

“Over the Seas to Tassie”

by Jim Morgan

When Captain of Flying John Smith first mentioned a flying trip to Tasmania, I must admit I said to myself, “Not me too much water.” John asked me was I going and I replied, “No. What if I have an engine failure over the water?” John quirked, “The plane doesn’t know it’s flying over water.” In response, I said, “No, that’s the bloody trouble. It doesn’t.”

Some time later, after much consideration and weighing up of all pros and cons, I decided to give it a go. After all, if worst came to worst, being eaten by a shark would be a new experience in itself.

A contingent of five aircraft carrying nine people on board embarked on the expedition, consisting of Bill Moncrief in his Jabiru, Roger and Lynn Turner in their Tecnam, “Charles Kingsford” John Smith and Mick Sutherland in The Rocket [Mooney], Paul Roberts and Col Duff in Paul’s retractable Cessna 182, and myself and a friend from Bowral, Wayne Jarvis, in my most times ever reliable Cessna 182 [more on that later].



Group prior to departure from Ballarat. Left tot right: John Smith, Bill Moncrieff, Wayne Jarvis, Jim Morgan, Col Duff, Lyn Turner, Roger Turner and Paul Roberts (missing from photo Mick Sutherland).

After all rendezvousing at Ballarat for fuel, coffee break, putting on life jackets and a group photo and some discussion regarding SAR time, it was up into that great blue yonder once again, heading for King Island. This was to be our first stop on our way to Tassie. It was the 22nd of February and God (captain of Flying John Smith) had organized almost perfect weather for us with only some low cloud just to keep us alert.

We departed the southern coast of Victoria at Apollo Bay with avid adventurer Bill Moncrieff leading the charge to fly the 67 nautical miles across Bass Strait. We had to do the crossing at about 2000ft because of

the low cloud. I must admit it was somewhat reassuring hearing the chat on frequency 123.45 from our Captain of Flying checking on each of us.



Lighthouse Cape Wickham, King Island

I had heard of King Island but was very surprised to see the amount of farming there. The Island only has a permanent population of 2000 people but it is very productive in agriculture. In the centre of the Island, they have an average rainfall of 1500 millimetres but this year they had their driest January/February since 1933. The best of the country runs about one beef cow to the acre. For comparison, I run one cow to seven acres. In spite of their drier January, it was still very green, which was a sight for sore eyes after leaving our parched brown land behind. King Island is renowned for its beef and cheese, as well as lobster fishing. Lobster was on the menu at the restaurant but at a cost of \$110. I chose not to partake. Apparently, tourists also fly in from all round the World to play golf on the Island. Maybe it is the challenge with the winds that they like.



We were chauffeured around the Island by minibus, ably driven by John Smith and navigator Mick Sutherland. Travelling to the far southern end of the Island to view a petrified forest was, in my opinion, most rewarding. What we saw was the actual tree roots that looked like the tree trunks. They were standing about 2 metres out of the sand. They had become calcified. Casts had formed around the roots of trees, which had earlier died, with the surrounding sand eroded by wind around 7000 years ago to reveal the root casts.



The winds on King Island can be extreme and on the morning of our departure to Tasmania, they lived up to their reputation with winds gusting to 45 knots or 72 km/hour. The high wing aeroplanes were taking quite a buffeting on the ground. As the forecast winds at our destination of Devonport were much calmer, we decided to depart. The strong wind made the ground roll much shorter than normal and the two light sport planes were airborne in a matter of metres. Roger and Lynn Turner in their Tecnam were airborne about as quick as Chris Cabot would lift his chopper off. Bill Moncrieff was next away and as he made his ground roll call, Roger barked over the radio, 'Hang onto it, Bill. It's pretty wild.' I have to take my hat off to these two chaps as I must admit I was a little apprehensive myself in a much heavier aircraft. In fact, I was taking a little longer than normal after taxiing to the far end of the runway, which was hidden from view from the runway holding point, that Paul Roberts called me and asked had I departed yet. This was Paul's polite way of saying, get a move on. This leg of our trip was about one hour over the water, flying directly to Smithton and then following the Tasmanian coast to Devonport. Bill was much more adventurous as he headed for the West Coast, tracking for Strahan. On our track for Smithton, the cloud base was very overcast and getting lower. Bill kept telling us that he was in bright sunshine. We were beginning to wonder whether he had actually headed off to the Bahamas. Eventually we all arrived safely into Devonport. Most of the way the Cessna had an indicated airspeed of 130knts with an over the water speed of 92knts. First time in 27 years of flying I have made reference to over the water speed and not ground speed.



Roger Turner and Mick Sutherland

The farming land in this area of Tasmania is extensively irrigated, with most of the properties having their own on-farm water storage dams. Travelling by minibus to Launceston gave us a good view of the countryside. Most of Tassie was looking quite dry at that time but it appeared as though they had had a fairly good season, with plenty of dry standing feed. We even saw some barley that hadn't been harvested and looked as though it would yield very well. Another farm was harvesting Arrowleaf clover that had been windrowed and looked very good.

About 40km from Launceston we visited the Hamilton's property that they had purchased about five or six years ago. The house on the property was built in 1846 and they had done a magnificent job of restoring it. The house was originally built by the then Treasurer of Tasmania.

Cataract Gorge at Launceston was certainly well worth the visit. We didn't really plan to visit Beaconsfield but sort of came across it whilst driving in the area. The mine tragedy and rescue occurred in 2006. The mine ceased operating in 2012, when it became uneconomical. The mine is situated right in the middle of the town and has now been turned into a tourist attraction.

The morning of our planned departure from Tassie to Flinders Island greeted us with fog. By late morning, the fog had cleared and we were airborne. The trip for Flinders was about an hour's flying time. Dodging low cloud, Flinders Island appeared majestically out of the Southern Ocean. The towering rocky peaks just looked magnificent. It was at this point of the trip that I suddenly became aware that there must have been some sort of air race on and there must have been a competition to see who could get back on the ground first. In any case, it created a level of airmanship and situational awareness.

At this point of the trip, my plan was to depart the company of the rest of the group who were staying at Flinders for a couple of nights, and head for home but for a short time it appeared that Murphy had other ideas. Wayne and I climbed aboard my ever-trustworthy Cessna 182 only to find the battery wanted to act up 'ornery. Well, would you believe it, remote Flinders Island, of all places for this to happen. We tried jump starting but the Cessna has a 24-volt battery and the ute wasn't up to it. I must admit I was becoming a bit stressed thinking that we may have been stranded on Flinders for some time waiting for a new battery to be ferried from the mainland because a 24-volt battery is required. Anyhow, sometimes things do work out okay as "God" had brought one of his disciples along with him, the very capable Col Duff. The airport operator had wheeled out a trolley with a bank of batteries all connected together, making a total of 36 volts. Now I knew I couldn't hook that to the Cessna without frying everything but to the rescue was Col. He followed the way the bank of batteries was connected and established what would give us the 24 volts required. Clearing the prop and a turn of the key had YEW bursting back to life and myself somewhat relieved. With an appreciative wave to the helpful chaps on the ground and John holding SAR time for us, we taxied for departure to Tyabb, which is on the mainland to the south west of Melbourne. Making sure that the battery was charging normally, I did an extra couple of orbits over the top before heading out to sea. I didn't really want the thought of been eaten by a shark to become a reality.

As Wayne and I didn't stay at Flinders, I am limited in what I can say about the Island except it has a population of 800. They also run cattle and the avgas was almost \$3 A LITRE. Landing fees were \$13 if paid then but \$40 if paid on account.

As a group we had a great time. The organisation that John put in to have it all come together left nothing to be desired and a job well done. The joking and friendly banter with one another also makes these trips so memorable. It just seemed to happen that most times I was last to board the bus after each stop. My response to the stirring that I got was that I was just seeing that little bit more of Tassie than they were.

Speaking with John some time later about the success of the trip, I asked him how he managed to even get the weather so right and did he have a direct line to God? Smithy replied, "I AM GOD."

Jim Morgan