

LAKE EYRE AND BACK WITH A GRAND OLD LADY by Mike Oulton

I have often considered sharing flying memories and photos is similar to asking the neighbours around for a slide night of your recent overseas holiday, needless to say they always seem to have an excuse with something else on that night. However having read Deb and Ian's adventures in the flying tadpole, and Mac's account of our Cape York trip, we were prompted to make a record of our Lake Eyre trip in April 09 and I guess folks don't have to read on but someone might get something out of it.

Annie and I were invited to the Cessna 180/185 club 25th anniversary held at a property called Eulalia about 15nm west of Coonamble NSW on the 18/19th April. We took off from home on Friday 17th and flew to Toowoomba to get a radio fixed and then to a friend's farm on the Darling Downs near Dalby where we stayed the night and fuelled up for the trip to Eulalia the next day. An early start with good weather except for the 15 knot headwind, took us overhead Burren Junction where we planned to land and put the extra 30 litres of avgas we carry, into the wing tanks. The Cessna 170 is a beautiful old girl but has small tanks and a limited endurance, but a careful calculation en route and almost no head wind on the latter part of the leg saw us to Eulalia with over an hour of fuel to spare without having to stop.

After giving a 10 mile inbound call, the ground crew asked if we knew about the spot landing competition. I replied that I had heard a rumour and was promptly advised that we were on, and it was a 3 pointer with no tail wheel lift allowed and shortest stopping distance measured. I must say it was one of my better landings and we did a pearler about 2 metres short of the line and stopped in about 30 metres. At that point the judges noticed we were not a 180 or 185 but their little 170 sister, sooo we were promptly marshalled to the opposite side of the strip away from our big sisters and our landing score was disqualified. That was the only uncivilised moment of the weekend, but it was all in good fun. The company, food, live music (club members) and Lloyd and Marj's place all made up an outstanding gathering. In total 26 Cessna 180/185 aircraft turned up plus 2 ring ins - ours and a friend in a 172 who was also marshalled to the other side. We left Eulalia on Sunday after too much fun, food, and alcohol induced lies and went via Coonamble for fuel and then on to White Cliffs.



26 Cessna 180/185's in an orderly line standing proud and smug



Both ring-in Cessna's in the quarantine compound across from the main parking area

White Cliffs is an interesting place. Similar landscape to Coober Pedy with the ant hill type diggings for the elusive opal and with it stories of the fortunes, fights and bankruptcies. It is also a RFDS stop over and fuel is readily available. The fuel man is also the publican, motel owner, ambulance driver, SES man, undertaker, taxi driver and who knows what else, we didn't stay around long enough to find out. The meal that night although wholesome, reminded me of boarding school days, no choice and you daren't leave anything on the plate unless you want a visit from the undertaker. Dinner was at 6pm and we turned up 5 minutes late!!! well... we nearly went hungry but after a sincere apology our meals were served... no, chucked on the table and then we were turfed out at 6.30 on the dot, finished or not. The next morning we went for a walk and got breakfast at a café, because we weren't game to wrestle with motel kitchen staff. The town is in 3 separate areas and quite a long walk between drinks. Checkout was at 10am and when we got back to our motel room at 9.30am we were getting our gear together and I was working on our flight plan on the laptop when we were told we had to move ourselves and our gear out of the room onto the patio because the staff wanted to go home. A short trip to the airstrip in the SES truck where we were half expecting to see no tyres on the 170, but all was well and we were aboard warming the engine up in no time for a quick getaway.



Finals for 12, a 1000m bitumen runway at White Cliffs



Bed and breakfast at White Cliffs was a tad better than this



Underground houses and ant hill diggings in the back yards.

Arkaroola in the Flinders Ranges was our next stop and what a wonderful place it is.

We originally planned for Leigh Creek but found out the fuel facility has been pulled out a few weeks earlier, but our time at Arkaroola was hard to beat, so our misfortune turned to fortune in a strange way. Our track took us over some crazy sand hill formations and lots of nothing else, and of course the engine seemed to be running a bit rougher than normal, however when we were 10 miles out and had our landing spot sighted it began to run sweet again. Lake Frome is about 30nm east of the ranges and looked a bit like a mini Lake Eyre except it had no water, just a vast salt pan. On approach to Arkaroola it is easy to pick up the white clay airstrip on the side of a valley with the ranges in the background. We landed on 03 which is uphill and a fair drop off on the threshold, and taxied to the hangars where Doug Sprigg met us in the resort bus. He even let us have a spot in the hangar beside his Auster and C 207, but he was more interested in us or more accurately what we were flying as he drooled over our 170, he used to own one in England many years ago. Our trip back to the resort was overwhelming as Doug rattled off the names of every bird, tree and rock formation we passed, and we just nodded as if we understood.



Afternoon sun on the rocks.

Doug took us to a very comfortable motel room and gave us the keys to a Toyota 4WD and said "it's yours until you leave". We spent 3 days there discovering the diverse landscape, old gold mines, waterholes and history. There is an observatory overlooking the resort and you guessed it, Doug runs night sky sessions and lectures and we continued nodding. We booked the famous 4WD ridge top tour, not for the faint hearted I assure you. It would be OK if you were driving and in control, but it is closed to private vehicles. Sitting in the back of an open troop carrier looking over the edge of the very rough track down a 1000 foot sheer drop was something else. I kept looking at the back wheel to make sure it was still on the vehicle and

rolling on the track and was ready to jump for our lives if it wandered over the ledge. Sometimes it seemed to be wobbling and going over the edge and eventually I realised I was paranoid so I looked through the camera viewfinder instead and left the driving to Sharpie, a very competent Aboriginal tour guide. When we got to the top he served cold strong 'billy' tea and told us of a dream time story that explained the mountains and valleys were formed by giant kangaroos and snakes and the rivers were goanna tears, and all he had to drink was tea, and this bloke was about to take us down the mountain again. We did survive the trip down, and went for a fly the next day and past the lookout where we heard the stories, just to check out the giant roo's and snakes. There was another group on top of the hill while we flew below in the valley so they would have had a diversion during the story time.



People at the summit of the ridge top tour

All good things come to an end and after we said thanks and goodbyes we headed off to Mooloorina, a large cattle property on the south eastern shores of Lake Eyre. Doug gave us the co-ordinates of the Marree Man so we tried to find it on the way. Apparently it is of an outline of a man close to a kilometre long that some farmer ploughed with the help of a gps some years ago. Since then as the story goes someone got offended at the explicitness and scrubbed out his genitals. In any case we couldn't make out anything that remotely resembled a figure with or without dangles.

Next place of interest was a Cessna 210 wreck in the mud of Lake Eyre. Some pilot thought a landing on the dry lake would be cool for his passengers but the top salt crust gave way under the wheels and they had a long walk home. The wings have been removed since but the fuselage is easy to see albeit being reclaimed by the lake. Mooloorina is easy to spot some distance away as it was the only green area about with a small lagoon filled by hot artesian bore water. The cross runways are gravel and well maintained and there were 2 other aircraft in the circuit, which took us by surprise as we hadn't seen another flying aircraft since Eulalia 5 days previous. There was a group in a Baron from Victoria and a 206 doing day jollies over the lake based at Marree and stopping at the homestead for tea and stickys. We got to know the Vic group well especially when they found out we had booked the old homestead and all 6 of them were cramped into 2 rooms of the shearer's quarters. They couldn't get over our 4 bedroom house we had all to ourselves, and we weren't about to trade.

When we first arrived I went up to new homestead and asked if I could use the phone to cancel our SAR as my mobile didn't have coverage. I was met by a young girl at the door and when asked the question, turned into the house without a word to me and I heard her yell, "Mum, there's a tourist standing at the door wanting to use the phone, what'll I do?" It must be the first time I have been referred to as a 'tourist', but I guess that's exactly what we were. I offered to pay for the phone call but was told that's OK but the landing fee is \$10 and we only take cash, a fair trade I suppose?

The lagoon was lovely and attracted a lot of mobile house ground folk to set up camp for a few days. The artesian bore is full flowing so the lagoon has a fresh supply of water. There is even an old electricity generator operated by a water turbine at the bore head but had been decommissioned some years ago, but the way power costs are rising it may well be used again soon. Another attraction is the old machinery dump, an incredible array of old vehicles, even a couple of model T Ford's with wooden spoked wheels!!! The station owners offer a 4WD tour to the lake's edge at \$200 for the vehicle. We had this experience some 25 years ago in our own vehicle so declined. Not much else there except outstanding sunsets and friendly flies.



210 mud skipper



Model T ford



Shadow of 127 leaving Mooloorina



Artesian bore

No avgas at Mooloorina so we used our extra 30 litres and planned for Coober Pedy. Flew over the southern part of the lake and counted 14 other aircraft on the radio operating from YWMC and YMRE. The southern part of the lake had plenty of muddy water but little wildlife and was a tad disappointing. Our return trip via the northern end was much better and the channel country was outstanding. We didn't intend to stop at William Creek but a rain band coming from the west made up our minds. We landed at WMC had lunch at the pub and stayed a few hours. When we drove to there 25 years ago we were the only vehicle on the road for 3 days. There were close to 50 cars parked all around the pub this time, most people queuing for a 20 minute flight over the great muddy puddle. We tried to buy a top up of fuel but nobody was available to fuel other than the charter planes. Coober Pedy was less than 1 hour and we still had 1:45 hours of fuel on board so we headed off after getting an update on the weather from the charter blokes. More crazy landscapes with few landing areas past underneath us and about 30nm east of YCBP we noticed another rain band on our track. There were no airfields in the vicinity and we were past our point of no return for William Creek so the best option was to use the 'council strip' until the front had passed as there were no road vehicles in sight. Just then a Rex Air Dash 8 gave an inbound call for YCBP, so I radioed him and asked if they were visual and could we make a VFR approach. He responded that it was clear to the west and the rain had passed to the east but the wind had picked up to 330/25. On that basis we decided to continue to Coober Pedy and dodge the rain keeping the ground in sight. After a few minutes we were through and had CBP sighted on the nose. The cross strip 32/14 would have been the best option but it was clay and looked very wet so we opted to land on 04, testing our crosswind skills. This was the only weather we encountered during the whole trip and my co-pilot was outstanding in not offering advice during the ordeal, but it wasn't a permanent lasting phenomenon. Taxing past the Saab 340 and getting a friendly wave from the crew we parked beside a Mooney MKP and a C 206, Graham Alexander's EGG from Gympie, so suddenly we didn't seem to be so far away from home, although we never ended up meeting with them.

We stayed in an underground motel room at the backpackers hostel and tripped around the magical landscape such as the breakaways and the no grass golf course, where the greens are called 'blacks' as they mix sump oil with the sand and roll it to resemble some form of putting area with a steel tube as a hole. One story that must be told was the Anzac Day experience. We arrived at the RSL at about 5.15am

expecting to be one of the first there ready for the dawn service, but were met by a crowd in the bar drinking coffee and eating Anzac biscuits. That sounded just the thing to wake us up on a chilly morning. Two mugs were thrust into our hands as we were introduced to all and sundry. I thought there was rather a strange whiff in the air and after the first sip of coffee all was revealed, it was laced with rum, and I can tell you that gets you going at 5.30am. This obviously helped lighten the atmosphere, it certainly worked for us. There was a choice of course, you could have a coffee with scotch instead or was that a scotch with coffee? After a surprisingly moving dawn service and speech by the Mayor we were treated to a huge breakfast and as much 'coffee' as you could drink. We did notice however that the bugle playing was taped and not live, and I can imagine how a real bugle player would sound after so much coffee, not that anyone would care anyway.

Coober Pedy was probably the highlight of the trip and far too many tales to tell in this format, so we will end it here. After 4 days we left for Mungerannie on the Birdsville track.



ALZ & EGG at YCPB



Karl Bratz's headstone



Underground church



Crocodile Harry's front door



"Keep off the Grass"



The Breakaways



Flight crew making a getaway



Dawn service

Our track took us over the northern side of Lake Eyre and we followed the Warburton Creek which was flooded and teeming with wildlife. About 30 miles west of Mungerannie we heard a gaggle of Mooney's (6 in total) creating a lot of chat on the CTAF, about the 25-30kt cross wind and if it would be possible to land. After every successful landing the now confident sounding pilot almost broke out in song to his still airborne mates as to how skilful he was and how uneventful the landing had been. After all the geese were on the ground I asked for a confirmation of the wind direction and speed, and was assured that there would not be a problem. I said we were flying a C-170 and there was silence, I don't think anyone had heard of such a thing. After explaining we were a light taildragger, there was still no response, so we were on our own. Unfortunately the Birdsville track was parallel to the strip so that was not an option, but there was a side track from the pub to the main track at 90° so we had a good look at it. A bit rough but it looked to be OK. Before we committed ourselves to a rough track I thought we should at least make an approach to the airstrip and feel the crosswind on the aircraft, it seemed to be fine and we continued on final and set her down on the mains using a stab of left brake to stay straight, and in no time we were taxiing on 3 wheels at walking speed but still needed to use the left brake to stay on the strip. At that point I began to sing just like the other geese. We tied her down into wind really well because she flies at 45kts so a strong gust would see her airborne.

Great pub lovely people and a refreshing swimming pool filled from artesian hot water. Mungerannie is about halfway between Maree and Birdsville, so a lot of travellers stop off to wash the dust down in a traditional manner at the pub.

After goodbyes to our new friends we set off to Birdsville following the inner track which was not open to land folk as it resembled a canal. Beautiful green creek (and road) banks winding all over the place creating a mirage of giant tree branches.



Warburton Creek



Inner track (canal)



Mungerannie pub



Annie @ Mungerannie

Everyone's heard of Birdsville and most have been so we'll keep it short. After landing and taxiing to the fuel bowsers there was a queue and we had to wait for those pesky Mooney's to drink first and waddle out of the way. After the gaggle there was a nice looking C-182 RG and then a ratty old 182 in the line. After watering the horses, we came back to the line and saw the ratty old 182 pilot walking towards us. His greeting was "you're Mike Oulton, Col's mate" I asked how did you know? He replied "there wouldn't be two 170's out this way." His next sentence was "when you get to Windorah, you're staying at my place, OK"? It wasn't a question, it was an order. Col had warned us about the legend of the outback Sandy Kidd so we knew it was too good an invite (order), to knock back. I asked him where he was headed, and he replied "ah just taking a few blokes to a bull sale." The comparison between the young 182 RG commercial white shirted pilot with epaulets and black pants, and Sandy was something to behold but I know who I would rather fly with. Birdsville was a bit touristy for us and the races were not till September so the next day we headed off to an opal miner friend north west of Quilpie.

Eric's place is remote and the airstrip is a bit of a goat track but quite safe if you follow his advice. The taxiing to the campsite and fuel needed more attention than the landing as we had to negotiate a deep gully and then a steep rise. He mines boulder opal with earthmoving equipment, and spent time explaining all the delicate operations involved in mining. Hard to imagine how it could be delicate when he operates a 50 tonne excavator, huge dump trucks and earth scrapers, but when the red, green and blue stone is uncovered, it is treated with kid gloves, as each piece may be worth in excess of \$30k when cut.



Old Birdsville Hotel



Opal mining machinery



Rock wallaby



Boulder opal



Sandy Kidd

From there we headed to Windorah to stay at Sandy's place. We landed at Windorah and phoned the fuel lady and asked if she could come out to the airfield to sell us avgas. Her response was "@#\$\$% no mate I'm not going out there till tomorrow when the RPT arrives." We tied down the old girl then phoned Sandy and he was expecting the call. He said "I'll pick you up and you can help me fix a pump." Annie asked me if we had a bed for the night and I answered "I don't know but we have a pump to fix." I won't repeat the rest of the conversation. Soon Sandy arrived and we were on our way to fix the pump. Luckily for me his neighbour turned up and I was off the hook which is just as well as I didn't have suitable clothes to tackle an oil porous 40 year old lister diesel engine. After the job was done Sandy took us around the property while checking his stock and water. We checked out the reddest sand hill imaginable and it wasn't even at sunset, as well as the sheering shed and other outback touristy things. Sandy took us to the pub that night where we met the RFDS pilot and medical staff and joined in the yarns and laughter. Next day we were offered a Pilatus PC-12NG tour at the airport which was very interesting. Bub the refueller was there marshalling her Qantas Dash 8 and welcoming the passengers. When she was done, I gingerly asked if we could have some avgas and was served the precious liquid with a smile. We were then on our way to Longreach.



Red sandhills



Windorah traffic



PC-12NG & C-170



Bub's Dash 8

We have been to Longreach before but it is a great stopover to regenerate and ween ourselves slowly back to civilisation. We were in range for our wireless broadband laptop so spent time answering emails etc.

The Qantas museum including the 747 and 707 tours are well worth the effort albeit a bit expensive. The only strange thing about the tours was the guide had a thick Kiwi accent. Knew his stuff but this was supposed to be the historical launching point of the kangaroo tail airline. The other attraction across the road from the airport of course was the Stockman's Hall of Fame, again worth a visit. On day 2 while we were walking into town we noticed a crowd complete with brass bands and school children at the railway station. Went to have a look and they were waiting for the Queensland 150 year celebrity steam train to arrive. We accepted a little flag each and joined in the flag waving cheering fun when the train arrived.

A sunset trip down the Thompson River is worth the effort. We were picked up from the motel, sailed up river, saw the sunset, drank some wine and served a good meal.

During our pre-flight for our trip to Rolleston the maintenance guys came to look over the old girl (C-170 that is), as they were discussing between themselves what sort of aircraft it was. The older guy knew it was a Cessna but had never seen a 170 before.

We had planned to spend a day or 2 at Carnarvon Gorge but found it too difficult to organise a pickup from a nearby landing strip so we opted to fly over it instead. I had been some years before and the fly over brought back memories. Some spectacular scenery and rough terrain cover the huge escarpment.

At Rolleston we met a friend who lives adjacent to the airport where we had lunch, swapped stories, looked over his C-185 and Lockheed 12, fuelled up and were on our way home. Nothing exciting to report between Rolleston and Gympie, but after all that travelling it's always good to be home.

THE END

