

Chapter XV

“The Dear Old Bus”

Shortly before the *Graf Zeppelin* made her flight around the world, the *Southern Cross*, with Sr. Kingsford-Smith at the controls, completed the journey begun in May, 1928 on the Oakland-to-Australia flight, by circumnavigating the globe through both the Northern and Southern hemispheres. Although his flight, often interrupted, required approximately two years to finish, “Smithy” displayed throughout the same dogged persistence that characterized him in his Pacific flight. He scored several “firsts” during those two years, and completion of the flight brought him the honor of being the first civilian pilot to girdle the globe by air.

Kingsford-Smith’s round-the-world flight began with his departure from Oakland Airport on May 31, 1928, in the tri-motored Fokker plane, *Southern Cross*, on his aerial trail-blazing route across the Pacific Ocean. After his arrival in Australia on June 9, 1928, Kingsford-Smith first began to visualize a flight around the world. Before setting out on such a venture, he was persuaded to make several preliminary flights in his own country in order to make Australia air-conscious.

It was first decided that he should make a nonstop flight across the continent of Australia, a feat that had never been accomplished up to that time. On August 8, 1928, Kingsford-Smith, accompanied by his co-pilot, Charles T.P. Ulm, and two other companions, took off in the *Southern Cross* from Melbourne, and after fling nonstop across Australia to Perth, returned safely after covering a distance of 4,390 miles.

Kingsford-Smith’s next aerial venture was a flight that took him through a region never before flown by man – that between Australia and New Zealand. This adventurous

journey led him across the Tasman Sea, which has the reputation among seamen of being one of the stormiest seas on the globe. Despite adverse weather conditions which included severe lightning and blinding rain that, at times, changed into driving ice, the flight of 3,248 miles to New Zealand and back was successfully completed on September 11, 1928. This journey proved to be a third record for both Kingsford-Smith and the *Southern Cross*. It was followed by a long series of triumphal civic receptions, which contributed to the postponement of the proposed world flight.

In the spring of 1929, plans were being formulated by Kingsford-Smith and his colleague, Charles Ulm, to establish a commercial aviation enterprise in their country, which was to be known as the Australian National Airways, Ltd. Such an undertaking required new planes and other flight equipment, which they intended to buy in England. Thus, it was decided that Smith and Ulm would fly the *Southern Cross* to England and later continue their westward flight around the world.

On March 31, 1929, Kingsford-Smith and three companions set out on their 10,000 mile flight to England. On this journey bad weather was encountered across the Australian continent. After they had flown for 28.5 hours through torrential rains, the gas gave out. Smith made a forced landing in the muddy swamps of the Kimberley District, approximately 200 miles west of Wyndham, his objective. For twelve days, before they were finally rescued, Smith and his companions survived in that desolate area bordered by tidal inlets abounding with alligators.

Despite the ill effects of their experience and the many disappointments they had encountered, Smith and his party resumed their flight to England on June 25. Stopped en route at Derby, Singapore, Rangoon, Calcutta, Karachi, Bandar Abbas, Baghdad, Athens,

and Rome, the *Southern Cross* journeyed to London, where she landed on July 9, having covered the 10,000 miles in 12.5 days' flying time.

The *Southern Cross*, affectionately referred to by Kingsford-Smith as "the dear old bus", had flown the Arctic and tropical regions across oceans and deserts, and had performed her many difficult tasks ably and well. She was now due for a complete overhaul.

Soon after arrival in London, she was flown to the Fokker Aircraft plant in Amsterdam, Holland, where Kingsford-Smith and his flight companions were royally received. It was there that Smithy made the acquaintance of Dr. Henrik willen Van Loon, the eminent scholar and historian, whose works, notably *The Story of Mankind*, enjoy a world-wide reputation.

It was not until nearly one year later that Sir Charles was able to continue his westward globe-circling flight in the re-conditioned *Southern Cross*. On June 24, 1930, accompanied by co-pilot Evert Van Dyk, one of Holland's outstanding fliers, J.W. Stannage, radio operator, and J.P. Saul, navigator, he took off from Baldonnel Aerodrome, near Dublin, on his east-to-west crossing of the Atlantic, bound for New York.

Following the Great Circle route from Galway, Ireland to Cape Race, New Foundland, a distance of 1,900 statute miles, the *Southern Cross* made fairly good progress during the day, despite continual headwinds. Toward nightfall, fog was encountered which became denser as the night wore on and they approached the bleak, rocky coast of New Foundland which, due to the interlacing of currents of greatly varying temperatures of the Gulf Stream and the Labrador current, is nearly always fogbound.

All through the night, the westward-soaring ship was enveloped in the heavy, thick, damp mist, which forced Smithy and his co-pilot, Van Dyk, to fly blind. It was a tiresome, grueling test for both pilots. The blinding fog was getting on their nerves. The noise of the three pulsating motors didn't help matters. On several occasions they attempted to climb above that opaque wall of dark grayness, but strong headwinds aloft reduced their speed to such an extent that their chances of reaching the American continent would have been seriously jeopardized. In order to preserve their precious fuel, they decided to continue flying blind in the lower stratus, hoping for a break in the blackness ahead and, if possible, obtain a glimpse of the starry heavens above to ascertain position and determine the ship's course.

For guidance in maintaining a safe altitude they depended entirely on their non-sensitive altimeter, which was merely an aneroid barometer indicating height in feet instead of atmospheric pressure in inches. I may explain here that altimeters are subject to errors due to changing atmospheric pressure during flight. If the barometer falls, the altimeter will read higher than the true altitude. If the barometer rises, it will read lower. Thus, a drop in the atmospheric pressure of one half-inch would cause a false reading of the altimeter and a subsequent error of 500 feet in height. In view of this, and especially since they were flying through pea soup-like fog, neither pilot was willing to go lower than 500 feet altitude. Smithy's log relates that although their altimeter reading was never below 600 feet that night, the ship flew at times so close to the hungry waves below that the 125 foot trailing antenna dragged in the water.

The inaccurate readings of the altimeter were undoubtedly due to a drop in the atmospheric pressure, and if this valuable weather guide was correct, the ship was within

a radius of a low-pressure area. While the *Southern Cross* was still some 400 miles from the nearest land, all three compasses were reported to differ with each other by as much as ninety degrees from the ship's course. This was indeed discouraging to the four-man crew of the fob-bound ship. For all they knew, they might have been wandering about for an unknown period of time in a series of curves. According to calculations of course and distance, the ship had not made the westward progress that she should have made. This was borne out by the series of radio bearings received from various surface craft en route, notably by the steamship *Transylvania*, which, acting as a parent ship, practically navigated the *Southern Cross* across the Atlantic Ocean by means of radio direction finding apparatus.

But what mysterious factor had caused the erratic behavior of the compasses? Was it the same cause as that which had led Hinchcliffe, Nungesser, and the argonauts of the air to fly around aimlessly until, their fuel exhausted, they had come to a watery grave?

Both Smithy and Van Dyk told me afterwards that it was the fog which they encountered during the night that had been responsible for the deflection of the magnetic needles of their compasses. I could not agree with this supposition, for fog itself does not affect the compass, neither mechanically nor magnetically. The only possible conclusion to be drawn is that the ship's normal magnetic character was affected by static electricity in the atmosphere.

The continuous long distance over-water flight of the *Southern Cross* through the moisture-laden atmosphere, particularly during its blind flying period within the radius of an electric storm, had so charged the steel components of the plane's structure that they

had become temporarily magnetized, and this concentrated energy directly affected the directive force of the ship's compass. The concentration of diffused electricity occasionally experienced in aircraft en route, and for which there is no immediate release, as is the case with surface vessels, probably accounts for the weird display seen occasionally on a dark, tempestuous night, when corposants (luminous, will-the-wisp-like appearances), also known as St. Elmo's Fire, silently chase each other along the wing edges and struts.

Toward the break of dawn, Smithy decided to climb out of the appalling fog, regardless of whatever wind was blowing aloft. When the ship finally emerged into the clear air between the top of the fogbank and the bottom of a layer of dark, lofty clouds, all three compasses returned to normal, which proved that the temporary effects produced were solely due to the change in the polarity of the ship's magnetism.

According to Smithy's reckoning, some three hours of valuable flying time were lost through this mystifying incident, not to mention the precious fuel that had been consumed. The time element had not become an all-important one.

As the proud ship bearing the great name of the Antipodean constellation approached the fogbound coast of New Foundland, radio continued to play its important role as to position finding, guidance, and direction. Ably assisted through its medium, the *Southern Cross* at last made land after 31 and ½ hours in the air. Through a rift in the fog, Smithy managed to glide in for a landing at the aerodrome of Harbor Grace. She had at last conquered the Atlantic, that strong salt and bitter sea that could whisper to you, roar at you, and squeeze the life out of you. No ship could have done so well.

The day following her arrival at Harbor Grace, the *Southern Cross*, after taking additional fuel aboard, continued her journey to New York, where she landed at 4:30 p.m., on June 26. The completion of her successful East-West flight across the Atlantic added another first to the many hard-won laurels of the *Southern Cross*. (Shortly afterward, two French airmen, Costes and Bellonte, favored by perfect weather conditions, duplicated this feat by making a nonstop flight from Paris to New York in their single-engine plane.)

After being entertained on a grand scale in New York for several days, on July 2, Kingsford-Smith and his flight companions once more turned the ship's blunt nose westward. Making two stops in her trans-continental flight, one at Chicago and the other at Salt Lake City, the *Southern Cross* returned under an aerial escort to the Port of Oakland, California, whence she had first set out to cross the Pacific about two years earlier. Having flown approximately 300,000 miles in all climes and under all weather conditions, the "Old Bus" had lost her youth. She was tired and needed a rest.

In the end, her body of steel, wood, and fabric was stored away with fitting reverence. Those of us who knew her, love to think that her perfect form is being preserved as an historic relic by the Australian Commonwealth on the shores "down under", hear the sunlit seas of Smithy's boyhood dreams, and that her fine spirit has returned to dwell in the regions where she once blazed the trail as an inspiration to that great sparkling constellation in the southern heavens, the Southern Cross.

“The Old Bus”

by

“Smithy”

Old faithful friend – a long adieu!
These are poor words with which to tell
Of all my pride, my joy in you.
True to the end, you’ve serve me well.
I pity those who cannot see
That heart and soul are housed within
This thing of steel and wood – to me
You live in every bolt and pin.
And so, my staunch and steadfast steed,
Your deep and mighty voice must cease.
Faithful to death. If God will heed
My prayer, dear pal. you’ll rest in peace.

In the late autumn of 1934, Sir Charles Kingsford-Smith paid the Port of Oakland another surprise visit when he came soaring out of the West after successfully completing a return flight across the Pacific Ocean from Australia. Accompanied by his co-pilot and navigator, Capt. P.G. Taylor, in the *Lady Southern Cross*, a single-engine Lockheed Altair plane, he covered the 7,350 statute miles of open ocean in 52 hours actual flying time.

Leaving Brisbane, Australia on October 20, 1934, Kingsford-Smith and Taylor covered the first leg of their flight to Suva, Fiji Islands, a distance of 1,750 miles, in about 12 hours. The second leg of their trans-Pacific flight, from Suva to Wheeler Field, Honolulu, a distance of 3,150 miles, was flown in 25 hours flat. The third and last leg, from Honolulu to Oakland, was covered in 15 hours of flying time.

With the arrival of the *Lady Southern Cross* at Oakland on Sunday, November 4, 1934, Sir Charles Kingsford-Smith added another record to his aeronautical achievements, namely, that of being first to make the aerial round trip crossing of the Pacific between Australia and California. The name of Kingsford-Smith will always be first for the Pacific, no matter what flight records are later made in crossing it.

(Insert two photos: 1. "The arrival of *Lady Southern Cross* over Oakland Airport after completing its trans-Pacific crossing from Australia to California, Nov. 4, 1934, and 2. Ann Voortmeyer, daughter of the author, greets Sir Charles with leis.).

It was in the attempt to lower the flight record from England to Australia that Kingsford-Smith set out on his last flight, November 6, 1935. He was last reported en route somewhere in the Andaman Sea, off the coast of Burma, near the Bay of Bengal.

None of the various rescue expeditions that were sent out ever succeeded in finding any trace of the missing flier. Nothing is known of his last moments, but it is certain that in whatever situation Kingsford-Smith found himself, he was loyal to his trust to the end. A better pilot I have never met. Sir Charles had many ups and downs in his flying career, but through it all he met the smiles and frowns of fortune with a cheerful grin. The frontiers have always been the scenes of heroism of men. His part in opening the last remaining frontiers of international air commerce was well done.

