



The Old Fliers' Group

Attached to the Royal Aero Club of WA (Inc).

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August Speaker

As *Speaker of the Day*, Chris Beattie told a story that came in two parts. Firstly, he spoke on the overall operation of the Royal Flying Doctor Service, and the high demands that are placed on staff – in particular the aircrew including pilots, doctors and nurses. Secondly, he gave a detailed description of an unfortunate accident that happened in 1981 on an outback airstrip at night.

Someone once said that, “aviation is both demanding and unforgiving”. Both parts of Chris’s talk brought those words into clear focus.

The public perception of the RFDS may be slanted toward routine clinics and specialist treatment in the outback which require a professional performance from the medical teams, both doctors and nurses, and of course the pilots. Almost all of the operations are carried out on government and licenced aerodromes. The RFDS keeps a large airstrip database on shire, farm and station airstrips and facilities. The database is updated on a regular basis.

The expectation of the widespread community served by the RFDS is that emergency evacuations may be carried out at any time of the day or night, irrespective of the weather and the availability of navigation aids. The potential hazards on this type of operation are enormous and pilots are trained to an extremely high standard to handle such occasions.

A night arrival at a bush strip, aided by the headlights of cars, is particularly challenging. With no glide slope reference, and a possible up-hill or down-hill runway slope, it is a true test of a pilot’s skill. Equally a take off into a “black hole” on a moonless night with no visual horizon requires the full concentration of the pilot. These are the “demanding” aspects of the RFDS pilot’s operation. As mentioned above, the situation can be very demanding and unforgiving if an error of judgment is made.

The second part of Chris’s talk covered a particular incident where an emergency evacuation was requested at night from a station airstrip in the Gascoyne region. It was a moonless night with scattered cloud forecast down to 1000 ft above ground level. On that particular occasion the crew consisted of only a pilot and nurse. They occupied the left and right-hand seat, respectively, of the twin engine Piper Navajo aircraft.

The approach was made using a standard technique to establish the aircraft on final approach. A calculation error resulted in the aircraft being too low and when the lights of the six motor vehicles disappeared the pilot assumed that it was because of cloud. This was not the case and the aircraft descended into bush about 400 metres short of the airstrip.

The impact with trees removed both wings and secondary fuel tanks outboard of the engines. One large tree caused the fuselage to swing through 180° so that

the aircraft slid rearward through the scrub. The rear of the aircraft crumbled as far as the bulkhead behind the cockpit. Fortunately, there was no fire and the pilot and nurse scrambled out, unhurt, via the over-wing exit adjacent the pilot’s seat. Their escape was nothing short of a miracle. Happily the patient was evacuated the next day and made a complete recovery.

Thanks go to Chris for a most interesting presentation.

Mini Speaker

Your editor delivered a short session on the early efforts John Clifford Peel. It is recorded that, sometime before 1912, when Peel was an 18-year-old medical student, he became aware of John Flynn’s work in the outback after reading one of Flynn’s books. According to Peel’s family, it inspired his interest and he set about devising a system that would allow Flynn to provide much-needed help to people in far-flung settlements of Australia.

Then, in 1917, several years after WWI had begun, the then 23-year-old Peel completed his training as a pilot in the Australian Flying Corps. He was posted to the UK and while on board ship he wrote to Flynn, suggesting that the aeroplanes might play a significant part in Flynn’s work. Over time, Peel’s plan was adopted by Flynn and by 1917 the Australian Inland Mission, the fore runner of the RFDS, was using radio and aircraft to provide a useful service to the widely scattered population of the outback.

Unfortunately, Peel did not survive WWI. In September 1918, his RE8 aircraft disappeared while on patrol in France. No trace of him or his observer and the aircraft was ever found.

Next Meeting

The next OFG meeting will be held on Friday October 26th at the Royal Aero Club. No parking fees will be charged. The *Speaker of the Day* – will be Ted Fletcher who will deliver a well-researched talk on Sir Norman Brearley. It will cover the difficulties encountered as he established Australia’s first airline.

As usual, lunch will get under way just before noon, so I hope to see you then.

Brian Hernan