

NATIONAL

When harbour was an airport, and you could play mid-air golf

By John Huxley

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EXOTIC island destinations. Celebrity passengers. Relaxed, informal, lasting relations with customers and crew. And the daily miracle, it seemed, of take-offs and landings on a Sydney Harbour either bathed in sparkling sun or sprinkled with fairyland night lights.

It is little wonder Margaret Holle looks back on her time as a hostess on the flying boats based at Sydney Water Airport on Rose Bay as among the happiest and most exciting of her life.

"It was a wonderful experience. So different from air travel these days," she said.

This week memories of the mighty seaplanes have come rushing back for Mrs Holle, 72, as she prepares to attend the opening tomorrow of an exhibition at the Museum of Sydney dedicated to the "golden age of aviation".

Her son, Matthew Holle, the museum's building manager, has been guest curator of the exhibition, which showcases the role of the flying boats between July 1938 and September 1974.

"It's been a nostalgic time for me," said Mr Holle, who vividly recalls travelling on flying boats in Australia and overseas with his mother and father, Noel, who worked as an aircraft mechanic and later as chief maintenance inspector at the Rose Bay base.

He points out the halcyon days of the aircraft were even earlier, before World War II, when giant Empire flying boats competed with cruise liners for international passengers. "The manufacturers, Short Brothers, said, 'We don't build aircraft that float, we build ships that fly'."

Thus travellers to England enjoyed 10 days of airborne luxury, staying in five-star hotels and flying in unprecedented space and supreme, albeit unpressurised, comfort.

There were powder rooms, promenade cabins, and room enough to play deck quoits and putt-putt golf - all for a one-way fare of about £200, or about one year's average Australian salary. War, though, put an end to such extravagance and elegance. The flying boats were commandeered, stripped, equipped with machine-guns and bomb racks, and based at places such as Rathmines, from which they operated as long-range patrol bombers and miners of Japanese harbours.

"When the war ended they flew to Singapore to bring back the first POWs from Changi jail," Mr Holle said.

The flying boat fleet returned to a different postwar world that relied increasingly on land-based aircraft. Nevertheless, Rose Bay continued to be used by Qantas Empire Airways and other independents for a decade, before Ansett was left to keep the boat flying.

When Mrs Holle joined in 1956 it was ferrying what one airline wit dubbed "the newly-weds and nearly deads" and other holiday-makers to the islands: Lord Howe, Hayman, Cook, Fiji and New Caledonia in Sandringhams.

She travelled extensively, both on scheduled flights and as an exchange hostess. She flew under the Harbour Bridge for a Cinerama movie. And she and her late husband subsequently flew with Matthew on planes out of the Virgin Islands with American stars such as John Wayne.

It was not all glamorous. She was frequently woken in the middle of the night to go on duty. She had to totter up and down flights of stairs in high heels to serve meals from heavy metal trays in a shifting cabin.

She could not wear jewellery or her hair long. And when she married Noel she had to give up her job. Such were the restrictions placed on hostesses.

Her son will talk about Sydney's fondly remembered flying boats and their Rose Bay base at the museum at 2pm on Sunday. Mrs Holle, who now lives in Port Macquarie, will fill the same slot next Sunday, May 18, when she will discuss her high life as a hostess.

The Golden Age Of Aviation, which is to be officially opened by flying boat enthusiast Dick Smith, runs until September 14.