

1919 ROSS SMITH RACES HOME

THE TWO huge Rolls Royce engines roared deafeningly as the Vickers Vimy bomber taxied through the thick pea-souper fog shrouding the runway at Hounslow airfield outside London. Worried mechanics shook their heads in disbelief: like everyone else at the airfield they knew a Class V weather forecast meant ‘totally unfit for flying’.

For South Australian air ace Captain Ross Smith and his crew of three, sitting one behind the other in open cockpits, far too much was at stake to let something as trivial as the weather stop them.

So, at 8.30 a.m. on November 12, 1919, the Vickers became airborne — and the Great Air Race was officially under way. In their flimsy biplane, Ross Smith and his comrades were attempting what no one had ever managed before: to fly from Britain to Australia — and to do so in under 30 days.

Few people in those pioneering days of aviation were better qualified than Ross McPherson Smith to lead an attempt at winning the 10,000-pound prize offered by the Commonwealth Government for the first flight between the two countries.

In 1914, at the age of 21, Ross had exchanged the counter of an Adelaide hardware shop for the bloody beaches of Gallipoli, serving with such daring in the 3rd Light Horse that he won a field commission to lieutenant. Soon he was seconded to the fledgling Australian Flying Corps (RFC).

The reason? If you were a good horseman, the military believed, you should be able to handle one of those new-fangled machines they called aeroplanes.

In the case of Ross Smith — cheerful, modest and very determined — such reasoning was remarkably accurate. His conspicuous gallantry in aerial combat won him numerous medals, including the Military Cross and bar and the Distinguished Flying Cross and two bars. When war ended he was a captain, fired with a desire to conquer the world from the air.

Ross was not yet 26 years old when the Armistice was signed in the forest at Compiègne on 11 November 1918. A few days later, the young pilot took off from Cairo at the controls of a Handley Page bomber to carry Major-General Sir W.G.H. Salmond, Commander of the R.A.F. in the Middle East, to India.

They arrived in Calcutta after only three weeks — the longest flight every made up to that time by any aviator. For Smith it was a journey that would

shape his destiny, for as he wrote later, 'it convinced me that a machine, properly attended and equipped, was capable of flying anywhere, provided suitable landing grounds existed'.

His chance to prove this came when Prime Minister Billy Hughes announced the contest for the first British-built aircraft manned by Australians to fly the 18,500 km route from Britain to Australia.

Inspired by a sense of adventure and the 10,000-pound prize money — a fortune in those days — Ross Smith and several other demobilised Australian pilots decided to give it a go.

Determined to be the winner, Ross immediately enlisted the aid of his brother, Keith, also a former RFC pilot, as his navigator. They were joined by sergeants Jim Bennett and Wally Shiers, who had previously flown with Ross as flight engineers.

The Vickers company agreed to supply Ross with a Vimy bomber, a primitive and flimsy craft by today's standards but then one of the biggest and most trusted in the world.

Ross wrote later: 'The machine was an ordinary Standard Vickers Vimy bomber ... and, apart from installing an extra petrol tank, we made practically no alterations. The machine was powered by two Rolls-Royce Eagle VIII engines, each of 360 horse-power. The wing spread was a little over 67 feet and the total weight, loaded, was 64 tons.'

Time was of the essence: in addition to several Australian crews who had entered the race, the renowned French aviator Etienne Poulet had left in

October 1919 from Paris in a small Caudron plane in an unofficial bid to become the first to fly to Australia.

So, apart from installing an extra petrol tank to give the wartime Vickers a cruising range of around 3800 km, Ross and his crew wasted no time or space on alterations. Even a radio, considered essential today, was left behind because the bulky valve set weighed 45kg.

The four men, sacrificing comfort in the interests of weight, would sit in open cockpits, exposed to bitter cold winds, rain and the deafening noise of the engines, day after day for almost a month.

Ross and his mates knew well the extreme danger of their undertaking — when the Air Ministry allocated the plane the code letters G-EAOU, they promptly transcribed it as ‘God ‘Elp All Of Us’.

At last, with sandwiches, tinned meat, biscuits, chocolate and Bovril aboard as rations, they took off. The first day it was so cold they could not eat — the sandwiches had frozen solid inside the unheated plane!

Braving extreme weather day after day, they leap-frogged their way across France and Italy to Crete, Cairo, Damascus and Bandar Abbas in Persia, where they arrived after 13 days.

Still Poulet was ahead and desperately they continued their pursuit. Hour after long hour Ross piloted the Vickers Vimy across remote desert country where a crash landing meant certain death.

Finally they reached Karachi, then Delhi, Allahabat and Calcutta, where they

found that Poulet was now only hours ahead.

The flight from Rangoon to Bangkok was more tense and frightening than anything they had experienced during the war, for flying blind they had to seek their way through fog-shrouded mountain peaks thrusting more than 2000 metres into the air.

Lashed by storms that reduced visibility almost to nothing and battered their heavily laden aircraft, Ross and his crew finally reached Singapore on December 4.

By now they had overtaken Poulet. Victory was within their grasp — but only if they reached Darwin within the next 15 days.

Unexpected problems kept delaying them, devouring vital hours. On an island in the Dutch East Indies a downpour turned the landing strip into a quagmire. It took seven hours and virtually the entire population of the island to lay a bamboo road and move the Vickers to an area dry enough to permit take-off.

Before crossing the Timor Sea, they tied a parcel of food, a bottle of water, a pistol and cartridges to the tail of the aircraft in case they ditched.

At 2.06 p.m. on December 10, Bathurst Island lighthouse loomed on the horizon.

About an hour later, Ross later wrote, 'having crossed over Darwin and having come low enough to observe the crowds and the landing place, we landed on Terra Australis ... 27 days, 20 hours after taking off from Houns-

low. We had won the race against time and the prize with just 52 hours to spare!’

The four were carried shoulder high by the enthusiastic crowd of about 2000, while news of their feat was flashed by telegraph all over the world.

In Adelaide, home of the Smith brothers, the Town Hall’s bells spread the news and, noted one newspaper, ‘a smile of genuine satisfaction spread over every face’.

Ross and Keith Smith were created Knights Commander of the British Empire, while the two sergeants were promoted to lieutenant and awarded the Air Force Medal.

Just how great their achievement was is illustrated by the final results of the Great Air Race. Of all the aircraft that started, only one other completed the journey — in a time of *seven months and 24 days!*

Ross, Keith and their crew showed the world what advantages the new form of transport held for a far-flung continent like Australia.

As one leading newspaper pointed out on the day after their arrival in Darwin:

The England-Australia air service ... will come. Public sentiment in Australia is keenly awake to the possibilities of aerial travel and carriage of mails, and Captain Ross Smith is the pioneer of an enterprise which will bring Australia very much closer both to the world’s international currents and to the centres of the world’s business.

For Ross Smith and Bennett, however, it was only the beginning. Soon they were planning an around the world flight in a Vickers amphibian.

On April 13, 1922, during a test flight, the new plane spun out of control and crashed — killing them both. Sir Ross Smith died only weeks before his book recounting the England to Australia flight, *14,000 Miles Through The Air*, was published.

Sir Keith Smith, who became chairman of the Australian division of Vickers, died in December 1955. A bequest in his will provided funds for a building at Adelaide airport to house the Vickers Vimy, codename G-EAOU, which brought him and his comrades their greatest triumph.

It remains there on display today as a permanent tribute to Australia's own daring young men and their flying machine.