



WWII RAAF Squadron Leader Bryan Monkton • 1918 - 2003

# Bryan Monkton, Founder of Trans Oceanic Airways, the first regular Water Based Airline to service Lord Howe Island

I had the honour of presenting the 2013 Arthur Butler Memorial Lecture, entitled "*The Aquatic Airman*" at the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.

In the year 2000 the subject of my Lecture, the *Aquatic Airman* Bryan Monkton, also delivered the Arthur Butler Memorial Lecture. Meeting Bryan after the Lecture, we discussed two subjects that were to greatly influence my life :

The first subject discussed was the fact that we both lived in the Southern Highlands of Sydney. The second subject discussed was that Bryan was in the throes of writing a book about his flying days.

Being a great devotee of Flying Boats, my very first flight taking place in an RAAF Sunderland over Sydney Harbour (my Godfather was in command of the Rose Bay Flying Base for the Air Force), I offered to help Bryan finish and publish his manuscript.

This decision was to begin an adventure that lasts to this day, still meeting people involved in one way or another with the *Aquatic Airman's* life. With the sad and unexpected passing of Bryan on the 29th of May, 2003 due to a brain tumour, it was left to me to fulfill a promise to him to finish and publish the book "*The Boats I Flew*". This took three years !

Bryan Arundel Wills Monkton was born in 1918 in Canterbury Victoria. At the outbreak of WWII, he was a Flying Instructor with the Royal Aero Club.

As a keen yachtsman, Bryan applied to the Royal Australian Navy, hoping to be given an immediate Commission. The Navy had other ideas, advising Bryan that it might be 6 months before he could be offered a Commission !

Bryan then promptly approached the Royal Australian Air Force, and was accepted for a Commission immediately. However, to his great chagrin, Bryan was initially posted to England, as the RAAF had few Fighters available. There he flew Hawker Hurricanes for a while before returning to Australia when the Japanese were closing in.

Much to his annoyance, Bryan was then posted to Flight Training. This was not what our hero envisaged, and he made his feelings very clear to all and sundry. Fortunately, a superior officer who remembered Bryan from the RAAF Selection Board, "Moth Eaton", took him to task and told him to stop whinging. As an afterthought, he suggested there might be a way out of Training new pilots – Flying Boats !!!

Initially aghast at the idea of flying aircraft with floats rather than wheels, the would be Fighter Pilot decided to give these strange aircraft a go ! When the Flying Boat Squadron CO discovered he was getting a Fighter Pilot type person, he was less than impressed, and made no bones about it to Bryan from day one !

Eventually of course our hero, rising to the rank of Squadron Leader, came to love this new form of flying, and over the period of his wartime service flew hair raising Night Mine Laying Missions in Catalinas, as well as flying Martin Mariner A70-12 and Dornier DO-24K aircraft in RAAF 43 Squadron.

At the end of the War, Bryan came across a number of surplus Short Sunderlands moored at the RAAF Base Rathmines. He was advised by the Commanding Officer to make a bid for one of the aircraft if he was interested in perhaps starting a water based airline service.

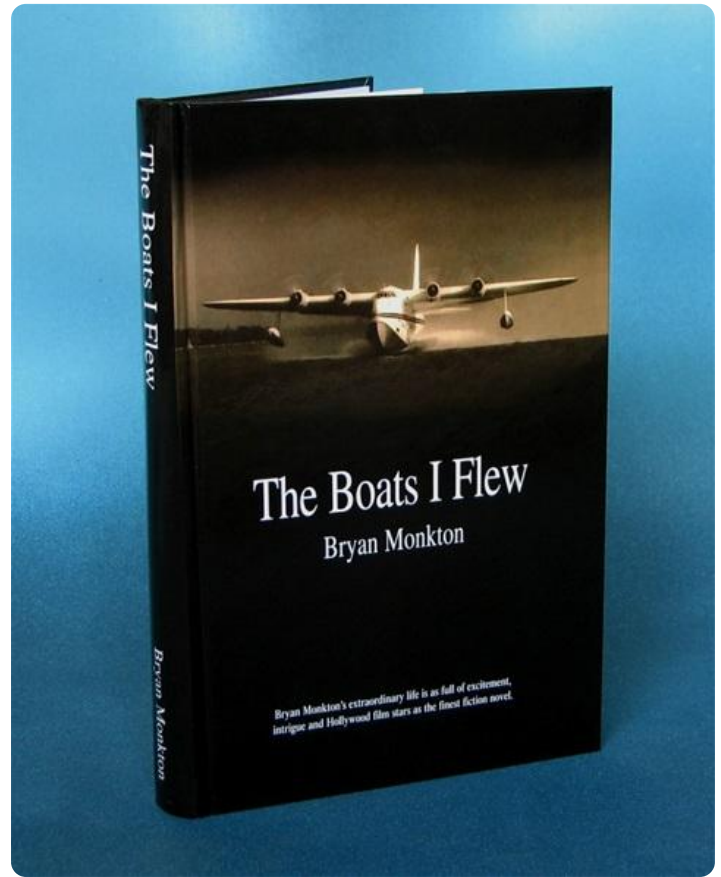
When Bryan made the decision to bid for one War Surplus Sunderlands, there were two slight problems : You could only bid for a minimum 5 Sunderlands, and he could not afford to buy one aircraft, let alone five !

However, he put in a bid anyway (5000 pounds, which he did not have), based on the fact that the Catalinas were being sold off for one thousand pounds each, and thought he would never hear about them again. Three months later, and to his astonishment, Bryan received a letter informing him that he was now the owner of 5 Sunderland aircraft and 22 spare engines. The letter also advised Bryan that he had just 21 days to move them from Rathmines !!! Where to find the money ?

Hugh Reskymer "Kym" Bonython AC, DFC, AFC was a highly decorated Mosquito Pilot during WWII. He came from a prominent South Australian family, his father at one time the Lord Mayor of the City of Adelaide.

Kym was an Art Lover, Jazz Lover and raced both motorbikes and cars. He was also a good friend of Bryan's, who named his only son Kym out of respect. Kym Bonython loaned Bryan the money to purchase the Sunderlands. Trans Oceanic Airways was born.

Bryan overcame the problem of moving the aircraft by enlisting a number of his former RAAF Pilot friends. Much to the horror of the RAAF Commander at the time, all five Sunderlands arrived at the Rose Bay Flying Base, many of the pilots becoming instant "Captains" by the time they completed the flight ! Bryan preferred Air Force pilots to others, as he considered them "gentlemen"....



Lord Howe Island was discovered by the commander of the First Fleet Ship Supply, and named after British Admiral Richard Howe. In 1862 the Nicols family built The Pines Guest House, taking in guests around 1895. In 1993 the first Steamship service from Sydney to Lord Howe Island began.

Gerald Kirby, son of Mary Nicols and his wife Beth changed the name to Pinetrees and ran the business from the 1930s to 1975. During that time deliveries of food and other supplies were at the mercy of the weather. High seas and strong winds often prevented the ships getting close enough to shore so that Lighters could transfer much needed goods.

Gerald appealed to Bryan Monkton to consider landing on the coral reef surrounding the island. At the time, TOA was flying cargo and passengers to Noumea. Bryan considered the request, and could envisage the potential of flying tourists to the Island. There was just one problem – the Department of Civil Aviation (nothing changes) !

The first aircraft to reach Lord Howe Island was (Later Sir) Francis Chichester's Float equipped Gypsy Moth in 1931. The aircraft was damaged in a storm, but repaired with the assistance from the Islanders and flew on to Sydney.

DCA would not approve TOA's service to Lord Howe Island because of the danger of the coral reefs tearing out the hull of the aircraft. Bryan worked out the tides and was convinced that at the right time of day, there would be sufficient depth of water for the Sunderlands to land safely.

To prove his point, on a return journey to Sydney from Noumea Bryan "faked" an emergency landing near the Island, by sheer coincidence at high tide ! DCA were not fooled for a minute by the ploy, however Bryan had proved his point, and TOA reluctantly received approval to begin a regular service from Rose Bay, making the first "official" landing on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August, 1947.

### **A Knight of the Realm and Notable Pilots**

Throughout the duration of TOA, Bryan hired many interesting Pilots. The First Officer on the inaugural flight to Lord Howe Island was **LG Taylor**, no relation to PG Taylor although his son told me he was very pleased if people actually thought he was the great Navigator himself !

**Sir Patrick Gordon (PG) Taylor** was indeed both a Captain for and Director of TOA, although it was sometimes said that as a Flying Boat Captain, he made a great Navigator ! The fact that he managed to "bend" more than one aircraft may have contributed to this comment. PG and Bryan were great personal friends, and when PG passed away in Honolulu in 1966, Bryan was at his bedside.

This friendship would come to the fore when Bryan was accused of deliberately blowing up a Qantas Catalina. More about that sensational story later....

*Other notable TOA Captains included :*

**Hugh Birch**, who later joined Qantas in an administrative role

**Jimmy Broadbent** Before WWII, Jimmy held the record for a solo flight from England-Australia-England. He flew for Butler Air Transport in the early 50s, as well as Qantas, Ansett and Connell airways. Jimmy Broadbent disappeared without a trace while ferrying a Mars Marina across the Atlantic.

**Phil Mathieson**, former RAAF Martin Mariner Captain who later became the TOA Training Captain

**Lloyd Maundrell**, who flew as a Captain for Ansett Flying Boats. Lloyd became very well known to Sydneysiders thanks to 2UE Radio Announcer Gary O'Callaghan who, with his "imaginary" friend Sammy Sparrow, used to announce the arrival of Ansett Flying Boats as they flew into Rose Bay, almost always it seemed with Captain Maundrell at the controls ! Ironically, Gary O'Callaghan's son became a Seaplane Pilot himself, flying for the late Vic Walton.

**John Poate** John was an amazing character who became a member of the Australian Aviation Museum. John flew Hurricanes and Spitfires during WWII (he was a member of the Spitfire Association) and later, as well as flying for TOA he flew the Comet for Middle East Airlines.

These were just a few of the many Captains and Co-Pilots who flew for TOA, most earning their endorsements while fling with Bryan on charter flights to Noumea and on the Lord Howe Island run.

### **Upsetting The Founder of Qantas**

Among the collection of photographs and documents which belonged to Bryan is a personal letter from (Sir) Hudson Fysh, pointing out that Qantas was the preferred airline of the Australian Government and therefore, TOA cease their flights to Noumea and beyond and as a concession, Qantas would "allow" Bryan to keep the Lord Howe Island business !

Not surprisingly, Bryan had different ideas and as a result, Qantas began flights to Lord Howe Island using their rather uncomfortable Catalinas. Knowing the Lord Howe Island climate well, Bryan always insisted that on stormy nights, the aircraft had to have crew on board in case the aircraft lost it's moorings.

On one such occasion, a Qantas Catalina crew decided that their aircraft was safely moored while they stayed cosily indoors. Next morning they found their "Cat" washed up on the beach ! Instead of taking responsibility for their careless action, the crew publicly accused TOA of deliberately untying their mooring !

This act of treachery was repeated years later when a Qantas Catalina was blown up while moored at Rose Bay. Qantas immediately suspected Bryan of planting the bomb and had him charged !



Fortunately for Bryan, and unfortunately for Qantas, the Barrister acting for TOA was able to prove that Bryan was in fact having Dinner with PG Taylor and his wife at the time. It was also revealed that the alleged timing device, an alarm clock, was found totally intact without a mark on it, proving it could not have been used to blow up the Catalina !

The case was very quickly thrown out of Court. Although the perpetrator was never caught, Bryan once told me he thought it was a former TOA Bookkeeper who had been recently sacked !

There were enough adventures in the life of Bryan and TOA to make a fascinating movie, including losing two engines on a long haul flight, safely arriving on the smell of fumes. On another occasion Qantas, in an act of sheer bastardry to cripple TOA, bought up all the drum of aviation fuel from the islands where TOA regularly refuelled on long charter flights.

When TOA arrived to refuel, they were told there was none left for them. Rather than give in to Qantas, Bryan used his nautical skills to “commandeer” a small supply ship and sailed to another island to pick up fuel. As the ship’s Captain was roaring drunk at the time, Bryan too over the helm. Problem solved !

## **Flying Solo**

One flight in a Sunderland made on the spur of a moment will remain unique..

Bryan managed to board the aircraft, close all but one hatch, slip the moorings, run upstairs and prime the engines, run downstairs and close the hatch, run upstairs and started the two inner engines, taxied out on Lake Macquarie, take off, do a few circuits then land, taxi to the mooring, shut down and secure the aircraft, all on his own !!!

Only one problem. While using a boat hook to snare the mooring buoy after landing, the hook instead snared the belt of his trousers and all of a sudden his posterior was revealed to an admiring crowd, much to Bryan’s embarrassment !!!

## **Upsetting the Founder of Pan American Airways**

In April 1953 Trans Oceanic Airways ceased operations, selling their fleet to Ansett Flying Boats who continued the Lord Howe Island service until 1974.

Looking for new adventures, Bryan flew to the USA where he became involved in the setting up of South Pacific Air Lines, much to the dismay and annoyance of Juan Trippe, founder of Pan American Airways who, like Hudson Fysh, believed that his airline was officially sanctioned by the government and there was no room for “foreign” interloper !

The Federal Aviation Authority thought otherwise, and allowed Bryan and his financial backer, the Dollar Shipping company to “set up shop” with two Short Solent aircraft.

Alas this operation did not do well, thanks again to a combination of treacherous personnel and the decision to use Christmas Island as a staging base. This was not a great choice, and the island is now in Australian hands and used for “immigration” purposes !!!

One of the Solent aircraft is on display at the Oakland Air Museum, California. This aircraft was used briefly in the film “Raiders of the Lost Ark”, with Harrison Ford sitting in the upper passenger lounge.

## **Hollywood Calls**

While in the USA, Bryan had the opportunity of meeting a number of Hollywood stars. One in particular stands out, the actress Linda Darnell. While not well known in Australia, Linda was voted as one of the most beautiful women in the world !

Linda, like a number of Hollywood starlets, was at one time a girlfriend of Howard Hughes. When she and Bryan got together, Linda introduced him to Howard, hoping to convince him to buy one of the SPAL Solents. He was not interested !

Bryan and Linda hit it off immediately, and became so close they decided to marry. Linda was divorced with one young daughter. Tragically Linda was to die when visiting the home of her secretary, the house caught fire. Linda went into the flames to rescue her secretary’s daughter, and was so badly burned she later died. Bryan was of course shattered.

## **A Freelance Captain**

With the demise of SPAL, Bryan returned to Australia. It was not long, however, before succumbed to calls from European Airlines for a freelance Captain on what on occasions turned out to be rather dodgy missions.

These included having a DC-4 destroyed by rockets in the Belgian Congo, from which narrowly escaped with a back wound, and flying a refrigerated cargo of meat in a DC-4 when the cockpit heaters failed to work. Bryan and his co-pilot had to be thawed out after landing !

The amazing types of aircraft flown by Bryan during his freelance sojourn included the :

**Douglas DC-4, DC-5, DC- 6, DC-7, Bristol Britannia and Sud Aviation Caravelle**

## **Deliveries Across the (Big) Pond**

Bryan took on a number of flying contracts, which included delivering a Beechcraft Bonanza from the USA to Australia For Connellan Airways. This turned out to be almost his last ! Taking a passenger along with who had a Private Pilot’s License, Bryan thought he would be able to have a short nap now and then while his passenger kept the aircraft straight and level. On the leg to Norfolk Island , Bryan woke

from a fitful sleep to find the Bonanza descending towards the ocean !

It transpired that the passenger had never flown at night, and had no idea the aircraft was in fact descending !!! That aircraft is on display at the Fleet Air Arm Museum in Nowra.

### A Virgin Island and a Movie Star

Having vowed once again to give up flying, and now married to Monica Clifford, a well known Sydney socialite, Bryan began the life of a Gentleman. One interesting item not generally known is that Bryan's mother imported the first fully completed Rolls Royce into Australia. Up until then, one bought the Chassis and Engine, the had a local Coachbuilder create the bodywork.

It was not long, however, before temptation again reared it's ugly head ! When Ansett Flying Boat Services ceased operations, they put two Sandringhams up for sale. The buyer was the incredible Charles Blair, a former US Navy Captain, a Test Pilot, a Brigadier General in the US Air Force (he once flew a P-51 Mustang over the North Pole) and an Airline Captain, flying Boeing 314 Clippers Flying for Pan Am. He wrote his autobiography *Red Ball in the Sky* in 1976.

Charles Blair had one other claim to fame – he was married to the beautiful Irish born Movie Star Maureen O'Hara. Maureen was often cast in Westerns with John Wayne, and was a brilliant actress in her own right ! Now in her 90s, Maureen still appears from time to time in cameo rolls and is the Patron of Foynes Flying Boat Museum in Limerick, Ireland, the very place where Irish Coffee was invented !

Charles had set up Antilles Flying Boats at St. Croix in the US Virgin Islands, and wanted the two Sandringhams to add to his large fleet of aircraft, including a number of Grumman Goose (Geese) ? Bryan was asked to crew one of the Ansett Sandringhams to St. Croix, a request he accepted. The other Sandringham was crewed by Charles Blair and Stewart Middlemiss.

Bryan settled happily into the life in St. Croix with just one concern. Charles Blair was not a great believer in spending money on maintenance. Flying several short hops a day in sometimes rough ocean water played havoc with the aircraft propellers which quickly became pitted. At the end of each day Engineers filed the props down until they became very thin.

Warnings to Charles that the thinning propellers may not keep an aircraft airborne if one engine failed were ignored, and this sadly caused his demise and that of Antilles Airlines. A Grumman Goose flown by Charles did lose one engine and, unable to stay airborne as predicted, crashed and sank.

Maureen O'Hara Blair shut Antilles Airlines down, and Bryan once again returned to Australia, and once again vowed never to fly again.

Bryan became a Sales Agent for a number of overseas airlines. I remember him telling me that when he flew to England in a effort to find a publisher for his book, it was the first time in his life he had ever paid for a commercial flight !

Of course the inevitable happened and, you guessed it, Bryan once again received a call for help. An Etonian educated young man named Edward Hulton, whose Publisher Grandfather have left him several million pounds, had decided to buy one of the Sandringhams and set up Charter business in the Caribbean with it. Bryan was asked to command the aircraft to England.

This Bryan did. The story of this epic flight from St. Croix to London would take as long as this presentation. Suffice to say that despite a number of problems and setbacks, the flight was achieved, but of course not without a twist !

Edward Hulton's girlfriend at the time was not keen on the idea of him swanning around the Caribbean in a Flying Boat, so the aircraft was put up for sale by auction while being moored near the Tower of London !

Bryan, Publisher Kevin Weldon and others put a Business Proposal to several companies to purchase the aircraft and fly it back to Australia. Each Sponsor would pay \$100,000 dollars to have their company name and product prominently displayed, attracting world wide publicity !

The return route would follow the Empire Flying Boats : Southampton – Marseilles – Augusta – Cairo – Bahrein – Karsachi – Calcutta – Rangoon – Singapore – Sourabaya – Darwin – Cairnes – Sydney. Bryan and Kevin's group also tried to raise enough funds to buy the air raft outright, and managed only a \$60,000 deposit. **Then along came Kermit Weeks...**

Kermit had the money to buy the aircraft, and so he did. Did you know that Kermit's grandfather, a Geologist and founder of Weeks Oi, found oil reserves in Bass Straight for BHP ?

The Sunderland is on display at Kermit's Fantasy of Flight in Polk City, Orlando, Florida the largest private collection of historic aircraft in the world. I have fortunate enough to visit FOF on three occasions. On the last trip Kermit gave me free reign of his hangars not open to the public, and there I saw a staggering collection of aircraft parts, fuselages and engines, including a original Wright Flyer engine !

Interestingly, had the Sunderland made it to Australia Nancy Knudsen, co founder of Aircruising Australia with the late Bill Peach wanted to lease the aircraft for flights around Australia. In the end they acquired two Fokker F-27s, one of which was the first F-27 to go into commercial airline service with Aer Lingus !

As an aside, I have copy of a letter from Saunders-Roe Ltd offering Bryan information on a new aircraft they had in mind would suit Trans Oceanic Airways, the Duchess II, a jet powered airliner which never came to pass. By their own admission, Saunders-Roe conceded that with a maximum range of 2000 miles, the Duchess would not be an economical proposition for Australia !

### A Mansion, a Caretakers Cottage, Rufus the Dog and Snakes

I mentioned at the start of my lecture that both Bryan and I lived in the Southern Highlands. Bryan lived in a magnificent 7 bedroom, 6 bathroom, ballroom, etc. property known as Invergowrie at Exeter, recently owned by John Hewson

...or so I thought !

From the moment Bryan and I started working together on his book, he always insisted on coming to my place. This was fine, except I was dying to take a look at this magnificent property, originally built by Arthur Yates of Yates Seeds fame, and was in fact used to test plant seedlings on the several acres which were once part of Invergowrie.

When I finally did get the chance to visit Invergowrie, I could see why Bryan did not want me there. Instead of living in the grand mansion, Bryan was living in a tiny one bedroom workman's cottage with his dog Rufus and several snakes under the floor for company !

For someone who lived with a well known socialite, had homes in Darling Point and Centennial Road Bowral and regularly entertained guests on his beloved yacht Utiekah, I was stunned at this revelation and Bryan, to his embarrassment, had to explain the situation.

A close friend of Bryan and wife Monica had offered to invest money on their behalf, promising profitable returns. Sound familiar ? That friend was never seen again, leaving the couple in dire straits. Monica contracted a rare illness and passed away in 1999.

With nowhere to go, the then owner of Invergowrie, an Investment Banker and his wife, both friends of the Monktons offered Bryan accommodation in the caretaker cottage which Bryan accepted. Behind the cottage was an old, run down Caravan and was here that Bryan worked on his manuscript when not at my home, using an ancient computer and equally ancient software !

When the manuscript was completed Seaplane Association President Phil Dulhunty gave me copy relating to the period in which he hired Trans Oceanic Airways for charter in the Grafton area, and this was added at the eleventh hour.

Having the book published took another three years, with two publishing companies in a row contracting to produce the book, both going under before printing a word. Bryan even flew to England to meet Editors of well known aviation publishers. Despite the fact that Spitfire Test Pilot and author of three books himself, Alex Henshaw MBE kindly wrote a reference for Bryan at my request.

Publishers only wanted manuscripts from known Authors. This is still the case today ! Eventually Ken Christie, a fellow Director of the Australian Aviation Museum put up the funds and the book was published in Hardback by Ligare Book Printers Riverwood, who did a great job.

In all, 1000 copies of the book were published, all of which have now been sold. Reprinting *The Boats I Flew* electronically is under consideration.

Sadly, Bryan did not live long enough to see his work published, passing away from a Brain Tumour on the 29th of May, 2003.



*This painting of a TOA Sunderland flying over the Rose Bay Base was painted by Bryan Monkton himself.*



Aviation Writer at the launch of *The Boats I Flew With* with (left) Rosemary Arnold, Australia's first female Helicopter Pilot and (right) the wonderful Aviation Legend Nancy-Bird Walton AO, OBE.