

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN AVIATION MUSEUM

SIGNIFICANT AVIATION EVENTS PROFILES

1919 Harry Butler flight to Minlaton and the re-enactments

History



Captain Henry John (Harry) Butler, AFC [SLSA]

Harry Butler was born in 1889 in Yorketown with schooling at Koolywurtie where he shared the single school teacher on duty with about twenty other children of various ages.

His mechanical interest developed at a very young age and he was soon tinkering with motor bikes including building one of his own. When Bill Wittber was building an aircraft near Smithfield Harry spent much time there learning about aircraft.

During WWI (from 1916) Harry served in the Royal Flying Corps where he won an A.F.C. Initially he was an air mechanic but soon received flying training and he became a Flight Instructor in which role he remained until the end of the war. However, he saw some active service over the Western Front in order to learn new flying tactics to teach his pupils.

After WWI he returned to South Australia and sought to forge a career in aviation. He formed The Harry Butler and Kauper Aviation Co Ltd and operated from a hangar at the Northfield Aerodrome.

On 6th August 1919 Harry flew the first airmail flight from Adelaide to Minlaton in his Bristol M1C, which was known as the 'Red Devil'. He was welcomed by a large crowd, estimated at 6,000. The flight carried an 18kg mailbag full of postcards and letters. Harry had a significant headwind and had taken an hour and five minutes for the flight. Following his welcome by the crowd and various speeches there was a big lunch. Letters had been sent from the State Governor and the Mayor of Unley where Harry was living at the time. Joy flights were conducted in the afternoon, followed a celebratory dance in the Minlaton Institute in the evening. Harry had come home.

Harry undertook a total of eleven mail-carrying flights during his short flying career. These included Scotland, Minlaton, Kadina, Adelaide, Victor Harbor, Jamestown and Murray Bridge (only leaflets carried to the last). He also flew from Unley Oval after trucking the aircraft in as the oval was too small to land on. The crowd was estimated at 20,000 and they saw a great display of aerobatics.

In March 1920 Harry Butler went to meet the Vickers Vimy (crewed by Ross & Keith Smith, Jim Bennett & Wally Shiers) when they were to arrive in Adelaide, but he missed them in cloud. He did escort the Vimy out of Adelaide on its return to Melbourne.

Sadly Harry crashed his Avro 504K at Minlaton on 11th January 1922, which resulted in substantial injuries. He died on 30th July 1924 and was buried in the North Road Cemetery in Adelaide.

Subsequent life of the aircraft

Horrie Miller purchased the 'Red Devil' from Captain Butler's widow in about 1930, and proceeded to restore the plane. He also installed an in-line Gipsy engine in place of the original La Rhône rotary.

Miller competed in races in Adelaide and Melbourne and flew in exhibitions in the following years in the aircraft. It was also flown during the time by Cyril Kleinig – a pilot for Commercial Aviation Co., later MAA - only the third to pilot it during its privately-owned lifetime.

Just prior to World War II, Miller flew the aircraft from Adelaide to Perth for exhibition flying until approximately 1945, when it was officially retired from flying. The aircraft was never involved in an accident.

The initial move in the establishment of this Memorial was made when Mr. C. B. Tilbrook, Chairman of Directors of Aviation Services (S.A.) Ltd (and a former resident of Minlaton) saw the monoplane of the late Captain Harry Butler slung from the roof of a hangar at Guildford Airport, Western Australia. Always an admirer of the late flyer, he knew that the aircraft had great historical value and he began a series of moves which culminated in the aircraft being given free of cost to the people of Minlaton by its owner, Captain H. C. Miller, of MacRobertson-Miller Airlines Ltd. The original Le Rhône engine was by then owned by the South Australian Museum, which donated it to be displayed alongside the plane.



The Red Devil in the Minlaton Memorial [NK Daw]

Mr. Tilbrook contacted the Minlaton Branch of the R.S.L., which rightly felt the matter was of civic and district importance. At a public meeting held in October 1956, the people of Minlaton endorsed Council action in accepting the plane for housing in a Memorial to be established at Minlaton by public subscription.

The building was opened on the 11th October, 1958 by Mr. Tilbrook, whose efforts to return the plane to Minlaton had finally been made worthwhile. The plane was restored at the time in every detail at Parafield by Aviation Services (S.A.) Ltd.

In the late 1980s there was a call to refurbish the aircraft and improve the memorial building to eliminate solar damage. As a result, a public meeting was called in March 1987 and authority

given to the Council to finance redevelopment of the Memorial Building and restoration of the aircraft.

The new building was completed in February 1989. Throughout the planning stages consideration was continually given to constructing a building that could both complement the aircraft and keep in character with the aviation theme. The new hangar-style design would also prevent further solar damage to the aircraft, while providing an eye-catching and impressive housing for the Red Devil display.

The aircraft itself was refurbished by members of the Balaklava Gliding Club and restored to its original design as when flown by Captain Butler. The new Butler Memorial was officially opened at a ceremony on 6th August, 1989 – exactly 70 years after Captain Butler's historic flight to Minlaton in 1919.

Re-enactment flights – Adelaide to Minlaton

To commemorate what Harry Butler achieved in 1919 the Australian Airmail Society held a re-enactment flight in 1969 (the 50th anniversary). Special airmail covers were carried from Adelaide to Minlaton and return. Details of these re-enactment flights have been as follows:

1969 – 10 August



VH-PDN Piper PA31/310 'Avis Rent a Plane' piloted by Nobby Buckley [NK Daw]



The 1969 flight cover [NK Daw]

1979 – 12 August



VH-COU Piper PA34-200 pilot Chris Lindisfarne [J Smith]



The 1979 Flight Cover [NK Daw]

1989 – 6 August



VH-MHM Hughes H269C Clark Helicopters Pilot – Robert Saunders [NK Daw]



The 1989 Flight Cover [NK Daw]

1994 – 6 August



VH-CXA Cessna 180 pilot Geoff Constantine, passengers C Lloyd, A Bergen & I Hamilton [NK Daw]



1994 Flight Cover [NK Daw]

1999 – 7 August



A25-201 Sikorsky S70B RAAF Pilots CAPT Phil Keys & LT Aaron Rose [NK Daw]



The 1999 Flight Cover [NK Daw]

2009 – 6 August



VH-ATM DH82 Tiger Moth, Pilots Alistair Crawford & Richard Hunt [NK Daw]



The 2009 Flight Cover [NK Daw]

2019 – 4 August



VH-MWN DH82 Tiger Moth Pilot Richard Hasting [R Hothersall]



The 2019 Flight Cover [NK Daw]

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Reference sources: South Australian Air Journal, Australian Airmail Society, South Australian Aviation Museum, Yorke Peninsula Council, own notes.