

VH-BPL DC-3 Rescue by Bob Sprague, Senior Production Engineer, ETOMS and Capt. Ossie Miller, Qantas Airways.

The Douglas DC-3/C-47 is considered a classic aircraft that revolutionised air transport and aircraft construction and is regarded as one of the decisive weapons of WWII. It is estimated that some 17,000 of these aircraft were built by the United States and Russia. The offer earlier this year to donate a DC-3 to the Qantas Founders Outback Museum (QFOM) in Longreach by its owner, Mr John Williams, was welcomed by the board of the Qantas Foundation Memorial (QFM), trustees of QFOM.



VH-BPL. Hoxton Park January 2004

As an ex-Qantas owned aircraft, VH-BPL is of greater interest to QFOM for display than just any DC-3 and is one of only five ex-Qantas DC-3/C-47s still believed to be in existence. As such it is recognised as a significant acquisition for the collection. Records show Qantas owned or operated some twenty-four of the type up until 1971 on passenger services in Western Queensland, passenger and freight services in New Guinea and training. In fact, when the Boeing 747 entered Qantas service there were still two DC-3s operating.

VH-BPL was built as a C-47 (a military version of the DC-3 with a cargo door) for the US Army Air Force (USAAF) in 1942 and carried the serial number 42-93009. It was received by the RAAF as A65-44 soon after in 1944 and operated initially as call sign VHCIA. Qantas purchased the aircraft in 1948 and it flew into Lae, New Guinea in June of that year crewed by Capt W Forgan-Smith and First Officer L Purkiss.

In New Guinea it was registered as VH-EAP then VH-EBY before being sold to TAA in 1960. TAA received the aircraft in a passenger configuration with first class seats and a removable buffet. The registration was changed to VH-SBG, named Lae and it operated the Sunbird Services. Later the name was changed to Kavieng. When TAA withdrew from the territory in 1973 the aircraft passed to Air Niugini who operated it until 1977. After 1977 the aircraft moved through private hands before being purchased and operated by Bush Pilots of Cairns in 1981 and later under their new Air Queensland branding. Records indicate that from 1987 VH-BPL was only intermittently flying ad hoc operations with a number of operators. By 1991 it passed into the hands of Laurie McIver who arranged for it to be flown to Hoxton Park, Sydney in January 1993. This was to be its last flight.

Mr John Williams acquired VH-BPL from the widow of Laurie McIver in October 1996. Since 2000, Mr. Williams tried to sell VH-BPL several times with the price steadily being reduced

from \$65,000 to \$20,000. As QFOM had expressed an interest in purchasing VH-BPL, when sale fell through in January 2004, it was offered to the museum as a donation.

In the past 60 years VH-BPL has only logged some 34,000 flying hours. Many of those hours, it will be noted, have been in the service of Qantas and now associated airlines.

The livery used by Qantas in the late 1940s was a polished bare metal fuselage with “Qantas Empire Airways” in red script above the windows. The registration was in tall bold letters on the rear of the fuselage. Later, in the 1950s, when the Lockheed Super Constellations arrived the more familiar white top and red side stripe livery with the polished belly was applied. As a result of VH-BPL having been painted for most of its 60-year life, it will not be possible or practical to polish the fuselage skin and a painted finish will need to be used.

The Move to Longreach

Unfortunately, VH-BPL had deteriorated to such an extent that flying the aircraft to Longreach was not economically feasible leaving road transport as the only option. Through a quirk of fate, we were fortunate to meet Jeff Dobe, proprietor of Bulldog Transport. Jeff and his wife Liz own a light aircraft based at Hoxton Park and had heard we were looking for a solution to our transport problem. Jeff spent many days at Hoxton Park measuring the aircraft and examining ways of loading the aircraft as compactly as possible whilst ensuring that no damage would be sustained during transit. Meanwhile, QFM Ltd worked at raising the necessary funds for the move and the engineers continued preparations for the long trip to Longreach. Throughout this preparation period, the aircraft was accumulating parking charges (albeit at a concessional rate) which taxed our limited resources. In January 2005, Qantas generously agreed to support the move and 1 March was agreed as the departure date. The engineers had already removed the empennage and engines leaving only the outer wings to be dismantled prior to shipment. We also took the opportunity to commence paint stripping in preparation for the aircraft’s return to QEA livery once reassembled in Longreach.



Qantas LAME Jeff Swinson preparing to collapse the undercarriage.

On Saturday 26 February, the flight control surfaces, fin and engine cowls were packed into the fuselage and the aircraft loaded onto an extendable low loader. As there was no suitable access "airside" at Hoxton Park for an oversize load, the truck was positioned on the access road to the aerodrome and the load slung over the fence necessitating the use of a 55T crane to lift the fuselage at the required reach. The wings were loaded first, one on top of the other, tip to root. After the fuselage was lifted, the hydraulics were depressurised, gear pins removed and the undercarriage collapsed. The fuselage was then lowered onto a specially designed cradle fabricated by Jeff Dobe and fitted across the rear of the low loader. The propellers were then loaded behind the cradle. Overall, the load was 30m long, 7.4m wide and 5m high.



The oversize load permit dictated the route: Day 1, Sydney, Newcastle, Willow Tree, Gunnedah, Narrabri, Moree and Goondiwindi ; Day 2, Goondiwindi, Roma, Mitchell, Morven, Tambo; Day 3, Tambo, Blackall, Barcaldine, Longreach. The route changed several times in the weeks leading up to departure as various roads and bridges opened or closed. As the load was only permitted to travel on the Sydney Newcastle expressway at night, it was decided to depart Hoxton Park at 0100 on Tuesday, 1 March. North of Newcastle, the load could only travel in daylight hours. The truck required four private escorts and one police escort to the Queensland border, thereafter, two police and two private escorts. Throughout the journey, forward escorts worked ahead of the truck, reporting road conditions and hazards to the driver, the police closed intersections and, on dual carriageways, entire sections of the highway (the load occupied a full two lanes). The rear escorts provided clearance guidance to the driver as hazards were traversed, as well as controlling traffic approaching from behind. After an hours break in Singleton, waiting for sunrise, the journey continued uneventfully to Goondiwindi – some 20 hrs on the road!



Awaiting sunrise. Singleton Day 1

Day 2 we met the two Goondiwindi Police escorts at 0530 ready to depart for our planned overnight in Tambo. The journey proceeded normally until the forward escort reached the tiny village of Amby, about 65 Km west of Roma. The Amby bridge was under reconstruction and had been reduced to a single lane! We stopped at the first opportunity where we could leave one lane of the Warrego Highway open while the problem was investigated. This was a serious dilemma; there was nowhere to turn around nor get the load completely off the road. After an hour or so of careful measurement (millimetres), Jeff was satisfied we would get through if we removed all the tie down chains on one side of the trailer and hung the load over the concrete barricades on the bridge. An hour later we inched our way over the Amby Bridge only to be met with more bad news. There were two more bridges between Amby and Mitchell, also undergoing reconstruction and even more restrictive! The problem, so we were told, were the signs approaching the bridge. They were cemented in place and only a single lane width apart. Could they be moved? Possibly was the answer, but not until the following morning and then for a cost of around \$2000.00! With BPL now off the road in Amby we decided to have a look for ourselves.

The first bridge, at Basalt Creek was 25 Km towards Mitchell. To our bewilderment, there were no signs in place at all. Not one. We moved on to the next bridge, One Mile Creek. Again, no signs. Both bridges allowed plenty of room for BPL to pass through. Dismayed with the bad advice, and loss of several hours, we drove back to Amby and were soon on the road again. We still don't know why we were delayed so unnecessarily. With no chance of reaching Tambo before dark, we decided to overnight in Mitchell.



Crossing the Maranoa River. Mitchell Day 2.

Day 3 we left Mitchell at sunrise, stopping briefly in Morven for breakfast before joining the Landsborough Highway for Tambo. Tambo was the changeover point for our Police escorts. Ron and Natasha left us and returned to Goondiwindi with two Longreach Police taking over for the final leg to Longreach. After a minor delay in Tambo, once again we were on the road. ABC Western Queensland and 4LG Longreach had been monitoring our progress and broadcasting our latest arrival time for Longreach. Time was becoming critical with 330Km to cover in 4 hrs if we were to make Longreach before sunset. The road was quite and we made good progress. At Barcaldine, we joined the Capricorn Highway for the final 107 km to Longreach, arriving to a welcoming crowd, right on sunset. BPL had survived the journey unscathed.



Crossing the Amby Bridge. Day 2



Traffic stopped on the Warrego Highway



Ron Williams and Natasha Anthony. Goondiwindi Police

The following day, Friday 4 March, we unpacked the fuselage and made preparations to unload the aircraft. Two engineers, Roger Peters (retd) and Jeff Calvert arrived on the midday flight and despite the 40+ heat, by 1700 the fuselage was off the trailer and wings refitted! Saturday saw the arrival of a second semi trailer from Sydney carrying the engines, tailplane and numerous other parts. Within a week of arrival, BPL was completely reassembled, ready for final stripping and painting which will take place as soon as weather permits.

The addition of VH-BPL to the collection at Longreach will further enhance the visitor experience and expand the story of Qantas while providing a link to the early history of TAA.

The success of the project is entirely due to the dedication of our volunteers and the support of Qantas Airways Ltd. Qantas Founders Outback Museum is greatly indebted to Jeff Swinson and his crew (who can turn a sow's ear into a silk purse) and Jeff Dobe, a thorough gentleman and extraordinarily talented transport operator.

Foot Note: The former TAA DC-3, "Hawdon", is based in Melbourne and maintained in pristine flying condition by a group of current and former employees. Hawdon was rescued from a pole at Tullamarine Airport a number of years ago and through a lot of dedicated hard work an important part of the TAA heritage was saved. Hawdon has been to Longreach a number of times in the last few years and the expert advice from the maintenance team is assisting with the rescue of VH-BPL.