

'NEVER LET DOWN'

Old Bus's Glory

"SMITHY" BIDS ADIEU

Named for Australia of the starry cross, To write Australia's name across the skies. The Old Bus, guided once more by her Boss, Wrote 'Finis' Sydney lifted up its eyes.

(Specially written for "The Sun" by Sir Charles Kingsford Smith)

To-day I am going on two journeys. One will take me round the world, mainly by ship and on business. The other, flying the Southern Cross to Richmond to be handed over to the nation, will take only a little while, but it will be nearly 400,000 miles at the speed of memory.

This is the last trip of the Old 'Bus, and my Sentimental Journey.

More Than 'Plane

I'll try and tell you why the Southern Cross is more than just an aeroplane to me.

When I talk of "my dear old faithful Southern Cross," I'm not being merely sentimental. This aeroplane has been a living thing to me.

No Arab could think more of his thoroughbred horse, no sailor regard his tall ship with deeper affection, than I feel for my Old 'Bus.

Do you realise that I have spent about 150 days and 20 whole nights in the Southern Cross, and during all those days and nights over the Pacific, the Atlantic, the Tasman, over the Australian and American continents it has never really let me down.

Even on that last Jubilee flight, half-way across the Tasman and back, it wasn't really the Old 'Bus that failed me. It seemed to call out when the propeller was smashed: "It isn't me, Boss. It's that new bit of cowling.

Daddy Of 'Em All

The Old 'Bus knows me. It flies better for me than for anyone else. I've proved that, time and again. Other people have trouble with the old girl. But she always "comes through for me." Here's her story:

The Southern Cross was built by Anthony Fokker, in 1925, when Sir Hubert Wilkins bought the machine for Polar exploration. It was crashed on rough ice in the Arctic, and shipped back to Seattle to be repaired.

Then Wilkins had no further use for it. He sold it to us without engines, to Charles Ulm, Keith Anderson, and myself without engines.

Few people realise that the Southern Cross is "The Father of the Fokkers." The Dutch, who always refer to an aeroplane as masculine, call it that.

Braved Ocean

It was the first big-wing, three-engined monoplane Fokker ever built.

To get funds to fly the Pacific, Captain George Pond and myself tried to break the world's endurance flight record.

Cruelly overloaded with fuel, the Southern Cross made the most arduous take-off of its career, and the most hazardous I have ever made. But she struggled into the sky for us, and we stayed up first 49 hours 27 minutes, then 50 hours 7 minutes. The weariness of those two-day stretches in the air, circling round and round at stalling point over San Francisco! And we missed the record by a few hours!

But I feel sure the Old 'Bus made her record on this occasion, and that no multi-engined aircraft has equalled her endurance since.

Then, on June 1, 1928, we took her off across the Pacific, and she came through with flying colors, as you all know.

No other aeroplane has ever crossed the Pacific from America to Australia.

Many times I almost lost control as we wallowed blind through storms between Suva and Brisbane, in the blackest night. No one could have "blamed" an aeroplane for going in the ditch that night, but the Cross stuck to us through thick and thin.

Over Atlantic

In 1929. came Coffee Royal, where the wing of the Old 'Bus was our shelter from the sun by day, our ceiling at night. We set out again, and broke Hinkler's time between Australia and England Charles Ulm, Litchfield, McWilliams, and myself.

In 1930. the Southern Cross was reconditioned by Anthony Fokker, who shares my affection for her, and didn't charge us a cent.

Then we flew the Atlantic. The Old 'Bus was the first aeroplane ever to reach New York from Europe.

In mid-Atlantic the altimeter went "hay-wire." It showed 600ft., but we were less than 100ft. from the waves we couldn't see in a blind fog. The aerial trailed in the water, and told us our danger.

The Old 'Bus responded to the climb out of that death valley. We got to New York.

Then we flew her across America. Having done that, the Southern Cross had flown around the world at its greatest circumference, and is the only machine ever to have done so.

We shipped the Old 'Bus back to Australia. She went on to the service of A.N.A. The Southern Cross has carried about 100,000 passengers, and some tons of mail.

Tasman Terror

The depression hit us and I took the Cross back for myself and went joy-riding through Australia, and in New Zealand after we made the first crossing of the Tasman.

That first Tasman flight was the worst in my whole career. I felt the chill of death creep up my spine and raise my hair on end.

We had ice on the wings — half a ton of ice! And the Old 'Bus never bowed her head and went down.

The Southern Cross has crossed the Tasman six times, and gone halfway across. Of that last trip I feel that no other aircraft has ever had to fly 600 miles with a dud motor and one failing.

Together we rescued the crashed English mail at Koepang, brought it back to Australia, and flew the outward mail to Akyab. Together we added to the tremendous tasks which the Old 'Bus had already done, two crossings of the Australian continent.

And together we go on the last flight of this grand old war-horse to Richmond to-day. Old horse, you've earned the clover, long rest and quiet repose!

So far as I am concerned, there will never be another aeroplane named the Southern Cross.

Plaque of Memory

Yet as long as I live I shall strive to perpetuate the name, in combinations, such as Star of the South, or something like that. The names of any aircraft we fly on a trans-Tasman service will have a definite relation to Southern Cross.

I want to put my own plaque of memory, of polished wood or brass, in the Southern Cross. I don't know how exactly what the wording will be, but it may be something like this:

"To my Faithful 'Old 'Bus,' in truly grateful memory and regard, from Her Boss."

This is a facsimile reproduction of an article which appeared in "The Sun", Sydney, Thursday 18 July 1935, page 8. It was transcribed by Ron Cuskelly in September 2021.