

## CHARLES JAMES (JIMMY) MELROSE



C.J. (Jimmy) Melrose in DH80A VH-UQO  
Courtesy NLA

Jimmy Melrose<sup>1</sup> was born at Burnside, Adelaide, on 13 September 1913, into a family of prominent South Australian graziers. His grandfather, George Melrose, had emigrated to South Australia 1839 and settled in the Mt Pleasant district. He had eight children, one of whom was James Melrose, Jimmy's father.

James Melrose in turn had five children by his first wife, then one child, Jimmy, with his second wife Hilda Westley nee Billing. On his second marriage he settled in Adelaide, on the esplanade in the suburb of Glenelg, where Jimmy was brought up.

Jimmy was the only child of James' second marriage and he was born into a life of comfort and privilege. He was educated at Sacred Heart College then St Peters College but was sickly as a child. This prompted his mother to take him out of school to travel to England when he was aged 12. They travelled extensively around Europe for the next three years before returning to Adelaide in 1929 just before Jimmy's 16<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Jimmy was a diarist from an early age, and his diaries are imbued with his passion for flying. He met Sir Alan Cobham in England just before they returned to Australia, and by then had formed a determination to learn to fly. He soon did so. His first flight was with George Rice-Oxley, the Aero Club of South Australia's flying instructor, in a DH60 Metal Moth, VH-UNE, on 13 May 1930, but it was July 1933 before he gained his "A" (private pilot's) Licence, aged 19, after only six hours of instruction.



Puss Moth DH80A VH-UQO  
Courtesy Helen Blake, PD

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<sup>1</sup> The primary sources for this profile is *Boy Phoenix C. James Melrose*, ©Helen Blake 2009 and *Wing Tips – The Story of The Royal Aero Club of South Australia Book 1 1919-1934* © Mike Milln Avonmore Books 2011

In March 1934 he persuaded the trustees of his trust account to release sufficient funds for him to buy a new DH80A Puss Moth with a Gipsy Major engine, VH-UQO, which he named *My Hildergarde* after his mother. By then he was already planning to fly to England to enter the 1934 MacRobertson Air Race from Mildenhall to Melbourne, and preparing himself for it with navigation instruction, but he decided first to make an attempt on Jim Broadbent's round Australia record.

He aborted his first attempt in July 1934 when after leaving from Essendon he made a forced landing at Jervis Bay. His second attempt began at Parafield on 7<sup>th</sup> August on a route to Essendon, Mascot, Old Bar, Brisbane, Townsville, Normanton, Darwin, Wyndham, Broome, Port Hedland, Carnarvon, Maylands, Kalgoorlie, Forrest, Ceduna and Parafield. He did it in 5 days, 10 hours and 57 minutes, beating Broadbent's record by 45 hours, and arriving back to a tumultuous welcome at Parafield on 12<sup>th</sup> August.

He left Adelaide again on 16<sup>th</sup> September 1934 in VH-UQO, three days after his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, arriving in Darwin on 19<sup>th</sup> September after a record flight time of 17 hours. He left Darwin at 6:30am on 20<sup>th</sup> September to the UK and the MacRobertson Air Race. He had been licensed only 16 months and had accumulated 200 hours flight time. He arrived at Croydon on 28<sup>th</sup> September at 7:00am after 8 days and 9 hours, beating Jim Mollison's 1931 time of 8 days 19 hours. His time was not recognised as a record, however, because he had departed Australia with no intention of attempting the record and so had not registered his flight as an attempt on it. It was only when he got to Allahabad in four days that he realised the record was in reach and decided to try for it.

The race started from Mildenhall in Suffolk on 20<sup>th</sup> October 1934. Melrose was entered in the handicap section and he was the last to start at 6:45am. He flew via Marseilles to Rome where he spent the first night, leaving at 9:00am the next day to Athens via Janina, where he landed for fuel. He left the next morning, 22<sup>nd</sup> October at 4:00am and arrived in Baghdad by early afternoon. He departed again at 2:00am to Karachi via Bushire and Jask, arriving after sunset. On the morning of 24<sup>th</sup> October he departed to Allahabad via Jodhpur, by which time Scott and Campbell-Black had won the speed race in their de Havilland Comet in 2 days 23 hours with five stops between Mildenhall and Melbourne. Melrose left Allahabad at 4:00am on 25<sup>th</sup> October to Calcutta then on to Rangoon, where he arrived at 3:00pm. He was on his way again at 1:45am next morning to Victoria Point then Singapore where he arrived at 1:40pm. He then left Singapore at 1:00am on 27<sup>th</sup> October to Rambang via Batavia where he again landed in the early afternoon before departing at midnight to Koepang then on to Darwin where he landed at dusk on 28<sup>th</sup> October to a very relieved welcome. His last sector over the Timor Sea was close-run as he missed his Australian landfall by some 75 miles to the south west, turned south west instead of north east and ended up 175 miles from Darwin before he realised his mistake and followed the coast up to Darwin, where he landed with empty tanks four hours overdue. His onward flights from Darwin to Melbourne were fraught with drama. He left in the early hours of Monday morning 29<sup>th</sup> October to Newcastle Waters but was delayed there due to strong headwinds before departing again at midnight, landing, lost, at a farmhouse where he asked for directions to Cloncurry. He was soon back on track, spent two hours in Cloncurry but had to land again to ask directions to Charleville where he finally landed to a huge welcome at 4:00pm. He left Charleville the next day, 31<sup>st</sup> October, at 1:30am to Narromine but got off course again (due to what was later found to be an out of alignment compass) and landed at a farmhouse at Forbes to arrange fuel at Cootamundra instead. That was his last stop before finally flying between the race terminus pylons at Flemington at 9:00am then landing at nearby Laverton.

The race committee had sent word to Melrose in Charleville that a motorcade through Melbourne was planned the next day for the finishers, so this last hectic day's flying was in an effort to reach Melbourne in time to participate. He did. Three hours after his arrival he was seated on the back seat of an open-top Vauxhall, one of six cars in the motorcade. The cars paraded in order of the race finishers, with the exception of the 4<sup>th</sup> placed Cathcart Jones and Waller, who had already started their return to England. Melrose was in the sixth car having placed 7<sup>th</sup> overall and 3<sup>rd</sup> on handicap.

The motorcade wove through the streets of Melbourne through a 100,000 strong crowd to a State reception and luncheon at Parliament House. Melrose was subjected to almost hysterical adulation as reported in the next day's press:

*"C.J. Melrose, the young South Australian, who landed at Laverton three hours before the parade began and who travelled in the last car, received perhaps the greatest oration of all. At times his car was unable to move because of thousands of persons surging around it and clambering on to it. By the time he reached Parliament House he was sitting among a pile of bouquets that had been thrown to him by almost hysterical women."*<sup>2</sup>

His flight was an extraordinary achievement. He was the youngest of 42 contestants in 20 aircraft, and the only solo contestant to finish. He was one of only two Australians who completed the race and he flew most of it suffering from a severe cold. While he finished third on handicap, he was awarded second prize as a result of contestants not being permitted to take both speed and handicap prizes. This meant that Scott and Campbell-Black, who placed first on speed and handicap, elected to take the £10,000 first prize in the speed section; while the Parmentier and his KLM crew of the DC2 'Uiver', who placed second on both speed and handicap, elected to take the first prize of £2,000 in the handicap section. This left the second prize of £1,000 in the handicap section to Melrose.

Melrose established a subscription fund for the Club to buy a new aircraft soon after he got back from the Centenary race the following week. *The Advertiser* promoted the fund and received subscriptions to it, Radio Station 5AD did the same and the fund soon reached £1,000. The Club had decided to buy a Miles Hawk, manufactured in Reading, England, by Phillips and Powis Aircraft Ltd, and obtained a price quotation of £820 for the Colonial Major model. The aircraft was powered by a 130hp Gipsy Major engine and was especially attractive to the Club because of its relatively high maximum cruise speed of 150mph coupled with a very low landing speed. The aircraft cleared customs at Port Adelaide on 29 April 1935, and was delivered to Parafield the next day. It was christened *Queen Adelaide* by Lady Dugan, the Governor's wife, on the first Saturday after Empire Day (25 May 1935) at Parafield.

Then that summer of 1934, Melrose set out to establish a number of records. He achieved an altitude record of 20,000 feet over St Vincents Gulf on 20<sup>th</sup> November 1934, then on 13<sup>th</sup> December flew 700 miles from Adelaide to Launceston followed by the 650 miles to Sydney on 20<sup>th</sup> December – both in record times.

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<sup>2</sup> The Argus, Thurs 1 November 1934 page 11

In January 1935 he sold his Puss Moth VH-UQO to his friend Jim Broadbent in Sydney, and delivered the aircraft to Sydney via Melbourne, where he sat and passed his 'B' (commercial) pilot's licence. Broadbent promptly used the aircraft to beat Melrose's round-Australia record.



Percival Gull VH-UVH over Adelaide  
Courtesy Helen Blake/ Graeme Minns, photo possibly W. Maddocks

On 31<sup>st</sup> January 1935, Melrose left Sydney with his mother on the *Aorangi* to Canada, then travelled across Canada and then the Atlantic to England to buy another aircraft. He settled on a Percival Gull IV and flew it back to Australia after thoroughly testing it in the September 1935 King's Cup race around Britain. He intended to use the Gull "*for chartered flights from Parafield in preparation for a service which he proposes to inaugurate between Adelaide and*

*Melbourne*".<sup>3</sup>

Jim Broadbent had also headed for the UK in VH-UQO but sold the Puss Moth in Basra after damaging the aircraft near there, and flew the rest of the way with Imperial Airways. He was to deliver another Percival Gull, VH-UVA, to the Percival agent in Australia, and he and Jimmy Melrose set off from Croydon in their Gulls on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1935 in an attempt to create a simultaneous flight record to Australia.

Kingsford Smith, meanwhile, had left Lympne in Kent on 6<sup>th</sup> November with Tom Pethybridge in his Lockheed Altair *Lady Southern Cross*. He was intent on beating Scott's and Campbell-Black's record set the previous year in the Centenary air race and conscious of Melrose and Broadbent racing ahead of him. The Altair was a much faster aircraft and by the time the two Gulls met up in Allahabad, it was close behind them. They parted company in Alor Star (Alor Setar Malaysia), from where Melrose flew to Singapore while Broadbent went on direct to Batavia (Jakarta). Jimmy had seen Kingsford Smith overtake him over the Andaman Sea south east of Rangoon and expected to see him in Singapore, but by then the Altair was missing and the RAF mounting a search for him. Melrose immediately decided to abandon his race with Broadbent to join the search, which resulted in more adventures including an engine failure, crash landing on a remote beach on the Thai-Burmese border and incredible perseverance in reaching Penang overland and returning with parts and help to fix the aircraft. So Broadbent won the race, beat Kingsford Smith's 1933 record and was awarded the 1935 Oswald Watt gold medal for his effort.

The Royal Aero Club of South Australia had recommended award of the 1934 medal to Melrose for his record flight around Australia, his unacknowledged record flight to London prior to the Centenary Race, and for his performance in the race itself, but he was up against an unbeatable favourite in Kingsford Smith for his trans-Pacific flight. One can't help feeling that he would have been a worthy 1935 winner after all he went through during the search for Smithy!

<sup>3</sup> *Wing Tips* No 81 September 1935, page 5

Melrose had flown the Gull back to Adelaide after repairs in Penang, reaching Parafield on 30<sup>th</sup> November. He continued on to Essendon after a brief Parafield fuel stop, but very soon afterwards came to grief. He was on his way from Essendon to Sydney on 3<sup>rd</sup> December for a complete overhaul when he decided to land at Penrose (on the railway line between Goulburn and Moss Vale in New South Wales) in poor visibility, hit a stump and wrote the aircraft off. He fared better than the aircraft – he suffered sprained ankles and concussion but was otherwise uninjured.

All this was before 1935 was out. By the middle of 1936 he was dead.

He was on a ship to England before the end of January 1936 to take delivery of a new Heston Phoenix, which he planned to use to form his own air-taxi business. He had ordered the aircraft while in England to purchase his Gull, and it was originally planned that the aircraft would be delivered to Australia. His decision to take delivery in England instead was no doubt a result of his impatience to receive the aircraft after the untimely demise of the Gull.



Heston Phoenix VH-AJM at Dawson SA 5 June 1936  
 Courtesy Helen Blake/photo Leslie Rasmus

He left Lympne on 7<sup>th</sup> April 1936 and by 25<sup>th</sup> April 1936 had flown the Phoenix, VH-AJM, back to Parafield with an incredible 27 stops along the way. This was because he had agreed to use it as a South Australian Centenary publicity flight, and to distribute Centenary pamphlets in all the countries through which he passed. This was his third solo UK-Australia flight, and he arrived at Parafield to a welcome by 8,000 people including Albert Blesing, the Minister of Agriculture, on behalf of the Government; and Jonathan Cain, the Lord Mayor, on behalf of the public.



Melrose Funeral, Melbourne 7 July 1936  
 Courtesy Helen Blake/Graeme Minns

On 30<sup>th</sup> April, he set off to Melbourne with Harry Plumridge (as a member of *The Advertiser's* staff as well as of the committee of the Royal Aero Club of South Australia) on a two-week continuation of his Centenary publicity flight to all the capital cities. By June his air-taxi business was in full swing and he had carried no less a luminary

than the South Australian Premier, Sir Richard Butler, on a chartered flight to Dawson and back to Parafield.

On 5 July, he and his passenger were killed when the Phoenix broke up in cloud over South Melton in Victoria while on a charter from Essendon to Darwin. He was not yet 23 years old.

Simultaneous funeral services were held for him at St Paul's Cathedral in Melbourne and St Peter's Cathedral in Adelaide on 7 July. 100,000 people again assembled to line the route of his funeral cortege from St Paul's to Springvale Crematorium and tributes poured in from the Prime Minister, the South Australian Premier and many people around the World who loved and admired him. The South Australian Premier suspended both Houses of Parliament on the day of his funeral in a unique mark of respect, and perhaps Premier Butler's tribute to Melrose best summed up the impact of Melrose's death and his contribution to aviation: *"News of Mr Melrose's death has come as one of the most severe shocks suffered by the people of South Australia for many years. Everyone will mourn the loss of one who, although little more than a boy, had become one of the most famous citizens of his country. He had performed great services for his State, for the Commonwealth, and for aviation, by his wonderful exploits. He was a born flier and his life was based on these principles – to advance the interests of flying, to make it safe for the public, and to be at all times a worthy son of his mother."*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *The Argus*, Monday 6 July 1936, page 9

<sup>5</sup> Mike Milln is author of *Wing Tips – The story of the Royal Aero Club of South Australia – Book 1: 1919-1941*, 2011 Avonmore Books