

FRANK BRIGGS - A FORGOTTEN FLYER REMEMBERED BY CHAS SCHAEDEL



*Frank Briggs in the cockpit of a DH9 during his RFC/RAF career in the First World War
[David Vincent]*

In November-December 1919 the Australian continent was first traversed by air when Captain H. N. Wrigley and Sergeant A. W. Murphy flew a wartime-designed BE2e from south to north. Members of the embryo Australian air force that replaced the disbanded Australian Flying Corps after the First World War, they had a couple of false starts before they left Melbourne on 16th November, but after covering 4,000 kilometres in 46 flying hours they touched down in Darwin on 12th December.

This was two days after Ross and Keith Smith with mechanics

Bennett and Shiers completed the first flight from England, so Wrigley and Murphy were not on hand to greet the crew of the Vickers Vimy as planned. They suffered a further setback when their superiors refused to let them fly back to Melbourne and made them dismantle the BE2e for return by land transport. Bypassing Brisbane, the Smith brothers then flew from the north to the south of Australia in stages via Sydney and Melbourne, until they reached their home city of Adelaide on 23rd March 1920.

In November-December 1920 the Australian continent was flown over in an east-west direction for the first time, when F. S. Briggs flew C. J. de Garis and mechanic O. J. Howard on a round trip Melbourne-Perth-Sydney-Melbourne in a De Havilland 4 aeroplane. Designed during the war as a day bomber, the performance of the DH4 eclipsed that of the BE2e to the extent that it covered the 9,600 kilometres in almost exactly the same number of flying hours that took Wrigley and Murphy less than half the distance.

This outstanding flight, much of it over sparsely populated and featureless country, was only one of several that put the name of Briggs into the record books, and yet he rarely gets a mention when noteworthy fliers are being discussed.

Francis Stewart Briggs was born in Calcutta in 1897, and as a boy before the First World War he moved to South Australia in the Adelaide suburb of Prospect. When war came he enlisted in the AIF and saw service in Egypt, followed by a period in France with a howitzer battery.

His first taste of flying came in June 1916 when he was seconded temporarily to No.16 Squadron of the Royal Flying Corps, to see at first-hand the value of co-operation between the aeroplane and the artillery. During his six weeks with the squadron he flew as an observer, and although his pilot on the first occasion crashed their machine Briggs revelled in the experience of flight. So later in the year when a call went out for AIF volunteers to transfer to the Royal Flying Corps, Briggs applied and was accepted. Also transferred from his Division were Charles Kingsford Smith and Edgar Johnston, both of whom earned fame in war and peace.



*Briggs flew a variety of types during his war service including this Sopwith Pup.
[David Vincent]*

Briggs did his ground schooling at Denham and Exeter College at Oxford, and in March 1917 his flying training began at Thetford. Before the end of the month his instructor Captain Foggin sent him solo after three hours dual, after which he went on to fly the necessary solo time to gain his "wings". But instead of being sent to France as anticipated, in June he was posted to Stirling in Scotland as an instructor. At the time he was 19 years of age and his total flying experience amounted to 23 hours!

From Stirling the training unit moved to Montrose where the Australian Major V. D. Bell was in the process of getting No.80 Squadron RFC ready to go to France. The flying skill of Briggs so impressed the Major that he tried to arrange a transfer, but before it could be finalised Briggs was ordered to report to the Orfordness Test and Experimental Station. His disappointment at missing a chance to see action overseas was lessened with the prospect of testing experimental equipment and flying new types of aircraft.

Briggs went to Orfordness in October 1917, and after that life was never dull. His first project involved a considerable amount of flying in cloud, in an effort to establish a training system to enable pilots to fly on their rudimentary instruments. It was hoped that with proper training pilots could operate over the lines in weather that was presently keeping them on the ground, and the experience he gained stood Briggs in good stead after the war.

The test unit was also expected to function as a Home Defence squadron, so one night when German Gotha bombers were reported in the area Briggs took off in a BE12a to attempt an interception. After flying around at 15,000 feet for an hour, freezing in his open cockpit (and no oxygen in those days!), he finally caught a glimpse of twin flickers of flame coming from the engine exhausts of a Gotha. He lined up behind it but the big machine was too fast and drew away from him. He loosed off a burst from his machine gun out of frustration, but he was beyond range and the bullets were wasted so he returned home. Next day he was taken to the BE and shown the throttle lever, clearly bent in his endeavour to get more speed out of the slow machine!

Some weeks later Briggs had a lucky escape when he dropped a 360 pound bomb on the proof range target at Orfordness. He was extremely low and the blast almost threw his machine into the ground, at the same time as something hit it with a loud thump. He managed to regain control and landed safely, but there was a large hole in the bottom wing root only inches away from his cockpit. Obviously made by a big fragment of hot metal, it was clear evidence that from then on he should drop his bombs from a much higher altitude.

The next posting for Briggs came in December 1917 when he was sent with a small squad to Stonehenge on Salisbury Plain, as the advance party of the newly formed No.1 School of Aerial Navigation and Bomb Dropping. He helped to train pilots for the reconnaissance and bombing squadrons in France, and made repeated requests to be sent to an operational unit himself. His appeals were turned down until August 1918, when finally he received orders to report to Cairo for posting to a squadron in Palestine.



*Briggs with passenger and DH4A of No.2 Comm Flight 1919
(note flat tyre).
[David Vincent]*

Once again his hopes were dashed. A training unit similar to the one at Stonehenge had just been formed in Egypt, and with his experience he was considered the ideal man to ensure it functioned along the right lines. No amount of argument could alter the decision of his superiors, but he was promised a posting to any unit of his choice after six months. Long before that, of course, the fighting was finished with the signing of an armistice

in the Middle East at the end of October, followed by the cessation of all hostilities in Europe on 11th November 1918.

Almost immediately Briggs was ordered back to England, but he fell victim to the Spanish influenza that was raging and taking many lives. He sneaked out of hospital to catch his ship, only to find when he reported to Air Ministry in London that he had risked his life to return to the same sort of training unit again. His appointment was to the No.2 School of Aerial Navigation and Bomb Dropping at Andover, and from his point of view the only advantage was the lack of activity that enabled him to quietly regain his health.

By March 1919 he was well again and feeling bored, so he applied to join the Royal Air Force component of the Allied Expeditionary Force that was fighting in Russia, but once again his desire to see combat was ignored by the Air Ministry. Instead he was posted to the new No.2 Communications Squadron, 86th Wing, which had been formed to carry VIP's and despatches over the English Channel, to and from Paris where the Peace Treaty talks were taking place. His skill and experience in bad weather flying was invaluable because it was important for the flights to be carried out in all but the most impossible conditions. Sound judgement was also required because of the important passengers, among whom Briggs flew the King's Messenger with the final draft of the Peace Treaty, and later the Australian Prime Minister Mr. W. M. "Billy" Hughes.

Briggs continued to fly with the Communication Squadron until late in 1919, then returned to Australia early in 1920 only to find that there was little opportunity to break into civil aviation in a serious way. But in the middle of the year he met Clement John de Garis, the energetic young managing director of the Sunraysia dried fruit business at Mildura in Victoria.

The business interests of de Garis were wide flung and he decided that an aeroplane was the ideal means of transport to cover them all, so he bought a Boulton & Paul P9 single-engined biplane and then looked around for somebody to fly it. Briggs presented his logbooks and references to de Garis and within a couple of days found himself in fulltime employment as a pilot. He had reservations about the ability of the P9 to do all that de Garis expected of it, and it was not long before the small machine was put to the test.

On 6th July 1920, only a few days after Briggs flew it for the first time, he and de Garis went from Mildura to Sydney in one day, taking six hours ten minutes flying time to cover the 880 kilometres. Then on 9th July they made the first one-day flight from Sydney to Melbourne in 6 hours 37 minutes flying time, but the P9 overturned on landing at the end of the flight, and rather than waste any time repairing it de Garis sold it and bought a Sopwith Gnu instead.

In August 1920 the Prince of Wales was preparing to leave Sydney by ship after a visit that took him overland from the west coast of Australia to the east, and it was proposed to present him with the latest English mail being carried across the continent by train from Perth. In the ordinary way the Prince would be at sea on his way home before the mail could reach him, but de Garis was approached with the idea for an aeroplane to meet the train at Port Augusta in South Australia, the halfway point of the journey, and speed the mail on by air.

Briggs knew that the Sopwith stood little chance of meeting the deadline and approached the Prime Minister for the loan of an air force De Havilland 9A. Mr. Hughes remembered Briggs from the days of the Peace Treaty talks and was in full agreement with the project, so he was supplied with a DH9A but only on condition that he had an air force escort. Unfortunately the machine that Briggs flew was forced down with engine trouble before he and de Garis reached Port Augusta, and the escort machines gained the honour of getting the mail through in time (although it had to be carried by road over the last twenty miles!).



*Briggs flew for C. J. de Garis with a Boulton & Paul P.9, similar to this which Arthur Long flew from Tasmania to Victoria in December 1919
[O. J. Howard]*

Even when the DH9A failed them, de Garis made a last ditch effort to carry on. He had his Sopwith Gnu flown over from Melbourne, but although Briggs made a remarkable take-off from a small paddock the engine failed just as they were clearing the surrounding trees and they crashed badly. Fortunately there were no serious injuries, but the Gnu was badly damaged and they did not use it again.

Instead, Briggs returned to the repaired DH9A and flew it to Adelaide, where he was asked to take part in the first

Aerial Derby to be held in that city. The Defence Department gave him permission, and on 8th September 1920 the race was run over a distance of about 32 kilometres, with Briggs as scratch man to VC winner Captain Frank McNamara in an Avro 504K, and Captain Harry Butler the local favourite in his Bristol Monoplane. McNamara's handicap was totally inadequate and he was overtaken and passed on the first leg of the triangular course by the other two, who fought out an exciting race which Butler won by a couple of seconds.



*A Sopwith Gnu similar to the machine flown by Briggs for C. J. de Garis
O. J. Howard*

Briggs returned the DH9A to Melbourne non-stop in a record 4 hours 10 minutes, but was then left grounded until the new aircraft for de Garis arrived from England. He had ordered two De Havilland 4 machines, a type that Briggs became familiar with during his war service and which had a good turn of speed. But the fact that he had no aeroplanes did not stop de Garis making plans, and Briggs was soon fully occupied working out the details for a flight from Melbourne to Perth.

Since the flight had not been attempted before there was a good deal of organisation required, including the establishment of landing grounds and fuel stocks along the way. Briggs contacted various stationmasters along the railway line across the desolate Nullarbor Plain, then made a train journey as far as Naretha in Western Australia to check out the suggested areas where he could come down safely.



*C. J. de Garis, mechanic Jack Howard and Frank Briggs
(helmet just visible in front cockpit) being
congratulated on completion of first flight Melbourne
to Perth in 1920.
[O. J. Howard]*

Towards the end of November 1920 the DH4 machines arrived at Melbourne, and one of them was prepared by engineer Jack Howard for the proposed trans-continental flight. Still bearing its service markings and serial number F2691, it was test flown by Briggs on 27th November (when the register of aircraft was initiated in mid-1921 it became G-AUCM). Not one to hang around, de Garis specified 30th November 1920 as the starting date, which only gave a couple of days to have the machine ready, but everything fell into place and Briggs, de Garis and Howard made a dawn departure from Melbourne on that day.

Their first stage to Adelaide was reached after 4 hours and 25 minutes in the air, and de Garis had business to conduct in the South Australian capital which kept them there until the next morning. That day they flew 1,768 kilometres to Naretha, with stops at Wirraminna and Cook, probably a record at the time for a cross-country flight in a single day. Then on 2nd December 1920, after a stop at Southern Cross for breakfast, Briggs put the DH4 down on Belmont Racecourse in Perth at 1 pm exactly, the time that they specified in Melbourne before they began the flight. Having already flown from Sydney to Melbourne, Briggs became the first pilot to span the continent by air from east to west.

The fliers were feted wherever they went and stayed in Western Australia until 14th December, for de Garis had quite a few business commitments there. He also committed Briggs to the task of flying him from Perth to Sydney, a feat that he announced they would

manage in two days. So on the 14th they left Belmont at first light for Southern Cross, where they were delayed several hours making repairs to the tail skid which was damaged in landing. Then on to Naretha and finally, due to the time lost at Southern Cross, an anxious period of flying in the dark over featureless country. Guided only by the barely discernible trans-continental railway track, Briggs flew mainly by feel for almost three hours until he reached Cook, and thankfully put the DH4 down for the night alongside the small railway siding.

Next day they settled for a comparatively short 2-stage flight to the estate of de Garis on the River Murray in South Australia, with only a stop at Wirraminna for breakfast. They landed at their destination early in the afternoon and as usual de Garis plunged straight into business while Briggs and Howard relaxed. Early the next morning Briggs took off for Mildura, the centre of business for de Garis and the first stop on the final stage to Sydney. After Mildura the weather became bad and they flew through heavy rain, but Briggs found their refuelling stop at Cootamundra without too much trouble and after mending a puncture they soon made Sydney. Actual flying time between Perth and Sydney worked out at 21 hours 30 minutes.

Still de Garis was impatient to be on his way. They spent one day in Sydney, which was another day of business for de Garis, then left again on 18th December and flew to Melbourne in 5 hours 50 minutes flying time with a refuelling stop at Cootamundra. Briggs had completed the first east-west round trip traverse of the Australian continent in 45 hours 25 minutes flying time, averaging 184 kilometres an hour for the 9,600 kilometres.



The DH4 at Belmont Racecourse on completion of the Melbourne to Perth flight in 1920.

[O. J. Howard]

of its crate from de Garis. Parer came first in the newer machine, only slightly ahead of Briggs. F2682 later became G-AUBZ, and both DH4's had long careers in commercial aviation.

The approach of Christmas gave Briggs a respite from long-distance flying, but he was back in the news again on 27th December 1920 when he took part in the first Victorian Aerial Derby. Organised by the noted wartime pilot and commercial operator Jimmy Larkin, the race started and finished at Epsom Racecourse, where other competition events kept the big crowd amused and amazed for most of the day. The aircraft entered in the Derby covered a wide variety of types, with Briggs off scratch in his DH4 alongside of Ray Parer, who had just bought the other DH4 F2682 out

Next de Garis decided to fly to Brisbane, and he and Briggs left Melbourne on 9th January 1921 with mechanic George Bond. As usual de Garis spent the following day doing business in Sydney, and on the 11th they flew to Brisbane in the record time of 4 hours 50 minutes. Not satisfied with that achievement, de Garis wanted to make the return flight to Melbourne in one day, so at daybreak on 16th January Briggs lifted the DH4 from the aerodrome at Brisbane and set course for Grafton, their first refuelling stop. Then on to Sydney for lunch with a record time between the two capitals, followed by afternoon tea at Cootamundra and finally a landing just after dark at Melbourne, again in record time from Sydney. The overall flight between Brisbane and Melbourne took 10 hours 30 minutes flying time and constituted a world record for a one-day commercial flight.

The next couple of months were occupied by relatively mundane business flights to various centres in the eastern states, until March 1921 when Briggs flew de Garis from Melbourne to Perth again. But this time the faithful DH4 needed more attention than could be given in the west, so it was dismantled and shipped back to Melbourne by sea. It was after this flight that his achievements earned Briggs the first Oswald Watt Medal, which was to be awarded annually for the most meritorious feat of airmanship in Australia or by an Australian overseas.

The following month de Garis reluctantly decided to give up flying for three years, after being pressured by many friends and investors who considered that his business acumen was too important to be risked in the air. The end of the partnership was a great disappointment for Briggs, because it was a period when their exploits were doing much to prove the value of commercial aviation.

In characteristic manner de Garis offered Briggs the DH4 to use as he saw fit. But Briggs felt unable to accept such a generous gift, and elected to stay in the employ of de Garis as long as work could be found for the machine. One of his first jobs was a charter flight for a Melbourne firm that took him all over Victoria for several weeks, and then he began to work out the finer details of a flight that had been in his mind for some time.

His ambition was to fly solo from Australia to New Zealand in the DH4, which de Garis willingly agreed to lend him for the flight. With extra tankage Briggs calculated having sufficient fuel to fly from Hobart in Tasmania to the closest point of New Zealand with a good margin for safety. He planned to go in August 1921 but the news reached Lieutenant Colonel Brinsmead, the Controller of Civil Aviation, who promptly came up with so many objections that Briggs reluctantly shelved the idea.

Instead, he settled on being the first man to fly to Alice Springs in Central Australia. The flight was chartered by Francis Birtles and involved a round trip from Melbourne of 4,800 kilometres. Birtles had already covered much of Australia by land transport before he decided that an aeroplane would enable him to film some of the more obscure areas, so by agreement with de Garis he arranged for Briggs to fly him in the DH4. They left Melbourne on 26th September 1921, taking along George Bailey as mechanic, and reached the Alice on 5th October. Then they had to wait for the arrival of the camel train with their fuel supplies, which had been despatched well in advance but took about six weeks for the long journey. Birtles gathered a wealth of material to take back to Melbourne when Briggs made a fast return flight, covering the last leg of approximately 800 kilometres from Adelaide to Melbourne in a fast 3 hours 40 minutes.

Before he left on the Central Australian flight Briggs had applied for a job as a pilot with Norman Brearley's Western Australian Airways, but while he was in Alice Springs he received an offer from a new company Air Transport Ltd in Perth. He discussed the situation with de Garis who reluctantly agreed that he should accept the offer, so before the end of 1921 he said goodbye to his mentor and the DH4 and boarded ship for Perth.

For the next few months Briggs gave joyrides to the citizens of many towns in the populated areas of Western Australia, flying an Armstrong Whitworth FK8, another type like the DH4 that had been designed for war service. But he could see no real future in that sort of work, so when Jimmy Larkin wanted a pilot for his Melbourne-based Australian Aerial Services Briggs applied for the job and was accepted.

After his return to Victoria Briggs was forced to cool his heels while Larkin built up a fleet of suitable aircraft to operate his new Adelaide to Sydney route. Problems with the machines and delays in getting the blessing of the civil aviation authorities resulted in 1923 going by without a start to the service, and it was midway through 1924 before the inaugural flight was made.

On 2nd June 1924 Frank Roberts left Adelaide to fly the first leg of the Adelaide-Sydney service, but sudden heavy fog forced him to land about 80 kilometres short of Hay where he was to be relieved. Roberts flew into Hay early next morning and Briggs took over to complete the flight to Sydney, but he also ran into fog near his destination and had to turn back until he found a safe place to come down. The last hop of about 160 kilometres was easily accomplished on the morning of the 4th, and the first regular airline operation between the capitals of South Australia and New South Wales had begun.



*Sopwith Antelope VH-USS "Whip Bird" and DH50A of
Australian Aerial Services
[S. E. Sutcliffe]*

Briggs then made the return flight right through to Adelaide, leaving Sydney on the 7th and battling atrocious weather to reach his destination on the afternoon of the 8th. The aircraft on both the out and return flights was the one and only Sopwith Wallaby. Originally registered G-EAKS when flown by Captain G. C. Matthews from England in 1919, it crashed in Bali and was shipped to Australia for repair, after which it was operated by Larkin as G-AUDU "Bower Bird".

From then on Australian Aerial Services connected the two cities for over a year, but the weather conditions over the final leg between Cootamundra and Sydney disrupted the schedules to such an extent that the section was discontinued and handed over to the railway. Instead, Larkin was given a contract to fly airmail between Melbourne and Broken Hill via Hay and Mildura, and Briggs made the first official flight Melbourne to Hay and return on 21st July 1925. By this time he was flying DH50s, much more comfortable than the Sopwith Wallaby, Sopwith Antelope and the DH4 that he had been flying (the DH4 was his old machine that Larkin had obtained from de Garis).

As time went on his career became more mundane as the airline settled down to an established routine of commercial flying. In February 1926 he had the honour of flying the Earl of Stradbroke, Governor of Victoria, on a tour of the Victorian towns along the River Murray, and in the following month he took Lord Stonehaven, the Governor-General, on his first flight on an Australian civil airway in a commercial machine. And he had other breaks from routine when he was called on to fly a number of medical emergency flights.

Eventually Briggs decided to get his feet back on the ground, and about 1930 he accepted a position as the Shell representative at Perth in Western Australia. In the mid-1930s he transferred in the same capacity to Archerfield aerodrome at Brisbane, but from there he left the aviation scene and started his own business in New South Wales.

In 1966 Briggs died, but he left behind a legacy of safe regular travel for thousands of airline passengers over several routes that he pioneered. It seems a pity that so few of those passengers know the achievements or even the name of Frank Briggs.

Chas Schaedel
History Group
South Australian Aviation Museum Inc
July 2018