

**ROY W GROPLER**

Roy Gropler was a 1930s Adelaide aviator famous for a solo flight to Australia from England when he was only 19 years old – at the time, the youngest to make the flight. Gropler makes an interesting comparison to another young South Australian aviator of the period, Jimmy Melrose. Both men were killed in air accidents – less than two years apart - at the age of 22.

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Roy Gropler  
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Born on 20 January 1916, Roy Gropler grew up in Norwood where his father was a grocer. His forebears were German settlers from the Barossa Valley.

At the age of 16 Gropler had begun taking flying lessons at Parafield in Royal Aero Club of South Australia (RACSA) DH-60 Moths. He soloed with 6 hours total flying time and received his A Licence at the Club in June 1934. In September 1934 Gropler got a job as Assistant Engineer at the RACSA. The following month the London-Melbourne Air Race to celebrate the Victoria Centenary gained the attention of the nation. Gropler must have been fascinated to follow Jimmy Melrose's successful solo England-Melbourne flight. Melrose – also from Adelaide and also a member of the RACSA - was only two and a half years older than Gropler.

Gropler assisted another pilot with commercial joyflight operations in Victoria, and on his return to Adelaide his father had agreed to back him in setting up an aviation business. Soon *The Advertiser* reported that Gropler was going to England to purchase an aircraft and fly it back to begin an "air taxi" business. This was an

audacious move given his youth. He was still very inexperienced, with just 60 hours in his logbook, and knew nothing of long distance or poor weather flying.

Gropler had selected a most unusual type to purchase: a second-hand Klemm L.27a IX (c/n 330; G-ABOR). This was akin to a large wooden "powered glider", but could carry two passengers and had extra fuel tanks installed to provide a very impressive range of 950 miles. Gropler described the aircraft to *The Advertiser*:

*"... some remarkable performances, the best of which is perhaps her low landing speed – 30mph. The machine can take-off in about 40 to 50 yards, and land in almost the same*

*space. It cruises at approximately 100mph and is economical on fuel. The engine is a Gipsy II and the cockpits are open."*

Gropler arrived in England in early November 1935, exactly at the time when Kingsford Smith, Melrose and Broadbent had each left England vying for speed records flying back to Australia. After picking up his Klemm from Heston airport in London, Gropler then delayed his departure for weeks. It is believed that he spent time with a woman, described on his departure as his fiancé. He must have been a fast worker!

He did not leave until 10<sup>th</sup> December, in the depths of the European winter. Because of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, Gropler was unable to fly the normal route via Italy to Athens. Instead he chose the KLM "summer route" through central Europe. He would be flying the most difficult section of the route around the winter solstice, when the day is the shortest of all on 21<sup>st</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup> December. This was an extraordinary choice, especially in a very basic open cockpit aircraft! He made some provision for the cold by purchasing a fur-lined coat, helmet and gloves.

The weather was atrocious on the day he left. A 50-60 knot gale was reported, and he spent two



Gropler and passenger in his Klemm VH-USZ

<http://www.edcoatescollection.com/ac1/austu/VH-USZ.html>

hours in the radio control room at the airport listening to various aircraft reporting difficulties. The authorities were closing the Channel ports for 24 hours as it was too dangerous for ships to berth. But Gropler's determined (or reckless?) nature got the better of him. He was so fed up with waiting he just thought "now or never" and took off just after 10am.

The cloud base was very low – just 300 feet – and the strong winds blew him miles off course. In stormy conditions he was soon "totally lost". However with luck on his side he somehow found the French airport. The airport staff were astonished that anyone would fly a light plane in such conditions. A Belgian SABENA airliner had crashed that day with the loss of 11 lives, approaching London from Brussels.

The next day Gropler experienced a strong headwind and sleet, and it took almost two hours to fly the 100 miles to Brussels. After landing he spoke to an Imperial Airways pilot, from whom he learnt the main danger he would face was ice forming on his wings. Due to the wintery conditions he managed only about 100 miles each day through Germany, simply following the Rhine.

The leg to Vienna Gropler would later describe as "the worst day I hope to experience in a lifetime of flying". Officials took an hour to deal with his papers, and then the cold engine would not start. It was a frustrating process that took all morning. Finally the engine fired at 1130am.

Gropler flew south-east over pine trees for a couple of hundred miles before reaching his key landmark – the River Danube. Given the low clouds and mountains either side of the river, he found himself flying every bend of the river itself at very low level. The further he went the worse the clouds got until he was just 30 feet above the river. He felt like flying in a tunnel – mountains either side and clouds above. His main worry was bridges, which would suddenly appear and he'd have to “hop” over.

The river led him into Austria, but by mid-afternoon it was getting dark. His hands were frostbitten and he knew ice would be forming on the wings. But on he flew, until finally he saw the lights of Vienna. Skimming over rooftops he saw where a row of lights ended and landed in the darkness, thinking he was over the aerodrome. He pancaked into heavy snow. He had landed in a field covered with snow a few feet deep.

Subsequently his plane was moved to Aspern Aerodrome, but he was delayed for three days by a gale. He decided to press on, despite the presence of dangerous icy clouds at low level, thinking he could make Budapest – only 150 miles away. Again he followed the Danube at low altitude, but was only half-way when he had trouble with ice on his wings. Seeing a snow-covered field near a village, he made the decision to land and resume the flight when the weather had cleared. But he had landed on the wrong side of the river and was in Czechoslovakia where he did not have a permit. He was detained on suspicion of being a spy, and was held at the village police station.



Gropler's Klemm VH-USZ

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After four days some troops arrived and cleared a runway 300 yards long. Gropler was allowed to take-off, but the runway was very narrow and from his cockpit he could not see straight ahead. With the entire village watching, he started down the runway. His wheels were still on the ground when he reached the end, and ploughed into the snow. Blinded by white, Gropler felt a jolt and believed for a moment that he had stalled – but miraculously the Klemm lifted

into the air.

Budapest was only 70 miles away, and again flying low down over the Danube he reached Budapest within an hour. The aerodrome staff were surprised to see him as he was four days overdue – he had seemingly vanished. From Budapest he flew 200 miles to Belgrade relatively easily, where he learned the Yugoslav Air Force had been searching for him.

On leaving for Athens he flew into a blizzard. Gropler, in his open cockpit and windscreen frosted with snow, got hopelessly lost in the mountains. The blizzard was terrifying, like “flying through thousands of streaks of white”. He saw the tips of pine trees below and contemplated crashing into

them. But he managed to find the Danube again and return to Belgrade. When he landed they thought he'd been in a crash because his face was covered with blood from the blizzard.

The blizzard lasted for three days. Eventually he flew out on a clear day – the 15<sup>th</sup> day out from London. He saw beautiful mountains up to 13,000 ft, all covered in snow, and reached Athens in the middle of the afternoon. After spending Christmas day there, he was now able to follow the Melbourne Air Race route – wintery weather would no longer be a problem.

Also now the long range of the Klemm was necessary as the legs were much longer. Without a permit to land in Turkey he flew the lengthy 850 mile leg to Aleppo in good conditions. But towards the end of the flight his propeller had become damaged. He described Aleppo as “a god forsaken place” but he waited – perhaps naively – for a new propeller to be sent to him from Cairo. But after nine days of waiting he decided to patch up the existing one as best he could with the help of some French mechanics, who advised him to fly across the desert at altitude as Arab bands were known to fire on planes!

At Baghdad he celebrated his 20<sup>th</sup> birthday and the RAF helped to overhaul his engine and repair his propeller. With his engine now running very smoothly he flew to Basra, and then to Jask in Persia (a KLM base), Karachi, Hyderabad, and Jodhpur.

Many of these legs were of the order of 600 – 800 miles. Next was Allahabad, Dum Dum (Calcutta), Rangoon, Victoria Point, Alor Star, Singapore, Batavia, Surabaya, Rambang and then Koepang. He was now often battling tropical rains in his open cockpit Klemm, and made a risky night landing at Alor Star after being delayed by headwinds.

Up until now all his over-water flying had been within sight of land. He was terrified by the over-water hop to Darwin which would require several hours over the open ocean. Worse, he could not get any weather reports so he had no idea of prevailing winds. He spent a “very nervy” night on the beach and left at 4am, because he presumed winds would be most calm at dawn. He took off and climbed to 7,000 feet. It was a trying experience flying for hours and hours over the ocean. Periodically he went deaf at altitude and would be petrified that his engine had cut. Then he would imagine distant banks of cloud were land. It was the longest five hours he ever experienced, but sure enough he made the Australian mainland and set course for Darwin, where 100 people greeted him. The next day he followed the telegraph line to Alice Springs, and the day after that he followed the railway line to Adelaide. He received a warm welcome at Parafield that afternoon, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1936, but nothing like the crowds that had greeted Melrose! The trip had taken 43 days.

The Klemm would receive the Australian registration VH-USZ. It was formally registered to Gropler's father, who provided the capital to start the business and who also assisted his son from the ground. The Klemm was used for joyflights very regularly from Parafield, with occasional flights to country towns and also for aerial photography. It was rare for the Klemm to use its long range, which suggests there was never the long distance business it was intended for.

The death of James Melrose just six months later in July 1936 must have given much negative publicity to the idea of an “aerial taxi” business. Further, Melrose had given much publicity to his modern, fully enclosed Heston Phoenix with retracting undercarriage. The relatively slow open-cockpit Klemm with its fixed undercarriage must have appeared rather antiquated in comparison. Despite often featuring in the press, Gropler never carried high-profile passengers such as the

Premier, whom Melrose had flown. Most likely the public was warming to the idea of travelling in modern airliners, such as the Douglas DC-2, but there was little stomach for sitting for many hours in an open-cockpit aircraft.

In December 1936 Gropler participated in the Brisbane to Adelaide air race held to celebrate the centenary of South Australia. Amid a very competitive field Gropler won third place in the handicap race and a £25 prize.

Among the regular joyflights, some longer flights were undertaken. He flew non-stop to Melbourne and back to gain pictures of the Test Match there. In January 1938 he flew non-stop from Adelaide to Sydney (7 hours 45 minutes) where he offered joyflights for a few days. The return trip was also flown non-stop in 11 hours! In his logbook was the notation "lousy trip"!

Sadly, just weeks later on 13<sup>th</sup> March 1938 Gropler and his two passengers were killed during a joyflight from Parafield when the port wing fell off in a steep turn. At the time it was SA's worst air accident.

The South Australian Aviation Museum's files contain a wealth of information on Gropler, much of it compiled by Museum member Alan Kilmier from a range of sources. A large amount has not been included in this brief profile. A lengthy book on Gropler's flight is included in the file, which contains many learned observations on the places he visited during his marathon flight. Most of this was written by a ghost writer, Jack Fewster. It is believed that Gropler had only a very basic education.

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February 2014