

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN AVIATION MUSEUM

SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR PROFILES

BILL POPE – AIRCRAFT RECOVERY SPECIALIST



William Keith (Bill) Pople in 1979 with Robby's Aerial Services.
[Madelene Cutting]

William Keith Pople was born on 16th November 1923, at Tweedvale (the WWI name for Lobethal). He was the fourth child of twelve born to William Alfred and Bessie Mildred Pople (nee Keen). Bill's siblings were born at Woodside, Tweedvale, Salisbury or Adelaide.

Until age 7 Bill did some of his growing up on a chicken farm that was between Parafield airport and the Salisbury Highway, and was run by his father. Bill soon developed an interest in aircraft and would spend Sunday afternoons at the airport.

When Bill was aged 7, the Pople family moved to Ovingham. Bill went to Brompton Primary School and passed year 7 in 1937. In 1938 he rode his bike to Wiles Chromium & Electroplating Company in Waymouth Street (before their move to Manchester Street, Mile End), Adelaide and got his first job as an electrician's off-sider/office boy. As a young man Bill played football for Ovingham Methodist Football Club and also kept fit cycling with the Henley and Western Districts Cycling Club.

In 1941 Bill joined the RAAF to get a start in aviation. He trained as an airframe fitter in Victoria at No.1 Recruit Depot at Shepparton, No.1 Engineering School at Ascot Vale and Melbourne Tech. Upon mustering as an airframe fitter Bill was posted to Mallala. Being a flying training establishment under the Empire Air Training Scheme (EATS), Mallala was equipped with Avro Ansons and Airspeed Oxfords for Bill to work on.

Bill's next posting was to No.1 FBRD at Lake Boga, where Scotty Allen was the CO, which introduced Bill to flying boats such as Catalinas, Martin Mariners, Supermarine Walrus and three of the Dornier Do24s then operated by the RAAF. When interviewed in 1993, Bill commented that "the Cats were number one!". Lake Boga was a "big, ideal lake for flying boats" reported Bill. The RAAF troops lived in a village nearby.

Some other postings for Bill were: RAAF Headquarters on St Kilda Road Melbourne, Morotai and Labuan. Bill was eventually posted back to No.22 Repair and Salvage Unit (RSU) at Mallala. This is quite possibly where Bill Pople's expertise in aircraft recovery was developed. In 1946 he became a member of No.32 Squadron at Mallala. It was also in late 1946 that Bill married Audrey Couch.

In 1947 Bill was sent to RAAF Laverton to “be screened for Woomera” and then sent to Woomera to serve. He lived in a tent for a time before getting a house. The aircraft Bill worked on were: Beaufighters, Meteors, Lincolns, Canberras and Valiants. It was while Bill was at Woomera that his three children: Lynette, Keith and Madelene were born at Queen Victoria Maternity Hospital at Rose Park. The children were educated in Woomera. In 1954 Bill left Woomera for RAAF Edinburgh to do airframe work on Meteors, Canberras and Sea Venoms.

Bill Pople left the RAAF in 1960 and worked for AV Roe as a supervisor on the early stages of the Blue Steel stand-off bomb project for nearly two years.

In 1962 Bill Pople joined the Royal Aero Club of SA (RACSA), when they were located in the first hangar north of the control tower (formerly the ANA hangar). At the time the RACSA Manager was Graham Alderman. Bill was taken on as workshop foreman. In 1971 Bill was interviewed for the position of Chief Engineer on the resignation of Reg Harding. That appointment did not satisfy the DCA however, and Max West was reinstated in that position. Bill did eventually become the Chief Engineer of RACSA in 1977.

During his time with RACSA Bill was involved in the maintenance of: Chipmunks, Tiger Moths, Cessna 172s, Piper Arrows, a Comper Swift and “Badger’s Mustang”. He was meant to work from 5am to 4 or 5pm each workday. Bill would often still be working at midnight.

In 1979 the RACSA was struggling and had negotiated with Ansett GA to take over the engineering division and Bill Pople with it. That did not eventuate, the RACSA engineering division closed and Bill went to Robby’s Aerial Services (Aerial Ag) as Chief Engineer. It is around about this time that Bill began his role as an aircraft recovery specialist, engaged by aircraft owners or their insurance companies.

The aircraft recovery work required travel to all parts of Australia in a suitable vehicle, with the tools and equipment to carefully dismantle an aircraft and a large trailer to load the aircraft onto for transport. The largest aircraft recovered by Bill Pople were Piper PA-31-350 Chieftains. They required two vehicles, each with a trailer. The vehicle of choice for Bill was a 1974 Ford F-100 utility with the rear enclosed. By 1993 Bill’s Ford had done 900,000km. By retirement Bill’s trusty Ford had covered 1.25million km!



Cessna 182N Skylane VH-RPS at the crash site on 19-Aug-1981 at Durrie Station QLD after a landing accident on 11-Aug-1981 [W. Pople]

For some recoveries, helicopters were required to airlift the aircraft sections out to where the vehicles and trailers could access them. In one recovery canoes, boats and a hovercraft were used for Cessna 210 VH-XAG that had “unintentionally ditched” into Lake Eyre.

The trips were often family affairs and when a second vehicle was required Bill’s son Keith would bring his.

Many aircraft recovered by Bill Pople were rebuilt, sometimes by him, and went on to fly for many more years.



Cessna 182N Skylane VH-RPS loaded for transport on 19-Aug-1981 at Durrie Station QLD after a landing accident on 11-Aug-1981 [W. Pople]

Bill joined Southern Aircraft Maintenance (SAM) at Parafield in 1980. SAM were then taken over by John White Avionics in 2003. Bill later joined Gulfstream Aviation in 2007 and stayed with them until he retired as a casual licenced aircraft maintenance engineer (LAME) in 2016 aged 93. His was a truly remarkable career.

Bill Pople died on 19th November 2020 aged 97. Dear Audrey had predeceased him, and he was survived by the three children and four grandchildren.

During 2022 the South Australian Aviation Museum (SAAM) scanned, captioned and filed over 500 photographs taken by Bill Pople, on the many expeditions from 1979 to 2011. For some crashed aircraft several photographs can be viewed giving an insight into the work done by Bill Pople and his crew in some quite remote locations.

References

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- SA Genealogy Society BMD index books
- Interview by Nigel Daw in 1993
- "Wing Tips – Story of RACSA, Book 2: 1941-1986 by Mike Milln
- ABC Radio Adelaide: article by Malcolm Sutton 17-Nov-2018
- Photo albums and slides loaned to the SAAM by Mrs Madelene Cutting 11-Dec-2021

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