

**Retrospection**  
**I Flew the Tasman – Just!**  
**(and I've got the T-shirt to prove it!)**  
**by Bob Livingstone**

*(This story has been published before, in a 1992 issue of Flightpath. But 32 years have passed since then, and most of the readers of Downwind will have either forgotten it or never read it in the first place. Additionally, certain information which it was felt best not mentioned at the time has been added.)*



I was sitting aft on the port side, head on my chest, fast asleep, when I was suddenly jerked awake with the fading memory of a loud BANG echoing in my head.

“Was that a backfire?” I thought, sitting tense for a minute or so. It wasn't repeated, so I figured I had been dreaming. I was nodding off again when it happened again: BANG! Well, I hadn't dreamed that one!

It was the jinxed number two engine again. The backfiring increased in tempo. The engine began to intermittently lose power and then surge back to full power with a roar, causing the Lockheed to slew first one way and then the other.

I crossed to the other side of the cabin and looked out the window at the starboard engine. As the engine backfired, the cowling appeared to puff out like a trumpeter's cheeks; each time it happened I had a vision of it coming off altogether and maybe taking the tail with it!

The two pilots were having a hard time in the cockpit, running through various drills trying to establish the cause of the problem while still trying to keep reasonably straight with the power surges.

Suddenly the engine dials all fell to zero as the engine shut itself down altogether.

Our Captain quickly feathered the propeller; there was just enough rotational force to complete the sequence.

The big prop sat there, edge to the airflow, the first time I had experienced this situation for real; this was no simulated engine failure like those I had experienced in DC-3s.



Not being the sort of person who likes to sit around doing nothing, I monitored the engine for any signs of fire, and finding none, went forward to see if I could help. What took my attention immediately was the sight of the 'spectacles' turned to the vertical; it was obvious that we had more than just an engine problem: we had VERY limited aileron authority left. Luckily the weather was quite calm, or we would have been in serious trouble.

(The previously unrevealed reason for the control problem was that when the painter at Bankstown did a repaint in the cockpit, he replaced the trim placards incorrectly, swapping the aileron and rudder trims. In the heat of the moment of the engine failure, this was not picked up and it wasn't until we approached Kaitaia that the penny dropped, the aircraft was re-trimmed, and it flew perfectly well!)

So, how had the ten aboard found ourselves in this predicament?

In the early days of what became the Australian Warbirds Association, one of the leading lights of New Zealand Warbirds addressed a meeting of interested parties at Bankstown. A close fellowship grew between the two organisations, culminating in the New Zealand Roaring Forties North American Harvard aerobatic team displaying over Sydney and at Richmond in October 1991. I had been lucky enough to score a back seat in the solo display Harvard in the aerobatic Sydney displays, photographing the formation.

In reciprocation, Australian Warbirds members decided in 1992 to attend the Easter long weekend Warbirds Over Wanaka airshow by flying the syndicated Lockheed Model 18 Lodestar (N56LH) which had recently been ferried to Australia from the USA.

Located in the beautiful Southern Alps region of the South Island, Wanaka was then the home of Tim Wallis' Alpine Fighter Collection and remains today as the premier southern hemisphere location for an air show – in my opinion anyway.

I was along to cover the story of the flight and airshow for Flightpath magazine. It was an assignment difficult to refuse – a trip to New Zealand, a flight in a warbird and an opportunity to attend a warbird air show which had worldwide standing at what was conceivably was the peak moment! I had many sleepless nights making that decision – NOT!



Early on the morning of Thursday, April 15 1992 the 10 passengers and crew assembled at Classic Aviation's hangar at Bankstown airport to begin the flight to Auckland, thence to Wanaka. Rather than fly Bankstown-Sydney (for Customs)-Norfolk Island, the decision was to shorten the first over-water leg by flying Bankstown-Brisbane-Norfolk.

The weather was fine as the Lodestar departed Bankstown and set course OCTA up the Light Aircraft Lane to avoid the Sydney Control Zone before taking up a low-level coastal route to Brisbane. Arrival at Brisbane was just under three and a half hours from Bankstown on a cool and showery morning. Taxying to the International Terminal seemed to take an eternity, even at a good clip; Brisbane airport had changed a lot since the days when as a kid on a pushbike I was chased around it by the DCA parking ogre on his Honda step-through. Later I adopted a pair of Ansett-khaki colour overalls (TAA used white overalls which I could not source) and would wave to Mr. DCA when I saw him.

We parked beside a Russian Antonov AN-124 which completely dwarfed us.



After clearing Customs, we trooped back to the aircraft only to find an ominous puddle of oil under the right (number two) engine. A valve-guide seal was leaking, but this was quickly attended to by the Captain – multi-tasking as an engineer, test pilot, Qantas skipper and our Captain. While this was being worked on, we were visited by a number of interested people who wanted to know what “it” was and what we were doing.

They were all quite fascinated by the background of the aircraft and particularly by its age. We were called brave for daring to take such an old aeroplane such a long way, but I am sure what these people were thinking was that we were completely crazy to be taking such a decrepit piece of junk hundreds of miles over the ocean – look, it was already having problems with one engine. Barking mad!

Undaunted we took off from Brisbane and climbed to cruising altitude of 10,000 feet: no pressurisation or oxygen available in this old beast. The aircraft performed faultlessly for the almost five-hour flight to Norfolk Island, arriving after dark. On the descent I could see red-hot pieces of carbon being flung out of the engine exhausts into the slipstream. The ocean glistened in the light of the moon and the shadows of the fair-weather cumulus clouds below us looked like the island we were looking for. Eventually we spotted the lights, right on track.

We spent the night in a motel and most of us made a party of it which might have had some bearing on the fact that I was snoozing when the backfiring started – that and the oxygen reduction at 10,000 feet. There was no great haste to leave in the morning, the Norfolk Island-Auckland leg not being in the same league as the eight and a half hours flown the previous day. This allowed those of us who were early risers a chance to go for a walk and have a look at the island, a great place to come for a holiday though deep pockets wouldn't go astray.

When we arrived at the aircraft, we found that the Brisbane oil pool had repeated itself although on a larger scale. The airport manager was beside himself over the situation, the FAC having only just spent a large amount of money re-surfacing the apron and already we were ruining it; oil and bitumen do not make a good combination. It seems he was much more at home with nice shiny turbine-powered aeroplanes and did not share our preference for old oily ones. He seemed unimpressed with my comment, “It's an aerodrome; get over it.”

The problem was obviously the same as the day before and on the same engine: the valve-guide was leaking. A bit more work on the offending item ensured that the problem would never occur again. We “kicked the tyres and lit the fires” before 10.00am and we were soon airborne. As we had arrived in the dark the night before and hadn't seen the island, we did a leisurely low level left orbit around the entire island. There are houses in some pretty interesting places along the coast.



Soon we were setting course and climbing back to cruise at 10,000 feet again. The cabin temperature dropped, and the passengers began to get a little cold, but a call to the cockpit soon had warm air flowing. This warmth, the reduction in oxygen and for some, a lack of sleep the night before, had many nodding off to sleep.

This was when it all happened and the adrenaline flowed, quickly putting paid to any lingering drowsiness. We were losing height: about 2000 feet by the time the prop was feathered, and slowly but surely we were descending. Of the ten aboard, six were pilots and had a good understanding of the situation and all were taking it with equanimity although there was one face which had gone a rather greenish grey. He was a non-pilot syndicate member so maybe he was worried about his investment!

We had just passed PNR, and so were committed to continue, unable to return to Norfolk. Since I had learned to fly in the mid-sixties and was a current air traffic controller with the licences and knowledge to deal with the situation, my offer to take over the radio while the pilots dealt with the aircraft was accepted. The first obvious move was to contact New Zealand Flight Service with a PAN call ... "Lockheed Lodestar November Five Six Lima Hotel heading one seven zero (X) miles from Auckland with one engine shut down, unable to maintain height and passing eight thousand from ten, POB ten. Standby for further intentions."

Our track Norfolk-Auckland was southward so we would make landfall at the top of the North Island. Continuing to Auckland did not appear to be a good idea in the circumstances, so I asked Auckland Radio for closer airfields and their runway lengths. Kaitiaki (the nearest) was the obvious choice for the diversion, an ex-RNZAF WWII airfield with a long, sealed runway.

We continued on our steady way, listening carefully to the left engine for any sound of irregularity; without it, New Zealand was a long swim! An uncharacteristically calm Tasman Sea grew inexorably closer as we droned on, slowly descending. We could see the occasional ship or boat and the pilots were ever mindful of their locations in case of need.

At 2800 feet the Captain fed more power to the operating 1200HP Wright Cyclone and the descent stabilised. I looked over at one of our passengers and found him quietly reading. How could he just sit there and read I wondered. He told me later: "If I was going to die, I wanted to know the outcome of the story"!

At last I was able to transmit, "We've crossed the coast," but the significance of the statement was lost on the operator who didn't seem to appreciate the message's importance (at least to me, anyway) at all; I was pleased that whatever happened, we weren't going to have to ditch.

Kaitiaki lay about 10 minutes flying time south and as we passed over the airfield we could see that quite a crowd of emergency vehicles had gathered. We did one more orbit and then joined the downwind leg to land. The Captain pulled off a terrific landing; to anyone not in the know it would have felt like any normal landing.



Backtracking on the runway we were confronted with the sight of fire engines, police cars and ambulances tearing down the runway toward us. The exit taxiway was on the left, and as we couldn't negotiate a 90-degree left turn, we executed what must have appeared to be a comical 270-degree right turn to leave the runway. We taxied up onto the apron, shut down and left the aircraft.

The police wanted our passports and restricted us from leaving the area of the aircraft – we still had to clear Customs (who were on their way, the nearest contingent being some three hours away by car). We pulled the cowls off the offending engine but there was nothing obviously wrong and there was a distinct lack of suitable tools.



The excellent runway was almost all Kaitaia had to offer although the local aero club had recently built a clubhouse in which we gratefully accepted a cup of tea and a biscuit. Despite the lack of facilities, the Kaitaia locals couldn't have been more helpful. Aero Tech of Ardmore, the light aircraft field for Auckland, were our agents in New Zealand and we gave them a call to explain our predicament. Since we had 10 people to move, they arranged two aircraft to fly up, pick us up and deliver us to Auckland where we had a motel booking.

We were locked in the clubhouse until Customs arrived and cleared us without difficulty. Not long before dark, a PA-28 and a C-402 landed from Ardmore. Kaitaia lacks runway lights so there was a deal of haste getting organised, transferring baggage, making our farewells and we got away just on dark. Tracking south towards Auckland it appeared that there was just a single two-lane road north from the Capital and since it was the Easter long weekend it was a long snake of tail and head lights showing us the way.

Things come in threes it is said and that certainly was the case here. Those who travelled in the Cherokee reported that they experienced the engine "coughing and spitting" and the taxi cab the Cessna passengers caught to the motel had electrical problems on the way.

On the other side of the road, opposite our motel, was The White House Hotel where we could get a meal. We ordered big steaks and went out to cook them on the barbecue, this being the style of the hotel. The owner of the hotel became aware that he had a group of Aussies at the barbecue, and he came out and started to give us a hard time which we of course reciprocated. The reason for our presence in New Zealand was raised after a few minutes and suddenly the attitude changed. It transpired that "mine host" was a part owner of a Harvard which was at that moment at Wanaka. What a wonderful chap he turned out to be – not only a warbirder but the owner of a pub! The free beer flowed for the rest of the night.

It was decided that the next day a crew would fly back to Kaitaia with tools, establish what the problem was and see if it could be repaired – we didn't need to be in Wanaka until Saturday anyway. The less mechanically inclined of the group took the opportunity to do some sightseeing around Auckland.

The Kaitaia crew returned that night without our Lodestar; the damage was serious. After we had returned to Australia it was discovered that the main auxiliary drive (at the rear of the engine) was the culprit. It appeared that initially it had lost a tooth, and the timing began to slip, producing the backfiring. Another tooth then jammed the mechanism and the shaft sheared. Since the drive powered the fuel and oil pumps and the magneto, the engine just stopped.

The outcome was a month's delay awaiting parts from the U.S., covered under warranty since both engines were zero-timed overhauls at the start of the Lodestar's ferry to Australia. Paul Simpson of Classic Aviation did the repair in the open, although by this time sunny Kaitaia had become windy, cold and wet Kaitaia. In May the aircraft was flown back to Bankstown, again via Norfolk.

What did I learn from the experience? Well, the first thing was that, as long as I had something to do, I could function normally and did not frighten easily. The second thing was that if you intend to go flying in old aeroplanes, make sure you have a healthy balance on your credit card. The cost of the last-minute QF one-way booking was more than a return air fare plus a week's accommodation to Auckland ex-Sydney! It took me months to pay the trip off.