

# A record-breaking flight

**D**ick Smith loves helicopters. In fact he has one parked under his house. He uses it for any trips the family needs to make. They use their helicopter the way many people use their cars. It is fast, there is no waiting in traffic, and it can take the family into areas other vehicles would have difficulty managing. It is an exciting way for the family to reach their destination on their frequent camping trips.

In 1982 Dick Smith had an extraordinary idea – he wanted to be the first person to fly a helicopter around the world, solo. His family supported him, although there were many times when they worried about his safety.

## **Planning the flight**

Having decided that this journey was something which he simply had to do, Dick bought a



Dick Smith

Dick, flying his helicopter.

JetRanger helicopter from the Bell factory in Fort Worth, Texas, USA. He didn't undertake this challenge lightly. Dick doesn't consider himself to be irresponsible. A challenge will be met successfully, he believes, only if it is prepared for properly and if the risks are minimised by good planning and by using good equipment. His extensive knowledge of the experiences of early Australian aviators had taught him this.

In his book about this historic flight, *The Earth Beneath Me*, Dick Smith wrote: 'If the

helicopter had not been invented I would still have attempted to fly around the world. I have always been a great admirer of the early aviators, the brave men and women who pioneered the air routes which we fly in comfort in jumbo jets today. I am proud to be an Australian, and very proud of the significant part played in the development of aviation by Australians, a part out of all proportion to the population of the country at the time. Australia had about five million people when trailblazers like Bert Hinkler, Charles Kingsford Smith, Charles Ulm, Keith and Ross Smith, Hubert Wilkins, Raymond Parer, Mrs Bonney and others were risking their lives in primitive aeroplanes with minimal navigation equipment. I had read everything I could on their early flights but that did not compensate for the real thing. I wondered what it would be like to follow in their footsteps.'

### **The flight begins**

Dick's helicopter, Delta India Kilo, took off from Fort Worth in Texas and he began the long haul across the Atlantic Ocean. The experience of being alone in a single-engined helicopter above such a vast body of water

was an unnerving one. The fact that the helicopter was fitted with the latest navigational aids didn't ease the loneliness and fear. He described it as 'a profoundly disturbing experience.' What kept him going was the thought of aviators who had made this journey, also alone, but without any navigational equipment, or radio or even weather forecasts. He thought particularly of James Mollison who, in 1932, was the first person to fly east to west across the Atlantic Ocean. The thought of Mollison's courage boosted his morale. He was also aware that his family was behind him. His wife Pip was there to meet him at various places and she was in charge of ordering supplies for him, getting clearances to fly in airspaces belonging to different countries and making sure that spare parts got to him. It was not always easy or even possible to get permission to fly over a



### **Daring adventures**

*'It's as if I can't stop doing these things. At the time, I regret it. I remember, during the helicopter flight, wondering how I could get out of it without losing face. But I know, if I had stopped, I'd still be trying to finish.'*

particular country's airspace. The Soviet Union as it then was (it is now Russia and a collection of independent states) did not permit Dick to land in its territory to refuel. It took all his skills to land his helicopter on the deck of a ship in the North Pacific Ocean for this crucial refuelling stop.

Dick Smith's flight was from the USA, via Greenland to the United Kingdom and from there, via India to Australia. The journey from the UK to Australia

was to commemorate the historic flight of Bert Hinkler (see box) in 1928. Dick tried as much as possible to follow Hinkler's flight, right down to landing exactly where Hinkler had landed, in a park in the Queensland town of Bundaberg – the town where Hinkler had been born. When he completed the final leg of the flight – back to Texas – Dick became the first person to fly a helicopter solo around the world. It was not to be the last of his adventures.



Dick Smith

Pip and Dick Smith in Greenland. Pip met Dick at various stages on his round-the-world helicopter flight.

## **Bert Hinkler**

Bert Hinkler is one of Australia's most famous aviators. He was born in Bundaberg on 8 December 1892, and was interested in flying from an early age. He travelled to England and at the outbreak of World War One he joined the Royal Naval Air Service. He won the Distinguished Service Medal and joined the Royal Flying Corps.

Hinkler wanted to make a solo flight from London to Australia but he couldn't get any financial backing for fuel, parts and maintenance. Instead he flew from London to Turin in Italy. This had never been done before and he was given the Britannia trophy in recognition of his feat.

In 1928 Hinkler set out on his solo flight from Croyden in England to Australia in an Avro Avian plane. He reached Darwin fifteen-and-a-half days later, breaking the previous record of 28 days. He received a hero's welcome.

In December 1931 he set out to fly across the South Atlantic Ocean and despite dreadful weather he reached the African coast not far from his intended destination. This was an incredible feat of navigation and it made him world-famous.

By 1933 aircraft technology had improved and flying times had decreased. The record for flying between England and Australia had been reduced to eight days and 20 hours. Hinkler wanted to beat this. He flew in the same Puss Moth aircraft that he had flown in across the Atlantic. His plane crashed in Italy and he was killed. He was buried in Florence with military honours.

There is a monument to Bert Hinkler in Italy near the place where his plane came down, and another in Bundaberg, the Queensland town where he was born.