

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN AVIATION MUSEUM

SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR PROFILES

CAPTAIN SIR ROSS MACPHERSON SMITH KBE MC*, DFC**, AFC, Order of El Nahda	b 4 December 1892 d 13 April 1922
LIEUTENANT SIR KEITH MACPHERSON SMITH KBE	b 20 December 1890 d 19 December 1955
LIEUTENANT WALTER HENRY SHIERS AFM*	b 17 May 1889, d 2 June 1968
LIEUTENANT JAMES MALLET BENNETT AFM*, MSM	b 14 January 1894, d 13 April 1922

These four men are bound together in history through their extraordinary achievement in 1919 when they flew Vickers Vimy G-EAOU from England to Australia in twenty-eight days to win the Australian Government's £10,000 prize for the first Australians to do so in less than thirty days.

Macpherson Smith early history

The Smith brothers were of Scottish extraction, the first and second of three sons of Scottish-born Andrew Smith and his Western Australian wife Jessie, nee Macpherson. They were born in Adelaide: Keith on 20 December 1890 and Ross on 4 December 1892. The third son, Colin, died from wounds suffered at Passchendale in June 1917.

Andrew Smith had emigrated to Australia from Scotland and in 1892, when Ross was three months old, the family moved to Mutooroo station, about 140 miles east of Burra in South Australia's mid north. Andrew was made manager of the station in 1897 and it was there that the boys spent their early years before being sent to Queen's School in Adelaide in 1902 as boarders. The family moved to Andrew Smith's birthplace in Moffatt, Scotland in 1906 where the boys spent the next two years at Warriston School. They all returned to Adelaide in 1908.

Ross Macpherson Smith – war years



Ross Macpherson Smith
(Courtesy SLSA PRG-18-9-1B)

By 1910, Ross had joined the Australian Mounted Cadets and was selected to represent the State on a tour of Britain and the US. He joined the 10th Australian Regiment, the Adelaide Rifles, when he got back and worked as a warehouseman for G.P. Harris Scarfe & Co until the outbreak of war when he enlisted as a private in the 3rd Light Horse Regiment, AIF. He was promoted to Sergeant on 1 September 1914 and embarked on the first troop convoy from South Australia to Egypt on 22 October. He landed at Gallipoli on 13 May 1915, was involved in the heavy fighting and rose swiftly through the ranks, first to regimental sergeant major on 11 August then second lieutenant on 5 September.

He was invalided to England via Lemnos in September suffering from enteric fever, he was promoted to lieutenant on 1 March 1916, then returned to duty on 5 April 1916 and was transferred to 1st Light Horse Brigade Machine Gun Squadron in Egypt on 18 July. He fought at the battle of Romani on 4 August 1916 and on

24 October 1916, by then no doubt heartily sick of the ground war, transferred to the Australian Flying Corps.

He qualified as an observer on 23 November and then as a pilot in March with 200 flight hours. He then embarked on very active flying service with No. 1 Sqn AFC (No. 67 (Australian) Sqn RFC) in defence of the Suez Canal zone and air attacks on the Turkish army in the Wadi Fara. He flew a variety of aircraft including Bristol Fighters and the Handley Page O/400 bomber on bombing and photographic flights across Palestine and was wounded in action on 1 September 1917. By the end of the war he had earned an MC and bar and the DFC and 2 bars.

Keith Macpherson Smith – war years

Keith's path into aviation was different. He was working at Elder Smith and Co in Adelaide when war was declared and tried immediately to enlist. He was rejected twice by the AIF for medical reasons but after corrective surgery he was determined enough to pay his own way to England where he was accepted by the RFC's Officer Cadet Wing in July 1917. In January 1918 he was posted to France with No. 58 Sqn – a newly formed bombing unit. Unlike Ross, however, Keith never saw action. On 24



*Keith Macpherson Smith
(Courtesy SLSA)*



*Walter Henry Shiers c1920
(Courtesy SLSA)*

February 1918 he was back in England as a gunnery instructor with No. 75 Sqn, was promoted to Lieutenant on 1 April and spent the rest of the war instructing pilots and navigators until being placed on the RAF's unemployment list on 5 November 1919.

Walter Henry Shiers

Wally Shiers was an Adelaide boy: born at Norwood to William, a plasterer, and Annie Shiers, and brought up in a family of 12. He left Richmond Public School in Keswick aged 13 and worked for a market gardener where he learnt basic machinery and motor maintenance for a couple of years before going to Broken Hill after the death of his mother in 1904. He worked at the Broken Hill North mine for the next eight years but by 1913 he had established an electrical contracting business in Leeton NSW in the heart of the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area.

He enlisted in the 4th Light Horse Brigade Ammunition Reserves AIF on 9 April 1915 as a Trooper and embarked for Egypt that June. He served as a driver until October¹

¹ Some sources state he was transferred to the AFC in July 1916, which is probably confusion with his transfer to the Light Horse 1st Double Squadron then. These were units formed with dismounted Light Horsemen for the protection of the Suez Canal.

the following year when he was attached to No 1 Sqn AFC at Kantara and taken on strength at Kilo 143 as a 2nd Class Air Mechanic in March 1917. He was promoted to 1st Class Air Mechanic in November 1917. It was here that his association with Ross Macpherson Smith began.

James Mallett Bennett

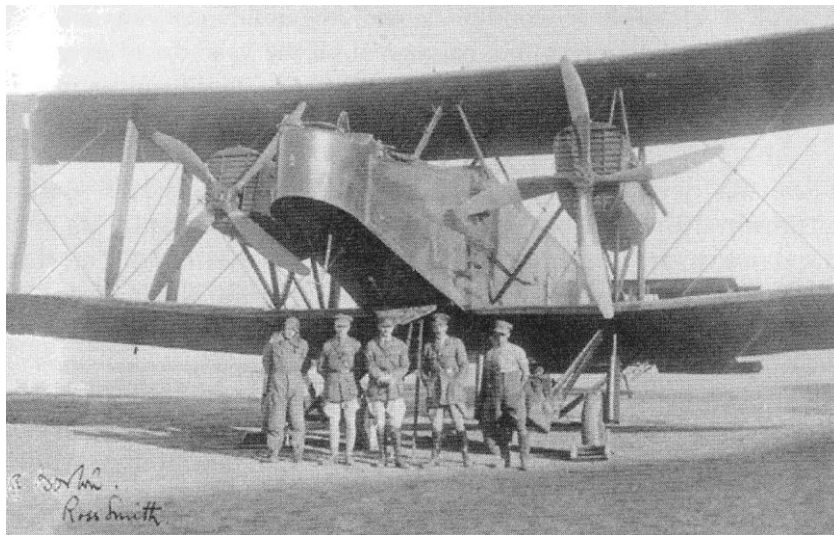
Jim Bennett was the only non-South Australian of the Vimy crew. He was born in St Kilda in Victoria to James, a tick-maker, and Henrietta Bennett. He was trained as a motor mechanic when he left school and served with the 49th Battalion militia from 1912-1915. He joined the AIF on 14 July 1915 before transferring to the AFC and being posted to 'C' Flight No. 1 Sqn AFC in early 1916. He was assigned to No. 14 Sqn RFC on arrival in Egypt in April 1916, where he was trained as a fitter and turner. He was promoted to Corporal on 24 August before joining No. 67 Sqn RFC. He remained with the squadron throughout the Sinai and Palestine campaigns and served with some distinction since he was promoted again to Sergeant in March 1918, was mentioned in dispatches and won the Meritorious Service Medal.



*James Mallett Bennett
(Courtesy SLSA B6099)*

Post – war

Because of Ross Macpherson Smith's considerable war-time experience in twin-engined heavy bombers (the Handley Page O/400), he was selected to co-pilot a survey flight in the aircraft, with Brigadier General 'Biffy' Borton² and Major-General Sir Geoffrey Salmond³, from Cairo to India immediately



*Handley Page O/400 C9700 just before takeoff from Cairo
(Borton via Airway to the East 1918-1920 Clive Semple)*

after the war. Borton had achieved some measure of fame by flying another O/400 from England to Cairo in July 1918. Shiers and Bennett were chosen to be mechanics on the flight.

They left Cairo on 29 November 1918, less than three weeks after the Armistice was signed, and took 14 days to reach Delhi on 12 December. Both Salmond and Borton were experienced pilots, but Sir Geoffrey was "excused from

² Brigadier General, later Air-Vice Marshal Amyas Eden Borton CB CMG DSO AFC b20/9/1886 d15/8/1969 was General Allenby's air commander and commanded the Palestine Brigade made up of the 5th and 40th Air Wings of the RAF. He had flown the Handley Page O/400 from Manston UK to Alexandria that Ross Smith later flew in Palestine.

³ Major General, later Air Chief Marshall and Chief of Air Staff Sir William Geoffrey Hanson Salmond KCB KCMG DSO b19/8/1878 d27/4/1933 was General Officer Commanding the RAF in the Field.

landing” the aircraft although all three shared the flying duties. They damaged the aircraft landing at a couple of refuelling stops so no doubt Shiers and Bennett earned their keep – and in fact sufficiently so for them both to be awarded the Air Force Medal on arrival at Baghdad.

Ross was royally entertained with his superior officers in Delhi, dining with the Viceroy, tiger shooting and pig sticking and generally living the high life of the Raj. By January Borton had decided to continue the flight to Australia with Ross and the two mechanics, but with virtually no knowledge of the available ‘landing grounds’ throughout SE Asia they decided to take advantage of an offered free use of the RIMS *Sphinx* to survey the route by sea first. They left the Handley Page in Lahore for an overhaul and set off on 10 February, with Shiers and Bennett and 7,000 gallon of petrol, to survey suitable sites in Burma, Siam, Singapore, Java and Timor and establish fuel depots at them. Only two days out of Calcutta the ship caught fire and nearly killed the lot of them. They were then offered a replacement, the RIMS *Minto*, – and they set out again, returning after a thorough three-month survey through to East Timor confident that the flight could be made. Unfortunately it wasn’t to be: the aircraft had been conscripted in their absence for bombing duty to counter an Afghan flare-up and written off.

The England – Australia Race



*The Vimy and crew before the start at Hounslow
In flying clothes, L to R, Ross Smith, Keith Smith Jim Bennett and Wally Shiers with Vimy G-EAOU.
The tall man between Bennett and Shiers is R.K. Pierson, designer of the Vimy
(Courtesy SLSA PRG-18-9-1-9A)*

It was then that Ross’s friends in high places really paid off. He was still in India when he happened to read in a months-old Australian newspaper about Prime Minister Billy Hughes’ offer of £10,000 to the first Australian to fly from England to Australia in less than 30 days. Ross knew straight away that he was uniquely qualified to take on the challenge with a readymade crew of his navigation-instructor brother Keith and the two mechanics who had kept the Handley Page serviceable on the long flight to India.

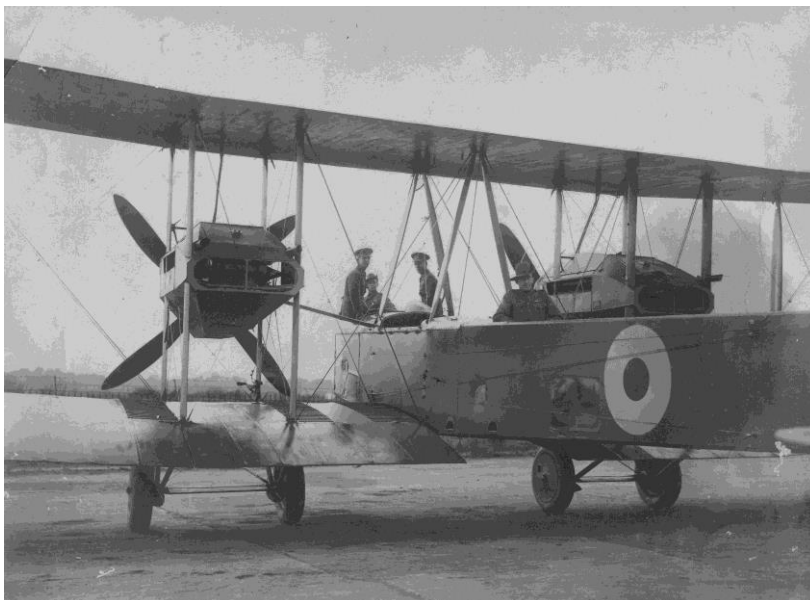
Biffy Borton, being English, wasn’t qualified to enter the race but as a Brigadier General he was certainly in a position to pull strings to secure a suitable aircraft for the Smith brothers to do so. He also pulled strings to get Ross a free first class ticket back to England on the *Soudan*, which left Bombay on 23 August 1919, and somehow got Shiers and Bennett accommodated too. The two mechanics had spent July and August attached to No. 31 Squadron RAF at Risalpur in the 3rd Afghan Campaign, where they supervised the rigging of the squadron’s new Bristol fighters. Ross had also been temporarily detached to 31 Sqn and to the RAF’s Simla HQ.

Back in England the competition to secure aircraft was intense but when Handley Page refused Borton's request for an aircraft he was able to persuade Vickers to supply its Vimy. This was designed as a WW1 heavy bomber, a biplane, with two Rolls Royce Eagle VIII engines of 360 horsepower, and was already famous as the aircraft John Alcock and Arthur Whitten Brown had flown from Newfoundland to Ireland in June 1919. It was produced just too late to see war service.

On 18 September 1919 Vickers lodged a race entry with the Royal Aero Club for Vickers Vimy G-EAOU that named Ross as its pilot. This relieved Ross of all the foot-slogging the other contestants faced in their attempts to secure aircraft and the sponsors necessary to finance the logistical support they would need along the route. Further, Vickers regarded the event as a commercial venture to display their aircraft and therefore had a considerable interest in making sure the aircraft was in top condition for the flight. The company installed new engines and arranged for fuel and oil sponsors to supply fuel at the various stopping places. It modified the aircraft for long-range flight by increasing fuel capacity, removed the gun mountings, strengthened the tail skid and modified the rear cockpit to accommodate Shiers and Bennett.

All these efforts gave the Smith brothers an incalculable advantage over their less-privileged competitors and there were other factors that rankled too. A month before the Vimy's entry was lodged the RAC changed the rules – and one has to surmise that Biffy was already by then pulling strings. On 21 August the RAC decreed that no contestant could start before 8 September 1919, a competent navigator had to be carried (who could also be the pilot), aircraft had to have a range of 500 miles or more, stopovers enroute must be pre-arranged and dispensation for engine changes enroute was made. All eminently sensible even in those pre-Workplace Health & Safety days, but it was no wonder that some contestants were convinced that the new rules were implemented to favour the Vimy crew and vociferously made their views known.

The race itself warrants a lengthy profile of its own to chronicle the mishaps of all the various contestants. This profile will attempt to summarise the progress only of the Smith brothers and



*Keith Smith, Shiers, Ross Smith and Bennett (rear cockpit) in G-EAOU before the start
(Courtesy SLSA PRG-18-9-1-4A)*

Shiers and Bennett in the Vimy. As to the others, suffice to say that of the six crews entered, only one other, Parer and McIntosh in an Airco DH9, finished the race – and then only in an incredible 206 days. Two of the six, Douglas and Ross in an Alliance P.2 and Howell and Fraser in a Martinsyde Type A, had fatal crashes with all four of them killed.

The Vimy crew took off into dense fog from Hounslow in Middlesex on 12 November 1919 to their first stop at Lyons in France. The Vimy had open cockpits and Ross and Keith suffered

abominably as they battled through thick cloud and snow. Lost at one stage, they were incredibly lucky to encounter a break in the cloud that allowed them to descend into clear air, regain their

bearings and find Lyons. The next sector was on to Rome, but when it became evident that they would not make it before nightfall, they elected to land in Pisa for the night. They planned to leave early the next morning but they found the airfield flooded by heavy rain and the aircraft comprehensively bogged. They tried three times with numerous helpers to free the aircraft and taxi out of the mud, but all to no avail and they were forced to spend another night there. The next day⁴ was scarcely better and they spent fruitless hours jacking one wheel after another out of the mud only for the aircraft to sink into it again. Finally, thoroughly out of patience and seeing their 30-day window shrinking rapidly, Ross decided to risk all in a full-power attempt to drive the aircraft onto firmer ground – even to the extent of having Bennett clamber onto the tail to stop the aircraft standing on its nose. It worked, and Bennett managed to scramble back into the rear cockpit with Shiers as the aircraft at last gathered way on its take off run.

Hardly an hour out of Pisa they lost oil pressure in one engine so that Ross had to shut it down and descend to find a landing spot. They landed at Venturina on the ‘Etruscan Coast’ of Tuscany where they found the problem to be with the gauge rather than the system. They were on their way within minutes and landed at Rome without further trouble.

The next sector was across the Apennines to Taranto in the heel of the boot of Italy. The mountains were obscured by clouds so Ross had to descend below them and fly the valleys until he was clear of the range. They overnighted in Taranto and headed for Suda Bay in Crete the next morning – again in appalling weather. They had to fly down the coast of Greece at low level in an attempt to stay below cloud. They couldn’t avoid driving rain and mist that almost caused them to fly into a rocky islet before they broke into clearer weather and made their way to Suda Bay. The landing ground there had been specially constructed for Biffy Borton’s Handley Page O/400 flight from England to Cairo the previous July.



*Wally Shiers and Jim Bennett
(Courtesy SLSA PRG-18-9-1-5C)*

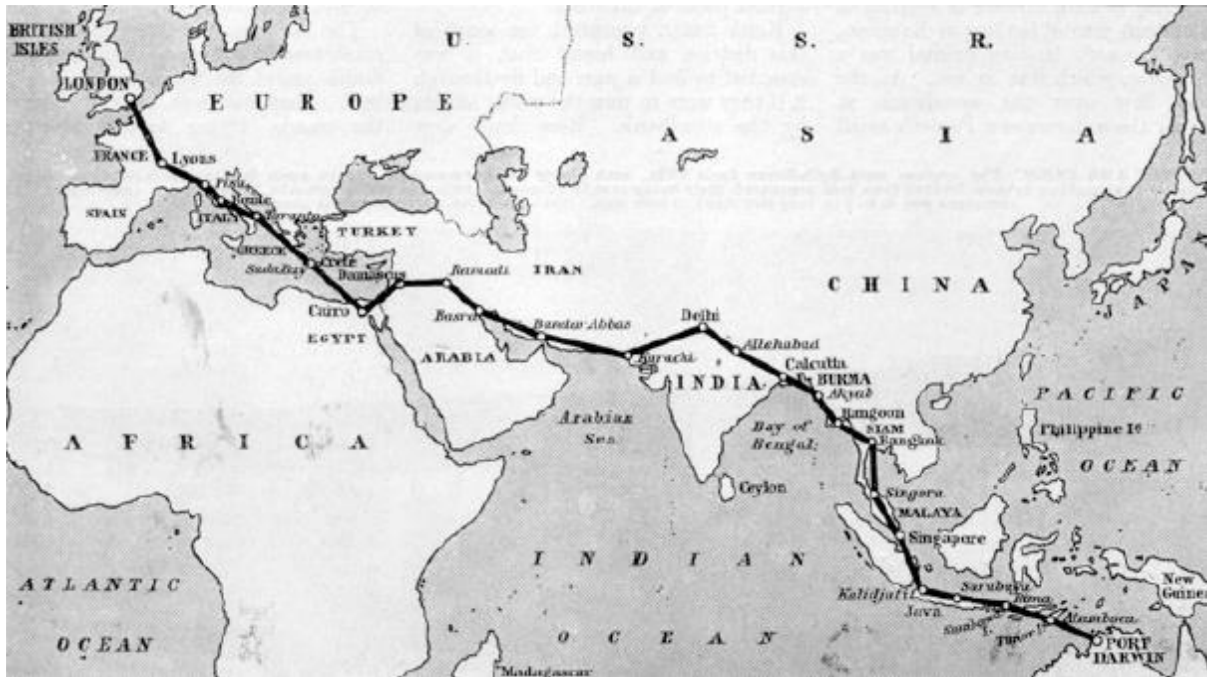
The next day⁵ required an over-water leg of 250 miles to Cairo, which they flew without incident after giving the Vimy a thorough precautionary overhaul. In Cairo they received news of the other contestants and that the Frenchman Etienne Poulet, who had started a month before them, was in India already in his Caudron G-4. Poulet, being French, was not eligible to compete but had decided to do so anyway as a tribute to a dead comrade and for the *honneur de la France*. Eligible or not, it would have been intolerable for the Vimy crew to be beaten by a couple of Frenchmen in a flimsy aircraft a quarter the weight of theirs. So they left Cairo without delay and this time Ross was in familiar territory and able to fly low below the clouds through the valley of Palestine to Damascus. From there they planned next day to fly non-stop to Baghdad for the night but, slowed by

⁴ 15 November

⁵ 18 November

headwinds, they were forced to land short at Ramadi where they were hosted by the 10th Indian Lancers who were able to supply them with fuel.

After all their airborne perils, it was gale-force winds overnight on the ground in Ramadi that were almost their downfall. It took 50 men to hold the aircraft down while Ross started up and taxied into the wind, then until noon the next day to repair the damage to aileron wires. One suspects that Shiers and Bennett were certainly proving their worth by then. They were able to obtain sufficient fuel from the Lancers to take them through to Basra without the planned stop in Baghdad. From there, after an overnight rest and another thorough check of the aircraft, they flew along the eastern coast of the Persian Gulf to Bandar Abbas.



The Vimy's route – from First to Australia, H.G. Castle

The next leg was 730 miles across trackless country to Karachi, then in India, which they reached without incident and, no doubt, sighs of relief. They must have been relieved, too, to hear that Poulet was now only one day ahead of them in Delhi. They hoped to overtake him there but they got to Delhi to find he had left that morning for Allahabad. Probably sorely tempted to press on and try and catch him, they were sensible enough to take an extra night's rest before heading off to Allahabad the next morning⁶, where they arrived after a brief stop in Muttra to repair an oil gauge. There they found Poulet had left that morning to Calcutta – then on reaching Calcutta that he was on his way already to Akyab in Burma. There they caught up with him at last after deciding to change their next stop from the planned Rangoon to Akyab because, being a Saturday, there were races scheduled at Rangoon so that the racecourse wasn't available for landing. Poulet knew by then he was beaten but they agreed to take off together the next morning to Rangoon – a plan that was stymied by the Vimy not being ready. Poulet took off anyway and although the Vimy didn't leave for another hour, they passed him enroute and landed in Rangoon an hour ahead of him.⁷ They suffered a bird strike on takeoff from Calcutta when two hawks struck the port propeller and lower wing.

⁶ 27 November

⁷ Poulet and his co-pilot Benoist got as far as Moulmein (now Mawlamyine) in southern Burma before a broken propeller and cracked piston stopped them. They shipped a replacement Caudron to India that they eventually reached Java in, but they never made it to Australia.

The leg from Rangoon to Bangkok must have been the most harrowing for Ross and Keith and, presumably, their trusting mechanics in the rear cockpit. The south-easterly route required them to cross the north-south mountain range that lies between Rangoon and Bangkok – mountains with peaks to 7,000 feet. With a cloud base of 4,000 feet, that posed a problem. First Ross chose valley flying under the cloud base but with narrowing valley walls reducing the opportunity to turn around if they had to, he tried to climb above the clouds. At 9,000 feet they emerged from the cloud tops but then, back in cloud, were forced to climb further. At 11,000 feet, the aircraft's ceiling, they were still in cloud. Flying at the edge of the aircraft's performance envelop on the rudimentary instruments of the day must have been challenging to say the least and it is not surprising that Ross found himself descending steeply in a spin. However, he quickly recovered control and decided to continue descending through the clouds in the fervent hope that they had cleared the range. It would have been a very nervous descent as the altimeter ticked over below 7,000 feet and they peered forward looking for the peaks. Their luck held. When they broke out at 4,000 feet it was clear that the mountains were behind them and it must have been a hugely relieved crew that landed at Don Muang outside Bangkok.

The plan was to continue on direct to Singapore from Bangkok but they decided to land at Singora first after learning that fuel was available there. The clouds forced them down to a thousand feet and then they flew into a rainstorm so heavy that their goggles were useless and Ross and Keith had to alternate the flying between them as they took the full force of the rain in their faces. They arrived over Singora, thankfully out of the rainstorm, but to find the aerodrome flooded. The only unflooded ground was covered in tree stumps. Ross chose the stumps rather than the water and managed to land the aircraft⁸ with only a broken tail-skid eventuating. Their next problem was that only 500 litres of fuel was available rather than the 500 gallons they had been led to expect, but more fuel was sent to the aerodrome from Penang and they eventually left on an uneventful leg to Singapore after two nights in Singora. Well, relatively uneventful. The only place to land was the racecourse, too small for the Vimy, so Bennett crawled onto the tail again as they touched down to ensure the tail dropped quickly and their ground run was minimised.

By this time it was 4 December – leaving only eight days for them to reach Port Darwin before the 30-day deadline expired. There was no time to be lost but two days were needed in Singapore to prepare the aircraft for the long over-water route ahead. Somehow on the morning of 6 December, Ross managed to lift the Vimy over the Singapore racecourse fence after a very inadequate take-off run over the sodden ground. Nine hours later they landed at Kalidjati, 650 miles away in south-central Java.



*The Vimy at Surabaya
[Courtesy SLSA PRG-18-9-1-31]*

The next day they left for Surabaya in east Java where the Vimy landed and was immediately bogged. It took 24 hours, 200

⁸ 2 December

coolies, and copious quantities of wooden planks and bamboo mats to unbog the aircraft and construct a 275 metre runway necessary to enable them to leave. So next day⁹ they were able to depart to Bima on Sumbawa Island, a couple of islands east of Bali, where they spent another night before flying on to Atamboea in central Timor - their jumping-off point for the 470 mile crossing of the Arafura Sea. They left Atamboea at 9am the next day and after a five-hour uneventful crossing, landed at Port Darwin at 3.40pm on 10 December 1919: 27 days and 20 hours after leaving Hounslow.

The Port Darwin to Melbourne Saga

As soon as they arrived at Fanny Bay airstrip the Vimy crew was subjected to a comedic health and customs clearance in the midst of the cheering local populace. That completed, Lieutenant Hudson Fysh, later of Qantas fame, welcomed them as a representative of the Defence Department and did the necessary verification that the five Royal Aero Club seals were still attached to the aircraft so that the race committee back in England could confirm them as race winner. Fysh, with Qantas co-founder Ginty McGinnis, had also hoped to enter the race but lacked the financial resources (or the



*The Vimy after landing at Port Darwin
[Courtesy SLSA PRG-18-9-3-2B]*

connections Ross Smith enjoyed) to make it possible. Instead, they were commissioned by the Army's Chief of General Staff, Major-General James Legge, to survey the route from Port Darwin to Brisbane. They made the trip overland in a Model T Ford, an epic journey in itself, with responsibility to select possible emergency landing sites on the Darwin to Cloncurry sector of the route. Although Port Darwin was the finishing post for

the race, the original intention was that contestants would continue to Sydney for the prize-giving via Rockhampton, Maryborough, Brisbane, Newcastle and points in between, then on to Melbourne.

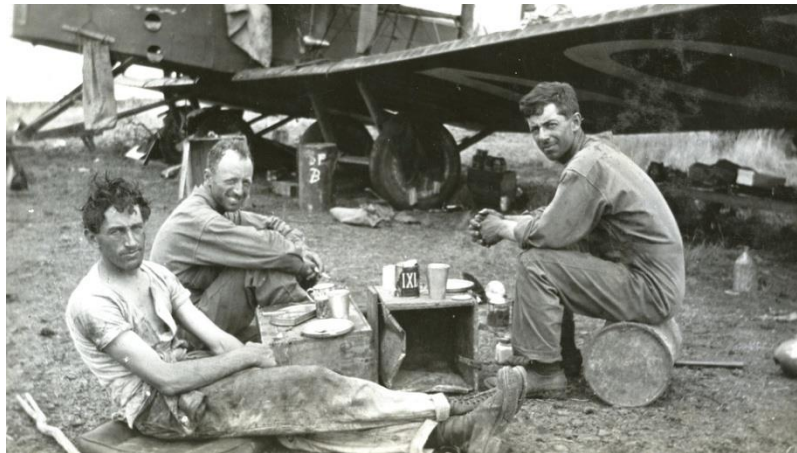
At some point it had been decided that the prize-giving would be switched to Melbourne, where the aircraft would be donated on behalf of Vickers to the Australian Government. It had always been the Smith brothers' intention to show the aircraft to Adelaide as well, being their home town.

They left Port Darwin on 13 December, three days after arriving. They needed to leave because of the risk of monsoonal rains water-logging the aerodrome and stranding them, but probably three days was enough to sate their appreciation of the relentless Darwin hospitality anyway. By then they had been confirmed as race winners, they had their £10,000 prize in the bag, Ross's and Keith's knighthoods were already being mooted and in their exhausted state they must have just wanted the whole thing to be over and done with. So they set out, planning to take it easy on the equally exhausted aircraft, which was badly in need of a new propeller and top overhaul.

⁹ 8 December

They were expected to arrive in Melbourne by 22 December, bypassing the previously planned stops in Brisbane and Sydney, but before they had even left Port Darwin both state governments were heavily lobbying for their reinstatement.

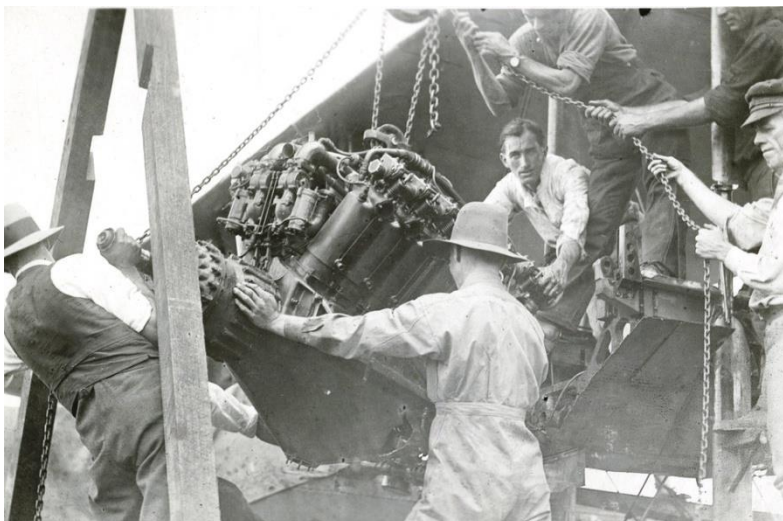
The first planned stop was Anthony¹⁰ Lagoon Station, some 530 miles south of Port Darwin, but four hours into the flight it was clear they were going to have to land with sticking valves in number one engine. They landed in a dried-up swamp at what turned out to be Warlock Ponds, where they were unable to fix the problem before nightfall. They spent a miserable night under the wings, then left the next morning to Anthony Lagoon but again had to land short with a split port propeller



*Camp at Cobb's Creek – L to R Ross Smith, Wally Shiers and Keith Smith
(Courtesy SLSA PRG-18-9-1-32D)*

– probably a legacy of the Calcutta bird strike. They landed at what Ross Smith called Cobb's Creek, where binding and rebalancing the propeller held them up until 17 December – three days of searing temperatures that melted their goggles and the aircraft's windscreen - when they finally made the 20 mile hop to Anthony Lagoon Station.

By then the crew were pretty much done in. They limped on to Cloncurry on 20 December after overnights at Brunette Downs¹¹ and Avon Downs stations, and pleased the enthusiastic town by agreeing to rest up for a couple of days while they repaired three punctures and tightened all the bracing wires. Ross wrote to Major-General Legge and Vickers to say that henceforward they planned to take it very easy and that their arrival in Melbourne should be considered indefinite.



*Removing the port engine in Charleville, Feb 1920
[Courtesy SLSA PRG 18-9-1-33D]*

So, on 22 December they flew on to Longreach and the following day to Charleville. On 25 December Ross had to make a forced landing only 2 miles out of Charleville when the port engine failed. There they were stopped cold with repairs necessary that not even the redoubtable Bennett and Shiers could carry out unassisted. Somewhere along the way the Sydney lobbying had proved successful and the stop reinstated, and Ross had to telegraph from Charleville that their previous Sydney estimate of 28 December was no longer

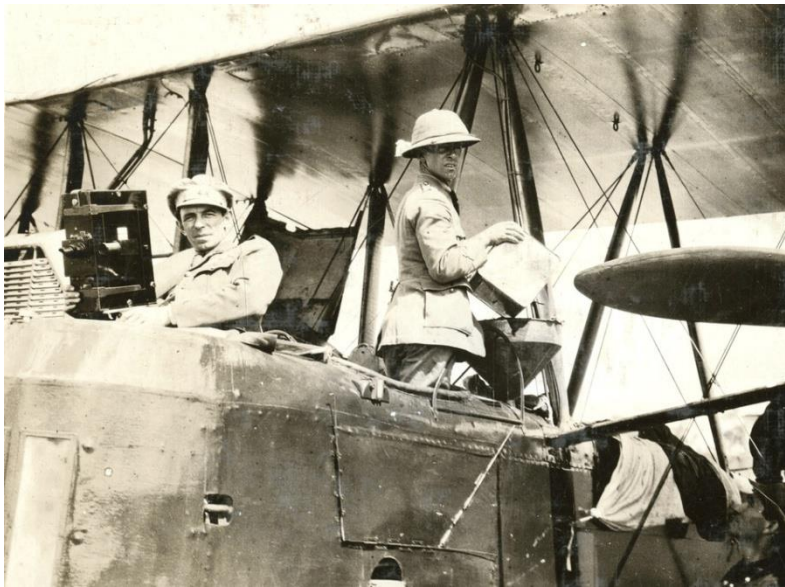
¹⁰ Ross Smith called it Anthony's Lagoon

¹¹ Where they made a forced landing with a badly burnt exhaust manifold [Daily Flight Log – SAAM Collection]

possible.

The problem was a major one – a holed cylinder in the port engine, all big ends gone and two conrods - and it looked for a while as if the trip was going to end ignominiously with the aircraft dismantled and shipped by rail to Melbourne. Fortunately this could not be countenanced by all concerned and the Queensland Government offered the services of the Ipswich rail workshop to manufacture the parts needed. This involved removing the engine and shipping it on a train journey of some 470 miles each way from Charleville.¹² It wasn't until seven weeks later on the afternoon of 11 February, after the aircraft had been thoroughly overhauled, all fabric re-doped and varnished, all the bracing wires adjusted again and the engine reinstalled, that it was test flown and pronounced serviceable.

Ross and Keith, during this long sojourn, had taken the time to visit Brisbane and been feted there



*Sir Keith Smith refuelling in Charleville. Captain Fran Hurley in the forward cockpit with camera, Feb 1920
[Courtesy SLSA PRG-18-9-1-35A]*

while Jim supervised the works at Ipswich and Wally overhauled the aircraft in Charleville. The following morning, on 12 November, Ross gave J.H. Coyne, a member of the Queensland Legislative Council, and a Mr Arnold and Mr Black a thirty minute thank-you joy ride, then the flight was resumed to Bourke, then Narromine on 13th, and finally Sydney on 14 February. Mascot was then nothing but a paddock and they were given a tumultuous welcome with all efforts at crowd control proving quite ineffectual.

It was during their Charleville sojourn, on Christmas Eve, that it was announced that both Ross and Keith had been made KBEs – Knights of the Order of the British Empire and Bennett and Shiers awarded bars to their Air Force Medals. Bennett had been promoted from Sergeant to Warrant Officer Class 1 and Shiers from Acting Sergeant to Sergeant on arrival in Darwin and, eventually, after public disquiet over their neglect in the context of the attention paid to Ross and Keith, both were made honorary Lieutenants. Also it was at Charleville that Captain Frank Hurley joined the flight to film and photograph the remainder of the journey.

They spent a frantic nine days in Sydney with state receptions, luncheons, dinners and press interviews, somehow finding time to fly the aircraft over to Richmond for a complete engine overhaul (its first experience of being under cover since leaving Hounslow) and, in Wally Shier's case, even to get married. He was married to his pre-war fiancé, Helena Alford, on 17 February at Bellevue Hill, the same day his crew mates flew the aircraft to Richmond. Evidently they returned in time to see Wally tie the knot with his bride.

¹² The engine was fitted with a new cylinder, 2 pistons, all big ends, 2 conrods, 6 new valves, new manifolds and a new Queensland maple propeller, and the sump was patched, then the engine bench-tested for 7 hours before being returned to Charleville. [Daily Logs of First England to Australia Flight & its Preparation – Researched by Arthur D. Robinson 1986 CAHSSA – SAAM Collection]



*Looking aft past Bennett and Shiers overhead Sydney, Feb 1920
[Courtesy SLSA PRG-18-9-1-38D]*

They left Richmond on 23 February, planning to fly via Cootamundra to Melbourne the following day. Enormous efforts were put into the planned welcome at Flemington with *The Argus*¹³ reporting “*Great Welcome Assured*”. Special trains and trams were organised, and a crowd of more than 50,000 expected. They flew a circuitous route to Cootamundra with Captain Frank Hurley as a passenger taking photographs and NSW Premier Holman aboard as well. They took a look at Canberra with *The Argus*¹⁴ reporting “*They were looking for something imposing in the Federal Capital, and were much disappointed in*

finding only some workmen’s huts”, then flew over Duntroon Military College where the cadets assembled below in white uniforms made the letters R and K in honour of Ross and Keith. They arrived at Cootamundra after a four and a half hour flight to an unruly welcome when the crowd rushed the aircraft, much to Ross’s indignation expressed in a post-flight interview. The plan was then to depart non-stop to Melbourne the next morning (24th) to arrive Melbourne at Flemington in the early afternoon. *The Argus* that morning again reported the planned arrival and the transport arrangements put in place.

They left the next morning all right, but soon ran into oil pressure problems on the troublesome port engine. This ended up costing them three forced-landings within 30 miles: first at Bon Accord, about 12 miles from Wagga in a paddock of wheat-stubble; then at The Rock, 20 miles south-west of Wagga; and finally at Henty, half way between Wagga and Albury. It wasn’t until they



*Vickers Vimy G-EAOU – the unruly crowd on arrival at Cootamundra
(Joy Burgess – SAAM Collection)*

got to Henty and decided they could not repair the oil pump in time to depart that day that they telegraphed Melbourne with the bad news. Up until then they had been doing everything they could – even, according to Ross Smith during interviews when they finally did reach Melbourne, hazarding both the aircraft and themselves in their efforts to keep going. The paddock at Bon Accord where

¹³ *The Argus*, Mon 23/2/1920 page 6

¹⁴ *The Argus*, Tue 24/2/1920 page 7

they force landed, for example, was so small that they brushed a tree on take-off, fortunately without damage - but very close to disaster. The final sector, from Henty to Point Cook was flown on the starboard engine only with all spares and kits removed and forwarded on by rail.¹⁵

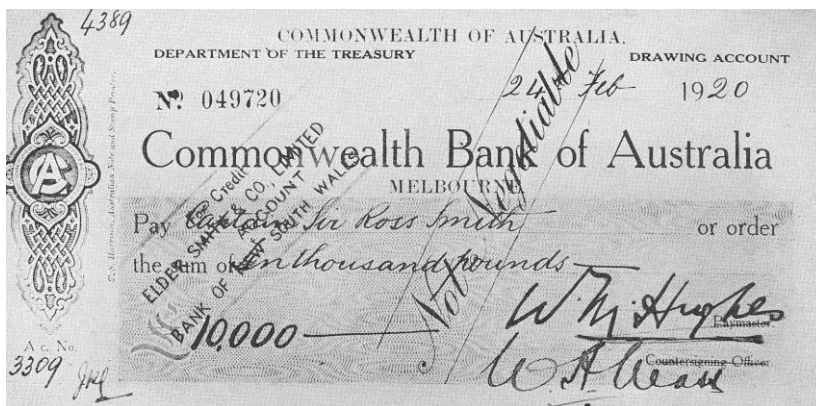
Wednesday's *Argus*¹⁶ told the sad story: "*Flight not completed. Delay at Henty. Great crowd disappointed.*" Well over 50,000 people plus the Governor were reported to have gone to Flemington the previous day. Sadly, a 10-year year old lad playing truant from school to see the arrival was hit by a car at Flemington and killed. It was a sad end to the epic flight. They left Henty on the Wednesday morning and flew to Point Cook instead, where they were met by a Colonel Case of the General Staff of the Defence Department – the official representative, and "*there were not two score of people*" onlooking. Jim Bennett's and the Smith brothers' parents were there, which must have mitigated the anticlimax, but perhaps they were all relieved to be spared the crush and mayhem of some of their previous arrivals. The *Sydney Morning Herald*¹⁷ rubbed it in of course: it reported "*Quiet landing in Melbourne*".



Receiving the cheque from PM Billy Hughes, 27 Feb 1920
[Courtesy SLSA PRG-18-7-73]

I suppose the official end of the flight was the luncheon on Friday 27 February when federal government ministers and Prime Minister Billy Hughes indulged in an orgy of speech making and presented the aviators with their cheque for £10,000. The aircraft was unofficially presented to the Government on behalf of

Vickers and the crew returned to their families for a well-earned holiday.



The cheque
(from *14,000 Miles through the Air*, Ross Smith)

The Adelaide flight

The long-promised flight to Adelaide was delayed several times, firstly by the lengthy delays to the aircraft's arrival in Melbourne, but then in Melbourne because of delays in ownership of the aircraft

being transferred from Vickers Limited to the Commonwealth as a bequest to the War Museum that was to be established in Melbourne.

¹⁵ Daily Logs of First England to Australia Flight & its Preparation – Researched by Arthur D. Robinson 1986
CAHSSA – SAAM Collection

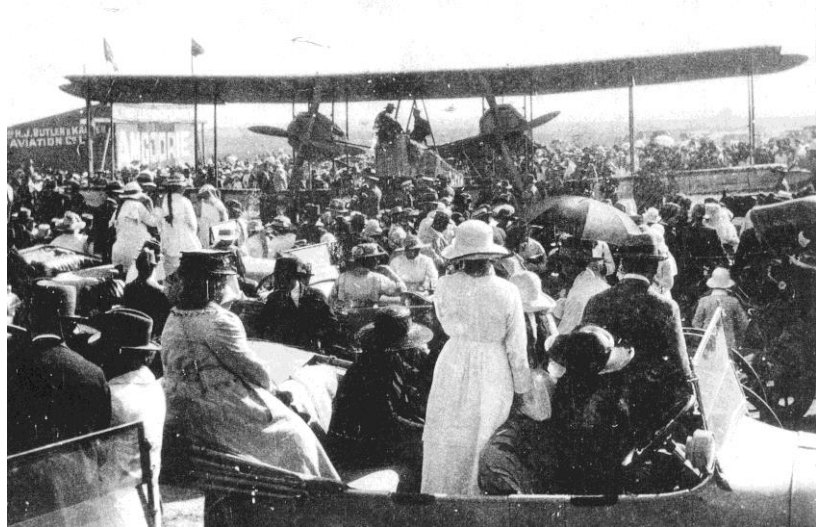
¹⁶ *The Argus*, Wed 25/2/1920, page 11

¹⁷ *Sydney Morning Herald*, Thu 26/2/1920, page 7

The aircraft was thoroughly overhauled while the intricacies of the ownership transfer were worked through. Prime Minister Hughes and Vickers finally granted permission for the flight to Adelaide on 18 March and the official handover of the ownership to the government was made at Parliament House on 19 March.

The Vimy left Point Cook on Tuesday 23 March at 7:15am SA time for its six hour flight to Adelaide via Horsham, Bordertown, Tintinara, Coonalpyn and Murray Bridge. It passed by Mt Lofty at 1:38pm, flew over the city at 1:55pm, circled over the city and suburbs and over the Smith family residence in Walkerville, before flying over the aerodrome at Northfield at 2:12pm. All four aviators were on board, plus Frank Hurley who had met them in Charleville and accompanied them through to Melbourne taking aerial photographs.

It was a huge event. Business virtually came to a standstill with many factory employees given leave to watch the arrival. Over 20,000 people made their way to Northfield by every conceivable conveyance and more people lined the route ten deep down King William Street past the Cathedral to Parliament House. When the aircraft was sighted at 1:38pm the town hall bells rang and factory whistles blew and the entire population seemed to be possessed by some sort of hysteria. At the Northfield aerodrome it was mayhem. Police and troops tried to form a cordon to prevent



*The huge crowd at Northfield with the Vimy parked in front of the Butler & Kauper Aviation Co hangar, 23 March 1920
(Courtesy SLSA B18543)*



*Another view of the huge crowd at Northfield, 23 March 1920
(Courtesy SLSA PRG-280-1-19-173)*

people running on to the aerodrome but were quickly overwhelmed. Even before the aircraft landed people were surging all over the aerodrome and it seems to have been sheer luck and Ross Smith's skill that enabled him to land without injuring anyone.

The decision that the Vimy would land at Northfield was taken long before the event of 23 March 1920. As far back as 13 December 1919, three days after the Smiths landed in Darwin, *The Advertiser* was anticipating the visit. Various

landing sites were assessed, with the police favouring sites closer to the city where security and crowd control could be more effectively maintained. Victoria Park Racecourse and Montefiore Hill

were mentioned as possibilities. However, the authorities sought the views of the Aero Club, which had been formed earlier in 1919. This resulted in the Acting Commissioner for Police with representatives of the Club inspecting Harry Butler's newly established Northfield aerodrome on 12 December. The Club was firm in its view that Butler's aerodrome should be used and perhaps Harry Butler's membership of the Club was a factor in forming this view. The decision was duly taken to use it.¹⁸

Butler had taken off in his Bristol monoplane 'Red Devil' to meet them but the Vimy passed below him in cloud so that he missed them and the Vimy had landed before he returned to Northfield. Two other aircraft from Glenelg aerodrome, however, did meet the Vimy: Captain Moore in his de Havilland and Lieutenant Horrie Miller in a Sopwith Dove. They accompanied the Vimy on its circuits over Adelaide and Walkerville and experienced similar difficulties in finding space enough among the unruly crowd to land at Northfield.

For the next fortnight, Ross and Keith endured a relentless round of parliamentary and civic receptions, lunches, dinners and dances and speech-making, so it was perhaps as well that they had had their holiday after arriving exhausted in Melbourne and before the Adelaide trip. Wally Shiers and Jim Bennett were no-shows at receptions given by returned members of the 3rd Light Horse and the Lord Mayor, and interstate press coverage suggested they were "tired of receptions". This caused them to write a joint letter to *The Register*¹⁹ that pointed out they had not been invited to the receptions and had nothing but praise for the people of South Australia and the welcome afforded them. Ross was entertained by the Harris Scarfe board and Keith by Elder, Smith & Co, their old workplaces, and they fired up the Vimy on Monday (29 March) and took their parents for a ride along the coast, apparently with Captain Hurley "strapped to the top 'plane' with his cine camera. So it was an eventful week.



The Vimy crossing North Terrace, Adelaide, March 1920
[SAAM Collection]

They planned to leave on Wednesday back to Melbourne but were delayed until the following Monday (Easter Monday, 5 April) due to engine problems that had to be fixed.²⁰ So at 7:30am on the 5th, they departed in front of "a large crowd" that had come to see them off, and 5¾ hours later they were in Melbourne, where they tuned the Aircraft over to the Department of Defence at Point Cook.

Sir Ross then embarked on a lecture tour with Frank Hurley and wrote his book with Hurley's help, which was published in September 1921. The book was based on his slightly shorter earlier *National Geographic* article that made up most of the March 1921 edition.

¹⁸ *The Advertiser*, Sat 13 December 1919, page 13

¹⁹ *The Register*, Thu 25 March 1920, page 9

²⁰ The epicyclic gear in the starboard engine failed and was dismantled and 3 new SKF ballraces fitted, a new ball cage made and fitted in the old RR race and the cracked gear casing repaired with steel plates and bolts. [Daily Logs of First England to Australia Flight & its Preparation – Researched by Arthur D. Robinson 1986 CAHSSA – SAAM Collection]

During the Adelaide stay efforts were made to convince the federal government to allow the aircraft to stay in Adelaide permanently, but Prime Minister Hughes refused Premier Peake's official request, partly at least presumably because Vickers had decreed that the gift be to the federal government.

The aircraft was entered on the RAAF register at A5-1 and displayed as part of the Australian War Museum Exhibition, which opened in Melbourne on ANZAC day 1922. The exhibition closed in 1925 and the aircraft was moved to Sydney until 1935, although it had been displayed earlier in Sydney, at the 1922 Royal Show. There it was displayed in a huge marquee and Wally Shiers was employed as a guide and lecturer about the aircraft. It was eventually moved to the present Australian War Memorial in Canberra when it was completed in 1941. What happened after that is detailed in the last section of this profile – "The Vimy Moves to Adelaide".



*Ross Smith in front of Viking IV G-EBBZ in Vickers' erecting shop at Weybridge
(Courtesy SLSA PRG-18-13-3)*

The death of Ross Smith and Jim Bennett

Apparently it was at one of their camps in outback Queensland during the Darwin to Melbourne part of the race that Ross Smith first broached the idea of a round-the-world flight to his crew mates. You would think it unlikely that such a grand enterprise would be hatched during one of the most arduous parts of the great race, and more likely after time and distance had blurred their memories of the dangers and hardships they had faced. Perhaps the story isn't true.

Anyway, planning for the flight must have started very soon after the return of the Vimy to Melbourne because early in 1922 Ross, Keith and Jim Bennett were in England implementing the plan. They had maintained their relationship with Vickers, which was to supply them with a Vickers Viking IV amphibious biplane G-EBBZ, powered by a 450hp Rolls Royce Napier Lion pusher engine. It had dual pilot controls and 4 passenger seats in open cockpits, with the passenger space taken up by long-range fuel tanks and stores. It was a much smaller aircraft than the Vimy with a 50 foot



*Sir Ross Smith and Jim Bennett with Rex Pierson, Vickers' chief designer, in front of
Viking IV
[Courtesy SLSA PRG-18-13-4]*

wingspan compared the Vimy's 68 feet. Unfortunately, however, according to C.F Andrews, *"It had one drawback, a vicious tip stall. This, combined with the couple caused by the high thrust-line and the low drag component of the hull, made the Viking IV with the T64 wing-section a specialist type to fly."*²¹

Ross had chosen Bennett to accompany them rather than Shiers – perhaps because Shiers wasn't able to leave the garage he had opened at Bondi Junction and his newly married status, or because of his duties in connection to the Vimy exhibition – or perhaps Bennett was just better qualified for the task ahead.



The crash site at Brooklands, 13 Apr 1922
[SAAM Collection]

They planned to depart England on ANZAC Day 1922 on a route that would follow the Vimy's course through France, Italy, Egypt, Mesopotamia, India and Burma, then turning eastwards through China, Japan, the Aleutian Islands, Alaska, Canada, New York, Newfoundland, the Azores and back to England. They planned to overhaul the aircraft in Japan, and an engine was shipped to Japan ahead of the planned departure.

On 13 April the three of them were to test fly the Viking at Brooklands near Weybridge. Ross Smith had already been checked out by Stan Cockerell²², Vicker's test pilot, who had completed a 30 minute flight in the aircraft prior to passing it over, with engine running, to Ross Smith and Jim Bennett. Keith Smith was supposed to be there too, but they left without him when he was late arriving. After only fifteen minutes of flight Ross was returning to land at Brooklands when he stalled in a sharp turn and entered a flat spin at 2,000 feet. Apparently he opened the throttle, which seemed to correct the spin, but when he throttled back again for landing the spin redeveloped and he had insufficient altitude to recover a second time. The aircraft *"...fell on top of the iron fence at Brooklands, and bounded onto the track/ Sir Ross Smith was killed instantly, and Lieutenant Bennett died two minutes later."*²³ All this was in front of 1,500 Vicker's employees who had been given time off to watch the flight. Sadly, Keith too witnessed the accident having just arrived off his delayed train. He was first to the accident scene and cradled his dead brother in his arms, sobbing uncontrollably.

There was never any contention that there was anything wrong with the aircraft. It was a lapse of piloting skill in an unfamiliar aircraft after a long layoff from flying, likened to Ross being on *"a new mount in the first run of the hunting season"*²⁴.

Keith contacted his and Jim's families and agreed to bring the bodies home, but there was such an outpouring of grief in England coupled with suggestions that they be buried in Westminster Abbey that he contacted the families again on 18 April to float the idea of burials in England. He got a flat no from the Bennetts and a puzzled response from his mother querying why he had changed his mind, so he reversed tack again and made arrangements for the voyage home.

²¹ *Vickers Aircraft Since 1908*, C.F. Andrews

²² Cockerell replaced Sir John Alcock, who first flew the Atlantic in a Vickers Vimy in 1919 with Whitten-Brown, and was killed only months afterwards in a Viking I near Rouen on 18 December 1919

²³ *The Argus*, Sat 14 April 1922, page 11

²⁴ *The Argus*, Tue 17 April 1922, page 9

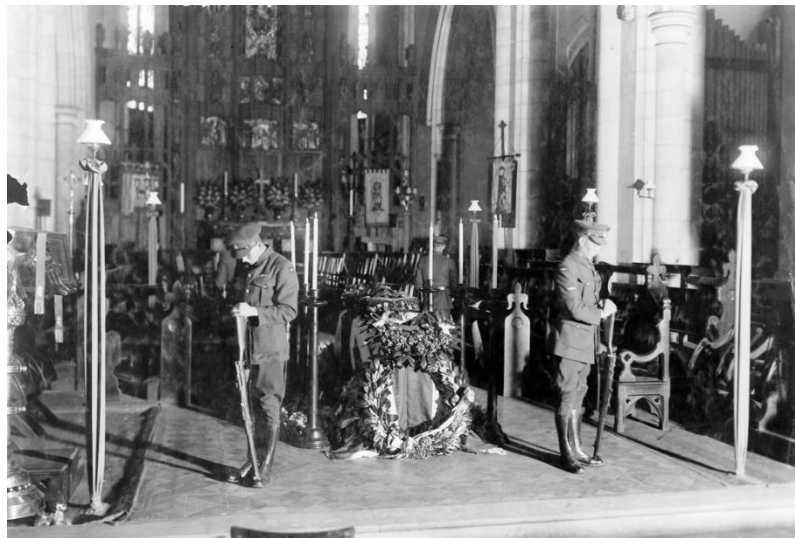


Sir Ross's casket being unloaded from the Largs Bay at Outer Harbor on 14 June 1922 and (inset) the casket carried by sailors to the carriage. (SLSA).

The bodies were shipped on the *SS Largs Bay* of the Commonwealth Government Steamship Line and arrived at Outer Harbor on 14 June. Keith came home earlier, on *RMS Ormonde*, leaving Tilbury on 29 April and arriving on 5 June. Both were to be given state funerals: Ross on 15 June in Adelaide and Jim on the 19th in Melbourne.

Keith's earlier arrival enabled him to play a part in Ross's funeral arrangements. WGCDR Richard Williams came over from Point Cook to meet the Premier on 7 June and a meeting was set up for the following day to include Keith, the Lord Mayor and other notables. Williams kept a firm hand on proceedings and made it clear that the funeral would follow RAAF protocols.

Ross's body was unloaded from the *Largs Bay* on Wednesday 14 June. There was a large gathering on the wharf and the flags on all the ships and buildings at the harbour were at half-mast. There was no official ceremony, but sailors from the *Largs Bay* carried the flag-draped casket to a horse-drawn carriage, from which it was transferred to the hearse that took it to St Peter's Cathedral. Sir Ross lay in state there on a catafalque with an honour guard from 3pm to 10pm with public access. Such were the throngs wanting to pay respects that another period from 9am-noon the following day was set aside for the public. Then the cathedral closed at 1:30pm except to invited guests for the funeral that commenced at 2.30pm.



Sir Ross Smith lying in state in St Peter's Cathedral 15 June 1922 [Courtesy SLSA B-890]

After the service the casket was carried in an enormous procession to North Road Cemetery with a huge crowd lining the route and at the cemetery for his burial. The guests at the funeral service retained their tickets to gain entry to the cemetery. It was estimated that 100,000 people lined the route, which was about a fifth of South Australia's entire population at the time.

The press reported that the order of the procession included mounted troopers, an RAAF firing party, band, cortege tender and trailer with pall-bearers alongside, Sir Ross's comrades from 1 Squadron AFC and 3rd Light Horse, Sir Keith, Wally Shiers, WGCDR Williams (representing the Air Board), a representative of the Governor-General, the Lieutenant-Governor, representatives of the



Sir Keith saluting at North Road Cemetery as his brother's casket is lowered into the grave on 15 June 1922 (SLSA).

Prime Minister and Acting Premier, Commonwealth and State Ministers, judges of the Supreme Court, the President of State Legislative Council and Speaker of the House of Assembly, Knights, Honourables, members of the Commonwealth and State Legislatures, the Lord Mayor of Adelaide, heads of Commonwealth and State Government departments, representatives of municipalities and district councils... etc etc. 'Draped' RAAF aeroplanes followed the route overhead.

What a forlorn figure poor Keith cut, saluting while Ross's casket was lowered into the ground. And he had to do the same all over again four days later in Melbourne where similar arrangements

were made for Jim Bennett. Both Keith and Wally Shiers left Adelaide on the Melbourne Express the next day in order to attend.

Postscripts on Keith Smith and Wally Shiers

Keith Smith married Anita Crawford in 1924, but they had no children. He went on to a long and distinguished civil aviation career: he was made Australian agent for Vickers, a company with which he maintained a connection until his death in 1955; and he became vice president of British Commonwealth Pacific Airlines, headquartered in Sydney, which was set up by the Australian, New Zealand and UK governments to develop trans-Pacific flights in competition with Pan American. It was eventually taken over by Qantas in 1954 just prior to its planned entry into the jet age with the



Sir Keith and Lady Smith on arrival back in Sydney after their wedding in England in 1924

[Courtesy SLSA PRG-18-14-3]

acquisition of de Havilland Comets. He was also a director of Qantas and Tasman Airways. In World War II he was vice-chairman of the RAAF recruiting drive committee.

He died of cancer on 19 December 1955 and was buried next to his brother at North Road Cemetery.

Wally Shiers had married Helena Alford in Sydney on 17 February 1920 during the Vimy's transit, as previously described. They had no children either. He opened a garage at Bondi Junction and worked for various aviation companies at Mascot until 1925 when he began learning to fly and barnstorming

with Dave Smith, a Sydney pilot who owned a Ryan monoplane. He obtained pilots licence no. 408 on 29 November 1929 and planned to fly the Ryan with Dave Smith to England.

They left Sydney on 30 March 1930 but were soon in trouble with a forced landing in the Ord River area of Western Australia and then a crash landing in Siam (Thailand) where they gave up and terminated the flight.

Shiers then joined New England Airways (later Airlines of Australia) as chief engineer until 1939 when he spent the war years in charge of the textiles branch of Light Aircraft Co. manufacturing parachutes for the defence forces.



*Dave Smith and Wally Shiers
(PD)*



*Dave Smith, Wally Shiers and other at their plane before their flight to
England, Sydney 26 March 1930
(PD)*

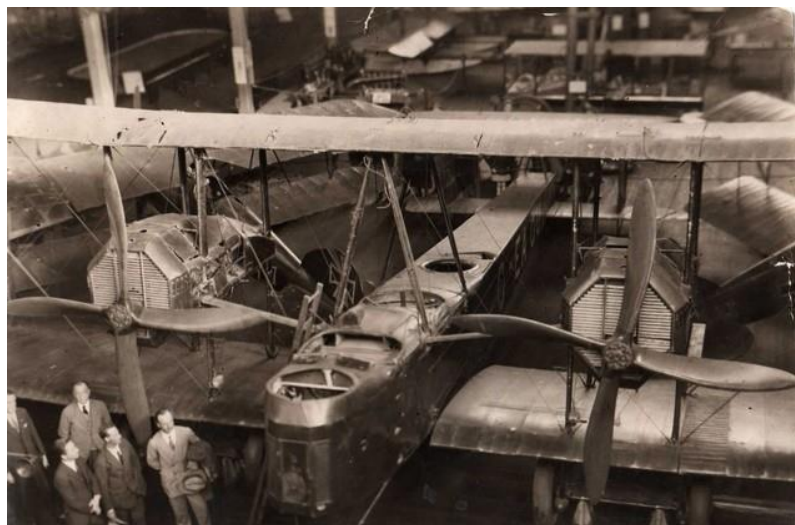
His health was deteriorating by 1945 when he lived in Dover Heights Sydney on his pension received for injuries suffered in World War I. He was in Adelaide for the dedication of the Vimy Memorial in 1958, and he moved permanently to Adelaide in 1965 where he lived until his death on 2 June 1968. He is buried at Centennial Park.

The Vimy moves to Adelaide

By 1953 the Australian War Memorial was faced with the need to create display space for more World War II artefacts. N.J. Flanagan, the Director of the AWM, quickly came to the conclusion that the

Vimy, which had never seen war service, had no place in a war memorial. The same applied to Charles Kingsford Smith's Southern Cross and Ray Parer's DH-9 (the only aircraft other than the Vimy to complete the 1919 UK-Australia air race), both of which were also displayed at the AWM.

Flanagan then wrote to the Department of Civil Aviation on 13 August 1953 to ask if the DCA was interested in acquiring the Vimy. The DCA considered



*G-EAOU on display at the AWM c1950
(Courtesy AWM)*

various options including housing it in the new terminal to be built in Melbourne or Brisbane (with the Southern Cross going to Kingsford Smith Airport in Sydney); dismantling it and scattering it around any interested technological museums in the capital cities; or building a new technical museum in Canberra to become a national aviation museum. This proved to be all too hard for the DCA, so its Director advised his counterpart at the AWM on 8 September 1953 that the Department was unable to accept responsibility for the aircraft's housing or maintenance.

Things then went quiet until 1955 when, on instructions of the Chief of the Air Staff, the Vimy was quietly dismantled at the end of June and moved into storage in a locked Bellman hangar at RAAF Canberra pending its ultimate disposal. As soon as word of this leaked out there was an immediate public outcry. Sir Hudson Fysh wrote to Athol Townley, the Minister of State for Air and for Civil Aviation in the Menzies Government, to express his shock about the removal and his desire that immediate steps be taken to reinstate it at the AWM. Sir Keith wrote to the Prime Minister expressing his concern. He opposed its relocation anywhere outside the capital and particularly to the "*partially derelict*" Parafield Airport as one proposal suggested.²⁵

Meanwhile, the Royal Aero Club of South Australia saw an opportunity to effect the transfer of the aircraft to Adelaide – an idea first expressed when the Smith brothers flew the aircraft to Adelaide in 1920. Captain Nobby Buckley, president of the Club, formed a committee called the Sir Ross and Sir Keith Smith War Memorial Committee to lobby and raise money for the proposal. The committee first met on 7 August 1956 with Buckley as its inaugural chairman; the Lord Mayor of Adelaide, J.S. Philips, the president; the Governor, AVM Sir Robert George, its patron; and a range of Adelaide leading lights including Senator K.A. Laught²⁶, its members. Group Captain R.M. Rechner DFC, the Citizen's Air Force member of the Commonwealth Government's Air Board, was later appointed chairman and Buckley became secretary of a new Appeal Committee that was moved out from the purview of the Aero Club. This effectively ended the Aero Club's role other than as participants of the new committee, a fact that caused increasing resentment among the Club's committee who came to feel they had not been sufficiently recognised for initiating the project.

They had written to the Premier, Tom Playford, on 14 July 1955 to ask him to support the proposal but only elicited a reply from his secretary saying the State Government did not have sufficient building space to accommodate the aircraft. The Committee nevertheless immediately set out to raise money and commission architects to design a memorial building. They set a target of £30,000 and quickly moved towards it with the donation of £5,000 from Vickers Corporation and a further £5,000 guaranteed if it proved necessary.

Things had moved on in Canberra too. On 16 August 1955, Cabinet approved Townley's submission that the Vimy be offered unconditionally to the South Australian Government and the Southern Cross to the Brisbane City Council. Cabinet, however, rejected his back-up plan seeking approval of the principle of establishing a national aviation museum.²⁷ A letter to Playford was drafted for Townley on 10 October 1955 that said "*I am directed to offer this aircraft to you unconditionally. I would appreciate your views at an early date*" but was annotated "not sent" in the file – perhaps in the knowledge of the Premier's very luke warm reception to the Aero Club's request for support.

It was not until 4 September 1956 that the Prime Minister wrote Mr Playford a much more equivocal letter confirming a willingness to transfer the Vimy to Adelaide to be housed in the building to be built by public subscription, and maintained by the Department of Civil Aviation. Transport to Adelaide and assembly of the aircraft in the building would be carried out by RAAF personnel. The Prime Minister then asked for confirmation that "*the South Australian Government regards the*

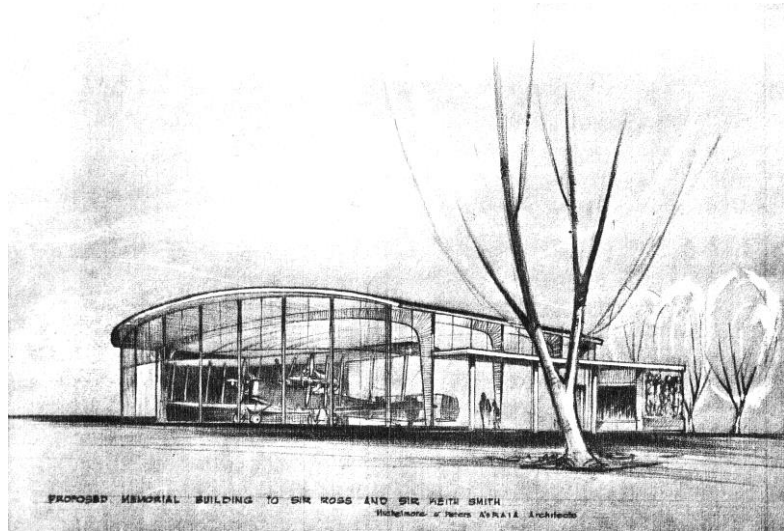
²⁵ Letter from Sir Keith Smith to Prime Minister Menzies, 1 July 1955

²⁶ Senator Keith Alexander Laught, 1907-1969, Liberal Part of Australia Senator for SA 1951-1969

²⁷ Cabinet Minute 16/8/55 Decision No 571

proposal as satisfactory.” How could Mr Playford say no? The Commonwealth’s unconditional gift of the aircraft to the South Australian Government was dead and buried and it was clear that the South Australian Government was incurring no obligation whatsoever. Mr Playford accordingly wrote back to Arthur Fadden, then acting Prime Minister, on 12 September confirming *“the proposed arrangements are satisfactory to the South Australian Government.”*

This still left a number of loose ends and precipitated a round of bickering among the Commonwealth agencies. While the Prime Minister had committed the DCA to the maintenance of the building, the issue of who owned the aircraft, and who would maintain it, wasn’t addressed. Mr Flanagan of the AWM had taken legal advice that he cheerfully passed on to the DCA’s regional director in Adelaide to the effect that *“in the case where a building was specially erected for the housing of a relic, even though the relic is not attached to the building, the*



Original 1957 architect’s drawing of proposed Vimy Memorial at Adelaide Airport (Department of Transport file 24/7/9/One)

organisation responsible for the maintenance of the building is also responsible for the relic inside it.” However, as late as 25 November 1957, when the Prime Minister’s Assistant Secretary had written to Senator Paltridge²⁸ to tell him that he had advised Mr Osborne – then Minister for Air²⁹ – that as Minister he was “custodian” of the aircraft, Osborne scrawled on his copy of the letter *“Wrong!!”*

Agreement was reached with the DCA to make land available for the construction of the Vimy



G-EAOU fuselage at Fairbairn loaded for transport to Adelaide, Oct 1957 [Courtesy AWM]

memorial building at Adelaide’s new airport, which had been opened in 1955 at West Beach. Construction started on 8 April 1957. The DCA’s role in addition to providing the site was to clear and prepare the site and its drainage, construct the access road and parking and provide power to the building. The committee was to be responsible for all expenses involved in the design and construction of the building itself. This inevitably led to more bickering over whether the bricked forecourt was part of the

²⁸ Paltridge, Sir Shane Dunn, 1910-1966, Liberal Party of Australia Senator for Western Australia 1951-1966, Minister for Shipping & Transport 1955-1960 and Minister for Civil Aviation 1956-1964

²⁹ Osborne, Frederick Meares, 1909-1996, Liberal Party of Australia Member of the House of Representatives 1949-1961, Minister for Air 1956-1958

building and should be paid for by the committee, or should be part of the DCA's site works. The committee won that one. It finally collected £29,092.2.1, all of which was spent on the costs involved in the construction of the building plus a £303.13.1 contribution to the opening ceremony.

It was during the transport from Canberra to Adelaide of this doughty aircraft, which had been through so much, that it came closest to destruction. The aircraft was loaded onto two RAAF semi-trailers and left Canberra on Friday 1 November 1957 in convoy with two smaller vehicles. It caught fire just outside Keith, in South Australia's south east, at 11:40am on 3 November. The fire occurred, for unexplained reasons, in the centre of the lead truck's load and was spotted by the following vehicle. The driver quickly moved to the side of the road, uncoupled the prime mover to remove it from the fire, and, together with RAAF personnel from the other vehicles, set about trying to extinguish the blaze with the extinguishers they carried. It was very quickly apparent that the fire, by then an inferno, was beyond them so one of the vehicles was dispatched into Keith to summon the fire brigade. The Keith fire control officer very commendably was on the scene with a fire truck within ten minutes, but said³⁰ "we were much too late – it must have gone up like a bomb. There were only the control wires left on the main frame. The rest was charred wood and fabric. The tray of the semi-trailer and all the tyres were a mass of flames when we started to pump water on to them. It took us about ten minutes to get the fire under control, but water was pumped on to the smouldering wreckage for several hours. We were scared that a bushfire might be started." Then, tellingly, he added that the RAAF party had been "most secretive about the whole affair. The men appeared to be very upset about the loss of the Vimy wing. A warrant officer, who appeared to be in charge, was particularly upset." No doubt the unfortunate warrant officer was already anticipating the press coverage and the wrath of his masters in Canberra.



Press photograph of G-EAOU prior to restoration in the newly-built Vimy memorial at Adelaide Airport [Adv 7 Nov 1957]

It was immediately decided that the Vimy would be rebuilt. Group Captain R.M. Rechner was quoted in the same edition of *The Advertiser* as saying that it would be. There was press coverage of the incident all that week: on Tuesday confirming that the aircraft would be repaired but the opening ceremony would have to be postponed from the planned 15 December; on Wednesday saying the aircraft had been moved to RAAF Base Edinburgh in Adelaide's northern suburbs; on Thursday confirming that the

upper wing and lower outer wings, lower elevator, propellers and one engine nacelle had been destroyed; and

on Friday a photograph of the aircraft on its landing gear showing that the entire fuselage and lower inner wings were intact.

Behind the scenes the Department of External Affairs was hastily requesting the High Commissioner in London to contact Vickers Corporation to ask for drawings to be sent to the DCA and the Minister

³⁰ *The Advertiser*, Monday 4 November 1957, page 1

for Air directed that the Department of Aircraft Production at Parafield restore the aircraft to “mock up” condition as follows³¹:

- (a) *The aeroplane is to be restored so that externally it appears sufficiently, like the original, to be accepted as such by persons other than those with special knowledge.*
- (b) *The aeroplane is not required to be restored in such a manner that its original structural strength is returned.*
- (c) *The strength requirement to be observed is that the aeroplane should maintain its structure without danger of collapse and injury to spectators.*
- (d) *Where available, original parts are to be used. However, in utilising salvaged metal fittings, rigging wires, etc, which have been subjected to extreme heat, extreme care is to be exercised in the selection of any such items for re-use.*

In other words, the restoration had to be good enough to fool the average punter and strong enough that the aircraft wouldn't fall to pieces. £2,000 was budgeted for the works.



Opening of the Vimy Memorial at Adelaide Airport on 27 April 1958
[SAAM Collection]

On Friday 6 December 1957 there was a press report about the Governor, Sir Robert George, inspecting the Vimy Memorial building, then nearing completion.

The memorial was finally opened, with the aircraft restored³², by Air Marshal Sir Richard Williams, Ross Smith's No 1 Squadron commander, on 27 April 1958. Some 40,000 people were reported to have attended. Sir

Richard, after formally unveiling the memorial handed the keys to Premier Playford. The Premier then handed them on to Sir Philip McBride, the Minister for Defence, who was representing the Prime Minister. One can't help seeing an echo of 'pass the parcel' in this with the Premier determined not to be seen left as the custodian of the aircraft!

None of the press coverage suggested a cause of the fire, although it was reported that an RAAF Court of Inquiry would commence immediately. The Inquiry never did ascertain the cause although opinion was expressed that it may have been a result of tyre friction between the dual wheels of the trailer. Popular legend has it that a cigarette discarded by the driver or from a passing vehicle was to blame. If so, it seems an



The Vimy Memorial, soon after opening c1958
[PD]

³¹ Minute from A.D. McFarlane, Secretary of the DCA to the Secretary of the Department of Defence Production

³² The final cost of the restoration, completed on 10 April 1958, was £4,996.10.0

extraordinarily reckless act during the bushfire season and, if the RAAF driver was the culprit, with such a highly inflammable and precious load. Another theory was that the fire started when a tarpaulin covering the aircraft was ignited by the truck's exhaust. We will never know.



*The John Dowie sculpture of the Vimy Crew
Vimy Memorial, Adelaide Airport
(SAAM Collection)*

In September 1964, Sir Keith's wife, Anita, who had taken a very close interest in everything associated with the memorial and had donated a large amount of memorabilia to be included in the display, formally complained to Frank Collopy, then regional director for the DCA, about the deterioration of the exhibits. It was clear that insufficient thought had been put into the orientation of the building and the exposure of the exhibits to ultra violet radiation, heat and humidity. This is curious because when the site was being considered by the DCA, Norm Fricker, the Assistant Secretary, had stated in a minute on 24 August 1956 to his Director General that *"one aspect which largely governed the site was the necessity to protect the Vickers Vimy from direct*

sunlight which would quickly damage the fabric." In any event, Lady Smith offered to refurbish Ross Smith's faded medals and even to buy an air conditioner for the building. A flurry of minutes and telegrams then ensued between the SA Division and the Director General with various remedial works suggested and rejected until finally funding was set aside in the 1967/68 budget. By then Lady Smith had got fed up and donated the refurbished medals to the Art Gallery.

It was clear that the Vimy had suffered too from the ultra violet exposure and extremes of heat and variable humidity. A further major restoration was carried out in late 1981 by Norm Pointing, a maintenance engineer who had been involved in the original restoration and was granted \$10,000 by the Commonwealth for the purpose. Much of the work, which took five months to complete, was to replace items missing after the



*Vimy Memorial, Adelaide Airport after installation of shade screens in 1987
(SAAM Collection)*

previous restoration but he also completed needed general maintenance. Pointing was highly critical of the Government's neglect of the aircraft and the design of the building that housed it. Although the deterioration of the aircraft that led to the restoration project had been obvious and documented over the previous twenty years, virtually nothing had been done other than the installation of some reflective foil. Pointing lobbied strongly for modifications to the building but it wasn't until 1985/86 that funding was finally allocated.

The Department (that had become the Department of Aviation – DOA in 1982) had tried unsuccessfully to get funding from the Arts, Heritage and Environment portfolio through its Bicentennial Projects Committee, but eventually bit the bullet and recognised that although the works could not be justified on an operational basis they must be funded as “non-attributable for cost-recovery”³³. The works, completed in January 1987, included the installation of the protective screen around the perimeter of the building (shown in the photograph at right), other minor building treatments to reduce solar gain, basic electrical works and the installation of a fire detection system. They cost \$261,000.



Vickers Vimy G-EAOU in Memorial Building at Adelaide Airport 28 August 2012
(Courtesy Helen Blake)

The Department (again renamed, this time to the Department of Transport & Communications – DOTC) was chafing badly over its “custodianship” of the aircraft and building after incurring such an expense. The ownership issue was still unresolved and a file note dated 22 October 1986, while the works were in progress, referred to a meeting between the DOTC and the Director of Birdwood Mill Museum to discuss “in an informal manner” the possible lease of the Vimy building and contents to Birdwood Mill in exchange for the Museum accepting their maintenance costs. This seems to have been

prompted by the impending transfer of the airport to the newly-formed Federal Airports Corporation and uncertainty over the Commonwealth’s right to transfer control and/or ownership of the aircraft and building to the FAC. The file note referred to a paper attached to Folio 22 being “quite indicative of ownership of the aircraft by the Commonwealth”, but went on to say “but only imply that the building and contents were given to the Commonwealth. No formal transfer is evident.” Unsurprisingly, nothing came of the proposal to the Birdwood Mill Museum, and the Department continued its custodianship until the FAC took over in January 1988.

In May 1998, Adelaide Airport was leased to the private sector as part of the privatisation of all the FAC-owned airports commenced in 1996. This was the opportunity the Commonwealth had long sought to offload its Vimy responsibilities. The memorial, including the building, statues, aircraft and artefacts associated with the aircraft, was made subject to an agreement between the Commonwealth and its new airport lessee, Adelaide Airport Ltd (AAL). The agreement made AAL responsible for management and operation of the memorial and for maintenance of the building and its contents.

The ownership remains unresolved in the minds of many. The Commonwealth’s agreement with AAL gets around the issue by stating in clause 3.1 *Ownership of Aircraft* that “the Commonwealth has certain interests in the aircraft” and that “the aircraft is in the possession and control of AAL”. This rather cloudy description that seems to have little to do with ownership is apparently contradicted

³³ Letter E Kiel, First Asst Secretary Airports to Regional Director SA/NT, DA 26 June 1985

by clause 3.2 *Right to deal with Aircraft*, that says “*The parties acknowledge that the Commonwealth is under no restriction and is free to deal with, or part with possession of the aircraft in its absolute and unfettered discretion.*” One would think, if the Commonwealth is bestowing the right on itself to flog the aircraft, that it regards itself as the owner. However, when the issue was raised as recently as 1999-2000, conflicting messages emanated from the federal government. Peter McGauran, Minister for the Arts and the Centenary of Federation, in a letter to the Civil Aviation Historical Society of South Australia said “*Advice from the Australian War Memorial indicates that ownership of the aircraft was transferred from the Commonwealth Government to the South Australian Government in the 1950’s.*”³⁴ He was contradicted by John Anderson, Minister for Transport, in a letter to Trish Worth, the Member for Adelaide, who said “*Whilst the aircraft is owned by the Commonwealth, the operator of Adelaide Airport Limited (AAL) has possession and responsibility for the aircraft by way of a contract with the Commonwealth that requires AAL to maintain the aircraft in good order and repair for the duration of the airport lease.*”³⁵

There should be no confusion. Vickers Corporation gifted the aircraft to the Commonwealth Government and it was accepted on behalf of the Government by the Prime Minister. While it was subsequently a decision of Cabinet to gift the aircraft unconditionally to the South Australian Government, no offer was made. Instead, the Prime Minister asked the South Australian Premier merely to accept arrangements for the aircraft to be transported to a building at Adelaide Airport, built by public subscription, where it would remain under the custodianship of a Commonwealth agency. The Premier accepted the arrangements. John Anderson got it right.

The Vimy’s last journey

The construction of a new terminal by AAL in 2005 and the consequent movement of the centre of activity of the airport away from the memorial obviously made the location of the memorial less than ideal. This resulted in a steady stream of public criticism over the years culminating in a concerted effort to convince AAL and governments to plan and fund its inclusion in plans to expand the terminal. The efforts were led by the Epic Flight Centenary Committee, which was formed to coordinate events and publicity commemorating the centenary of the Vimy’s flight. The Committee of a wide range of community stakeholders was chaired by the chief executive of the History Trust of SA, and included Adelaide journalist Lainie Anderson who became the face of the efforts to relocate the aircraft. It also included Air Chief Marshall Sir Angus Houston AK AFC (Ret’d) and Dr Andy Thomas, NASA Astronaut (Ret’d) as its patrons.

The efforts were successful and joint funding of the \$7m project by the Liberal Party State and Commonwealth Governments and AAL was announced on 11 May 2019, just prior to the federal election. The State and Commonwealth Labour opposition parties both pledged to match the undertakings and were subsequently elected to carry them out.



*AAL’s interim refurbishment of the Vimy Memorial completed in 2017
[M Milln]*

³⁴ Letter Peter McGauran to CAHSSA, 26 August 1999

³⁵ Letter John Anderson to Trish Worth MP, 5 June 2000

As an interim measure, however, AAL had undertaken a comprehensive refurbishment of the existing memorial in 2017. The South Australian Aviation Museum Inc was largely responsible for the design of the interim improvements.



*The Vimy fuselage enroute to the new display space on 19/20 May 2022
(Artlab Australia)*

AAL then contracted Artlab Australia, a State Government entity, in early 2022 to coordinate the multitude of tasks involved in the relocation. The Vimy was disassembled into three packages: the fuselage and upper and lower wings. Wheeled scaffolding frames were built around each wrapped package to protect them, and on the night of 19 May 2022 at 11pm, the 2.1km, 4 1/2 walk from the original pavilion to the new exhibition space at the north end of the terminal adjacent to the Atura Hotel commenced. Artlab's Ian Miles led a team including staff

from AAL and the Australian Federal Police and volunteers from the Epic Flight Centenary Committee, which ensured safe passage of the aircraft to, and positioning in, the new display space for reassembly.

The new exhibition was opened to the public on 19 December 2022 after an official opening attended by the Premier, various State and Commonwealth ministers and a large number of invited guests on 16 December. The exhibition, which is now fully ultra violet protected, includes audio-visual displays including original video footage of the aircraft and crew, interactive educative material on the other race contenders, a ceiling-mounted mirror to view the cockpit interior, and an upper level providing overview of the Vimy from above, which includes a display of artefacts and more video material.



G-EAOU in its new display space in the Adelaide Airport terminal. [M Milln 16Dec2022]

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Mike Milln³⁶

South Australian Aviation Museum Inc

August 2018, Revised May 2019, Revised January 2023

³⁶ Mike Milln is author of *Wing Tips – The story of the Royal Aero Club of South Australia – Book 1: 1919-1941*, 2011 Avonmore Books and *Book 2 – 1941 -1986*.2018 Avonmore Books.

TIME TABLE WITH DISTANCES

Date	Hour	Route	Time in Air Hrs Mins	Distance in miles
12/11/19	0905	London to Lyons	6:20	500
13/11/19	1006	Lyons to Pisa	4:45	380
15/11/19	1000	Pisa to Rome (landed Venturina enroute)	3:20	180
16/11/19	0904	Rome to Taranto	2:35	260
17/11/19	0815	Taranto to Suda Bay (Crete)	5:40	520
18/11/19	0812	Suda Bay to Cairo	7:20	650
19/11/19	1024	Cairo to Damascus	4:10	450
20/11/19	1015	Damascus to Ramadi	6:00	420
21/11/19	1315	Ramadi to Basra	3:30	350
23/11/19	0635	Basra to Bandar Abbas	7:40	630
24/11/19	0700	Bandar Abbas to Karachi	8:30	730
25/11/19	0740	Karachi to Delhi	9:00	720
27/11/19	1020	Delhi to Allahabad (landed Muttra enroute)	4:25	380
28/11/19	0830	Allahabad to Calcutta	5:00	470
29/11/19	0830	Calcutta to Akyab (Burma)	4:45	420
30/11/19	0730	Akyab to Rangoon	4:15	330
1/12/19	0655	Rangoon to Bangkok	6:00	400
2/12/19	0745	Bangkok to Singora	6:00	470
4/12/19	1015	Singora to Singapore	6:20	480
6/12/19	0700	Singapore to Kalidjati (Java)	9:00	640
7/12/19	0735	Kalidjati to Surabaya	4:20	350
8/12/19	1200	Surabaya to Bima (Sumbawa)	5:00	420
9/12/19	0945	Bima to Atamboea (Timor)	5:30	440
10/12/19	0835	Atamboea to Port Darwin (Australia)	6:30	470
13/12/19	1023	Port Darwin to Warlock Ponds	4:20	220
14/12/19	0900	Warlock Ponds to Cobb's Creek	5:30	300
17/12/19	1800	Cobb's Creek to Anthony's Lagoon	0:15	20
18/12/19	1005	Anthony's Lagoon to Brunette Downs	1:00	50
19/12/19	1105	Brunette Downs to Avon Downs	2:45	180
20/12/19	0745	Avon Downs to Cloncurry	3:00	230
22/12/19	0650	Cloncurry to Longreach	4:40	300
23/12/19	0705	Longreach to Charleville	3:40	330
12/2/20	1100	Charleville to Bourke	4:00	260
13/2/20	0900	Bourke to Narromine	3:00	230
14/2/20	0700	Narromine to Sydney (Sydney to Richmond on 17/2 for overhaul)	4:15	200
23/2/20	1005	Sydney to Cootamundra (departed from Richmond)	4:14	240
24/2/20	1000	Cootamundra to Henty (landed Bon Accord and The Rock NSW enroute)	1:10	80
25/2/20	0600	Henty to Melbourne (Point Cook)	3:05	220
23/3/20	0700	Melbourne to Adelaide	7:30	430
Total flying time and distance, London to Adelaide			188:20	14,350