

# Aviation heroes

**D**ick Smith has always admired the men and women who pioneered flight. There have been an extraordinary number of important Australian flight pioneers, among them Bert Hinkler, Charles Kingsford Smith, Charles Ulm and Mrs Harry Bonney. (In 1933 Mrs Bonney flew in a DH Moth aircraft from Australia to England. She was the first woman to do this. In the previous year she had become the first woman to fly around Australia.)

One of the mysteries of Australian aviation history was the whereabouts of a plane called The Kookaburra. In 1977 Dick Smith began searching for it. He did not find it on his first attempt.

## **The story of The Kookaburra**

In the 1920s there was a lot of competition among fliers to be

the first to achieve a particular feat, or to hold a particular record. Charles Kingsford Smith and his co-pilot Charles Ulm had become famous in 1927 when they flew around Australia in a record time of ten days and five-and-a-half hours. This was less than half the time of the previous record. This was an incredible feat at the time. People were amazed.

Kingsford Smith and Ulm had competition. Keith Anderson and Bob Hitchcock, both friends of Kingsford Smith, tried to beat the record but failed. The story of The Kookaburra really begins with an expedition set up by Kingsford Smith and Ulm but ultimately involving Anderson and Hitchcock. In 1929 Charles Kingsford Smith and Charles Ulm began a flight which they hoped would take them around the world. There were two other men in the party – H. A. Litchfield who was the

navigator and T. H. McWilliams who was the radio operator. They were flying in The Southern Cross, an aeroplane made famous in 1928 when Kingsford Smith and Ulm flew it in the first successful flight across the Pacific Ocean.

The Southern Cross took off on 30 March 1929. Things did not go as planned and the plane and its crew became lost. They were very low on fuel and were forced to land in a remote part of north-western Australia. A rescue mission was launched. Many people volunteered to search for Australia's most famous aviators. Among them were Keith Anderson and Bob Hitchcock. They wanted to be the first to find their friends.

The plane they flew was called The Kookaburra. The compass wasn't working properly and they were carrying a lot of fuel, making the plane very heavy. After flying for three days they were forced to land in the Tanami Desert in the Northern Territory. This is remote and dangerous country. They ran out of water and died of thirst before anyone could rescue them. Kingsford Smith and his party were found and rescued, and the

bodies of Anderson and Hitchcock were recovered 14 days after they had gone missing. The plane was not brought back and, as time went on, its whereabouts in the desert became a mystery. Dick Smith wanted to find it and restore it.

### **The search begins**

Dick knew roughly where the wreckage might be found because in 1961 a surveyor had come upon it while doing work for the Northern Territory. He had brought back some small parts for identification. The Northern Territory Museum was interested in finding the wreckage and sent people to look for it in 1974 and 1975. They did not succeed.

In 1977 Dick Smith made his first attempt. Using a helicopter he landed in the area but it was impossible to find the plane without a properly equipped search party as the area was rugged and one part of it looked just like another. A second search began, this time with vehicles, the helicopter and an aeroplane. Still nothing was found. This only made Dick more determined. In 1978 he returned to the Tanami Desert, bringing his wife Pip and his two

## Sir Charles Kingsford Smith (1897–1935)

Charles Kingsford Smith, or Smithy as he was known, is one of the great heroes of Australian aviation. He was born in Brisbane on 9 February 1897. During World War One he was sent to England to train as an officer and was transferred to the Royal Flying Corps. He flew planes in France and was awarded the Military Cross for bravery. He was wounded and no longer permitted to fly, but he became an instructor instead. He knew that after the war he would need to make a career for himself in aviation.

When the war finally ended in 1918, Smithy was among many pilots who made a living by offering joyrides. Few people, other than fighter pilots, had ever been up in an aircraft at that time. It was a thrill people were prepared to pay for. He worked in this way in California as well. He also worked in films and gave aerial displays. It earned him a living but it didn't pay much. He returned to Australia in 1921 without much money.

Kingsford Smith's great ambition was to fly across the Pacific Ocean. He did not have the money he needed to buy the plane so he and his friend Keith Anderson started a trucking company in Western Australia called Gascoyne Transport Company. The money he earned from this enterprise enabled him to return to Sydney. Here he joined up with Charles Ulm and together they broke the round-Australia flight record. But they did not yet have a suitable plane to attempt a trans-Pacific crossing so they went to California to find one. There was a lot of interest in their quest and they received funds from various individuals as well as a fund from the people of New South Wales. Kingsford Smith bought the airframe of the Fokker aeroplane used by Sir Hubert Wilkins (another of Dick Smith's heroes) in his arctic flights. He modified the plane and gave it the name The Southern Cross.



Charles Kingsford Smith (right) and Charles Ulm.

On 31 May 1928, Kingsford Smith, Charles Ulm and two Americans, H. Lyon and J. Warner, took off from San Francisco. They accomplished the east-west crossing of the Pacific Ocean in three stages. The leg between Honolulu and Fiji was the longest distance flown non-stop by anyone up to that time. After a successful landing in Australia Kingsford Smith and his companions received many honours.

The Southern Cross was flown by Kingsford Smith on several other record-making flights. In 1928 he made the first non-stop flight across Australia. This was followed by the first flight across the Tasman Sea to New Zealand. The attempt to fly around the world in The Southern Cross failed when the plane was forced down in the north of Western Australia. Keith Anderson and Bob Hitchcock lost their lives in The Kookaburra when searching for Kingsford Smith and his crew.

daughters with him. This time they found the wreckage. He said, 'It was a moment to remember forever, a moment to dream about, to talk and laugh and cry about.' The remains of The Kookaburra were taken to the Alice Springs Museum.

The tragedy of The Kookaburra is significant in Australian aviation history because it led to the Federal Government's decision that detailed aeronautical maps of Australia had to be made. It also led to flyers being obliged to submit flight plans detailing when and where they expected to fly. Regulations were also introduced about the equipment

Charles Kingsford Smith finally began his journey around the world in The Southern Cross in June 1929. He was accompanied by Charles Ulm, H. A. Litchfield and T. H. McWilliam. Along the way they set a new record for the Australia-England flight. Kingsford Smith continued to establish new records for flights between England and Australia, and in 1934 he made the first west-east crossing of the Pacific Ocean. In 1935 on a flight from England to Australia, he and his companion J. T. Pethybridge disappeared somewhere between India and Singapore — their bodies were never found.

Charles Kingsford Smith is remembered as one of Australia's greatest aviators and a pioneer of aerial routes both within this country and between Australia, Europe and America. His plane, The Southern Cross, is treasured as one of Australia's most revered relics.

planes had to have on board if they were to fly over remote areas. All these measures made flying safer.



Pip and Dick Smith with the wreckage of The Kookaburra.