

# Bush Pilots Airways

**I**n the big Wet of 1951, Bob Norman, a young ex-RAAF pilot who ran a dry-cleaning business in Cairns and who worked as a pilot for the Aerial Ambulance, received a phone call that was to send his life off on a completely new tack. It was from Les Clarke, the Aerial Ambulance's superintendent, who asked Norman to come in and see him urgently.

Norman lived for his flying. He would even instruct without pay if it came to it. But on this particular day he was exhausted after ferrying polio patients from the outback. Still, he went to see Clarke anyway.

Clarke came straight to the point: Vera Anning, the wife of grazier Bev Anning, had miscarried and was bleeding to death on their cattle station, Cargoan, 130 km west of Charters Towers. Bev had desperately tried to drive Vera out to hospital at Hughenden, 240 km away by road, but had been thwarted by mud and floods. There was only one option: fly her out. Would Norman be willing to land a Tiger Moth on a sloping paddock that had been partly cleared for a vegetable patch at Reedy Springs Station, 30 km from Cargoan? Men were at that moment removing the last stumps from the 180 m strip, Clarke said.

As they were talking, a call came through from the Postmaster at Pentland with a message from Cargoan. Vera's condition had worsened and she was now gravely ill. That decided Norman. He agreed to fly her out, even though he realised that if he had a bad landing on the way in he would be stuck at Reedy Springs for two months until the Wet ended.

Conditions were foul. In strong winds and heavy rain, Norman flew his little Tiger Moth south over Mount Fox, across the Seaview Ranges and over the flooded Clarke and Burdekin Rivers. Meanwhile, Bev Anning was moving heaven and earth to negotiate the sodden road to Reedy Springs in his old truck, his wife on a wire stretcher on the back. For part of the way he was towed by a party in a four-wheel-drive truck from Reedy Springs.

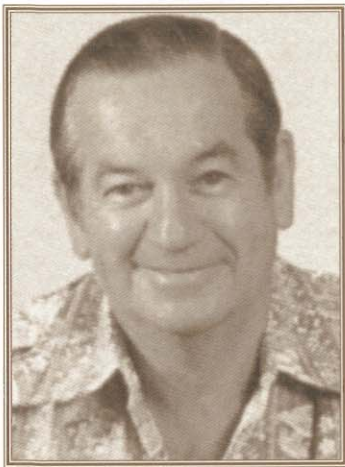
When Norman arrived over Reedy Springs he was horrified. The strip was on a spur with a swamp at one end and a tree-covered ridge

at the other. He would have to land uphill and downwind towards the trees.

He touched down going too fast, but the tail wheel dug into the rain-soaked ground and brought the plane to a halt. Vera was loaded into the front cockpit and the plane took off again, reaching Hughenden to find the strip under water. As Norman put the Tiger Moth down, mud covered the plane, Vera and himself. But she was safe.

The following day, Norman took off for Cairns but the weather turned nasty and forced him down at Reedy Springs once more. It was while he and Bev Anning were waiting for the weather to clear that they hatched a plan to establish an outback emergency air service for graziers. The result was Bush Pilots Airways (BPA).

To start with, the Tiger Moth was the airline's only aircraft, but by 1957 it had 11 four-seat Auster Autocars flying throughout Cape York Peninsula, the Atherton Tableland and the north Queensland plains. Syd Williams (later Sir Sydney) took over as chairman and managing director in the same year. In 1959 the company bought a Cessna 182 and began a flying surgeon service, based at Longreach. Its first scheduled service began between Karumba and Cairns in 1968, when Craig Mostyn & Co. Pty Ltd became involved in the company.



Sir Sydney Williams O.B.E.

CM had occasionally chartered aircraft from the airline for various purposes, including spotting prawns. At about this time CM was becoming involved in a stock-feed manufacturing plant outside Mareeba with Fred Beaver and the Shaw Savill shipping line. CM and Shaw Savill had the majority shareholding, and although Beaver had some financial involvement, he was doing most of the practical work on the spot. One weekend Syd Williams bumped into RL and Dennis Stillwell of Shaw Savill and told them that BPA was looking for money to buy twin-engined Cessna 402s so that it could tender for the Gulf and station run that ANA wanted to give up. Williams, being a great organiser, soon had Shaw Savill interested in taking up shares, and RL, not to be outdone, said he would buy into the airline as well. So CM and Shaw Savill put in a total of \$100,000, with the shipping line contributing the larger share.

Shaw Savill kept its share of BPA and Stillwell remained on the board until the shipping line pulled out of the Australian scene with the advent of containerisation in the late 1960s, at which point CM and Williams bought its shares in the airline. Between them they owned 60 per cent of the company, though at no point did CM hold more than about 45 per cent. Other shares were held by graziers and small shareholders. Bob Mostyn, as interested in aircraft and flying as ever, joined the board and eventually became deputy chairman.

Bev Anning was still on the board when Bob Mostyn joined, but Bob Norman had retired some years previously.

Early in the relationship, CM put in more money to finance expansion into larger aircraft and a bigger route network. By the early 1970s, BPA was flying five DC-3s to remote mining areas in north Queensland such as Mount Isa. This helped Williams persuade MIM, Queensland Mines Ltd and Comalco (as well as the State Government Insurance Office) to invest in BPA, eventually reducing CM's share to about 20 per cent.

In 1974 the airline began operating from Brisbane to Toowoomba, Dalby and Roma and in the following year it was flying to Rockhampton, adding Cunnamulla, Biloela and the Burnett soon afterwards. Four Britten-Norman Trislanders joined its fleet in 1975 and two Cessna 404s in 1977. In 1980 the flying surgeon service was established in a second centre, Roma, from which surgeons could be flown to outback hospitals. At one point BPA was registered in Papua New Guinea and ran a charter service for mining companies there.

A deal was struck in September 1981 enabling BPA to streamline its reservations and ground-handling arrangements through Ansett (formerly ANA). This strengthened relationship led to BPA changing its name to Air Queensland. By the beginning of 1982, Air Queensland was flying some 280,000 passengers annually to 89 centres in the State using a 33-aircraft fleet that included six Metro propjets (built by Fairchild of the USA), three Fokker Friendship F27 propjets, six DC-3s, four Cessna 402s, two Cessna 404s, five Twin Otters (one of which had acquired some bullet holes during a UN stint in Africa) and the Trislanders. Later it added two ATR 42s, built by a European consortium.

Syd Williams organised many fun excursions for friends, colleagues and people in high places. Once he flew a group of guests, including Michael Somare, previously Papua New Guinea Prime Minister, to Mackay and then had them ferried by boat to Brampton, Hamilton and Hayman Islands on a Saturday. While they were on Hayman, Sir Edward "Ned" Williams (Syd's brother) encouraged the others to bet on a horse due to race in Sydney and selected by his wife Dot. It bolted in, forcing the island's TAB to borrow money from the hotel to cover the payout. Next day the guests were ferried to Lindeman Island and then back to Brampton Island, where, amid a fanfare of speeches and acclaim before a number of politicians, the company's first Twin Otter was introduced to the public. The aircraft had been bought from TAA.

On BPA's 21st birthday, Williams loaded a DC-3 with the company's directors and their wives and flew with them around

Some Bush Pilots Airways Board members visiting the top of Australia – Cape York Peninsula – to inspect land leased from the Queensland Government, on which the Wilderness Lodge was subsequently built.

Left to right (back row): Allan McInnes, Bob Horseman, Bev Anning, Alan Hope

(front row): Bob Mostyn, Syd Williams.



Papua New Guinea. On another occasion Williams, Bob Mostyn, Bob Harrison and other directors flew in one of the airline's new Metro propjets, which had not yet entered service, to Thursday Island, Bamaga, Weipa (as guests of Comalco) and then Cairns for a ceremony to christen the first of the Fokker Friendships.

In 1983 it was discovered that Air Queensland had in its fleet a DC-3 that had been the first aircraft flown by Cathay Pacific. When the Hong Kong-based airline asked if it could have its plane back, Air Queensland duly redecorated it in the Cathay Pacific livery, fitted it with a pair of its best engines and had it flown to Sydney by two of its own pilots – because Cathay Pacific had no crews trained to fly it. There, after a small handing-over ceremony by Bob Mostyn on 18 September, the DC-3, still under the control of the Air Queensland pilots, took off ahead of a Cathay Pacific jumbo jet, flew up the coast to Cairns, across to Papua New Guinea and then to the Philippines, where it was handed over to the John Swire group, owners of Cathay Pacific. In Hong Kong, the old engines were replaced in the aircraft before it was put on permanent display in a museum. The newer engines were flown back to Australia.

By the mid-1980s, both TAA and Ansett recognised the benefits to be gained from acquiring Air Queensland. Air Queensland already

had the ATR 42s in service when Ansett bid 80c for the smaller airline's shares, par value of 50c (the price CM had originally paid for them). TAA came back with an offer of \$1, which Ansett duly matched; so TAA went up to \$1.25. Ansett countered with a matching offer but attached a number of conditions. In May 1985 Air Queensland shareholders accepted the TAA bid and sold for a total of \$7.7 million, even though their company was contracted to put passengers into the Ansett system.

An article by John Stackhouse in *The Sydney Morning Herald* criticised Air Queensland's directors for failing to disclose the contract, an accusation that was quite unfounded. The ensuing legal wrangle resulted in Fairfax having to pay \$85,000 (half of which went on legal expenses) in settlement to the former directors. TAA honoured Air Queensland's contract with Ansett until it expired.

CM did not gain many direct benefits from being involved with BPA. It never used BPA's aircraft for flying its prawns out of Karumba, for instance, although its competitors did. Its investment was profitable only at the very end, when the sale price yielded a good return. But it was an adventure, something new and exciting, and as such it fitted in with CM's (and in particular RL's) pioneering philosophy.

