

JON JOHANSON

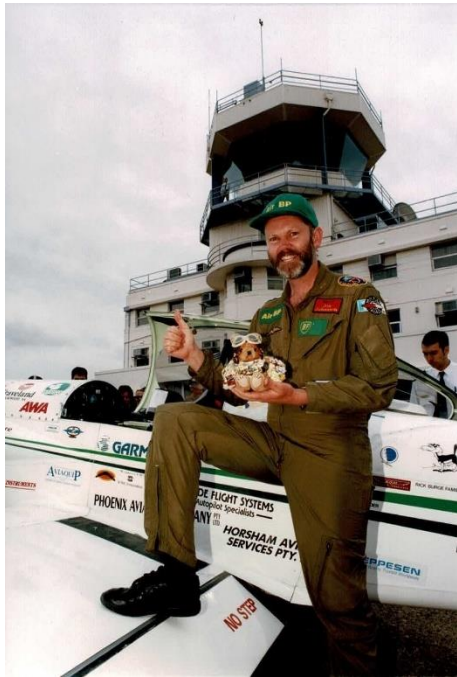


Figure 1 - Jon Johanson, Kingsford and VH-NOJ at Parafield [SAAM collection]

Jon Johanson was born on 10 September 1956 in Warburton, Victoria and spent early childhood on a Bairnsdale dairy farm managed by his father. He had an older sister and brother, Lorinda and Cris, and a younger brother Leigh.

He developed an early fascination with aviation, but initially as a spectator with no real expectations of becoming a participant. This seems to be largely because of his being imbued from childhood with the belief that his abilities were meagre and that he would be a life-long under-achiever. He struggled at school but completed it nevertheless and undertook a carpentry apprenticeship in 1974-77 rather than the medical degree he aspired to. He hadn't relinquished his dream of flying, however, and his apprenticeship was just able to fund flying lessons at Horsham and a private pilot's licence.

His heart wasn't in carpentry and so during 1978-81 he trained as a general nurse at Sydney Adventist Hospital – nursing being the closest he felt he could achieve to a medical degree. He struggled mightily through the training, failing on several occasions, but grit and perseverance enabled him to pass with distinction to become a registered nurse. He then immediately volunteered to work with refugees in Cambodia and during 1981-82 conducted and coordinated health services and a special feeding program in a Cambodian border village. He went on in 1982 to be a field director of optometry/ophthalmology in the Cambodian border area of Thailand, acting as deputy director as required.

All through this period he maintained his love of flying and he took the opportunity to return from Thailand via the US, where he stayed with an American doctor friend he had made in Thailand who was a fellow aviation aficionado. They toured airfields in the northwest and visited Van's Aircraft where they met Richard VanGrunsven ('Van'), the designer and manufacturer of a range of recreational aircraft kits. By then Jon was assessing options to acquire his own aircraft and Van's RV-4 met all his desired attributes: 150kts cruise, stall speed less than 50kts, aerobatic capability and cross-country suitability.

After his return to Australia in 1982 he started accident and emergency nursing at Mt Druitt in NSW before undertaking midwifery training at Nepean Hospital in Penrith during 1983-84. After qualification he practised midwifery as a clinical nurse specialist at Penrith then Hawkesbury Hospital in Windsor NSW, where he remained until the end of 1988, gradually increasing his flying in hired light aircraft including relatively long distances such as Sydney-Thursday Island and return. That particular flight convinced him he should take instrument flight training, which he did in 1986, then a Commercial Pilot Licence in 1988. Also, while at Hawkesbury Hospital, he purchased Piper Comanche VH-AZK with one of the hospital's obstetricians, increased his flying, and decided on a career change to full-time commercial flying. Somehow, he found the time to achieve an ATPL (Airline Pilot Transport Licence) during that period as well.

By 1989 Jon had distributed his resumé throughout the Australian and Pacific Islands commercial aviation communities and in January he was hired by Arnhem Air Charter to fly out of Maningrida so he sold his share in -AZK and moved north. His commercial flying was in a range of aircraft including Cessna 172, 182R, 210 and 404; Partenavia P68B; and Piper PA31-310 Navajo and -350 Chieftain. The air charter job came to an end around March/April 1990 and he moved to Darwin where he took up full-time nursing, becoming night supervisor in a 100-bed private hospital. He purchased an RV-4 aircraft kit and built it, virtually single-handed, in his time off over 2,000 hours during 1989-92.

He registered his RV-4 as VH-NOJ (Jon backwards) and first flew it on 5 January 1992. The specifications of the aircraft are attached as Appendix A. His first long-distance flight in it was to the Sport Aircraft Association of Australia's annual

convention in Mangalore, north of Melbourne, then on to Tasmania. By then Jon was setting his sights on a trip to the Oshkosh Airshow in Wisconsin, but he also wanted to upgrade his nursing qualifications to degree level so in 1993-94 he studied full-time at Flinders University in Adelaide while working as an agency nurse in midwifery, recovery, high dependency, ICU and CCU. In his 1993-94 semester break he midwifed again at Horsham Hospital and graduated as a Bachelor of Nursing at the end of 1994. Somehow during this period, unbelievably, he found time to work as a casual ground school lecturer at the Australian Aviation College at Parafield and continue his recreational flying.

In 1993 he had a significant mishap when he made a heavy landing at a friend's country property. His pride and wallet were the only things hurt - he suffered no injuries - but -NOJ was substantially damaged with a large number of parts requiring replacement. He had another couple of hard landings: one in 2000 at a country property and another in 2001 at Port Pirie, both of which Jon frankly admits were entirely his fault. Both were expensive but neither resulted in injuries.

He set world records in -NOJ in December 1994 flying Adelaide-Hobart-Melbourne-Adelaide, being airborne for almost 9 hours, and in January/February 1995 more records for Adelaide-Auckland and Wellington-Melbourne. His Auckland flight was the first on which Kingsford, his teddy bear mascot given to him by a teaching colleague, accompanied him. Kingsford stayed with him for the rest of his flying and later proved very useful in handing Jon's correspondence with school children as his fame grew. Record-setting was important for the attraction of sponsors to assist with his Oshkosh trip, which by then had morphed into a planned eastbound round-the world flight. Jon modestly noted that records were somewhat easier than usual to come by because the RV-4 was in a class with virtually no records set in Australia. All his records are listed in Appendices B & C.



Figure 2 - From Air BP's 1995 sponsorship advertisement [SAAM collection]

After returning from New Zealand in February 1995, Jon spent most of his time producing a sponsorship promotional document and knocking on doors. He achieved sponsorship from Garmin, Goodyear, Jeppesen and, most importantly, Air BP for fuel, plus a number of other companies. He was knocked back by Qantas, but Qantas Executive Services agreed to coordinate the various enroute clearances required. At the same time, he meticulously planned every foreseeable aspect of the flight.

He set off from Parafield on 26 June 1995 to Moorabbin where he was to meet his major sponsor, Air BP, and be subjected to all the associated press and television attention, the next day to Sydney for more of the same, to Gilgandra to meet his sister on the 28th, then finally the

start of his Pacific transit from Brisbane on 1 July to Fiji, Pago Pago, Christmas Island and Hawaii. His planned US landfall was Santa Barbara, but he diverted to nearby Santa Ynez after a 15-hour flight from Hilo because of coastal fog. He returned later the same day (7 July) to Santa Barbara a very tired man, to a memorable reception by members of the Experimental Aircraft Association, media and friends. From there he wended his way to Oshkosh via Van's factory in Oregon and some eight other sight-seeing stops, finally arriving Oshkosh on 26 July. He was asked to open the Show the next day and generally treated as the aviation royalty he had become, before departing on 5 August for the Atlantic crossing ahead. His gateway was Bangor in Maine, from where he departed on 8 August to Santa Maria in the Azores then Madrid. From Madrid he flew to Biggin Hill where he stayed with a fellow RV kit builder he had met at Oshkosh, saw a bit of England, then set off on 20 August on a route back to Darwin close to the one followed by the Smith brothers in the 1919 Great Race – but with only four intermediate stops (Crete, Dubai, Madras and Seletar) compared to the Vimy's 25! He arrived Darwin on 30 August and finally Parafield via Moorabbin again on 4 September. He had flown 198:20 flight hours and 48,800km over 71 days and added another 3 flight records to his resumé.

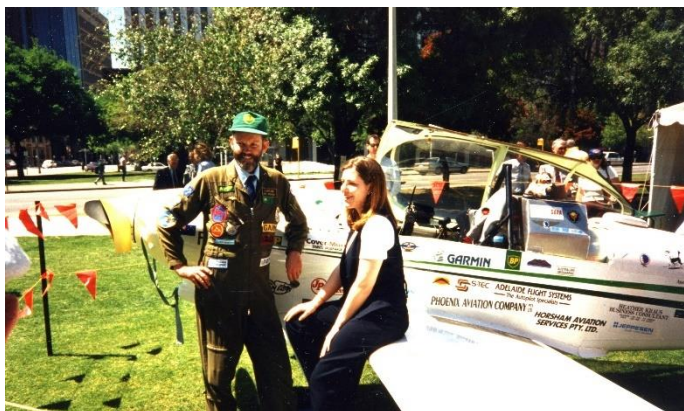


Figure 3 - Jon with -NOJ and an unidentified admirer - Victoria Square Adelaide Sep 1995 [SAAM collection]

Back in Adelaide he returned to nursing and his part time Australian Aviation College lecturing, having deservedly become a full-blown celebrity. Far from being the underachiever he had been brought up to believe himself, he had proved to be an extremely high achiever. He put this down to an unwillingness to accept defeat in any venture he set his mind to, rather than innate ability – and, with typical modesty, he inscribed his business cards with “Once started too thick to quit”! -NOJ was displayed in Victoria Square then at the Adelaide Grand Prix at Victoria Park, and Jon was subjected to state and civic receptions and much media attention. He also received a swag of awards (listed as Appendix D).

When in Oshkosh he had met Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who invited him to fly to the Malaysian international air show at Langkawi to represent a Malaysian company planning to produce Van’s aircraft kits. So, probably tired by then of all the attention, Jon set off again on 11 November 1995 to Langkawi via Darwin, Seletar and Kuala Lumpur, where he arrived on 3 December. He spent 6 days at the show before leaving on 11 December back to Australia, spent Christmas in Gilgandra with his sister and arrived back in Adelaide on Boxing Day. The trip added another 61:44 hours to his logbook, flown over 15,462km in 45 days.

Jon’s next venture was to fly -NOJ to Auckland for the New Zealand Sports Aircraft Convention in Matamata. He left Parafield on 6 February 1996 and was in Auckland in 10 hours and 48 minutes – in a new record time 3 hours and 11 minutes under his 1995 record. By then he was starting to think about a South Polar flight and an Air NZ captain friend got him a flight to Christchurch and back, where he visited Antarctic NZ’s headquarters. He also took the opportunity to visit friends and the museum in Wanaka before returning from Invercargill to Melbourne on 16 February in yet another record time.

Next up was a flight to the Sport Aviation Association of Australia’s triannual fly-in at Langley Park in the centre of Perth – Norman Brearley’s airfield for his 1921 initiation of Western Australia Airways services. This westbound flight evidently got him thinking about planning a flight on to South Africa, which would make him the first solo pilot on the route since Lores Bonney did it in a Klemm Eagle in 1937. Lores flew via SE Asia and India, but Jon decided to tackle a direct route over the Indian Ocean. So, after returning home via Albany and between working, speaking engagements and dealing with his heavy volume of correspondence, he set about planning the oceanic flight to South Africa with an extension on to the 1996 Oshkosh air show. By then it was April 1996 and time for the Mangalore SAAA meeting and more honours flowed: the Oswald Watt Gold Medal for 1995, which put him in the distinguished company of legendary aviators including Bert Hinkler, Kingsford Smith, P.G. Taylor and Hudson Fysh; and Rotary’s Paul Harris Fellowship. At Mangalore he was invited to attend a RAAF anniversary air show on Norfolk Island, which was the first long overwater flight via Lord Howe Island on which he took a friend as a passenger.



Figure 4- VH-NOJ over Cranfield UK [SAAM collection]

Once he got home from this adventure, he started full-time planning for his South Africa and Oshkosh flight, which soon became a second round-the-world venture. This would make him the only solo pilot to fly twice around the world and to traverse the four major oceans – the Pacific, North and South Atlantic and the Indian Ocean. Rather than continuing to Oshkosh on the conventional route through Africa and Europe, he decided to add the South Atlantic to his accomplishments by flying from Namibia to Brazil instead. He worked hard on sponsorship proposals and Air BP and many of his previous sponsors came to the party again.

He left Parafield on 19 June 1996 in a blaze of press and TV cameras, initially backtracking to Moorabbin to satisfy his supporters and sponsors there, then to Horsham the next morning to correct an alternator problem, then to Port Lincoln to stay with friends for a couple of nights and wait out some bad weather. This was the first time he was equipped with a laptop and email to enable him (and Kingsford) to correspond and transmit digital pictures throughout the journey.

His route from there was to Jandakot, Karratha, Cocos Islands, Rodrigues and Mauritius to Durban, but 4 hours into the 15-hour flight from Cocos Islands to Rodrigues, Perth instructed him to return because his clearance for Rodrigues had not come through. Since he had uplifted all his available fuel in Cocos Islands and would be stranded if he returned, he elected to continue anyway with an outside chance, depending on the winds he encountered, of reclearing direct to Mauritius. In the event he elected to land in Rodrigues where he was subjected to hours of bureaucratic process before being allowed to depart the next morning after uplifting 40 litres of motor fuel as the only fuel available.

The Mauritian civil aviation authorities were very unhappy about the Rodrigues stop, which caused further bureaucratic wrangling, including telexed correspondence with CASA who unhelpfully advised that -NOJ was not approved to use motor fuel. It took all day to sort out, but eventually Jon was able to satisfy the authorities and allowed to depart the next day to Durban. From there, after thoroughly servicing -NOJ and a stay with friends, he flew to Vereeniging (50km south of Johannesburg) accompanied by a friend in his RV-6 to meet the press, then on to Johannesburg where he was scheduled to speak to a chapter of the Experimental Aircraft Association.



Figure 5 - Jon at Parafield prior to departure 19 June 1996 [SAAM collection]

His departure point for the South Atlantic crossing was to be Walvis Bay in Namibia, where he arrived on 14 July after visits to Bulawayo, friends at their airstrip at Allendale Station, some scenic flying over Victoria Falls, Cape Town, an air show in East London and Upington in South Africa's northwest. His plan was to fly over Ascension Island to Fortaleza in Brazil. He had been refused permission by the USAF to land at Ascension during his planning stage but when nearing Ascension his oil pressure had dropped enough to be concerning, so he declared a PAN (Precautionary Advisory Notice) and asked for landing clearance. It was denied, so he duly declared an emergency and landed to a very hostile reception by the USAF officials, although the RAF contingent on the joint base was much friendlier. After being accused of landing under false pretences and much wrangling he was fuelled and allowed to depart to Fortaleza, but 2 hours out he was ordered to head to Recife, on the coast some 630 km south of Fortaleza, for reasons he never determined. From there he departed on a 14-hour flight to Barbados then arrived in the US at Fort Lauderdale on 20 July. After a day off and a side trip to the Space Shuttle facilities he made his leisurely way via 3 stops over a week to Oshkosh.

-NOJ was given pride of place at the air show again and after a couple weeks Jon flew off on 12 August to meet his parents, who had flown up for the show, in Peoria in Illinois so his father, a long-time Caterpillar employee, could tour their plant. He made various other stops to catch up with Oshkosh friends throughout the Midwest before heading on to Sunset Park in Oregon for Van's RV 'homecoming' on 30 August. He then flew up to British Columbia in Canada to stay with friends in Salmon Arm before heading down the coast on 9 September to Monterey for the Pacific crossing home. He landed in Bankstown on 24 September via Hilo, Christmas Island, Pago Pago, Norfolk Island and Lord Howe Island. The final stages were to Point Cook for press interviews, Horsham to see his parents and pick up his house keys, then Murray Bridge to meet flying friends who would escort him into Parafield. He landed Parafield on 26 September 1996 to a huge welcome after flying 61,649km over 100 days in 255:32 flight hours and adding another 24 flight records.

From then and throughout most of 1997, Jon wrote his book *Aiming High*. Writing didn't come naturally to him, particularly about himself. so was a huge undertaking and he laboured mightily over it. Once published he needed some RV therapy so he set out to break more records. On 28 October 1997 he left Parafield on a flight around Australia of 50 hours 42 minutes (38h 27m flight time), arriving back in Parafield on 30 October. He had flown non-stop to

Townsville over Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane, overnighing in Townsville before continuing over Darwin to a refuelling stop in Port Headland, then over Carnarvon and Perth to Parafield – a total of 10,439 km. The existing record was 180 hours.

Jon spent the next couple of years dealing with his celebrity status and promoting his book on a round-Australia speaking tour arranged by his publisher. He resumed his nursing and Aviation College duties, but it wasn't long before he was planning for yet another round-the-world venture. His original plans were to circumnavigate via both poles but owing to difficulties involved with the Antarctic routing he decided on an eastbound routing with a trip over the North Pole, and to leave the South Pole for another day. It was his longest itinerary and biggest challenge yet, lasting nearly 5 months. He left Parafield on 16 May 2000 to Canberra where he stayed overnight with friends, then direct to Lord Howe Island the next day. From Lord Howe he tracked southeast to Ardmore (Auckland) before turning northeast to Tonga, overnight to Christmas Island for a couple of days' rest, then to Hilo. The Hawaiians proved to be somewhat of a problem both on arrival because Jon lacked the US visa required and because on taxiing for departure the flight centre ignored his filed flight plan and required him to fly north to join the Honolulu-San Francisco track. That put him a day behind schedule because it took hours that night and the next day to sort out how he would report positions enroute instead. He eventually arrived at Santa Barbara after a 16-hour flight on 29 May.

From California he made his way north without a break for a 3-day stop at Van's Sunset Strip in Oregon, then to British Columbia where he went to Kamloops to visit friends and to talk to the local aviators, then to Salmon Arm to visit his friends there again. After that he headed for the Pole – up to Yellowknife and Eureka Island in Canada and over the Pole on 7 June to Longyearbyen in Spitsbergen. While flying over the Pole the intense cold (-28C) cracked his canopy, so it was a relieved man who arrived in Spitsbergen. A shattered canopy would not have been survivable. After a 10-hour flight over the pole, he flew another 4 hours on to Tromso on Norway's north coast where he overnighed and made temporary repairs to the canopy.

From Norway Jon made his way through Denmark, Germany and France to England where he indulged in some serious tourism with Sue Ball, who had been acting as his business manager/media liaison for some time. They toured the southern counties then drove up through Duxford to Cheshire, York, the Peak District, Wales and back to Cranfield where -NOJ was waiting after permanent repairs to the canopy. He met Polly Vacher, who features later in this story, while at Cranfield and advised her about some of the procedures and difficulties involved in Antarctic flight planning. He departed there on 10 July north to Teesside for the night then north again to East Fortune on Scotland's east coast for another night before backtracking to North America the next day via Reykjavik. He overnighed there before landing at Goose Bay in Labrador on 12 July. The East Fortune stop was 'for the sake of history': world-crossing aviatrix Sheila Scott's Comanche was in a museum there!

It gets increasingly difficult to map Jon's progress through Canada and the US – but from Goose Bay he flew to Milwaukee for customs clearance then 45 minutes to visit a friend in Appleton Wisconsin before heading east to Fort Collins in Colorado for maintenance on -NOJ and some Grand Canyon and Arches National Park tourism. He was back in Wisconsin for the Oshkosh air show on 23 July where -NOJ was again featured in the "Earthrounders" display area. After the show it was back to Fort Collins on 2 August for a number of local flights with local aviators and EAA Young Eagles and visits to friends, then north to stay with his Salmon Arm friends again via Kelowna for Canadian customs on 5 August. From there, after visiting the Abbotsford air show and Vancouver Island, he flew back to Van's Oregon airstrip before heading to his Bangor gateway via Ft Collins and Kirksville (Missouri) for another Atlantic crossing on the way home. He departed Bangor on 6 September on same itinerary as his 1995 world trip to Santa Maria in the Azores, but instead of continuing through Europe, India and SE Asia, he proceeded via the Canary Islands to Accra in Ghana, Namibia and South Africa to Durban where he was to



Figure 6 - VH-NOJ at Cranfield showing the fuel tank Jon installed in place of the rear seat [SAAM collection]

reverse his 1997 Indian Ocean eastbound crossing to Reunion, Rodrigues and Cocos Islands to Australian landfall at Karratha on 29 September.

He was back in Parafield on 2 October 2000, after an incredible 73,200 km over 139 days and 350 flight hours, a North Pole and Arctic Ocean crossing, plus 3 more FAI flight records to add to his achievements.

Only 3 years later Jon was off again – this time for his long-planned South Pole crossing. In preparation he had spent July to October 2003 extensively modifying the aircraft as an “RV-4TE” for the flight. This involved completely rebuilding the wings to increase in-wing fuel capacity and installing a “cloned” Lycoming engine custom-built for him in Kamloops with water and methanol injection. Power was increased from the previous 160hp to 180hp and the aircraft empty weight increased by 176 kgs. With the additional wing fuel loading and his extra tank installed in the aft passenger seat, his total fuel capacity increased from the stock aircraft’s 120 litres to over 1,000 litres.

Before setting off to the Pole he made two maximum take-off weight test flights from Parafield: the first on 15 November when he circled over the Gulf in a very slow climb, then flew Hobart-Melbourne-Parafield in a total time of 13 hours 15 minutes. The second, on 26-27 November, was another round-Australia flight over the prescribed course, but this time flying non-stop to Port Hedland in 25 hours 40 minutes, then back to Parafield in 12 hours 50 minutes. Both flights earned him new records as certified by the Air Sport Australia Confederation – by then Australia’s FAI affiliate (see Appendix C), and reassured him -NOJ was capable of tackling the long flight over the Pole.

He departed Parafield on 6 December 2003 to Invercargill, from where he planned to fly over the Pole to Ushuaia at the southern tip of Argentina on a flight plan of an incredible 32-33 hours. This would add the Southern Ocean crossing plus the Pole to his list of achievements. He left Invercargill the next day with 36 hours of fuel on board and flew abeam McMurdo whose aeradio operator informed him he was ‘welcome to land there if necessary at his own risk’. By then Jon was not experiencing the forecasted light winds his flight plan was based on, which put at risk his chance of overflying the Pole and continuing to Ushuaia with safe reserves. However, McMurdo’s reassurance gave him sufficient confidence to keep going past his Invercargill point of no return to achieve his objective and the whole point of the flight. He overflew the South Pole at 0435GMT on 8 December and, with no change to the adverse winds and the only other option of landing at the British Rothera base at Adelaide Island on the Antarctic Peninsula being ruled out, he turned around and headed back to McMurdo. He landed there after some 26½ hours in flight.

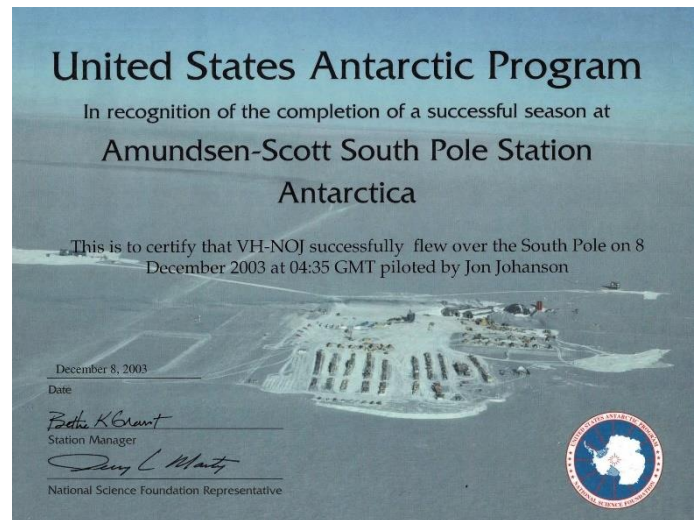


Figure 7 - Jon's certificate awarded by the US National Science Foundation to recognise his South Pole overflight [SAAM collection]



Figure 8 - Jon with VH-NOJ on the ice at McMurdo Station - Dec 2003 [SAAM collection]

This caused a diplomatic furore when both the NZ Antarctic program chief and the US base commander refused to assist him, citing the bases’ policy requirement for private expeditions to be completely self-sufficient. Jon was offered a passenger flight to Christchurch and advised that -NOJ would follow by ship at his expense and be dumped on the wharf. It was implicit that this effectively meant destruction of the aircraft. This he flatly refused, deciding instead to let the diplomatic process work its way through. Lou Sanson, CEO of Antarctica NZ, was particularly unsympathetic. He claimed Jon’s secrecy and poor planning had led to his predicament and said “we are not

discouraging adventure in Antarctica, we're just discouraging poorly planned adventures." Ouch.

A 6-day impasse followed. Alexander Downer, then foreign minister, intervened politically on Jon's behalf and that may have helped achieve the final outcome. Jon camped by his aircraft initially in a refuelling hut and for the last 4 nights in the heated empty passenger terminal while the incident blew up in the press. Back in Adelaide Sue Ball managed a 'crisis centre' with much help from friends of hers and Jon's, under massive pressure over very long days from world-wide media while simultaneously searching for ways to resolve the impasse and coordinating all the information Jon would require for a return flight. Finally, Polly Vacher, an English long-distance aviatrix, who was embarked on a planned flight over both poles and 7 continents, agreed to release fuel from her cache pre-positioned at McMurdo. A much-relieved Jon then flew back to Parafield via Invercargill and Hobart, arriving on 16 December 2003. The flight earned him two more FAI records for the South Pole-McMurdo-Invercargill sectors, but Mr Sanson, a mealy-mouthed bureaucrat to the end, had the last word: "Jon Johanson should be grateful to Ms Vacher for enabling him to fly his plane back to Invercargill...Polly's trip was well organised and properly planned...It is ironic that she is now assisting a stranded pilot who embarked upon an ill-prepared and secret flight over the South Pole."

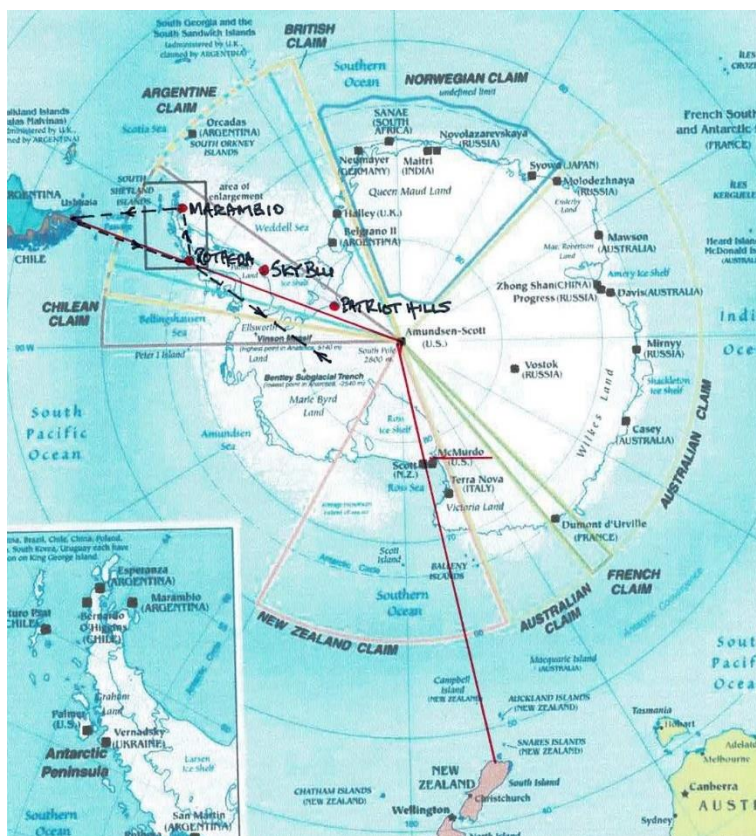


Figure 9 - Johanson's planned route is in red, closely aligned to Vacher's planned route in the opposite direction, but with her additional planned stops at Rothera, Patriot Hills and McMurdo. In the event, her actual route is shown as black dashed lines with the approximate locations of her sought-after fuel stops at Sky Blu or Patriot Hills also marked.

[Map - <https://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/polar.html>]

Invercargill to Ushuaia over the Pole without enroute fuel uplift. That made it quite unreasonable for him to go to the huge expense of seeking authorisation for a McMurdo landing and pre-positioning fuel. In the event – as occurred – that unforecasted winds ate into his reserve, he faced either having to return to Invercargill at his point of no return (PNR) prior to the Pole or landing in Antarctica. The fact that he refused to forego his Polar objective and elected to proceed past his PNR to overfly the Pole then land at McMurdo seems reasonable in view of the information he received from the base while inflight.

Polly Vacher, incidentally, was initially reluctant to relinquish her McMurdo fuel, which would effectively end her polar aspiration. She had waited five weeks in Ushuaia for suitable weather conditions before giving it a go and departing

Jon's long record of meticulous planning suggests this was less than fair – and, after all, the base *had* informed him he was welcome to land at McMurdo. And his flight wasn't secret: although Jon had made no press statements prior to leaving because of the difficulty of the flight and its possibility of failure, the aeronautical authorities in NZ, enroute and in Argentina, including McMurdo, had his flight plan that made his intentions clear.

It seems probable that much of the criticisms of Jon's planning were actually based on a basic misunderstanding of the fundamental differences between Polly's and Jon's aircraft. Polly was flying a Piper Dakota on a planned Antarctic route of Ushuaia - Rothera (Adelaide Island) – Patriot Hills – over the pole - McMurdo - Invercargill. The aircraft had fuel for a maximum of 18 hours and did not have the legs for sectors longer than those, so her flight was dependent on fuel being available at the intermediate stops. She accordingly had sought and achieved prior permission and positioned fuel at the British base at Rothera and NZ's Scott Base/McMurdo Station, but was never able to finalise an arrangement at the privately operated US base camp at Patriot Hills.

Jon's flight, on the other hand, was based on -NOJ being capable of flying the entire route from Invercargill to Ushuaia over the Pole without enroute fuel uplift. That made it quite unreasonable for him to go to the huge expense of seeking authorisation for a McMurdo landing and pre-positioning fuel. In the event – as occurred – that unforecasted winds ate into his reserve, he faced either having to return to Invercargill at his point of no return (PNR) prior to the Pole or landing in Antarctica. The fact that he refused to forego his Polar objective and elected to proceed past his PNR to overfly the Pole then land at McMurdo seems reasonable in view of the information he received from the base while inflight.

on 2 December to Rothera, still without the arrangements at Patriot Hills that would make flight over the Pole possible. Unsuitable weather made her wait at Rothera until 7 December before she decided to attempt direct to McMurdo with the possibility of a side-trip back to the Pole from there, but strong headwinds forced her to return to Rothera. She was in Rothera still vainly trying to negotiate additional fuel either at Patriot Hills or at the British operating station at Camp Blu as an alternative (see map), when she was asked, and refused, to allow Jon access to her McMurdo fuel. By 12 December, when it became clear she had no chance of positioning fuel at either place, she changed her mind and released the fuel to him. On 18 December, after another wait for suitable weather, she flew back to Ushuaia via the Argentinian base at Marambio at the tip of the Antarctic Peninsula – where the Argentinians welcomed her and supplied the fuel she needed to reach Ushuaia. She then completed her round-the-world flight via the Pacific instead.

The following February Jon was invited to speak at RAAF Base Tindal. Jon told me he always suspected, rather than being recognition of his achievements, this may have been their desire to inspect the aircraft that had been the centre of an international incident, with US military authorities concerned he may have seen things going south that he shouldn't!

The Fédération Aéronautique Internationale bestowed another significant honour in 2005 on Jon when Qantas flew him to Paris in October to receive its Gold Medal for 2004. The medal was in recognition of his outstanding contribution to the development of aeronautics in sport aviation and presented at the opening ceremony of a conference celebrating 100 years of the FAI.

After that until the end 2008, his time was mostly taken up with general flying and working to assist other sport aircraft builders/purchasers complete/upgrade their projects, firstly at Parafield then at Goolwa. He flew a lot of sport aircraft, did some international ferry flying, started some contract environmental survey flying and continued his nursing and midwifery.

In 2009 he first flew an RV-3 he had taken over as a stalled project and completed with some help from those around him. With the availability of the new aircraft, he used VH-NOJ less, which in any event was very heavy because of the modifications made for the Antarctic flight. Continued use of -NOJ would really require a complete re-build to return it to standard RV-4 configuration, but Jon felt it should be preserved as the unique aircraft it had become.



Figure 10 - Jon with VH-NOJ at SAAM on 29.01.2005 [Mike Milln]

Some sectors of the aviation community felt it should go to the Smithsonian Museum in Washington or the Experimental Aircraft Association at Oshkosh, but Jon preferred to keep it in South Australia so he contacted the South Australian Aviation Museum to gauge its interest in acquiring it. Unsurprisingly, the Museum jumped at the chance and immediately embarked on a fundraising campaign launched by Hon Mark Butler MHR at the Museum on 2 July 2010 to cover the nominal price Jon asked. The aircraft, as Jon flew it to the South Pole except for a substituted Lycoming engine, together with his faithful mascot Kingsford, is still proudly displayed at the Museum. Jon also generously donated many of his awards, some of which are displayed with the aircraft, plus a plethora of documents and memorabilia.

At time of writing Jon continues his nursing interspersed with some contract survey flying and very occasional international ferry flying. He remains a Vans aircraft enthusiast and has owned RV-3 VH-NQJ, now owns RV-8A VH-ISQ and has repaired RV-6A VH-OCB back to new flying condition, which is on the market. He is now building another RV-6.

Mike Milln
History Group - South Australian Aviation Museum
March 2025

Sources

Jon kindly reviewed several drafts of this document and assisted in confirming/correcting various facts and dates during an extensive discussion at the Museum on 29.01.2025 and multiple telephone calls, texts and emails. Sue Ball also reviewed drafts and contributed valuable insights. I tried but was unable to contact Polly Vacher to comment on her part of the story.

Other sources include:

- *Aiming High*, Jon Johanson, Wakefield Press 1997 &2002
- *Wings Around the World*, Polly Vacher, Grub Street Publishing 2006
- South Australian Aviation Museum library files of contemporaneous press and magazine articles and media releases
- State Library of SA on-line archive of press reports of the Polly Vacher story
- South Australian Aviation Museum collection of Jon's donated documentation including transcripts of flight records and awards, -NOJ's maintenance logbook and photographs
- Emails from Jon Johanson to Glenunga International High School sent during his 2000 world flight
- Jon Johanson Online Travel Diary created for the Sport Aircraft Association of Australia 1996 www.saaa.nasma.com/jonjoh file copies
- Jon Johanson Curriculum Vita, undated c1996
- VH-NOJ The Little Australian, Jon Johanson's sponsorship prospectus, undated c1996
- Round the World Flight 1 ([www.wingnet.org/rtw/RTW\)Y.HTM](http://www.wingnet.org/rtw/RTW)Y.HTM)), Flight 2 (/RTW008D.HTM) and Flight 3 (/RTW009D.HTM) accessed 25.1.2025
- Jon Johanson Story VANS RV-4 VH-NOJ (Serial number DA4), Nigel Daw, articles dated 21.11.2009 written for SA Air Journal

APPENDIX A – RV-4 Specifications – VH-NOJ as configured as RV-4TE for 2003 South Polar flight

	STANDARD CONFIGURATION	VH-NOJ
SPAN	7,010 mm	7,010 mm
LENGTH	6,198 mm	6,198 mm
HEIGHT	1,651 mm	1,651 mm
WING AREA	10.2 m ²	10.2 m ²
EMPTY WEIGHT	411 kg	587 kg
PROPELLER	Metal fixed pitch	MT constant speed (MTV 12)
FUEL CAPACITY	120 litres	More than 1,000 litres
BAGGAGE	16.4 kg	0 kg
ENGINE	Lycoming O-320 160 hp	Lycoming clone TI0-360 with H2O & methanol injection, 180 hp
TOP SPEED	178 kts	178 kts
CRUISE (75% @ 8,000')	168 kts	168 kts
CRUISE (55% @ 8,000')	151 kts	151 kts
STALL SPEED	42 kts	45 kts
TAKEOFF DISTANCE	91 m	91 m
LANDING DISTANCE	91 m	91 m
RATE OF CLIMB	2,050 fpm	2,050 fpm
CEILING	24,000 ft	Tested to 25,000 ft
SPEED RATIO	4.2:1	4.2:1

APPENDIX B – World Records held – Fédération Aéronautique Internationale

Route	Date/Class	Performance Km/h
	Class C-1b	
Adelaide to Hobart	20.12.1994	311.41
Hobart to Melbourne	20.12.1994	225.05
Melbourne to Adelaide	20.12.1994	277.25
Adelaide to Auckland (NZ)	29.01.1995	232.26
Wellington (NZ) to Melbourne	05.02.1995	215.68
Adelaide to Oshkosh (USA)	26.07.1995	21.32
London (UK) to Melbourne	31.08.1995	61.02
Melbourne to Melbourne around the world eastbound	31.08.1995	29.37
Adelaide to Auckland (NZ)	06.02.1996	302.17
Invercargill (NZ) to Melbourne	16.02.1996	258.44
Perth to Cocos Island	28.06.1996	37.36
Perth to Mauritius	30.06.1996	46.43
Melbourne to Mauritius	30.06.1996	37.33
Melbourne to Durban (South Africa)	01.07.1996	37.77
Perth to Durban (South Africa)	01.07.1996	48.64
Mauritius to Durban (South Africa)	01.07.1996	240.70
Walvis Bay (Namibia) to Ascension Island	15.07.1996	257.25
Cape Town (South Africa) to Recife (Brazil)	16.07.1996	59.80
Ascension Island to Recife (Brazil)	16.07.1996	231.39
Perth to Barbados	18.07.1996	31.37
Durban (South Africa) to Barbados	18.07.1996	33.10
Cape Town (South Africa) to Barbados	18.07.1996	64.78
Perth to Oshkosh (USA)	30.07.1996	26.27
Recife (Brazil) to Oshkosh (USA)	30.07.1996	26.17
Cape Town (South Africa) to Oshkosh (USA)	30.07.1996	31.52
Durban (South Africa) to Oshkosh (USA)	30.07.1996	23.70
Barbados to Oshkosh (USA)	30.07.1996	17.51
Monterey (USA) to Hilo (Hawaii USA)	15.09.1996	247.77
Hilo (Hawaii USA) to Norfolk Island	20.9.1996	81.88
Norfolk Island to Lord Howe Island	23.9.1996	217.18
Oshkosh (USA) to Sydney	24.09.1996	14.59
Monterey (USA) to Sydney	24.09.1996	54.52
Lord Howe Island to Sydney	24.09.1996	276.39
Melbourne to Melbourne round the world westbound	25.09.1996	23.31
Adelaide to Melbourne	28.10.1997	278.90
Melbourne to Sydney	28.10.1997	306.72
Sydney to Brisbane	28.10.1997	281.52
Brisbane to Townsville	28.10.1997	314.12
Townsville to Darwin	29.10.1997	315.33
Darwin to Carnarvon	29.10.1997	222.61
Carnarvon to Perth	29.10.1997	228.03
Perth to Adelaide	30.10.1997	263.51
Yellowknife (Canada) to Eureka (Canada)	06.06.2000	232.98
Eureka (Canada) to Longyearbyen (Spitsbergen Norway)	07.06.2000	206.27
Adelaide to Stauning (Denmark)	09.06.2000	26.44

	Class C-1c	
Adelaide to Invercargill (NZ)	06.12.2003	315.06
Adelaide to McMurdo Station	07.12.2003	97.05
Invercargill (NZ) to McMurdo Station	07.12.2003	208.47
Adelaide to South Pole	08.12.2003	110.56
Invercargill (NZ) to South Pole	08.12.2003	222.50
South Pole to McMurdo Station	08.12.2003	308.87
McMurdo Station to Invercargill (NZ)	15.12.2003	284.19

APPENDIX C – Records published by Australian Authorities

(Note most of which but not all are duplicated in Appendix B – FAI Records)

Royal Federation of Aero Clubs of Australia

Route	Date/Class	Performance km/hr
	Class C-1b	
Adelaide – Hobart	20.12.1994	311.41
Hobart – Melbourne	20.12.1994	225.05
Melbourne – Adelaide	20.12.1994	277.25
Adelaide – Auckland (NZ)	06.02.1996	302.17
Invercargill (NZ) – Melbourne	16.02.1996	258.44
Melbourne – Mauritius	30.06.1996	37.33
Melbourne – Durban (South Africa)	01.07.1996	37.77
Perth – Durban – (South Africa)	01.07.1996	48.64
Mauritius – Durban (South Africa)	01.07.1996	240.70
Walvis Bay (Namibia) – Ascension Island	15.07.1996	257.25
Ascension Island – Recife (Brazil)	16.07.1996	231.39
Cape Town (South Africa) – Recife (Brazil)	16.07.1996	59.80
Perth – Barbados	18.07.1996	31.37
Cape Town (South Africa) – Barbados	18.07.1996	64.78
Perth – Oshkosh (US)	30.07.1996	26.27
Durban (South Africa) – Oshkosh (US)	30.07.1996	23.70
Cape Town (South Africa) – Oshkosh (US)	30.07.1996	31.52
Recife (Brazil) – Oshkosh (US)	30.07.1996	26.17
Monterey (US) – Hilo (Hawaii US)	15.09.1996	246.77
Hilo (Hawaii US) – Norfolk Island	20.09.1996	81.88
Norfolk Island – Lord Howe Island	23.09.96	217.18
Oshkosh (US) – Sydney	24.09.1996	14.59
Monterey (US) – Sydney	24.09.1996	54.52
Lord Howe Island – Sydney	24.09.1996	276.39
Round the World Westbound Melbourne-Melbourne	25.09.1996	-
Round the World twice, once in each direction Melbourne – Melbourne	25.09.1996	-
Adelaide – Melbourne	28.10.1997	278.90
Melbourne – Sydney	28.10.1997	306.72
Sydney – Brisbane	28.10.1997	281.52
Brisbane – Townsville	28.10.1997	314.12
Townsville – Darwin	29.10.1997	315.33
Darwin – Carnarvon	29.10.1997	226.61
Carnarvon – Perth	29.10.1997	228.03
Perth – Adelaide	30.10.1997	263.51
Around Australia via the approved route (elapsed time)	30.10.1997	202.95
Air Sport Australia Confederation (Australia's representative on FAI)		
	Class C1-1b	
Yellowknife (Canada) – Eureka (Canada)	06.06.2000	232.98
Eureka (Canada) – North Pole	07.06.2000	251.87

Eureka (Canada) – Longyearbyen (Spitsbergen Norway)	07.06.2000	206.27
North Pole – Longyearbyen (Spitsbergen Norway)	07.06.2000	282.28
North Pole – Tromso (Norway)	07.06.2000	210.50
Adelaide – North Pole	07.06.2000	26.03
Stauning (Denmark) – London-Cranfield (UK)	23.06.2000	2.32
London-Cranfield (UK) – Goose Bay (Labrador Canada)	12.07.2000	76.72
East Fortune (UK) – Goose Bay (Labrador Canada)	12.07.2000	65.00
London-Cranfield (UK) – Oshkosh (US)	23.07.2000	19.45
Oshkosh (US) – Santa Maria (Azores)	07.09.2000	6.12
Santa Maria (Azores) – Durban (South Africa)	21.09.2000	30.30
Durban (South Africa) – Cocos Island	28.09.2000	57.51
Adelaide – North Pole	02.10.2000	8.32
North Pole – Adelaide	02.10.2000	26.03
Cocos Island – Adelaide	02.10.2000	65.52
	Class C-1c	
Adelaide – Hobart – Adelaide [<i>Note: this flight was recorded in error as being in Class C1-b</i>]	15.11.2003	248.78
Adelaide-Melbourne-Sydney-Brisbane-Townsville-Darwin-Carnarvon-Perth-Adelaide (flight time)	27.11.2003	267.44 38h26m46s
Adelaide - Invercargill (NZ) -	06.12.2003	315.06
Adelaide – South Pole	07.12.2003	110.56
Adelaide – McMurdo Station	07.12.2003	97.05
Invercargill (NZ) – McMurdo Station	07.12.2003	208.47
Invercargill (NZ) – South Pole	08.12.2003	
South Pole – McMurdo Station	08.12.2003	308.87
McMurdo Station – Invercargill (NZ)	15.12.2003	284.19

APPENDIX D – Awards Received

Year	Award
1981	Seventh Day Adventist Church World Service Thailand Award for outstanding service to Indo-Chinese refugees
1995	Oswald Watt Gold Medal
1995	Premier of SA Award in recognition of his round the world flight
1995	South Australian Government Award
1995	Australian Aviation Safety Award of Certificate of Air Safety for outstanding contribution to air safety
1995	Advertiser South Australian of the year
1995	Lord Mayor of Adelaide Award in recognition of being the first Australian to fly a homebuilt aircraft around the world and the world records set during the flight
1995	City of Mitcham Award in honour of achievements as a solo aviator
1995	City of West Torrens Award and Freedom of the City in recognition of achievements in the field of aviation
1995	Civil Aviation Historical Society of South Australia Award as a tribute to his incredible record-breaking global flight in a personally home-built SV-4 (sic) aircraft of the Municipality of Mascot's 1920 award to Captain Sir Ross Smith
1995	AOPA Australia R.C. "Bill" Adams Award in recognition of his solo round-the-world record-breaking flight in a single-engine home-built aircraft
1995	Sport Aircraft Association of Australia Most Meritorious Flight Award
1995	Morphett Vale Seventh Day Adventist Church Award in recognition of world record breaking achievements
1995	Horsham Rural City Council Award to recognise solo world record flight
1995	Experimental Aircraft Association Award for Custom Built Aircraft for his perseverance in flying from Australia to Oshkosh in 1995
1995	SA Great Award in recognition of achievement in Special Field – Aviation
1996	Paul Harris Fellow Award Rotary Club of Horsham for 1 st Australian to circumnavigate the world in home-built aircraft and other various records
1996	3WM Citizen of the Month February 1996 for outstanding service to the aviation industry and for inspirational achievements demonstrating resourcefulness, endurance and courage
1996	Sport Aircraft Association of Australia Most Meritorious Flight
1996	Sport Aircraft Association of Australia Special Award
1996	Sport Aircraft Association of Australia Award for first Australian to build & fly his homebuilt aircraft RV-4 round the world
1996	Sport Aircraft Association WA Fly-in Award for attendance at the SAAA fly-in at Langley Park and Serpentine Airfield WA 2 March 1996
1996	Luskintyre Aviation Group silver tray award in recognition of world record solo flight from UK to Australia
1996	Royal Aeronautical Society Award
1996	Australian Geographic Award for Excellence
1996	The Institution of Engineers, Australia, South Australian Division Award for Outstanding Achievements in Aviation
1996	Aero Club South Africa, Medal of Honour for Outstanding Aviation Achievement
1997	Sport Aircraft Association of Australia Special Award
1997	Sport Aircraft Association of Australia Award for circumnavigation in a RV-4
1997	Institution of Automotive Engineers Award
1997	SAE Australasia Albert Ludgate Award for outstanding contribution in the field of aircraft engineering in recognition of his construction and record-breaking performance in the RV-4 fixed-wing light aircraft
1998	Sport Aircraft Association award for meritorious flight around Australia record
1998	Guild of Air Pilots and Air Navigators Johnston Memorial Trophy in recognition of his outstanding pilot skills in a series of world record-breaking solo long distance flights in his home-built single-engined aircraft
1999	Mildura Rural City Council Certificate of Appreciation for performance at Mildura Airshow Magic '99
2000	West-Wind Aviation Award for longest distance travelled to the Revelstoke Canada Fly-in
2000	Denmark Veteran Fly Klubben Award

2000	Popular Flying Association Clive Canning Award for flight from Australia via North Pole
2001	Sport Aircraft Association Award for third round the world flight in a RV-4
2003	US Antarctic Program National Science Foundation Certificate certifying VH-NOJ successfully flew over the South Pole on 8 December 2003 at 0435GMT
2004	Fédération Aéronautique Internationale Gold Medal
2004	Australian Geographic Adventurer of the year
2007	State of Oklahoma Wiley Post Spirit Award of Citizen of the Sky for 2006
2007	State of Oklahoma Award & Proclamation of Jon Johanson Day 21 Jan 2007 for his flying exploits
2015	Fédération Aéronautique Internationale Gold Medal Certificate Award for building his own aircraft, circumnavigation the world twice and flying over both poles, all flying solo