# 1928
# ROYAL FLYING DOCTOR TAKES OFF, KINGSFORD-SMITH CONQUERS THE PACIFIC

*Contents*

**Royal Flying Doctor - John Flynn's 'Mantle of Safety' .......................... 2**
**Smithy conquers the Pacific ........................................................... 8**

# Royal Flying Doctor - John Flynn's 'Mantle of Safety'

On 17 May 1928 a Qantas de Havilland DH50A aircraft, with newly-painted red crosses glowing on the white fuselage, took off from a dusty runway at Cloncurry in the far north-west of the Sunshine State.

As the small plane, appropriately named *Victory,* headed east for the Bush Nursing Home at Julia Creek, a dream of more than ten years turned to reality for a Presbyterian minister named John Flynn, soon to be known all over the world as 'Flynn of the Inland'.

A novelist would have been sorely tempted to have portrayed that inaugural flight by the first Flying Doctor, Kenyon St Vincent Welch, and pilot Arthur Affleck as a dramatic 'mercy dash' to save one or more lives under dangerous conditions in the remote outback.

Although, later, that would happen many times, the first flight was merely to perform two minor, previously arranged, operations at the small bush hospital. Yet, perhaps, that apparent anticlimax best illustrates what Flynn had strived all along to achieve: to make possible 'routine' medical care at places where previously even emergencies could rarely be provided for in time.

What John Flynn wanted was a 'mantle of safety' over the people of the inland. The Flying Doctor Service was a crucial part of its weave.

John Flynn was born in the small Victorian town of Moliagul on 25 November 1880. After working as a pupil teacher for nearly four years, he joined the Home Mission staff of the Presbyterian Church and served in small country towns until 1907 when he passed the entrance examination for Ormond

College in Melbourne.

Ordained four years later, he was posted first to outback South Australia, before being placed in charge of a newly-formed ‘special home mission’ which took in the huge area then called the Northern Territory and Central Australia.

Flynn had been a driving force behind the establishment of this enormous ‘parish’ after a fact-finding tour of the area had convinced him of the great need not only for spiritual guidance, but also for medical and social services in the seemingly God-forsaken region.

From the start, he made it clear what his approach would be when, in his report to the church, he quoted the words of a famous Canadian medical missionary: ‘When you set out to commend your Gospel to men who do not particularly want it, there is only one way to go about it — to do something for them which they will be sure to understand’.

To achieve this he suggested that travelling missionaries criss-cross the vast emptiness, bringing not only the Gospel, but reading matter, news, and even advice on rudimentary medical and dental care to the 50 000 people living in almost total isolation.

The church enthusiastically agreed, and named the new undertaking the Australian Inland Mission. Flynn further recommended the establishment of medical centres at strategic locations, including Alice Springs; this, too, was accepted.

Flynn soon founded an Australian Inland Mission journal called the *Inlander*

— *but* devoted to the 'Outer Outback' — which he produced for sixteen years. It remains as a fascinating, personalised history of the Australian Inland Mission and of Flynn's herculian efforts on its behalf.

In October 1918 the *Inlander* printed an article from a young medical student and air force pilot, John Clifford Peel, outlining a plan for an aerial medical service to treat sick and injured people in outback areas.

The article was written in November 1917, at Flynn's invitation, on the troopship taking Peel abroad for active service.

At the end of Peel's article, Flynn commented: 'Is it not a reasonable hope that before long we will have bird-men darting over Inland paths? Our young friend thinks we may do a little "stunt" on our own account. Perhaps, if he and one of his medical mates want to prove just how easy it really is, we will have a fly just to see! Why not?'

There was one very good reason why not: unbeknown to Flynn, Peel had been shot down and killed three months before the article was published.

But his suggestions became an obsession with the missionary, who could see in his mind's eye aircraft stationed at Oodnadatta, Cloncurry, and Katherine, as Peel had suggested.

It would service an area of about 430,000 square kilometres, with 'a missionary doctor administering to the needs of men and women scattered between Wyndham and Cloncurry, Darwin and Hergott'.

But, enchanting though the dream was, Flynn soon realised the major stum-

bling block: lack of fast, efficient communications of a kind only radio could provide.

It is remarkable, as Michael Page points out in his detailed study, *The Flying Doctor Story 1928-78,* that Flynn should have seen that the key to the whole idea lay in the creation of a radio network when he, himself, had never seen or heard a radio set in operation.

Yet Flynn almost immediately realised that what was needed was a cheap, compact, easy-to-operate radio transceiver — at a time when a ‘very compact machine’ had to be transported on the backs of two horses!

Money, fortunately, ceased to be an obstacle, for in June 1926, Flynn learnt that an old acquaintance, H. V. McKay, had remembered Flynn’s efforts in his will.

McKay, a millionaire harvester manufacturer, had bequeathed a substantial yearly sum to charities, including £2000 for the creation of an aerial medical service by the Australian Inland Mission — but only if the mission could raise £4000 of its own for this purpose.

Flynn was positive this could be done, and with the assistance of an Aerial Medical Services subcommittee, he was soon proved correct. The Wool Brokers’ Association of Australia led donations from various businesses with a cheque of £1000.

Arrangements to charter an aircraft were soon made with Qantas. It was also decided to base the first Flying Doctor at Cloncurry, which had a hospital, a good airstrip, and telegraph and telephone links with many outlying

areas;.

When the first Flying Doctor took off on that auspicious day in May 1928, Flynn had not yet overcome the final obstacle to completing his ‘mantle of safety’ — a comprehensive radio network.

Several times, messages for help reached Dr Welch too late to save the patient, but even with this immense handicap, almost all of the 225 missions — involving some 18 000 nautical miles in the air undertaken during the first year were completely successful.

Flynn had now been forced to drop the idea of voice communication in favour of Morse transmission, which required less sophisticated equipment and less power.

Alfred Traeger, an Adelaide electrician and ham radio operator who had become intrigued with the dedicated missionary’s problem, eventually designed a foot-powered generator which enabled one person simultaneously to power and operate a cheap and simple ‘bush transmitter’ with a range of about 480 kilometres.

This was the breakthrough Flynn had been waiting for. ‘At last’, he rejoiced, ‘the dumb Inland speaks!’

Soon Traeger was installing transceivers all over the out-back and training men and women on remote stations to tap out their messages in Morse. The long silence and isolation of the outback had at last been broken.

Since then the Royal Flying Doctor Service, as it was renamed in 1954, has

spread to all parts of the Australian outback. Nearly 100 000 consultations are handled each year, involving more than 2 million nautical miles in the air. In addition, the radio network has become the means of educating thousands of outback children through the unique ‘School of the Air’, adding yet another dimension to Flynn’s ‘mantle of safety’.

John Flynn died in Sydney on 5 May 1951, and his ashes were interred near Alice Springs in the heart of the Inland he so dearly loved.

The John Flynn Memorial Church in Alice Springs was built by the Australian Inland Mission in his memory; a national reserve nearby bears his name; a commemoration cairn was erected outside Tennant Creek; another monument stands opposite his birthplace in Victoria.

But, in a way, all these memorials are really superfluous. For, every time a Flying Doctor wings his way into the never-never, every throb of the aircraft’s engine pays tribute to that remarkable Australian who refused to give up a dream.

# Smithy conquers the Pacific

While the Flying Doctor Service was being set up in Queensland in early 1928, another intrepid Australian airman was many thousands of kilometres away preparing for the first aerial crossing of the Pacific — from Oakland, on the west coast of the United States, to Brisbane. His name was Charles Edward Kingsford Smith, and he was about to begin a career which would make him, in the words of Qantas co-founder Sir Hudson Fysh, the ‘greatest trans-world flyer of them all’.

‘Smithy’, as he was popularly known to his millions of fans, had been barred nine years earlier from what could have been his stepping stone to fame: the £10 000 England to Australia race which was won by his namesake, Ross Smith.

Then aged twenty-two, Smithy had become an aviator in much the same way as Ross Smith, having served first with the army in Egypt, at Gallipoli, and in France, before being transferred to the Royal Flying Corps.

This transfer was a turning point in the life of the banker’s son from the Brisbane suburb of Hamilton, who wrote home: ‘I have already been up several times, it is a fantastic experience, and I have already discovered one thing about flying, and that is that my future, for whatever it may be worth, is bound up with it. Flying has a great future. Just you both wait and see.’

Within three months after qualifying as a fighter pilot in 1917, Smithy was awarded the Military Cross, and not long afterwards became an instructor

with the rank of captain.

After the Armistice he teamed up with two Australian pilots and bought two old military aircraft in which they gave joyrides to the public.

When the Australian Government announced the £10 000 contest for the first Australian to fly a British aircraft from London to Australia, they immediately applied — but Prime Minister Billy Hughes refused to accept their application, claiming all three had too little experience of navigation.

It was a bitter blow and the trio soon split up, with Smithy vowing that, one day, ‘I’ll be the biggest name in aviation. I’ll show Hughes.’

After a chequered career as a Hollywood stunt pilot and co-owner of a trucking company in Western Australia, Smithy first put his name in the aerial record books when, accompanied by Charles Ulm, he flew 12 000 kilometres around Australia in ten days and five hours — cutting the previous record by more than half.

A few days later, on 4 July 1927, Smithy, his former trucking partner, Keith Anderson, and Ulm sailed for San Francisco to attack an even greater challenge: the first flight across the Pacific.

Raising money to buy an aircraft and finance the long flight was difficult and, at times, heartbreaking for the idealistic young men. A 3000-pound donation promised by the New South Wales Government, for instance, was withdrawn when Jack Lang was replaced as Premier by Sir Thomas Bavin, who denounced the proposed trans-Pacific flight as a ‘cheap stunt’.

But, eventually, and thanks mainly to an American shipping magnate named G. Allan Handcock, and Sidney Myer, of the Myer Emporium in Melbourne, they were ready to attempt the journey in a Dutch Fokker FVIIB-3M monoplane which they named *Southern Cross.*

Anderson, after a row with Ulm, had earlier returned to Australia. Smithy then chose two Americans, Harry Lyon and James Warner, as navigator and radio operator. At 8.54 a.m. on 31 May 1928, with Smithy at the controls and Ulm as co-pilot, the *Southern Cross* lifted off at San Francisco and headed west into the vast and virgin skies over the Pacific Ocean.

One of Ulm's first entries in the log read: 'We're as happy as hell. Everything is going as smooth as silk.' Twenty-seven hours and twenty-five minutes later, deafened by the three pounding engines and half-frozen, they touched down at Wheeler Field, just outside Honolulu, for a few hours sleep.

Early the next morning they were off again, the *Southern Cross* so heavily laden with fuel that for the first twenty minutes Smithy could lift no higher than 15 metres off ground. Soon they discovered that their radio was partly out of action — it could transmit but not receive.

Fierce electrical storms followed them as they flew towards Suva, capital of Fiji, about 5200 kilometres from Hawaii, with Ulm noting in the log: 'The storm seems to be all around us now. Smithy is at the controls. Thank God he is the flyer he is...'

Many frightening hours later, as they flew over the Fijian Islands, he added: 'There's something close to tears of joy in all our eyes right now.' Telegraph

poles and tall trees had been cut down to provide the *Southern Cross* with a landing field at the Albert Park sports ground at Suva, and here the aviators were met by an enthusiastic crowd of about 10 000, including Sir Eyre Hudson, British High Commissioner for the South Pacific and Governor of Fiji.

On Friday, 7 June, the *Southern Cross* started the last leg of its epic flight. Soon the airmen were being lashed by what Ulm logged as ‘rain the like of which I have never seen. ... the thunderclaps and lightning are frightening... Three times now we have been sucked down into vacuums and the plane has been tossed about like a great wet sponge.’

But gradually the Australian coast drew nearer until shortly before 10 a.m. on 9 June, Ulm wrote in the log: ‘In about 20 minutes from now Smithy and I will have satisfied our first ambition — to be the first men to fly over the Pacific Ocean.’

Newspapers all over the world reported their triumph in banner headlines. Smithy was the toast of all Australia: when the *Southern Cross* touched down at Sydney’s Mascot Airport (later renamed Kingsford-Smith Airport) it was met by an estimated 300 000 people.

Warner, the radio operator, told newsmen: ‘We wouldn’t be standing here, in Sydney, now, being idolised, if it weren’t for Smithy’s skill as a flier. I like the guy. He knows what he wants and how to go about getting it... If he were an American I’d try to get him nominated for President of the United States.’

To Smithy the Pacific crossing was only the first leg in the trip around the world he was intent on making.

In March the following year he set off for Britain in the *Southern Cross,* but was forced down in Western Australia when he ran out of fuel in a heavy storm. In the search that followed, Keith Anderson, Smithy’s onetime partner, and another of his friends, Bob Hitchcock, were killed.

Smithy was accused of having planned his crash-landing as a publicity stunt, and although an official enquiry exonerated him, the cloud of suspicion continued to haunt the aviator for years.

Accompanied by Ulm, Litchfield, and T. McWilliam, he eventually arrived in London on 27 June 1929, setting a new record for the United Kingdom-Australia run.

One year and several speed and distance records later, Smithy at last completed his circumnavigation of the globe when he reached the United States after flying from Ireland. President Hoover told him at the welcoming ceremony: ‘Your feat in flying across the Atlantic is remarkable enough, even though it has been done before, but Kingsford Smith’s achievement in becoming the first flyer to circumnavigate the world by aeroplane is enough to take one’s breath away.’

Smithy’s life continued as a mixture of triumph and tragedy. He succeeded in carrying airmail from Britain to Australia, and from Australia to New Zealand, but never won a government contract.

He established his own airline, but it was forced into liquidation when one of its passenger aircraft crashed. Then, on 6 November 1935, Smithy, accompanied by Tommy Pethybridge, took off from Hamble Airport near Lon-

don in a Lockheed Altair named *Lady Southern Cross.*

After refuelling in Greece they flew to Allahbad, India, and the following day took off for Singapore. At 3 a.m., another pilot spotted them above the Bay of Bengal. There were, he reported later, ‘jets of flame spurting from Smithy’s plane’s exhaust pipe’.

Neither men nor machine were seen again. Only a wheel from the *Lady Southern Cross,* washed up on the Burmese coast two years later, confirmed their fate.

Smithy was only thirty-eight when he died. Yet he had achieved far more than most men do in seventy years. Above all, he had seen a dream come true. His was, indeed, ‘the biggest name in aviation’.