

DC-3 VH-EAP

(Echo Alpha Papa)

in

Longreach, Queensland

By Ron Entsch 2005

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The life of DC-3 VH-EAP

This DC-3, “VH-EAP”, stands in Longreach as a tribute to the sterling service that over 13,000 of these aircraft gave to the world and, particularly, to the role it played in civil operation within Queensland and Papua New Guinea. Ending its effective service life as VH-BPL, it has been restored to its former glory by volunteers aided by financial assistance from QANTAS. During an almost 60 year flying career it served:

Royal Australian Air force	4 years (1944-1948)
Qantas Empire Airways	12 years (1948-1960)
Trans-Australia Airlines	13 years (1960-1973)
Air Nuigini	8 years (1973-1981)
Air Queensland	7 years (1981-1988)
DC-3 Queensland	3 years (1988-1991)
and languished for	13 years (1991-2003)

ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE

The constructor’s serial number for the aircraft was 42-12873 which indicates that it was built in 1942. The model was C-47A-20-DK, fitted with Pratt & Whitney Twin Wasp R1830-90C engines, and the United States Army Air Force gave it serial number 42-93009 prior to delivery to the USAAF on March 28, 1944.

It was transferred to the Royal Australian Air Force on April 12, 1944 with serial number A65-44, and received by 38 Squadron on April 21, 1944. Transporting cargo and personnel, it was transferred to 33 Squadron on December 29, 1944 to replace

A65-61. Two months later, on February 28, 1945, its undercarriage was retracted by the pilot whilst the aircraft was on the ground.

Over a year later, on March 26, 1946, it was received by DAP (what is this? Ed.) at Parafield, and allocated to 86(T) Wing on September 20, 1946, then to 37 Squadron on October 14, 1946, and then back to 38 Squadron on November 6, 1946. From there it was scheduled for disposal on July 10, 1947. On March 25, 1948 it was approved for issue to Qantas Empire Airways “on unpaid voucher”. Finally, it was sold to QEA on April 1, 1948, delivered to Mascot five days later, and put into service on April 26, 1948, registered as VH-EAP.

QANTAS EMPIRE AIRWAYS

The Australian government-owned QEA converted the aircraft to civil use in a DC-3 configuration, and designated it DC-3C-S1C3G.

Qantas was acquiring a number of similar aircraft to operate their services throughout eastern Australia and nearby territories, including Papua New Guinea. Flown by Captain W. Forgan-Smith and First Officer L.W. Purkiss, VH-EAP arrived in Lae on June 12, 1948 to establish DC-3 operations in Papua New Guinea.

Qantas operated internal Queensland services with DC-3 aircraft, including a service Brisbane-Mount Isa-Darwin until all these routes were passed to the Australian government-owned airline Trans-Australia Airlines, effective April 2, 1949. TAA was

formed in 1945. However, VH-EAP continued to operate throughout Papua New Guinea where it had been based since its acquisition by Qantas.

Qantas policy was to register its Lockheed Constellation overseas aircraft with the VH-EA.. block (Empire Airways). To make the P registration available for a new Constellation, to be VH-EAP, the DC-3 was re-registered VH-EBY on July 29, 1957.

TRANS-AUSTRALIA AIRLINES

Following a government direction, Qantas passed its Australia-Papua New Guinea services to Ansett-ANA and TAA on July 1, 1960. These airlines operated the route on alternate days. VH-EBY was sold to Australian National Airlines Corporation, trading as Trans-Australia Airlines, on September 1, 1960. Six DC-3 aircraft, including VH-EBY, and other smaller types were included in the transfer to TAA.

On December 8, 1960, TAA re-registered VH-EBY to VH-SBG, using the VH-SB.. sequence which TAA was to use on other aircraft following the naming of their internal flights “Sunbird” services. The aircraft was named “Lae”, but this was changed to “Kavieng” on November 25, 1969, in honour of the ports served by TAA in Papua New Guinea.

All mainland internal Papua New Guinea routes operated by TAA and Ansett were licensed by the new, independent Papua New Guinea government to its new national airline, Air Nuigini. On November 1, 1973, VH-SBG was sold to Air Nuigini for

\$A15,000 but the Department of Civil Aviation records the change-over date as February, 12 1974.

AIR NUIGINI

All the DC-3 aircraft were transferred to the local register under the prefix P2, and on June 1, 1974 VH-SBG became P2-SBG.

On November 6, 1975, all their aircraft were re-registered in the AN block (Air Nuigini) and P2-SBG subsequently became P2-ANP on June 15, 1976.

Air Nuigini decided to withdraw all its DC-3s from service in mid-1977 and P2-ANP was withdrawn from service on July 26, 1977, and was placed in storage at Jackson Field airport, Port Moresby, waiting for a new owner. Along with a number of other DC-3s, P2-ANP was sold, on February 5, 1979, to an American aircraft dealer, John J. Ford III in San Francisco. The aircraft was re-registered N5590A on February 25, 1980 in the name of Insured Aircraft Title Service Inc.

On June 30, 1981, the aircraft was supposed to go to the Red Cross in Thailand but it never left Jackson Field, Port Moresby.

AIR QUEENSLAND

The aircraft remained at Port Moresby until it, along with another two DC-3s, N5590C (c/n12187) and N55894 [c/n 9749), were sold to Bush Pilots Airways, in

Cairns. BPA was in need of more spare engines and other parts for its DC-3 fleet and planned to have the three aircraft stripped and the required parts and engines crated and shipped to Cairns. It transpired that two of the aircraft N5590A and N5590C were flown to Cairns with the engines and other parts of the third, N55894 on board as cargo. Both were delivered to Cairns on October 27, 1981.

The story of the ferry from Jackson Field, Port Moresby to Cairns was unusual, and is told by Captain Bob Mackinnon:

DC-3 N5590C to become VH-BPL

Bob Mackinnon was a pilot with Bush Pilots Airways cum BPA cum Air Queensland from 1971 to 1980 when he joined Air Niugini where he retired in 2000. A large part of his time with BPA was as a DC3 Captain and he was one of the youngest people of the era to fly the old gooney bird. It was the only aircraft he ever flew that was older than him!

This is his story.....

In 1981 I was approached by an Air Niugini engineer, Mark Shanley, to test fly some ex Air Niugini DC3s that had been mothballed in 1977 before being sold to an American in San Francisco. He introduced me to the owner's representative from San Francisco who authorised me to fly the aircraft for them, after inspecting my licences and log books.

We test flew three of them. One was flown to the USA and subsequently to South America, whilst the other two remained in Port Moresby.

I called Ron Entsch, general manager of BPA, on a turn-around in Cairns one night regarding another matter, and he told me that Air Queensland was purchasing the ex Air Niugini DC3s at Port Moresby and would be breaking them up to ship them to Cairns. I told him that I had recently test flown two of them and that I would be happy to fly them down to Cairns rather than see them scrapped.

He later contacted me to establish that this could be done. The whole deal was arranged and three captains from Air Queensland arrived in Port Moresby to assist me in flying these aircraft back to Cairns - Ken White, Jim McGowan and Ian Best. Ian and I were the only pilots holding a U.S. licence as the aircraft were still registered in the U.S.

They stayed with me for several days and abundant fellowship was enjoyed while we waited for engineer Mark Shanley to finish the preparations to both aircraft for the flight to Cairns.

The big day finally arrived! I went to the Control Tower at Jackson's Airport Port Moresby and requested some special departure procedures, based on the fact that this was probably the last time the DC3s would ever fly from there, and they were the last of Air Niugini's.

The local newspapers and TV crews were invited as well. The *Post Courier* arrived with no film and the TV crews had flat batteries in their cameras! Such was life then.

I planned that both aircraft take off simultaneously on the two separate runways, form up on downwind, and if there were no problems to do a formation flypast up the southern taxiway, at a very low altitude, prior to setting course for Cairns. This was approved and we took off. No apparent problems occurred so we formed up and flew up the taxiway as planned in a tight formation.

We did some feathering checks and other engine and control checks over Daugo Island prior to departing for Cairns. This put Ken White and I a little behind for our tandem ferry to Cairns with the other aircraft flown by Ian Best and Jim McGowan.

Satisfied that the aircraft was in flying condition, we set off for Cairns on a three and a half hour flight, over-water. Ken and I had taken a little more time checking our aircraft and the other guys had got ahead a little. We were extremely sparse on navigation equipment, having one ADF between the two aircraft and our radios were portable with the aerials jutting out the side windows. So we needed to remain in visual contact.

We were supposed to be the lead aircraft and were trying to catch up which, at about 150 knots, took a while. About halfway to Cairns we encountered a slow roll to the right, close to 90 degrees. Full opposite controls failed to make any effect but the aircraft slowly returned to normal attitude. We were probably about one mile behind the other aircraft at this stage and concluded that we got our problem from the slipstream of the aircraft ahead. No further flight problems occurred.

Nearing Cairns, the Air Niugini F28 was cruising its way to Port Moresby. Its captain, Dick Glassey, the original chief pilot for Air Niugini, excitedly called us up to say that he could see us below and that we looked great. I quickly asked him for his DME distance. He replied that it was 80 miles, so at last we had a distance to run. Of course, these days were long before GPS.

As we approached the Cairns coastline we closed up in formation for our arrival that had been arranged with Cairns Tower. We flew along the runway, again at very low altitude, then broke off into a pattern that separated us for a downwind landing.

Cairns Airport was lined with many people taking photos and observing but I have never seen any. Someone must have some photos somewhere!

On October 27, 1981, after 3.7 hours flying, we parked the aircraft. Customs arrived and the officer said "I thought there were three?" I told him the other one was broken up in the back of these two! He called to his mate and said "Fred, three of them came in two!" and slapped a quarantine sticker on the door.

Of those two aircraft one is on the pole at Cairns Airport as a memorial to Bush Pilots Airways and the other was registered VH-BPL destined not to be on a pole, but on resplendent display at the QANTAS Founders Museum at Longreach. I figured that would be the final time that I would ever fly a DC3, and it is great to see that it has its place in fame at Longreach.

On January 4, 1982, Bush Pilots Airways changed its name to Air Queensland. After an intensive overhaul N5590A was converted to a freighter and re-registered on the Australian register as VH-BPL on October 5, 1982. It carried the new Air Queensland livery and had AIR CARGO across the rear fuselage. It was the third aircraft to carry this registration previously assigned to a Bush Pilots' Cessna 402B and then to a Swearingen Metro.

Air Queensland received a take-over offer from TAA on February 6, 1985, and in a short time, TAA owned Air Queensland. Hence VH-BPL returned to the TAA stable.

On August 8, 1987, TAA announced that Air Queensland DC-3 operations would cease on September 30, 1987 with the remaining four DC-3s in service, including VH-BPL, being sold. The four aircraft were flown to Brisbane Airport during late December 1987, VH-BPL making the journey on December 29, 1987, the last of the once proud Bush Pilot/Air Queensland fleet to leave Cairns. All had their titles removed.

Late in 1987, a new southern Queensland-based aviation venture, Northeast Airlines, had been formed with the intention of again operating DC-3s from Cairns on similar flights that had been operated by Air Queensland. The new company announced its arrival in Cairns in December with a leased DC-3 VH-SBL. It announced that it was

negotiating the purchase of the four DC-3s from TAA, now re-named Australian Airlines.

DC-3 QUEENSLAND

But, in February 1988, the aircraft was registered in the name of DC-3 Queensland.

Then it was announced early in March 1988 that the four DC-3s had been purchased by another new company, Air Rambler (Australia) Pty Ltd which had been formed by a syndicate aligned to bus coach travel companies, including Rambler Tours based in Melbourne. It announced that the DC-3s would return to Cairns to operate as DC-3 Queensland, with Lionel Griffiths as its Chief Pilot, and that the company would employ many former Air Queensland staff since it was being wound down by Australian Airlines.

This ended the hopes of Northeast and its leased DC-3 VH-SBL was also acquired by DC-3 Queensland.

But VH-BPL was still at Eagle Farm at the end of May 1988. It returned to Cairns some time later when it operated occasional freighter flights. On May 15, 1990, it flew to Mendi, in Papua New Guinea, for filming of Camel cigarette advertisements. It was still in Cairns in July 1990, devoid of any marks apart from the blue and white colours it carried with Air Queensland. It had taken on a neglected appearance.

During 1991, DC-3 Queensland opened a Sydney base at Bankstown Airport and operated as DC-3 Australia. VH-BPL was based there in the expectation of securing freighter charters, and had been previously registered in DC-3 Australia's name during the previous year.

Languished

The company ceased operations and all aircraft were positioned at Bankstown, and auctioned off. The passenger aircraft were purchased by a new company, Dakota National Air, but VH-BPL was not wanted by them. On June 10, 1991, it was sold to Laurie McIver, the owner of Hoxton Park Flying School and registered to him on August 27, 1992. It was flown to nearby Hoxton Park airport in early 1993, where it languished. Prior to his untimely death, McIver stated that he intended to return it to the skies on charter work, and so its last flight was on January 10, 1993. VH-BPL's total flying time was 34,388 hours.

Ms Paulette Denise McIver became the registered owner of the aircraft on August 28, 1995. McIver advertised VH-BPL for sale and it was purchased by and registered to John D. Williams from Hobart, Tasmania, on October 29, 1996. He endeavoured to re-sell it. However, its condition was becoming such that it would have taken many dollars to return it to an airworthy condition.

On July 1, 2000, the aircraft was auctioned by Slattery's with time expired engines for an asking price of \$65,000. There were no bidders.

QANTAS FOUNDERS OUTBACK MUSEUM

The Qantas connection for that aircraft became well known and the Longreach-based Qantas Founders Outback Museum became interested in acquiring it. With no buyers coming forward, on February 20, 2004, Williams donated the aircraft “as is” to the Museum.

In the first year at Hoxton Park under QFOM ownership, a group of former and current flight crew and engineering staff cleaned the fuselage as best as they could, and removed an engine, the fin and stabilizer, and started paint stripping. The cabin interior also had the loose and flaking paint removed. The final job was removing the wings just prior to loading the aircraft onto a low loader.

The trip from Hoxton Park to Longreach took just three days, a fantastic effort by the transport company as the DC-3’s fuselage was a very over-size load. It arrived at dusk on March 3, 2005. By March 6, both wings had been re-fitted along with one engine, and paint stripping had re-started.

Soon it will be keeping company with another retired QANTAS aircraft, the Boeing 747-238B VH-EBQ which stands prominently and proudly at Longreach airport.

(Written for the QANTAS Founders Outback Museum in Longreach by Ron Entsch, July 2005)

Sources:

Roger McDonald

Allan Bovelt

Bob Sprague