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Proving Smithy right

Charles Kingsford Smith, or Smithy as he was widely known, combined courage with a zest for adventure. He lived — and died — for flying.

Although his flying career lasted less than 20 years, he was a successful Hollywood stunt man, superb barnstormer, and the first man to fly across the Pacific Ocean, east-west across the Atlantic Ocean and around the world through both hemispheres.

Smithy was a trail blazer and a visionary. He was co-founder of the original Australian National Airways and, more than any other pioneer, forced the aviation industry to move from "spit and balancing wire" to an era of safe, long distance transport.

The man who accomplished all this should have been able to rest easily on the pages of history. But fate was not so kind. Even after he lost his life over the Bay of Bengal in 1935, he was the subject of speculative gossip. People said he caused two of his mates to die in agony from thirst.

It was Smithy's own success which led to the unhappy incident, known as Coffee Royal, in 1929. By that year Smithy had pioneered more long-distance routes than any pilot in history. He had developed the ability to "fly blind" through clouds for hours, making it possible to attempt feats which others shied away from.

He showed the world that the aeroplane was more than a rich man's plaything, or a weapon of war. It could shrink oceans and bring the northern and southern hemispheres closer together.

Smithy created history in 1928 when he, Charles Ulm, Harry Lyon and Jim Warner, flew the Fokker triplane named Southern Cross from California to Brisbane. The following year, Smithy was keen to fly the same plane to Britain, then back to California, thus becoming the first to circumnavigate the world through both hemispheres.

With Charles Ulm as copilot, H.A. Litchfield as navigator and T.H. McWilliams radio operator, Smithy set out to fly from Richmond, New South Wales, to Wyndham, on the northern tip of Western Australia, as the next leg of the around-the-world trip.

The Southern Cross ran into appalling weather over Western Australia and, des-
pite his skill, Smithy became lost and ran out of fuel. McWilliams sent out a cryptic message: “We are about to make a forced landing in bad country.”

The nation listened for further word. None came. After 24 hours of radio silence, plans were made for what would be Australia’s largest aerial search.

It was publicly organised and several private aviators volunteered. Among them were two former colleagues of Smithy and Ulm, Keith Anderson and H.S. (Bob) Hitchcock. They set off from Richmond in a tiny monoplane called Kookaburra to fly across the continent and join the search.

Eventually the massive air search paid off. Thirteen days after leaving Sydney, the Southern Cross was spotted from the air about 220km north of Derby in Western Australia’s north-west region. Smithy and his crew waved to show they were alive.

The big plane had made a forced landing on mud flats, close to the rugged coast of the far north-west. The men lived on scant rations carried in the plane, eked out by cooking mud snails; they even attempted to shoot birds which ventured close to camp.

The landing site became known as Coffee Royal. When he realised their plight, Smithy had mixed some coffee and brandy from the plane’s meagre emergency kit and said: “Well mates, we may be lost, but at least we have Coffee Royal to drink.”

It was meant as a jest, but the name was to bring a bitter taste to the mouths of many Australians.

There was celebration throughout the nation when Captain Les Holden radioed from a DH 61 search plane that he had sighted the missing plane. The jubilation died when news came that the Kookaburra had been lost.

Hitchcock and Anderson were half way across the continent when engine trouble forced them down in the Tanami Desert in the Northern Territory near the border with Western Australia. Hitchcock fixed the fault and though he and Anderson wore their fingers to the bone, they were unable to clear away enough of the thick scrub to take off.

Unfortunately the Kookaburra was way off course. By the time Lester Brain, in the Qantas-owned plane, Ata Lanta, found them, they had died from thirst.

Then a Sydney newspaper claimed that Smithy and the Southern Cross had never really been lost. It was said they had put down as part of a publicity stunt. The article went on to infer that the stunt was intended to make newspaper headlines.

In June, 1929, after a full month’s sitting, the committee exonerated Smithy and Ulm, saying there was no evidence to suggest that a forced landing had been premeditated.

But its report criticised the nation and, after a suitable time, Anderson would arrive at the search scene and “find” them. The story was taken up by a flying magazine.

The report created a storm, and Smithy later wrote: “I cannot forget how certain of my countrymen turned from adulants to defamants almost overnight scurrilous letters, unsigned of course, were written to me, to my mother and to other members of my family…”

Still, public disquiet forced Prime Minister Bruce to announce a three-man committee of inquiry to examine a number of factors, including the circumstances surrounding the deaths of Hitchcock and Anderson. Implicit in the broad reference was an instruction to determine if there was any truth in the rumours that the Southern Cross’ forced landing had been pre-arranged.

By Dick Smith

The diagonal lines show Kingsford Smith’s intended flight path from Richmond to Wyndham, his actual flight path, which ended with Southern Cross crash landing near the Glenelg River, and the flight path taken by Anderson and Hitchcock in Kookaburra, which resulted in their deaths in the Tanami Desert.
McWilliams for having failed to make adjustments to his radio receiving set so that it could be used as a transmitter and censured Smithy for not having used the 82 litres of engine oil in Southern Cross to create a black smoke fire to attract the attention of the searching aircraft.

This point did the most damage to Smithy’s reputation, for the whispers persisted long after the inquiry had closed. “Why would an airman so smart as Smithy fail to burn the engine oil?” people asked.

Did Smithy deliberately refrain from lighting the oil, or was he smarter than people thought? Did he know that the smoke would not be seen from the air as he had stated at the inquiry?

I promised myself that one day I would answer that question.

The entire Coffee Royal incident made a deep impression on me and in 1977 and 1978 I organised two expeditions to find the Kookaburra, which was abandoned in the Tanami Desert after the bodies of the dead aviators had been recovered. My group eventually found the plane and we left a monument at the site.

Then the day came in May, 1981, when my wife Pip and I, our daughters Hayley, 9, and Jenny, 7, and colleagues Tony Wilson and Garry Crapp, who were on hand to help me make a television documentary of the trip, set out to find the site where the Southern Cross came down.

We flew via Darwin to Derby, where we picked up a four-wheel-drive vehicle to continue the journey to Beverley Springs station, about 205km to the north-east.

To assist in making the television documentary we had arranged for a Bell Jet Ranger helicopter to fly from Darwin to Beverley Springs.

We flew from Beverley Springs to the Glenelg River area, about 120km northwest. We had no reference points for the exact area where the Southern Cross
landed, although reports published in Sydney newspapers in April, 1929, said the searching airliner had sighted the plane on the edge of the Glenelg River, 400km south-west of Wyndham.

We had obtained copies of some photographs taken from the DH 61 as it circled over the plane. It took us several hours using these to match up the landscapes, but we eventually located the approximate site, landed and put up camp. All we had to do now was find enough evidence to pinpoint the actual crash landing site.

We were camped in utter desolation on the edge of a huge mud flat in stifling heat, with flies, angry mosquitoes and feral donkeys for company.

After searching for some hours, Pip found some glass and Hayley and Jenny found some rusted tin cans. They might not have been left by Smithy's crew, but the chances of other white men having been there were slim. Then Pip wandered off and came back with the news that she had found an old camp fire, with lots of broken glass and old tin cans.

Soon after, Hayley and Jenny were playing with my metal detector when the signal went off. We uncovered three cartridge cases. I was jubilant, for Ulm's diary of Coffee Royal had referred to Litchfield having attempted to shoot doves with a .32 calibre pistol — and the cartridge cases we had found were .32s.

We were so close to our goal that, after dinner that night, we poured a little brandy into our coffee and echoed Smithy's words: “Well mates, we may be lost, but at least we have Coffee Royal to drink.”

Smithy and his crew had cooked mud snails to stay alive, so next day we went looking for some to photograph and eat. On the way Pip found a length of copper wire entwined in rock — doubtless it came from the Southern Cross radio aerial. Hayley made the next discovery — a brass bracket,
Top left: Jenny, left, and Hayley Smith show the type of mud snails which Kingsford Smith and his crew cooked and ate to stay alive. Top right: Dick Smith, Hayley and Jenny filmed searching for evidence which would enable them to pinpoint the crash landing site. Above left: Hayley, Jenny and Dick light an oil fire near the crash site to determine if such a fire could be seen from the air. Above right: The plaque placed at the Coffee Royal site by Dick Smith.

which had been part of the radio aerial's winding mechanism. Two more cartridge cases turned up, as well as more tin cans and broken glass. A very excited group returned to camp.

While Pip made cups of tea, I studied the old photographs and tried to relate our discoveries to the original camp site. Suddenly everything fitted neatly in place. There could be no argument. We knew the exact spot where the Southern Cross had lain for 13 days 52 years before.

Many Coffee Royal reports said that the plane had landed on the flats alongside the Glenelg River, but they were slightly out. Smithy actually landed in the bush about 3km from the river.

The natural vegetation was very dark in colour and I realised why Smithy had told the court of inquiry there was no point in burning the engine oil. It would not have shown up against the vegetation.

I was convinced Smithy had been right — but I needed to prove it. We built a large fire from green branches and poured on engine oil I had brought specially for the purpose.

Tony and Garry filmed the smoke from the ground, then flew over the site for aerial shots, while we added more oil. They reported that the black smoke was invisible at any distance more than 500m, whereas the plane itself would have been visible from the air 5km away. Smithy had been right.

Satisfied that our mission had been accomplished, we erected a brass plaque. It read:

COFFEE ROYAL
At this location in April, 1929, Charles Kingsford Smith and his crew awaited rescue. Their aircraft, the Southern Cross, was forced to land here after 28 hours in the air during an attempt to fly from Sydney to Wyndham.

Dick Smith has told the full story of the incident involving Anderson and Hitchcock in his book, Kookaburra.