

Celebrating the Great Air Race Centenary

England to Australia (Darwin) 1919 - 2019 (10 December)

by Bev Phelts

In 1919, the Australian government offered a prize of £A10,000 for the first Australians in a British aircraft to fly from Britain to Australia. Six entries started in the race with the winners being pilot Ross Smith, brother Keith Smith as co-pilot, and mechanics, Sergeants James Bennett and Wally Shiers, in a modified Vickers Vimy bomber.

The crew left Hounslow Heath, England at 8.30am on 12 November 1919. They flew via Lyon, Rome, Cairo, Damascus, Basra, Karachi, Delhi, Calcutta, Akyab, Rangoon racecourse, Singoa, Singapore, Batavia (Indonesia) and Surabaya where the aircraft was bogged and had to make use of a temporary airstrip made from bamboo mats. The crew reached Darwin at 3.40pm on 10 December 1919.

The flight distance was estimated to be 17,911 kilometres (11,123 miles) and total flying time was 135 hours 55 minutes over 29 days. The flight was an extraordinary achievement because it was not only the first flight to connect the two countries - but they also delivered the first airmail from England.

The prize money was shared between the crew and the Smith brothers received a knighthood. Their aircraft was presented to the Australian Government and is on display at Adelaide Airport.

Information from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1919_England_to_Australia_flight

The Naming of James Mallett Bennett Park, Muirhead - 7 December

The recognition of James Bennett's role in the Great Air Race had been neglected when considering the naming of roads. While Ross and Keith Smith and Wally Shiers had been acknowledged in the naming of streets in Fannie Bay and Ludmilla¹, James Bennett was omitted from any street naming.

Due to the advocacy work by the Fannie Bay History and Heritage Society and in conjunction with the Place Names Committee, an unnamed park on the corner of Colin and Fuhrmann Streets, Muirhead was identified. Hon Nicole Susan Manison MLA. Deputy Chief Minister unveiled a plaque commemorating the James Mallett Bennett Park.



Minister Nicole Manison unveiling the plaque
Photograph courtesy Allan Mitchell



Plaque at James Mallett Bennett Park, Muirhead
Photograph courtesy Ian Anderson

¹ Ross Smith Avenue, Keith Lane & Smith Park, Fannie Bay and Shiers Street, Ludmilla.

A Commemoration at the Aviators Monument, Fannie Bay - 10 December

At 8.30am around 200 people gathered at the Aviators monument to commemorate the arrival of the Vickers Vimy one hundred years ago.

Besides the general public, among the audience were descendents of the Smith brothers, Wally Shiers and James Bennett.

Alanah Hardy, a Darwin High School student was an outstanding Master of Ceremonies. Speeches were delivered by Vicki O'Halloran, Administrator of the NT; Michael Gunner, Chief Minister; Austin Asche, AC, QC and Judy Boland, President, Fannie Bay History & Heritage Society. Other notables who were present were Luke Gosling, Member for Solomon, Lauren Moss, Member for Casuarina, past NT Administrator, John Hardy and Marie Hardy and Daryl Manzies.

The event was organised by the Fannie Bay History & Heritage Society and supported by the RAAF, Australian Air Force Cadets, the Motor Vehicle Enthusiasts Club, Darwin High School and Parap Primary School students.



The Aviators monument



Her Honour, Vicki O'Halloran, Administrator of the NT



Michael Gunner, Chief Minister



Austin Asche, AC, QC



Judy Boland, President, Fannie Bay History & Heritage Society



Col Beard & Richard Luxton



Fannie Bay History & Heritage Society volunteer, Allan Mitchell.



Earl and Wendy James



Parap Primary School children



Fannie Bay History & Heritage Society volunteers, Sue Dibbs & Kathryn Southon

Re-enactment of the Flight of the Great Air Race

To honour the Great Air Race Centenary, 2016 Australian Geographic Adventurer of the Year, Michael Smith followed as much as possible, the original route from London to Darwin. Mike left Hounslow on 19 November in his *Southern Sun*, a custom built flying boat. In addition, he brought along a bag of commemorative mail postmarked in Hounslow which was distributed to mark the occasion.

Mike landed in Darwin Airport on 10 December at 3.45pm, the same time the Smith brothers landed their Vicker's Vimy. In accordance with tradition, Mike and his plane were greeted by water cannons from Territory fire trucks.

Information from <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-10/great-air-race-flight-from-uk-to-australia-centenary/11782024>
<http://www.southernsun.voyage/currentadventure>



The arrival at Darwin Airport of Mike Smith and the *Southern Sun*. Photograph courtesy Allan Mitchell

Arrivals 12:5						
Airline	Flight	Origin	Scheduled	Estimated	Gate	Status
QANTAS	TL405	Groote Eylandt	12:55	12:55	B	
QANTAS	AA7320	Sydney	13:05	13:53	5	
QANTAS	EY6664	Brisbane	13:25	13:45	3	
QANTAS	EY6972	Perth	14:05	14:00	9	
LH	LH7200	Singapore	14:50	14:50	INT	On Time
QANTAS	CX9000	Perth	15:05	14:56	9	
QANTAS	SS001	London	15:45	15:45	INT	
QANTAS	QF2694	Cairns → Gove	16:30	16:30	9	
QANTAS	TL219	Maningrida	16:40	16:40	B	
QANTAS	QF2684	Toowoomba → Townsville	17:30	17:30	5	

Darwin Airport announcing the arrival of the *Southern Sun*. Photograph courtesy Allan Mitchell



Michael Smith
<http://www.southernsun.voyage/currentadventure>

Sponsors of the Great Air Race

Fannie Bay History & Heritage Society, NT Major Events, Northern Territory Government, Michael Gunner MLA, Darwin City Council, Darwin Aviation Museum, RAAF, Australian Air Force Cadets, the Motor Vehicle Enthusiasts Club, Darwin High & Middle School, Parap Primary School,