

## SOUTH AUSTRALIAN AVIATION MUSEUM

### SIGNIFICANT AVIATION EVENTS

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#### THE DUDLEY ANGAS AND DONALD LOFTES AFFAIR

Dudley Angas<sup>1</sup> was elected to the chair of the first incarnation of the Aero Club in South Australia on 4 September 1919. He was an ex-sub lieutenant in the Royal Naval Air Service, who had resigned his commission in January 1916 after being wounded and invalided back to Australia, when he took over the family property, Hill River Station, at Clare in 1917.

The Club is mentioned in the press several times throughout 1919 and 1920, and was heavily involved in the preparation for the arrival of the Smith brothers in the Vickers Vimy at Northfield on 23 March 1920, but some time thereafter it became inactive.

The first meeting of what became the *Australian Aero Club (South Australian Section) Incorporated* took place on 23 August 1926, and it is from this point on that the South Australian Aviation Museum has the minute books of the Club.

Only five people attended, one of whom was Captain E.C. Johnston of the Civil Aviation Branch. He was there to explain the conditions attached to the formation of aero clubs and under which Commonwealth Government assistance would be provided. No reference is made in the minutes of this first meeting to the previous Club and only one member of the previous committee, Charles Exton, was present. Dudley Angas, the previous committee's chairman, was not present and in fact was refused membership of the new Club, for reasons not explained, on 8 July 1929.

The reasons must be related to the crash of Dudley Angas' Sopwith Dove in Keith in 1920. Angas, notwithstanding his RNAS service, was not a pilot. He was something of an aviation enthusiast, however, and had purchased a Sopwith Dove from Aerial Transport of South Australia. ATSA was incorporated in 1919 by Horace (Horrie) Miller with two other ex-AFC pilots, Captains Loftes and Moore. They in turn had purchased it from Larkin-Sopwith Aviation Company of Australasia, then the Sopwith agent in Australia. ATSA was wound up in February 1920, and Horrie Miller went on to bigger and better things. Angas hired Donald Loftes<sup>2</sup> to fly his new aircraft for him.



Dudley Angas' Sopwith Dove [Photo – PD]

Loftes was flying Angas to Melbourne from a field then in use at Glenelg on Tuesday 17 August 1920 when they crashed on take-off out of Keith, where they had landed en route for fuel. There was no aerodrome at Keith and the stop was not planned. They selected a field in which to land about a quarter of a mile from the township, and landed safely although it was rough with stumps and stones and ringed with trees. This was a big event for Keith, and the press, when reporting it the following Thursday, wrote that *"it was not long before nearly all the residents of the district were wending their way to the scene."*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sub Lieut. Dudley Theyer Angas, b10 May 1892, d11 November 1942, Australians in the RNAS, [www.ozrnas.org.au](http://www.ozrnas.org.au)

<sup>2</sup> His real name was actually Clarence William Basil Loftes, and there is no explanation as to why he called himself Donald

<sup>3</sup> *The Register*, Thursday August 19 1920, p7

Three hours later, after difficulty obtaining petrol and restarting the aircraft, they departed. As Angas later described their take-off, "I said to Loftes, 'Get up, get up.' The machine was not rising too well, and it struck a limb of a tree, and we fell."<sup>4</sup> Neither Loftes nor Angas was seriously hurt, but they were badly shaken and the aircraft was a write-off. Angas had a glass splinter in his eye from broken goggles, which the local nurse extracted, and both were entertained for afternoon tea by the station master and his wife.



*The Register* Wed Aug 25 1920 – "Photograph of the aeroplane after it crashed at Keith"

They then returned to the crash site and dismantled the aircraft with local help. It was loaded onto wagons and taken to the railway station, and arrangements were made for it to be trucked to Melbourne. Angas and Loftes completed the journey on the Melbourne Express that night, arriving in Melbourne on Wednesday morning.

At some point after the crash, one or both of them decided to cover it up. How they thought they could do so is a mystery given the number of witnesses to it. In any event, Angas, or Loftes posing as Angas, telegraphed Adelaide to book two tickets on the Melbourne Express under assumed names. On arriving in Melbourne, Loftes wrote to a friend in Glenelg to say that they had fuelled in Keith the previous day, made a further stop in Horsham due to bad weather and eventually landed in a field near Footscray, some seven miles out of Melbourne. He claimed a flying time for this totally concocted itinerary of just under six hours, "not so bad under the circumstances".<sup>5</sup> He also claimed that they had flown on the next morning (Wednesday) to Joseph Larkin's aerodrome at Glenhuntly.

What neither Loftes nor Angas knew was that *The Register* in Adelaide had a correspondent resident in Keith who had reported the crash. While *The Advertiser* reported their departure from Glenelg and their supposed safe arrival in Melbourne,<sup>6</sup> *The Register* had a full report of the crash, the dismantling of the aircraft and the departure of the airmen on the Melbourne Express in its Thursday edition. Curiously, *The Advertiser* never reported the crash nor the subsequent events.

By then Angas and Loftes were at Glenhuntly making arrangements to purchase a replacement aircraft, painted in the same chequer-board pattern as the original. Obviously they had not heard the old adage that when you are in a hole you should stop digging. They immediately commenced digging furiously. A telegram purporting to be from Larkin was sent to *The Register* on Friday stating that it was a Larkin-Sopwith Aviation Company aircraft that had crashed at Keith, not Angas' aircraft.

The next day, the Keith correspondent confirmed the details of the crash in the Saturday edition of *The Register*. Loftes caught the Melbourne Express that night and arrived back in Adelaide on Sunday morning when he was interviewed by *The Register*. He kept digging. He maintained that the crashed aircraft was Larkin's, flown by a Captain Vickerson, and that Angas was expected to fly back to Adelaide in his original aircraft with a Larkin pilot later that day or Monday. When confronted with witness reports of their being seen on the Melbourne Express on Tuesday night, he put it down to possible confusion resulting from their

<sup>4</sup> *The Register*, Friday August 27 1920, p7

<sup>5</sup> *The Register*, Thursday August 19 1920, p7

<sup>6</sup> *The Advertiser*, Wednesday 18 August 1920, p7 and Thursday 19 August 1920, p6

going to Spencer Street Station on Wednesday morning to collect baggage shipped from Adelaide that they had been unable to carry in the aircraft.

Angas then telegraphed *The Register* on Monday afternoon to say the Melbourne weather was unsuitable for flying so that he would not be departing until the next day. When interviewed the next day by *The Register's* Melbourne representative at the Oriental Hotel, he refused to make any statement until after he returned to Adelaide.

Meanwhile in Adelaide on Tuesday, *The Register* received eyewitness reports and photographs of the crash from its Keith correspondent.<sup>7</sup> Loftes called in to *The Register's* office on Tuesday afternoon and, when confronted with the evidence, came clean. Well, sort of. He admitted the deceit and apologised profusely to his deceived friends and the Keith correspondent, but then started furiously digging again. He claimed he was writing an aviation novel with a Melbourne friend and had decided that the crash and his subsequent "bluff" would make a fine plot for the book. He had then decided "to experiment the business with the general public" and the subsequent reporting had satisfied him that "when all the facts of the case are written up they will create the utmost that is wanted in a book of the present day."<sup>8</sup> What a shame he never wrote it!

Angas left Glenhuntly on Wednesday morning in the new aircraft piloted by Captain Vigers MC DFC, one of Larkin's pilots. They stopped at Stawell for lunch, then overnights in Bordertown before finally arriving back at Glenelg at 10am on Thursday 26 August. He was met by Loftes, representatives of *The Register* and a crowd of onlookers, but refused all comment until he consulted with his solicitor. His interview later that day was reported in Friday's *Register*.<sup>9</sup>



Angus (left) and Vigers in the back seat after arrival back in Adelaide on 26 August 1920  
State Library of South Australia

That was when it got really ugly. Angas disclaimed any responsibility for the telegrams sent from Keith or Melbourne and claimed it was not until after their arrival at Glenhuntly on the Wednesday that he became aware of the deception at all – whereupon he dismissed Loftes and told him to return to Adelaide. It was not until he got to Bordertown that he heard Loftes was still "bolstering up stories". There was no intention on his part to misrepresent the new aircraft as the original, and no collusion between himself and Loftes to concoct the various stories that had been told. *The Register* seems to have tried to confront him with some of the inconvenient facts, such as the telegrams bearing his name received in Adelaide and his denial of his identity on the Melbourne Express, but all were put down to Loftes' extraordinary behaviour.

Loftes was interviewed afterwards and immediately claimed Angas' responses represented an "amazing change of front" and they had "all along acted together and with perfect mutual understanding of the bluff

<sup>7</sup> *The Register*, Wednesday August 25 1920, p7

<sup>8</sup> *The Register*, Wednesday August 25 1920, p7

<sup>9</sup> *The Register*, Friday August 27 1920, p7

which had now been exploded.”<sup>10</sup> I suppose we will never know the truth, but it does seem unlikely that Loftes could ever have hoped to maintain his “bluff” without Angas’ connivance. He pointed out that he had spent most of the week with Angas and it had not been until the Friday evening that they learned that the crash had been reported in Adelaide. He came back to Adelaide to relate the story they had jointly composed, and not as a result of being dismissed by Angas. He claimed it was Angas’ voice that had conveyed the telephone messages to *The Register*, and that the replacement aircraft had his (Loftes’) initials – D.O.Y.L. – painted in the cockpit in imitation of the original. Both claims would appear to be readily verifiable but nothing seems to have been published subsequently to settle them one way or the other.



Donald Loftes in happier times just before the Melbourne flight, taking Miss Olive Young to the Gawler races. His initials, ‘D.O.Y.L.’ that he referred to in the press are by Miss Young’s right hand  
*The Mail* 7 August 1920

Another curious facet of the story is the part, if any, that Larkin played in the deception. Captain Vigers, when confronted by *The Register* on arrival with Angas in Adelaide, immediately contacted Larkin to determine the authenticity of the telegram he was purported to have sent on Friday 20 August, in which he claimed the crashed aircraft in Keith as his own. In fact a second telegram was sent by Larkin-Sopwith Aircraft Company the next day confirming the previous telegram, and saying that Angas’ aircraft was at Glenhuntly and would fly back to Adelaide on Monday. Larkin confirmed to Vigers by telephone that both telegrams were forged and later sent a further telegram to *The Register* to say so.

Did Loftes send them with or without Angas’ participation? Or is it perhaps possible that on the Friday, before the full import of the magnitude of the furore in Adelaide hit home, that Larkin agreed to participate in a harmless “bluff”, perhaps as part of his sale negotiations with Angas for the new aircraft?

There was more coverage on Saturday 4 September,<sup>11</sup> when Angas was reported to have called in at *The Register’s* office on Friday 27 August with a written statement reiterating the facts as he had earlier related them and declining to comment further. Loftes got the last word in the same article when he was reported as saying “I think I am entitled to accept this very feeble rejoinder as an admission on the part of Mr. Dudley Angas that my statement published in *The Register* this morning is unanswerable. Mr Angas has called me a liar. I think the public will have no difficulty in judging between us.” Touché! Captain Vigers flew Angas back to his Clare property on 3 September and he does not seem to have responded further.

Why was the deception perpetrated? Robert Noye, in his district history of Clare,<sup>12</sup> suggested that Loftes may have been attempting to “protect his reputation and his prospects with future employers” or was “afraid of the Air Navigation Act which was about to become law, and which meant all pilots would have to be licensed.” If true, this suggests that Loftes perhaps may have been a sole conspirator. Another theory is that the pair was attempting to break the Adelaide-Melbourne flight time record and was reluctant to let it go. That seems highly unlikely given Loftes’ telegram about the difficulties they had encountered with

<sup>10</sup> *The Register*, Friday August 27 1920, p7

<sup>11</sup> *The Observer*, Saturday September 4 1920, p31

<sup>12</sup> *Clare - A District History*, Robert J. Noye, 1980 Investigator Press pp 164-167. [Interestingly, Horrie Miller in his book mentions the crash but not the deceit – in fact he claims that Loftus (sic) was eloping with his (Horrie Miller’s) girlfriend at the time (*Early Birds*, p 74)]. Note that both Horrie Miller in his book, *The Advertiser* and, initially, *The Register* used the spelling Loftus. *The Register* first corrected this to Loftes in its report on Saturday 21 August.

headwinds and weather that had resulted in a flight time of nearly six hours. My own feeling, with no support from the facts, is that neither wanted to admit to such a banal accident, both thought they could get away with a harmless deception, and then they just kept digging long after they should have climbed out of the hole. We will never know, but what a story! And no wonder poor Dudley Angas suffered the ignominy of being refused membership of the Aero Club!



DH-6 C9372 "The Clutching Hand" at Waikerie in late 1920 with Darcy Rees, Horrie Miller's partner (left), and a passenger (PD)

As a postscript it's interesting to note that Loftes had a very similar accident in 1919 when he was flying a DH-6 from Melbourne to Adelaide as part of the formation of Aerial Transport of South Australia with Horrie Miller. *The Register* published a telegram from Melbourne on 11 December 1919<sup>13</sup> reporting that he had had a serious accident the day before (the same day the Smith brothers arrived in Darwin on their epic flight from England in the Vickers Vimy) when the engine failed shortly after takeoff and the aircraft hit a red gum. He was flying with Schrivener, a mechanic, who the telegram reported as

sustaining a broken leg and facial injuries. The aircraft was sent back to Melbourne by train.

The following week, Loftes approached *The Register* to say the telegram was wrong. Whether he was correcting the record or rewriting history we can only surmise, but he is reported as saying *"What happened was that in the course of the pioneer flight from Point Cook Flying School to Adelaide, when we were bringing despatches from the Governor-General to the Governor of South Australia, we landed first at Lismore for supplies, and then flew to Hamilton (220 miles from Point Cook). The flight from Point Cook to Hamilton occupied two and half hours." The Register went on to report "Slight engine troubles developed at Hamilton, and after repairs had been effected Capt. Loftes resumed the flight. A cross wind accentuated the risk of 'taking off' over some tall trees, with only a few feet to spare, and when the machine was just clearing the trees the engine momentarily choked. One of the planes caught in a branch, and the aviator had to make a forced landing; but the machine was only slightly damaged, and the mechanic sustained a few scratches to the legs. The pilot escaped injury of any kind"*.<sup>14</sup>

Sadly, less than a year after the Keith crash Loftes was in real trouble. He was arrested on 18 March 1921 for a forgery committed the previous October involving £1,000 of inscribed stock. He forged the transfer of the stock to himself then sold it, but it wasn't until March that the owner noticed that he was not accruing interest on his stock and the forgery was exposed. This followed an incident in Sydney in January 1921, when he was committed for trial there on charges of 'forging and uttering' a cheque for £950. He was sentenced to two years hard labour in the Adelaide Criminal Court on 10 May 1921 after the presiding judge elected to exercise leniency on the basis of Loftes' mental condition. A fellow 66th Squadron AFC member had testified that Loftes had sustained head injuries in an aircraft crash in May 1917 and had "changed character" thereafter, taking foolish risks and losing a sense of danger.<sup>15</sup>

Another sad note was the failure of Loftes' marriage. He was married in November 1920 to Olive Young, with whom he is pictured on the previous page in the Sopwith Dove. I don't know when the marriage failed,

<sup>13</sup> *The Register*, Thursday, 11 December 1919, page 8

<sup>14</sup> *The Register*, Tuesday, 16 December 1919, page 7

<sup>15</sup> *The Advertiser*, Wednesday 11 May 1921, page 11

but Olive remarried on 4 December 1929 to a General O.F. Phillips, former Base Commandant of South Australia.<sup>16</sup> A much better bet than poor Loftes, one would think.

As for Dudley Angas, he remained a 'prominent pastoralist and grazier' on his Clare property, Hill River Station. He died aged only 50 at the Clare and District Hospital on 11 November 1942. He was eulogised as 'an engineer, a fine musician, and authority on pastoral and grazing pursuits.'<sup>17</sup> Not a word about his famous 1920 flight to Melbourne of course.

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November 2012

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<sup>16</sup> *The Register*, Thursday, 5 December 1929, page 29

<sup>17</sup> *Border Watch*, Tuesday, 17 November 1942, page 1

<sup>18</sup> Mike Milln is author of *Wing Tips – The story of the Royal Aero Club of South Australia – Book 1: 1919-1941*, 2011 Avonmore Books. This article is based on Chapter 2, *Birth and baptism*, together with additional material and photographs.