

To me the most telling remark in John’s presentation that really jolted me back to reality was in Question time when, in response to a query as to whether he could expand on the actual navigational aspects of his story, he modestly replied “Well it was some 70 years ago.....”. Add to this his age at that time and this true to life saga becomes all the more remarkable, due to his strong clear delivery and presentation content.

As outlined by Brian Morgan in his introduction, John is a Sydney lad who enlisted in the RAAF in 1941. Following his initial training he was posted to an Air Observers School in Canada, graduating top of his course and showing superior aptitude in astronavigation. He was commissioned a Pilot Officer RAF Ferry Command based at Dorval, Quebec. Having completed 23 deliveries as navigator, in 1944 he was promoted to Flight Lieutenant and transferred to the elite 231 Squadron responsible as navigator for transporting VIPs on trans-oceanic flights. Passengers included amongst other notables General Omar Bradley, senior commander US ground forces in Europe, Hon Arthur Drakeford, Australian Air Minister and Dr H V Evatt, Australian Foreign Minister. He was discharged in December 1945, commenced studying engineering in Feb 1946 and his last job before retiring - air conditioning the new Parliament House in Canberra.

By way of background, John touched on early milestones in trans Atlantic flight – in 1919 the Vickers Vimy flight from Newfoundland to Ireland, then in 1927 Charles Lindbergh’s solo flight from New York to Paris in the “Spirit of St Louis”. In 1938, aircraft development in the UK had languished and a crisis was realised. The British Government ordered 250 Lockheed Hudson aircraft for RAF Coastal Command. Manufactured in US West Coast factories, they had to be flown overland to an East Coast port, rust proofed, shipped to the UK, then reassembled and tested to become operational. This extremely long delivery period resulted in the need to find a faster alternative. A proposal to fly all the way encountered a lot of scepticism. The RAF was not interested and in 1940 Churchill’s Minister for Aircraft Production Lord Beaverbrook had a skeleton organisation set up in Canada as a “Canadian Pacific Railways Air Services Department”. At this stage pilots used a radio range to fly from A to B and navigators used landmarks and maps to find their position. There were no radio ranges or landmarks over water.

A trial flight was proposed from the most Easterly point of Newfoundland to South Belfast in Northern Ireland. Long range fuel tanks were to be fitted to the Lockheed bombers. A test flight of 7 planes was authorised on the basis that if 3 or more of the 7 arrived safely approval would be given. Keep in mind that at this stage there was no infrastructure, no weather forecasts, no appropriately trained aircrews and particularly that navigators were not trained in astronavigation – at that time the only way to navigate out over the ocean, and of course then only if you could see the stars and the plane was held steady enough to get a satisfactory fix. The arrangement was for the 6 planes to keep in contact with the leader Bennett – the only experienced astronavigator. Upon reaching point of no return they could decide to continue on or return depending on their circumstances. Amazingly all 7 arrived safely. So approval was given and astronavigation training commenced in Canada. The initial group included “1 Aussie, 9 Yanks, 6 Brits and a Canuck”. As the program grew, so too did the losses. And circumstances meant there were no “mayday” calls, and no survivors if planes went down. Even though crews were now including trained astronavigators, the North Atlantic weather conditions were a major problem not only for navigating but for other reasons including “ice secretion” – an unknown phenomenon at the time. There were no de icing facilities then – even now NASA is still doing tests on this problem and it is believed to have possibly been a factor in the loss of the Air France plane flying between Brazil and France of recent times.

Also US law inhibited delivery as military planes were not allowed to fly across its national borders. So planes had to fly to the Canadian border, be dragged across by horse then fly to the East coast. This continued for some 6 to 8 months before the US law was repealed.

Ferry pilots were initially returned to Canada by ship taking 6 weeks, again very slow. Three bombers were then converted to troop carriers by removing all armaments. The "passengers" entered through the hatch in the bomb bay lying on sleeping bags on the floor. No light, no heating, non pressurised and with temperatures often -40C for a flight lasting between 20 and 23 hours, the boys resolved they were not paid for ferrying but for the trip home.

By 1941, the RAF decided it was a worthwhile venture and took over the whole operation forming RAF Ferry Command.. By the end of the war the supplementary staff had produced many specialists such as weather forecasters and meteorologists.

The initial route direct Canada/Nthn Ireland was only suitable for the specially fitted long range bombers, and with the increasing variety of planes to be ferried, a shorter route became urgent. The British having taken over Iceland when Denmark fell to the Germans, a route comprised of 750 nautical mile stages was set up from Labrador via Greenland, Iceland to Scotland.

John also outlined other routes developed to supply craft to Nth Africa which were being shipped from US around Cape of Good Hope. The US had developed 25 airports around Central America and these became available in 1942. One route went Florida, Puerto Rico, Trinidad, Brazil, Ascension Island, Accra on Gold Coast (now Ghana), to Cairo, another through the Azores, Morocco, Algeria then to Europe.

John then listed ferried planes which included Lockheed Hudsons, B24 Liberators, C47 Douglas Dakotas, Martin Baltimores, Mitchells, Mosquitos, Lockheed Ventures, Martin Marauders, Catalinas, Douglas Bostons, Lancasters, Consolidated Coronados, Boeing Flying Fortresses, Martin Mariners – in all 9,341 planes at a loss rate 1.8%. The Command included 84 Australians of which 29 did not return.

Summarising, John commented that at the start of WW2, Britain ruled the Atlantic skyways but with the US becoming involved and a force in 1942, international rules needed to be set up to cover safe movement. The Trans Atlantic Air Control Board was set up to control movement, safety etc., and the relevant regulations were accepted in 1945 for all other routes. These were the foundation for today's Air Traffic Regulations providing regular safe travel for the whole world.

A very interesting question time ensued.

Les Anderson summed up the feeling of us all that John's address had been exceptional as too had been his contribution to the war effort and to safe flying today.