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Charles Kingsford Smith



First to Fly Across the Pacific

By [Stephen Sherman](#), Oct. 2003. Updated April 16, 2012.

First across the Pacific in 1928, Charles Edward Kingsford Smith rivaled Lindbergh for great accomplishments in the Golden Age of Aviation. For years, he was Australia's most famous personality, a small man with a ready wit, a drink & a cigarette in hand, and women at his side. He lived hard and fast

He was born in Hamilton, Brisbane, Australia, February 9, 1897, the youngest of seven children.

Charles, or 'Chilla' as he was nicknamed was a small, energetic boy who loved adventure and would do anything for a dare. He also loved working with his hands.

He attended Sydney Technical High between 1912 and 1913 when the school was located at Ultimo. He was an average student achieving twelfth place in 1C, a class of thirty pupils. Known to his classmates as 'Chilla' he was well remembered for his Canadian accent and is still regarded as the school most famous alumnus. He studied mechanics and electrical engineering, and graduated from Sydney Tech as an Electrical Engineer at age 16.

A memorial plaque honoring him decorates the school today.

He was a good but not brilliant student and got bored easily. He much preferred to be riding his motor bike.

World War One burst over Europe and he enrolled in the Australian Forces in 1915, serving in the Middle East. After fighting at Gallipoli, and a stint as a motor-bike despatch rider, he entered the Royal Flying Corps and received his wings in 1917, serving in France as a fighter pilot. He wrote home to his parents "I have discovered one thing about flying and that is that my future, for whatever it may be worth, is bound up

with it." In one of his many flying missions during the war his plane was riddled with bullets. Smithy was shot in the foot and later had three toes amputated. His war days were over. Only twenty years old, he earned the coveted Military Cross for gallantry in action.

He traveled to America and worked in Hollywood as a stunt pilot. It was a dangerous occupation and when another stuntman was killed he quit. After spending a year in the U.S.A. in 1921, Kingsford-Smith founded (or joined?) the Western Australian Airways and provided the first regular Australian airmail service between Geraldton and Derby. In 1926, with fellow pilot C.T.P. Ulm, he undertook a round-Australia flight in 10 days 5 hours - which halved the previous record. He flew mail through the outback, but aimed to be the first to fly across the Pacific Ocean.

The *Southern Cross*

With borrowed and donated money he and Ulm returned to America seeking an airplane. Their research led them to the Fokker F.VIIb-3m with Wright Whirlwind engines, as the best choice for the trans-Pacific attempt. The Fokker F.VIIb-3m was derived directly from the single-engined F.VIIa high-wing monoplane. The prototype was built in seven weeks, on the instructions of Anthony Fokker to construct a suitable entrant for him to fly in the 1926 Ford Reliability Tour. Fokker F.VIIb-3m aircraft were employed by KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, and KNILM in the Far East, to link Amsterdam and Batavia (Djakarta), the longest scheduled air route in the world for many years. The F.VIIb-3m was also operated by various large and small world airlines, including Australian National Airways.

For his 1926 Arctic expedition, their fellow countryman, George Hubert Wilkins, had bought a single-engined F. VIIa and one of the new F. VIIb-3m trimotors, called the "*Detroit*" after main sponsor the Detroit News. After breaking an arm and suffering a few flying accidents Wilkins postponed his flight and sent the "*Detroit*" to Seattle for repair. Sir Hubert met with Kingsford-Smith and Ulm in San Francisco to discuss a possible sale. The two decided to buy the trimotor without engines and instruments, and to have two additional fuel tanks installed. With those, the Fokker could cross the Pacific. The Wright Whirlwind production schedule was backlogged, but the U.S. Secretary of War agreed to deliver three Whirlwinds from a Government order immediately and accept their later order in return.

Abruptly the disastrous Dole Race to Hawaii (which claimed ten lives) soured the mood for ocean flights and many sponsors withdrew their support. One businessman implored them to keep his £1,500 as long as they wouldn't use it in risking their lives. In order to enhance their financial situation, Kingsford-Smith made two attempts at the world endurance record. Both failed to break the record, but Kingsford-Smith gained much valuable experience. Under pressure from the government in New South Wales to give it up, and pursued by their American creditors, they saw no alternative but to offer their aircraft for sale and abandon the flight. In a despondent mood, they met the wealthy American Captain G. Allan Hancock, who not only bought their Fokker at a price that allowed them to pay off their debts, but also let them use it for their proposed flight.

With the renamed Fokker, the '*Southern Cross*.' they filled out their crew, with marine navigator Harry Lyon and Jim Warner as radio operator.

The "Southern Cross" weighed 6840 kg. This included 4 crew at 291 kg, 3541 kg of benzine and 109 kg of oil. The aeroplane had a wingspan of 23 meters; it was almost 15 meters long and stood 3.9 meters high. It had a cruising speed of 93 MPH.

For communication there were three radio transmitter sets and two separate receivers, as well as four compasses. The crew was also well prepared for an emergency. If the aircraft had to ditch at sea Kingsford-Smith would dump what fuel was left in the wings and use them as rafts. There were distress signals, water, and enough food to last a week.

Across the Pacific

Smithy and co-pilot Ulm, who couldn't actually fly a plane at the time, crossed the Pacific Ocean in 1928. Along with Lyon and Warner, they took off from Oakland, California, with the first stage of 2,400 miles to Hawaii. This stage took 27 hours and 27 minutes and was uneventful. Stage two was to Fiji, some 3,100 miles away. Almost immediately they ran into a storm which Smithy fought to the point of exhaustion before handing the controls to the yet unlicensed Ulm. Luckily, they reached Suva some 33 hours later, and then on to Brisbane and the realization that trans-Pacific commercial flight was possible.

25,000 cheering fans greeted them at Brisbane's Eagle Farm Airport (now named simply Brisbane Airport, where the *Southern Cross* is still on display). On June 10th they flew on to Sydney in the blue *Southern Cross*, met there by a throng of 300,000 people, including the Governor-General and State Governor. They had achieved the historic flight the day before, landing to be met by After being feted in Sydney, Smithy and Ulm carried on to England and then across the Atlantic and America to Oakland and the first around-the-world flight. Smithy didn't stop there. He continued to break records again and again.

In 1930, at the age of thirty-two he flew 10,000 miles single handedly and won the England to Australia air race. Two weeks later he married Mary Powell and they were to have a son, Charles. In 1933, after once again breaking the record for solo flight from England to Australia, he was acclaimed as the world's greatest airman. Smithy held more long distance flying records than anyone else on earth. But the adulation couldn't last forever. Later when Smithy pulled out of a race because his plane wasn't ready, he was sent white feathers in the post. The sign of a coward. Smithy was devastated. The press criticized him and his health suffered. It was the most difficult period in his life. At thirty-eight Smithy was a veteran but wanted to prove he still had what it took.

The Last Flight

The fate of Sir Charles Kingsford Smith remains one of aviation's great unsolved mysteries. On 6 November 1935, Smithy and his co-pilot mechanic, Tommy Pethybridge took off on a planned flight from England to Australia in the *Lady Southern Cross*, a Lockheed Altair. At dusk on 7 November 1935 he and Pethybridge, departed Allahabad, India to fly non-stop overnight to Singapore. They passed over Calcutta, Akyab and Rangoon - which they overflew at 1:30 am. Just before 3:00AM, 8 November, another Australian pilot, Jimmy Melrose who was heading south from Rangoon in a much slower plane, a Percival Gull, saw the Altair overtake him above the Andaman Sea. In Singapore later that day Melrose was surprised to learn that the *Lady Southern Cross* had not arrived. Despite the RAF's search of the entire Rangoon-Singapore route, no trace of the Altair was found for 18 months. In May 1937 its starboard undercarriage leg was picked up by Burmese fishermen on the rocky shore of Aye Island off the south coast of Burma about 140 miles south-east of Rangoon. The theory grew that Smithy had flown into the 460-foot top of the jungle-covered island and the aircraft had plunged into the sea, the wheel breaking off and floating ashore. But an Australian expedition to the island in 1983 searched the seabed without success.

Links:

- *Rand McNally Encyclopedia of Military Aircraft, 1914-1980*, by Enzo Angelucci, The Military Press, New York, 1983
- [The Aerodrome](#)