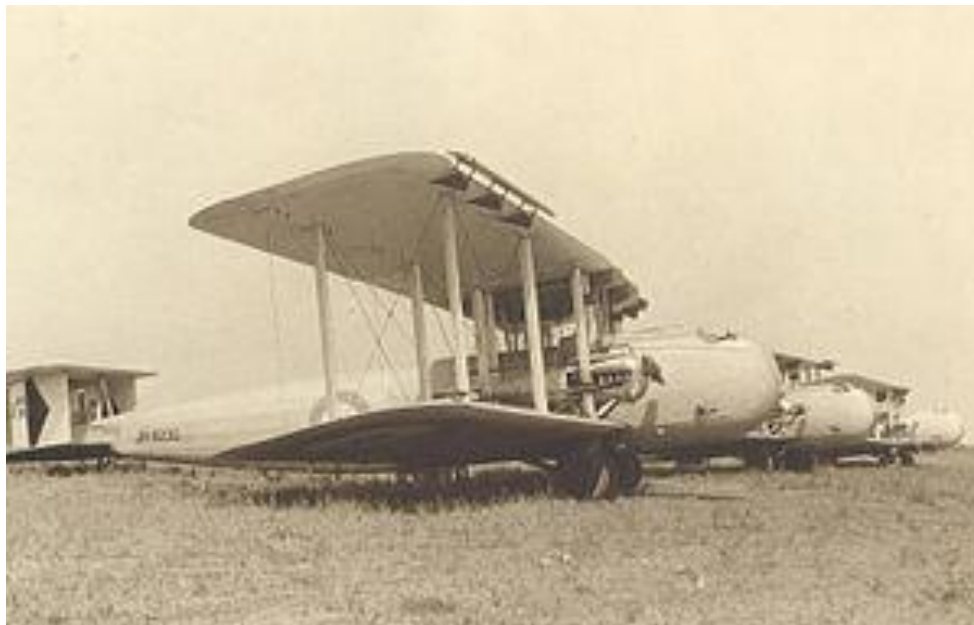


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Born at Ulverstone, Tasmania on 2 October 1904, the son of R. W. Koch, and Elinor (Burton) Koch, Aubrey was educated at Clemes College, Hobart, and began an Engineering Degree at the University of Tasmania. He was a keen rower and was in the bow for the 1925 winning crew in the inter-varsity eights in Brisbane. Aviation called, however, and he entered the RAAF Point Cook for pilot training in 1926, graduating at the end of the year and was one of six graduates from his course selected for a Short Service Commission in the RAF.

Koch was initially sent to England for training and assessment, where he flew the Avro 504, the Armstrong Whitworth Siskin, and the Bristol Fighter. Accepting a posting to the Middle East, he was attached to No. 208 Army Cooperation Squadron RAF at Heliopolis, Egypt. Whilst with the squadron, he flew operations on the Bristol Fighter and in August 1929 was involved in the suppression of the Hebron riots. In 1929 while on leave in Australia he met with Lieutenant Colonel Horace Brinsmead, the Controller of Civil Aviation to understand the skills he would need to find a commercial aviation position back in Australia. Brinsmead advised him to gain experience on larger aircraft and fortunately in May 1930, his Squadron re-equipped with the Armstrong Whitworth Atlas. Koch was then allowed to convert to fly the Vickers Vimy at No. 216 Squadron, and flew as second pilot on Vickers Victoria aircraft. He returned to Australia at the end of 1930 at the expiry of his commission, arriving in Melbourne on 15 December.



No 216 Squadron RAF Vickers Victoria's at Ismailia (A A Koch)

On his return to Australia Aubrey found employment in public transport aviation was difficult to find, however, he was able to continue flying with the Citizen Air Force at No. 1 Squadron, Laverton.



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To gain experience he flew as second pilot, without pay, for Australian National Airways and could consider himself lucky not to be aboard the ill-fated "Southern Cloud", when family commitments prevented him being part of its crew on its fateful flight.

In mid-1933 he was appointed instructor with the Australian Aero Club, based at Essendon Aerodrome and in November was recruited by Guinea Airways as a captain spending the next five years in Papua and New Guinea where he flew the Junkers W 34, the Junkers G 31, and the Ford Tri-Motor, gaining experience with sea operations when the W34 was float equipped.



File photo of Ford Trimotor similar to Koch's aircraft in New Guinea

During this period of time the second (1936–37) Archbold Expedition had become isolated when its own aircraft was accidentally destroyed in Port Moresby harbour. They were thought to be camped in the Blucher Mountains near the headwaters of the Strickland River, low on supplies and without fuel for its generators. Koch flew out of Mt Hagen in a Ford fitted with long range tanks, found the party and resupplied them by parachute with food and gasoline and gained some notoriety for his efforts. Among his many photographs taken during this period are several of the last known days of Amelia Earhart at Lae aerodrome.

Koch finally achieved his ambition of becoming a commercial pilot by joining what was then known as Qantas Empire Airways (QEA) on 4 July 1938. The Australian to Singapore service commenced on 2 August 1938 (the westbound service on 4 August). In the almost nautical language of QEA, he was promoted from "Extra Mate" to "Senior Mate" in October 1940. This allowed him to fly as relief Captain on the Singapore service. He was soon promoted to "Master", and in June 1943 to "Extra Master" fulfilling his ambition to Captain a commercial airline.

QEA was intimately involved in the war effort almost from its beginning and in late 1940's it was contracted to fly 19 PBY5 Catalinas from Honolulu to Australia on behalf of the RAAF. By a convenience, the crews were regarded as civilians (to meet American diplomatic niceties) for this operation, but on other RAAF contracts, particularly to combat zones, they were seen



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as serving in the RAAF Reserve. Koch and a crew that included the now famous aviator and author, P.G. Taylor, flew the final leg of one of the Catalina's delivery flights, arriving in Sydney on 24 October 1941, for the first time via Suva, Fiji.



File Photo of RAAF Catalina

The crew of this flight were determined to commemorate their mission by flying the first airmail delivery between Fiji and Australia and to that end they had a large number of "First Day Covers" (but without Airmail stamps). They were endorsed by the Suva Post Office prior to departure and by the Sydney Post Office on arrival (some examples of what became collector's items are held by the Qantas Museum). They also transported 200 pounds weight of ordinary mail on behalf of the Fiji postal authorities. This plan led to a serious disagreement with the American Airline Pan American, which had the contract to convey the air mail from Fiji but was not due to start operations until 9 November 1941.

Following the delivery flight, Koch returned to the East Indies operation and on 30 January 1942, when in command of the Shorts S23 Empire aircraft named *Corio*, was shot down off Timor by seven Japanese Zeros whilst carrying out a relief flight to Surabaya, Dutch East Indies. Of the eighteen people on board, five survived. Koch was wounded by gunfire in the left leg and left arm and broke his right leg in the subsequent crash landing. Despite the injuries, he swam about five miles to the shore where he was looked after by local people, until the Dutch Navy found the survivors some days later and rescued them with a Dornier flying boat. Some three weeks later, once again apparently tempting fate, he was in Darwin hospital on the day of the first Japanese raid on Darwin. By good fortune, the QEA Shorts S23 aircraft *Camilla* survived the raid and Koch was flown to Sydney for treatment.

He was unfortunate again on 22 April 1943 when, in command of this aircraft on an RAAF contract involving the transport of military personnel to Port Moresby, he found himself



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unable to proceed due to bad weather. With low fuel supplies on board, he decided to attempt a night landing on the open ocean when off the coast of New Guinea. Some comment has been made that the relatively inexperienced RAAF co-pilot Sydney Peak may have contributed to the accident when he initially believed he caught sight of the sea then shouted it was still some distance below them. In attempting to regain control of the aircraft Koch had just configured for landing, the *Camilla* stalled, struck the water and broke up. Koch would later recall that just prior to impact the altimeter was reading “*minus 30 feet.*”

Of the 31 people on board, 13 did not survive and for the second time in fifteen months Koch found himself struggling for his life. Koch spent about 18 hours in the sea before being rescued by the chance passage of a local steamer. Following the incident, A. B. Corbett, the Director-General of Civil Aviation, recommended to his Minister that in view of the circumstances no Court of Inquiry be held—in effect Koch was exonerated.



File photo of the illfated Shorts “Camilla” and below the “Corio.”





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Following the war in 1946, the Australian Government determined to nationalise commercial air operations in the belief that air transport was primarily a public service, but it was prevented from doing so by a High Court decision. It therefore formed a government airline to compete with the private carriers (which was to be administered by the Australian National Airways Commission), and would operate as Trans Australia Airlines (TAA). Lester Brain was headhunted from Qantas and was appointed General Manager of the new airline. One of his first appointments was that of Captain Aubrey Koch to be Senior Pilot DC4 Skymaster. Brain would later be quoted as describing Koch as *"one of the best and most versatile pilots and navigators of his eraone of the most manly, courageous and honest characters I have ever known."*

Koch remained in this role for four years, however reoccurring disabilities developed from his war injuries forced his retirement from active flying in September 1950. With in excess of 17,000 flying hours, he now took up the role of Inspector of Air Safety for TAA.

In June 1955 he was appointed a Member of the Civil Division of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, the citation being: "In recognition of Captain Koch's long and distinguished service to civil aviation in Australia." He finally retired in June 1961, and settled at Mt Eliza, Victoria, where he died on 21 June 1975.



File photo TAA DC-4 Skymaster