
Preface

This is a revised and expanded edition of the original *Qantas Empire Airways (Western Operations Division) Indian Ocean Service 1943-1946* published in 1979 by the Aviation Historical Society of Australia. Barry Pattison, my co-author of that book had wanted to work together to produce this updated edition, but unfortunately his poor health has precluded another co-authorship.

During our original research we interviewed a number of retired Qantas personnel who had key roles in the secret wartime Indian Ocean services. These included Captain Bill Crowther, Captain Lewis Ambrose and Senior Engineer Norm Roberts, who welcomed us into their homes. The wealth of detail from their first-hand recollections, logbooks and records was the catalyst for publishing the first book.

This is a remarkable story of long-distance flying by the Australian airline Qantas Empire Airways Limited (QEA) during the Second World War, when the air route between Australia and Great Britain was cut by the Japanese occupation of the Netherland East Indies, Singapore, Malaya and Burma. To bypass enemy territory, a new route was proposed from Perth, Western Australia, to Ceylon but the long Indian Ocean crossing was beyond the endurance of military landplanes in the early days of the Pacific War. The result was the Australian and British governments tasking QEA to create a clandestine air service using British-supplied Catalina flying boats.

The flying time between Swan River, Perth, and Koggala Lake, Ceylon, averaged between 25 and 30 hours, flown in radio silence carrying diplomatic, military and war cabinet inter-government despatches and airmail. Because of the massive fuel load, a maximum of only three high-priority passengers could be carried. They endured an uncomfortable, cold and shatteringly noisy

journey, during which they saw the sun rise twice. QEA produced a light-hearted paper certificate *The Secret Order of the Double Sunrise* which was signed by the aircraft captain and handed to each passenger at their destination. Little did the QEA aircrew realise that the magnitude of what they accomplished would be looked back on with the greatest respect today. Indeed, the “Double Sunrise” service is more widely known now than during the war years when it operated in secrecy.

Because many hours of each ocean crossing were flown through airspace where enemy aircraft might be encountered, the operation remained secret until the war situation improved. Most flights carried military personnel and military supplies. The civilian aircrew wore standard RAAF issue uniforms, with QEA rank and insignia. They were sworn in as members of the RAAF Reserve and were briefed that if captured by the enemy they were to give only their name, airline rank and RAAF Reserve number.

Other published accounts of the QEA wartime services have quite correctly acknowledged the extraordinary efforts of Captains Crowther, Ambrose and Tapp, however a fourth QEA officer must be included: Perth Senior Station Engineer Norman W Roberts. His determination to keep the aircraft flying and his personal resourcefulness was legendary. Indeed, after the publication of the original edition of this book, the Perth manager of Shell Oil at the time, Dudley Barker, wrote regarding Roberts:

I cannot conceive that any man could have achieved more, in both the technical aspects and administration of the operation. That was despite injuries from a serious motor accident, which could have caused his termination from Qantas.

I have made extensive use of direct quotes. I