
Chapter 5 Lancastrians: Express Air Service

As the war situation improved in Europe and the Pacific, BOAC and Qantas Empire Airways began planning the resumption of their joint civil airline service between London and Sydney. The Qantas managing director, Hudson Fysh, went to London again in August 1944 for talks with BOAC management and the Air Ministry on joint operation of a new fast service to Australia. It was agreed that Avro Lancastrians would be a suitable stopgap aircraft while awaiting the production of the Avro Tudor airliner, upon which both airlines originally placed their hopes for postwar long-range services. The Lancastrians were transport modifications of Avro Lancaster bombers and could be made available by early the following year.

A telegram from the Director-General of Civil Aviation, London, to the Australian government on 26 December 1944 advised that a number of Lancastrians had been allotted to BOAC for long distance routes, including a through service from England to Australia. The Lancastrians were to be operated by BOAC from London to Karachi, where Qantas crews would take over for the rest of the flight to Sydney. Routing was via Ceylon for the Indian Ocean crossing to Learmonth, then non-stop to Sydney. On 5 December 1944 BOAC despatched Douglas Dakota G-AGHH from Hurn along the

proposed Lancastrian route to drop off Lancastrian support parts. It reached Colombo on 13 December.

Although the Lancastrian operation would use the facilities and airfields of Qantas Western Operations Division, the two operations were separately administered within Qantas as the Lancastrian service was controlled from the head office in Sydney. Some Catalina and Liberator crews were initially withdrawn from Western Operations Division to fly the Lancastrians, and eventually all flight crews were transferred to this service.

The Lancastrians

The Lancastrians flown by QEA and BOAC were a much more advanced design than simply a Lancaster bomber with turrets removed and fitted with a new nose. Avro's refinements made it a high-speed passenger transport with an impressive range. It was the first British commercial aeroplane with the capacity to cross the Atlantic to South America. At that time there was nothing else comparable.

The Lancastrian concept began in Canada in 1942 when Victory Aircraft at Toronto modified a Lancaster bomber to a transport. Gun turrets were removed, the nose was faired over and windows were cut into the rear fuselage. After trials by Trans-Canada Airlines, it was flown to England for further modification by AV Roe and Company including



The lines of the Lancaster bomber are clearly evident in this 1945 view of BOAC Lancastrian G-AGMD. (Avro)