

# 1922

## QANTAS TAKES OFF

NOVEMBER 2, 1922. At remote Charleville aerodrome in Queensland, the dawn silence was suddenly broken by the roar of a powerful aircraft engine. Slowly the Armstrong Whitworth FK8 taxied into position.

The mayor and every man, woman and child from the town and surrounding stations, held their breath as the clumsy biplane rumbled across the roughly cleared field, gathering speed at what seemed an astonishing rate.

Then, at exactly 5.30 a.m., its wheels lifted off the ground and the plane, registration number G-AUDE, winged its way towards Longreach on the first leg of the first scheduled flight of Queensland and Northern Territory Aerial Services Limited.

Qantas was in business as a regular airline — yet, ironically, on board with pilot P.J. McGinnes and engineer W.A. Baird was not a single passenger, but 106 letters that made up Queensland's first official airmail.

Cruising at an average speed of 82 miles an hour, the plane landed briefly at Tambo and Blackall, where enthusiastic crowds coughed and cheered amid the dust whipped up by the single propellor.

When McGinnes touched down at Longreach at 10.15 a.m., the chairman of Qantas, Fergus McMaster, was there to welcome him with the brave but prophetic words: 'This is a small beginning, which will develop into one of the greatest services in the world — we will be neglecting our duty if we allowed it to end here.'

Longreach, 425 km from Charleville, was the halfway stop for the first Qantas service to Cloncurry. In those pioneering days, it meant an overnight stop, because the planes flew better in the cool morning air.

The second leg of the run brought the airlines' first paying passenger, 87-year-old Alexander Kennedy, who had agreed to buy shares in the new company only if he could be first in the passenger seat. More than 50 years earlier Kennedy had pioneered the same route by bullock waggon; now he was determined to be the first to see it from the air.

The pilot for the second leg of the inaugural Qantas flight was the legendary Hudson (later Sir Hudson) Fysh, who later recalled: 'Kennedy had arrived at Longreach by train from Brisbane ... and here he was out at the Longreach aerodrome at 5 a.m. on a warm November day, having a final cup of tea and already dressed in cap and goggles.'

The Armstrong Whitworth was wheeled out of the hangar at the first streak of dawn, many willing hands helping to push her onto the airstrip. A few turns

of the propeller from Baird and his helpers and the 160 horse-power Beardmore engine sprang to life, flames spurting from the exhaust stubs.

After several false starts, they were finally airborne. 'Kennedy was thoroughly enjoying it,' Hudson Fysh wrote later in his book *Qantas Rising*.

'His flying cap had slipped round and his whiskers were streaming in the wind, but looking back I could see a happy smile on his face. "Be damned to the doubters!", he shouted.

'Kennedy was now coming back into his own country, and he looked down on the rugged hills and rough bush that in his early life had swarmed with hostile savages bent on repelling the intruding white man. It all now looked so quiet from a height of 4,000 feet, which was our cruising altitude — just high enough to keep us within gliding distance of the emergency landing strips which we had cleared in this rough section.

'The scattered homes of Cloncurry came into view, with here and there a mine shaft sticking out amongst the hills. What a homecoming it was for the old pioneer, with Queensland's first airmail! Gone were the days when he had groped through the hills on horseback stalked by a group of Kalkadoons, one of whom had speared and killed his partner. In the last few hours he had been wafted on a magic carpet for 3104 miles from Longreach at a speed of 70 miles per hour...

'As we landed and taxied in to pull up alongside our new hangar, Kennedy could see many friends, and three cheers rang out for the old pioneer and his strange homecoming. There was indeed a large crowd at the aerodrome

to welcome us, about half the population of Cloncurry... And so the new service was officially opened.'

Qantas, today Australia's — and one of the world's — premier international airlines, had its genesis long before those eventful days in November 1922. Its story, in many ways, is the story of Australian aviation, for the idea of an airline to link the western railheads of Queensland had its roots in perhaps the greatest air race in Australian history.

The First World War had shown the great potential of aviation, which prompted the Commonwealth Government in 1919 to offer a prize of 10,000 pounds — then a staggering amount — for the first British aircraft manned by Australians to fly from London to Australia within 30 days.

For many of the daring — but now jobless — young men who had so valiantly piloted their flying machines in aerial combat, this was a great opportunity to win new fame and, hopefully, carve a flying career in peacetime. Among them were Lieutenants Hudson Fysh, Paul Joseph McGinnes, Ross Smith and his brother, Keith.

The Smith brothers managed to find sponsorship from the giant Vickers company, which provided one of its own aircraft for them to fly.

But Fysh and McGinnes were not so lucky: while they were preparing for the race, their sponsor died and his estate refused to fund them. It was a blow at the time, but in hindsight the best thing that ever happened to the two young men.

No one had ever flown across Australia, so Major-General James Legge,

Chief of the General Staff, was ordered to choose and establish an air route across the continent to be followed by those aviators who managed to complete the long journey from England.

Hearing of the plight of Fysh and McGinnes, he offered them the chance to travel overland by car from Longreach in Queensland to Darwin, selecting and marking out suitable aerodromes and emergency landing sites every few hundred kilometres.

It was an amazing adventure which gave the two urbanised young men an insight into the unique problems — and possibilities — of the outback.

‘After having seen something of the country we could not help being struck by the natural advantages which favoured an air service in the district,’ recalled Sir Hudson.

‘Our map showed the unconnected railheads of Charleville, Longreach, Winton and Cloncurry. Added to this was the absence of made roads or bridges over the dry river beds, which became roaring torrents in flood time. We were also told that for periods each year after heavy rain all road transport across the blacksoil plains ceased.

‘Finally, the country was open, lending itself to safe forced landings — an essential feature in those days when our unreliable single engines so often decided to give up the ghost, usually at an awkward moment. It is no wonder that the people of the West, mostly the sheep squatters, decided to support us when Qantas came to be formed a little later on.’

Their overland trip completed, Fysh and McGinnes prepared an aerodrome

at Fanny Bay outside Darwin where, on December 10, 1919, they proudly watched their old wartime colleague Ross Smith land his Vickers Vimy bomber to win the historic air race 52 hours short of the 30-day deadline.

Next the Smith brothers successfully flew into Cloncurry using the map and aerodromes prepared by Fysh and McGinnes, who soon decided to exploit the potential for an air service in the region.

On a glass-topped table in the lounge of the Gresham Hotel in Brisbane, the two young men mapped out their dream to two western Queensland graziers, Fergus (later Sir Fergus) McMaster and Ainslie Templeton, and Alan Campbell of the Queensland Primary Producers, who was invited to assist them with business advice. The result was the registration, on November 16, 1920, of the Queensland and Northern Territory Aerial Services Ltd.

Raising capital for the new company involved barnstorming around the district in rickety old planes, taking locals for joyflights and talking them into buying a few shares. Many rich graziers regarded their shares as a donation to help two young war heroes — and lived to see their investment multiply many times over.

From the start, however, the founders realised that to create a proper airline, they needed a government subsidised airmail run, which they finally won against heavy competition in February 1922, with a tender of four shillings per mile flown.

And so, on a crisp morning nine months later, the first scheduled flight of Qantas proudly rose into the air, creating a new Australian legend.

'With all our optimism,' Sir Hudson wrote shortly before his death in 1974, 'little did we founders dream that Qantas would enjoy the success it has, nor air transport be where it is today, bridging land and sea and conquering the oceans, connecting the whole world by a network of fast air communication.'