
Chapter 4

Liberators: The Kangaroo Service

By early 1944 Qantas renewed its request that Consolidated Liberators should be released to provide more capacity on the Indian Ocean service. The four-engined Liberator had been the initial preference for the service because it offered a much higher payload and performance over the Catalinas. BOAC had been issued with former RAF Liberator bombers converted to unarmed passenger transports for some wartime routes to Cairo and Africa. BOAC also operated Liberators on the North Atlantic Return Ferry Service, returning ferry crews to collect their next American built bombers to be delivered across the Atlantic to Britain.

Qantas overtures intensified during an Australian visit by the BOAC chairman Lord Knollys during March 1944. Soon after his return to London he cabled Fysh to advise that two Liberators would be delivered to Qantas within the next two months. Captain Ambrose wrote in a company report:

The news that our Catalina fleet was to be supplemented by two converted Liberators was received enthusiastically throughout the division. Great interest centred on Guildford aerodrome when during the first week of June 1944 the first LB-30 G-AGKT arrived under the command of Captain OP Jones, a veteran English airline skipper.

The introduction of land-based aircraft required QEA Western Operations Division to move part of its operations from the Nedlands marine base to an aerodrome. The existing Perth civil aerodrome at Maylands lacked sealed runways and was quite unsuitable for heavily laden Liberator departures. Given the wartime importance of the Indian Ocean service, Qantas was given approval to use the recently constructed RAAF station at Guildford, only a few miles from Maylands on the site of the pre-war Dunreath golf course.

At Guildford the Department of Civil Aviation had built a large hangar for civil airline use, with a wide aircraft parking tarmac and sealed taxiway. It was in an area cleared from scrub some distance away from the RAAF hangars. QEA had to establish new maintenance facilities at Guildford, while at the same time maintaining the existing Nedlands engineering for the Catalinas. The same irregular supply of essential parts, as experienced with the Catalinas was repeated with the Liberators. Aircraft instruments were particularly difficult to obtain, and it was not until the end of the war that the spares situation was resolved satisfactorily.

The Catalinas had been flying the Indian Ocean service for almost a year when the first Liberator was ferried to Perth by BOAC's famed senior commander Captain OP Jones, who was to provide operational and technical advice on the new type. To reduce the length of the ocean crossing, flights would refuel at Exmouth Gulf military airfield, 800 miles north of Perth. This new route would reduce the ocean crossing from the Catalina's 3,513 miles to 3,077 miles, and the higher cruising speed of the Liberator would cut at least ten hours from the flying time between Perth and Ceylon. Initial Qantas crews were drawn from those operating the Catalina service and were later augmented by Qantas staff transferred to Perth from other duties and seconded RAAF aircrew.

Some Catalina pilots had no experience flying aircraft equipped with a retractable undercarriage; their Qantas careers having been on DH.86s with a fixed undercarriage, Empire flying boats and Catalinas. The first QEA Liberator crews received conversions on RAAF B-24s from No. 7 Operational Training Unit at Tocumwal, New South Wales. For the following airline aircrews, a more formalised classroom and flying training course