

The History of
SOMERSET AIRWAYS
LONGREACH, QUEENSLAND

By Ron Entsch 2005

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Introduction

Australia's airlines fly the majority of hours operated by all civil aircraft, but they are not the entire story. Since 1945, many small operators have appeared in Australia. A typical example is Somerset Airways, based in Longreach, the old QANTAS base.

Somerset was born in 1950 at Muttaborra. In 1952 it moved its operation to Longreach and was headquartered in the original QANTAS hangar. It grew into a private company in 1956 with more shareholders; then became a public company in 1958 when more capital was needed to acquire aircraft.

In 1963 Somerset was taken over by Bush Pilots Airways, a Queensland company of similar characteristics. During its time, Somerset Airways faithfully served the people of central western Queensland who were in need of urgent food, supplies and transportation, particularly during the wet seasons.

It had to survive during the dry to serve during the wet.

Gordon Lee – the founder

After the war Captain Gordon F. Lee, (Mentioned in Dispatches), a chartered accountant and the founder of Somerset Airways, was asked by his father, the Queensland dealer for Armstrong-Siddeley cars and Albion trucks, who also had a stock transport business operating with a diesel Albion at Charleville, to run a business and mail services at Muttaborra which he subsequently bought. The mail services were between Muttaborra and Longreach, and Muttaborra and Prairie. Lee had been a transport officer during the war and, prior to the war, had been assistant secretary of the RACQ with which he later maintained close links. Prior to seeing his father, Lee had thought he would go to Alice Springs to be a public accountant, with encouragement from Eddie Connellan, but his plans changed and he headed for Muttaborra in December 1945.

Muttaborra

After a temporary residence with the previous owner of the business in 1946, Lee collected his wife Isabelle and young son from their home in Brisbane, and drove them a thousand miles inland in a Chev utility, a very eventful trip. They traded as Somerset Garage and Somerset Agencies, which included the Armstrong-Siddeley and Landrover franchises.

Lee also had a tilt at politics in the late forties and early fifties as the Country Party candidate for Gregory.

Somerset Agencies was the agent for Trans-Australia Airlines which operated DC-3 aircraft throughout the channel country servicing small towns like Muttaborra and Longreach. Classified as “essential rural” services, TAA was subsidised by the Australian government as the revenue from passengers and cargo were inadequate to meet operating costs. The DC-3 aircraft were sister ships to VH-EAP, on static display at the Museum. Gradually, the subsidy reduced and airline services ceased.

Lee’s wife, Isabelle, undertook to stay there for five years but ended up staying for 28 years. It was really she who initiated the birth of Somerset Airways. After the “big wet” in 1950 when his family had to be lifted out in a Richmond grazier’s Tiger Moth, Isabelle insisted that Gordon either buy an aircraft or she was leaving! For 80 days it had rained 53 inches. In the wet season, this very rich wool area is bogged down: in the dry, it is a sea of dust.



Figure 1

Gordon Lee M.B.E., O.A.M., and his wife Isabelle at Bribie Island where they moved in 1974 (pic taken 1989). Gordon was awarded the Red Cross Meritorious Service Medal and Isabelle was awarded the Red Cross Distinguished Service Medal for her 43 years of support and work for Red Cross.

Origin of the name

Lee's father was an accomplished musician and singer whose favourite song was "We've come up from Somerset" so he followed his father whose business was called Somerset Transport and naturally called his new venture "Somerset Airways".

First aircraft

The search began for a suitable aircraft and finally an Auster J1B "Aiglet" was chosen. It was initially registered VH-KAC and later changed to VH-SAC. Not being a pilot, Gordon engaged Keith Galloway, from the Royal Queensland Aero Club, as his first pilot. There was no airstrip at Muttaborra so Gordon set about clearing a suitable area behind his residence, with a grid made from a light railway line, dragged behind a Landrover. When parked, the aircraft was tied down to four gallon drums, but the livestock became a problem when a cow chewed at the fabric on a wing!

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Somerset Airways



in the **“AUSTER” CABIN MONOPLANE**

Our Licensed Charter Service is intended for the use of people of the Central West for Emergency Flying Medical and Dental Services, Transport to Towns, Rail and Airports, for Stock Inspections, Supply Dropping, Survey and Flying Instruction. Rates are approximately the same as for road taxis.

Some SPECIFICATIONS of our AIRCRAFT—

- Carries Pilot, 2 Passengers and as much luggage as you would take in an airliner.
- Range of 480 miles at over 100 m.p.h.
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- The finest and safest British built aircraft of its type.
- DeHavilland Gipsy Major 130 h.p. engine.

PLEASE MAKE YOUR AIRSTRIP URGENTLY AND PAINT NAME ON HOMESTEAD ROOF

Phone 10 or 35 Muttaborra

DU73714

Figure 2

Somerset Agencies advertised on its letterhead (which showed an Auster), that it was an agent for Kingsford Smith Aviation Service, at Bankstown, which specialized in Auster aircraft sales and service.

Airstrips

At the bottom of that advertisement appeared the plea to station owners: PLEASE MAKE YOUR AIRSTRIP URGENTLY AND PAINT NAME ON HOMESTEAD ROOF

It was not understood by most station people that, from the air, one homestead looked the same as another, and it was difficult for the pilots to ensure which was the right property. The sameness of the terrain added to the navigating difficulties. However, the flat plain country was conducive to creating airstrips with ease, as Lee had done at Muttaborra.

Customers

Lee wanted an aeroplane to pick up drivers of marooned trucks but as soon as he started this rescue work with a hired pilot, he was overwhelmed with requests from graziers and stockmen to rescue or feed marooned stock and people, to drop mails.

The aircraft did general charter work, food and supply drops being necessary since few grazing properties had airstrips. Isabelle was the booking clerk, did the paper work, and also flew on air drops. They became quite accomplished at dropping bottles of rum, packed in loaves of bread, to property owners and shearing teams. After the wet when blow-flies were bad, chemicals were especially packed for dropping.

The civil aviation authority allowed the aircraft to fly 50 hours between major inspections and this meant flying to the coast which consumed five hours flying each way, thus sacrificing 10 of the 50 hours. A Somerset Garage motor mechanic was approved to do daily inspections prior to each day's flight.

The Proctor

Primaries general manager, Gordon Reid, became Somerset's biggest customer and this influenced Gordon to re-locate the aircraft to Longreach. As a result, he then needed a local manager and another aircraft to meet demand so he responded to an advertisement in *Aircraft*, placed by an ex-RAF navigator and pilot, Jesse Luxton. He advised that he would find a suitable aircraft and ferry it from England. He procured a Percival Proctor 5 which cost £600 but it ultimately proved, as Lee feared, to be totally unsuitable in the high temperatures of inland Queensland. However, Gordon Lee agreed to buy that aircraft and to engage Jesse Luxton as a managing partner in the business, in 1952.

Luxton would have preferred to purchase a DeHavilland Dragonfly or Rapide, both having two engines, and this would have been preferred by his largest customers, but without suitable airstrips at that time, this desire was out of the question. So the Proctor, registered G-AIEV, headed for Australia.

The ferrying of the Proctor from England, starting from Blackbushe on November 1, 1951, was breaking all records until it reached Soemba Island in Indonesia when a sudden squall struck the aircraft as it was taxiing after landing. It lifted the Proctor off the ground, and bounced it heavily on one wheel which then damaged the main spar. Repairs could not be undertaken locally so the wings were removed and the whole plane taken to the coast. After 17 days Luxton finally found a cattle barge on which he floated the aircraft two miles out to a Dutch steamer which transported him and the aircraft to Jakarta. There a clever artisan replaced the damaged wooden spar with special Oregon pine that he had saved from a packing case. Finally the aircraft

reached Longreach just 15 weeks late with Luxton having endured an interesting experience, and with Lee wondering if he would ever see the aircraft!

The Proctor was re-registered VH-ALR. One of its flights, in March 1952, with Jesse Luxton in command, was to transport a sick child from Muttaborra to Longreach hospital at night. An emergency flare-path was laid at Muttaborra.

That year, glue break-away was found in the woodwork of the centre section and wing spars, the deterioration being attributed to the dry and hot operating area of central and western Queensland. It was ferried to and repaired at Archerfield, and sold in November 1954 to Sunraysia Air Taxi at Mildura. After various other ownership changes it was broken up at Moorabbin in 1962 when the Department of Civil Aviation grounded all Proctor 5 aircraft in Australia due to glue deterioration.

Expansion

The company expanded to Mackay chiefly to operate service to Lindeman Island, and to Roma, using the two- and three-passenger Auster aircraft.

When Somerset became a private company in 1956, Luxton was granted a quantity of shares as an incentive. Lee and Luxton shared joint managing directorships, Lee being 'commercial' and Luxton 'technical'. As the two major shareholders, Lee with about 11,000 shares and Luxton having about 6,000 shares, they set forth to develop Somerset, using the company call-sign *SOMAIR* for telegrams and ground to ground radio communications . The air/ground communications were handled through the

Department of Civil Aviation's Flight Service Unit which was also based at Longreach.

Another big wet, when the Thomson River flooded in 1955, caused a further spurt of development which required more capital. Other shareholders held less than 1,000 shares but they were vital sources of capital and security to acquire more aircraft. The increased number of shareholders necessitated the company going public, and it was then that Jesse Luxton was made sole managing director, with Gordon Lee as Chairman.

By 1957, the company had six more Austers – VH-SAD, VH-SAB, VH-SAE, VH-SAF, VH-SAG and VH-SAH. By using the block registration “VH-SA..”, pilots and others instantly knew by the “Sierra Alpha” call-sign that it was a Somerset Airways aircraft. Somerset pilots were carrying doctors, dentists, policemen, undertakers, businessmen and civil servants, transforming life in the black-soil plains around Longreach.

VH-SAG was destroyed in 1957 when it struck a dead tree during a forced landing at Lonesome Station near Injune. In August 1959, VH-SAE a J5F Aiglet Trainer, was sold to R.R. Sara at Longreach. Dick Sara was the first pilot for the Flying surgeon Service which commenced operating from Longreach in June 1959 with a single-engine VFR Cessna 182. Two years later the aircraft was replaced with an IFR twin-engine Cessna 310 and Sara departed to join one of the major airlines.

VH-SAB went to Versace Sawmilling in Brisbane, VH-SAD to D.M. Henderson in Winton, VH-SAF to Grant's Aviation Service in Mount Isa and VH-SAH to R.F. Lillyman in Richmond, Queensland.

The company had disposed of most of the "wood and rag" Austers and invested in more modern and efficient "all metal" aircraft – in 1958 a Cessna 182A VH-SAI which was traded in 1961 on Beech Bonanza VH-SAK, and, in 1959, a Cessna 180B VH-SAJ. In 1963, the new owner, Bush Pilots, sold both aircraft, the Cessna 180 going to Stol Air Services in Port Moresby which had a fleet of tail-wheel aircraft.

Merger

An opportunity arose to become stronger by merging with Bush Pilots Airways which was a kindred operator in far North Queensland, based in Cairns. Its fleet comprised six Austers and three Cessnas and, it too, had mostly graziers as shareholders who needed an air service during the wet. It seemed that advantages could be gained in dealing with suppliers of fuel and spare parts, and the bureaucratic regulators, being only some examples.

However, merger negotiations foundered when Jesse Luxton, the managing director, opposed the merger. Three of the four directors, Gordon Lee (Chairman), Jack te Kloot and Bill Allen Jnr voted for the deal, but Luxton played a spoiling game. Consequently, the merger negotiations ceased and both parties retreated.

Flying Surgeon Service

Soon after, the opportunity arose to tender for the new State Government contract for the Flying Surgeon Service which was to be based in Longreach. It called for a single engine aircraft capable of conveying the surgeon, his anaesthetist plus their gear to hospitals throughout central and western Queensland. Somerset Airways was well placed to operate this service and this would have supported the company generally.

However, the contract was won by Bush Pilots Airways, a bitter blow to the local operator. Suspicions were held about the tactics employed by Bush Pilots to make this coup but the outcome was indisputable, and this soured relations between the two companies. Bush Pilots took every opportunity to entrench its name and reputation in the local area and with government. But Somerset simply soldiered on.

Survival

The company continued in spite of the drier years. Lee claimed “it had to survive during the dry to serve in the wet”. Revenue from the two mail services was inadequate and neither government was prepared to provide subsidy. These tribulations, and efforts to grow, created management tensions. Jesse Luxton persuaded the other members of the board to demand that the Chairman Gordon Lee should move to Longreach to manage the business. Lee was angry and called an emergency meeting of the board where he tendered his resignation. He would not tolerate such disloyalty. Jack teKloot was elected Chairman, with Lee remaining an involved participant, as the major shareholder.

Later, the board sacked Jesse Luxton as managing director and appointed Jack Smith, an aircraft engineer, as general manager. Luxton sued the company for wrongful dismissal and the matter was finally settled out of court. Despite this acrimony, the company continued its usual operation and service to central Queensland.

Tragedy

On May 12, 1961 tragedy struck. Jack Smith was killed, along with the pilot and three other passengers – D.C.H. Barrett, W.D. Taylor and R. Ferguson, when a new Beech Baron, registered N433T, and flown by an American sales and demonstration pilot, Rear-Admiral (Ret'd) E. Dinning, crashed three miles west of Longreach. It was to be a short demonstration flight, the last for the morning, before departing for Archerfield.

When its return was overdue, initially, it was thought that the party had gone to Barrett's property, nearby, for lunch. But a check revealed that this was not the case and a search commenced. One of the searchers, Somerset's pilot, Peter (Robbie) Roberts found the wreck mid-afternoon on that fateful day. (More in the Addendum)

It was a "joy ride" that went terribly wrong. This dreadful accident still rests in the minds of the local residents, and the relatives and friends of the deceased.

It was a pivotal event that had Somerset's board reeling about the company's future. Not only did the accident create a fear of flying, but the company also lost its key person, Jack Smith, a competent manager and engineer who was irreplaceable in a remote location. This turned out to be a mortal blow.

A possible alternative was to invite Bush Pilots to resume merger discussions.

Take-over

This time, the advantage was lost to Somerset, and Bush Pilots would only offer a takeover proposal. After considerable discussion and concern about the future of local air services, Bush Pilots assured Somerset that it would continue, as Somerset had done, and so the deal was consummated. It involved a mixture of cash and exchanging four Somerset shares for one Bush Pilots' share. Bush Pilots was a public company, but not registered on the Stock Exchange, and this made the later disposal of its shares difficult.

Thus, in 1963, Somerset Airways disappeared from the Australian aviation landscape to the great disappointment of its local supporters. Jack teKloot joined the Bush Pilots' board and travelled from "Marmboo", his property near Longreach, to board meetings in Cairns in his little Cessna 172. The linkage between the companies endured until teKloot retired from the board. Though previously a WW2 Squadron Leader fighter pilot, flying Spitfires and Mustangs, over 20 years later, the lengthy VFR flight in sometimes inclement weather, ultimately became too onerous.

The End

The tough operating environment in the central and western areas did not change, and now Bush Pilots had to face the same challenges in its heartland, north of the Townsville/Mount Isa railway line, of low revenue in too many dry seasons, and too few profitable wet seasons.

They had immediately disposed of Somerset's principal aircraft, Beech Bonanza VH-SAK and Cessna 180 VH-SAJ, because they were non-standard to the Bush Pilots fleet, and replaced them with five-passenger Cessna 205s. Several QANTAS pilot cadets, on secondment to Bush Pilots for 15 months, were based there to gain flying experience before ascending to being second officers in the big jets, the Boeing 747s.

The old QANTAS hangar continued to be their Longreach headquarters until they pulled out completely in August 1966, only three years after promising to serve the area, as Somerset had done. After returning its aircraft to Cairns, Bush Pilots sold what few assets remained to Rex Aviation, the Cessna aircraft distributor for Australia. Rex saw potential in the area for aircraft sales to graziers.

The Flying Surgeon Service was Bush Pilots' only remaining link with Longreach.

When it attempted to return in 1982 to take over the TAA F27 services, political hell broke loose. Though TAA had advised its intention to withdraw from its remote F27 routes in Queensland, the state government soon discovered that replacement Metro aircraft being proposed by Air Queensland (the new name of Bush Pilots), was not acceptable to the locals. This failure forced TAA to continue for a few more years.

QANTAS Founders Outback Museum

This Museum has brought QANTAS back to Longreach after so many years, in a circuitous way, to preserve its roots. Somerset Airways was taken over by Bush Pilots/Air Queensland, which later was taken over by TAA/Australian Airlines, which was then taken over by QANTAS. The common thread was that all of these companies played a vital role in serving remote Queensland communities.

Without a doubt, flying has been the outstanding aspect in the development of the Australian bush, in the many ways it transformed life in the outback.

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

Sources:

Gordon F. Lee, MBE, OAM.

In 1972, Lee was hospitalised with a nervous breakdown, with stress caused by the business difficulties afflicting the grazing industry. He remained in Muttaborra until 1974 when he moved to Bribie Island and reverted to being a tax agent. In 1994, Gordon and Isobelle moved into a retirement village. Isabelle passed away in 1997. In 2000, at age 85, Gordon was an Olympic Games torch bearer, and still runs at age 92.

He received no remuneration or director's fee from Somerset during the 13 years. Later, Gordon was honoured with an MBE for communications and service to the community in central western Queensland, and later, at Bribie Island, an O.A.M. for services to the RSL and Red Cross.

Roger McDonald, aviation historian & author

Stanley Brogden, aviation author

Longreach Leader

Longreach Printing Co Ltd

BUSHIES: A History of Bush Pilots-Air Queensland, Ron Entsch, 2001.

Geoff Goodall, aviation researcher & author of *War Birds Directory*

Historical Milestones

- 1950 Born at Muttaborra with Auster J3 “Aiglet”
- 1952 Proctor aircraft arrived from England
- 1952 Operation moved to Longreach
- 1956 Became a private company
- 1957 Expanded to Mackay and Roma
- 1958 Became a public company
- 1959 Merger discussions with Bush Pilots Airways
- 1960 Jack Smith took over management
- 1961 Beech Baron accident – Smith killed
- 1963 Taken over by Bush Pilots Airways

Addendum

Beech Baron crash May 12, 1961

A twin-engine Beech 55 Baron registered N433T, flown by retired U.S. navy pilot, Rear-Admiral Edward Binning (45), had been on a global sales and demonstration tour through Europe, India and Malaya. It had arrived in Darwin on Tuesday, May 9, 1961. The Baron had a top speed of 230 m.p.h. and was fitted with long-range fuel tanks.

The new aircraft, costing £35,000, was destined for delivery to Connellan Airways in Alice Springs after it had completed its tour and conducted demonstration flights at Longreach, Archerfield and Bankstown.

Connellan had already reserved the Australian registration VH-CLL for the Baron.

Binning was a senior sales and demonstration pilot for Beech Aircraft Corporation of Kansas, U.S.A. Formerly, he was commanding officer the U.S. Navy's 118 Volunteer Bomber Patrol Squadron, which served in the Philippines during World War II. He had visited Longreach about six months earlier.

On the flight from Darwin, Binning was accompanied by pilot Peter Benjamin who was travelling on to Brisbane with him. On Friday, May 12, 1961, they had planned to depart Longreach between 10.00 and 10.30 a.m. for Archerfield, where some 20 prospective clients awaited them to do a series of demonstration flights. These people had been mustered by the Queensland agent for Beech, Ian Wilson.

Benjamin was left to do the flight plan to Archerfield whilst Binning did the last of the local demonstration flights that morning, departing at 9.27 a.m. There were four passengers on the fatal flight, some being last-minute additions to the team to fill the seats.

When the aircraft failed to return, Benjamin raised the alarm. Serious concern was not then aroused because some believed that the party could have stopped off for lunch at one of the passenger's property, 15 miles away. Wilson is quoted as saying that Ed Binning was probably having a cup of tea with some grazier, somewhere; that with a machine like that, nothing could go wrong; if one engine fails, you don't even notice it. Later, Wilson claimed that something "most illogical must have occurred".

At 1.30, the Department of Civil Aviation issued an alert, for all aircraft to be on the lookout for the Baron. At 2.30, a full-scale search was ordered.

Four light aircraft flown by charter pilots and graziers who were private pilots, took off from Longreach and fanned out over a wide area. At 3.45, Somerset Airways pilot, Peter Roberts, radioed that he had found the plane "badly smashed". By 4.05, police and an ambulance bearer were at the scene, having driven cross-country through tall grass to reach the site.

The aircraft had crashed in an open paddock on Kerfield Station, three miles west of the town. It was so badly damaged that only the tail-planes was intact. All occupants had been killed instantly by the impact. Four well-respected Longreach identities had been lost, in one of the most stunning blows ever inflicted on Longreach.

David Charles Hugh Barrett, 42, owner of Leander Station, 15 miles from Longreach, former shire councillor and graziers' association official, left a widow and seven children aged from 4 to 15 years. Barrett was a wartime bomber and transport pilot, and recently had flown his own plane. He was laid to rest under a tall gum tree on Leander.

John Joseph Smith, 39, manager of Somerset Airways, left a widow and five children up to 14 years. Jack Smith was buried at Longreach cemetery.

William David Taylor, 25, the representative of a local optometrical firm, was known as the flying optometrist. He was single and lived with his mother.

Robert Ferguson, 50, radio technician with the Department of Civil Aviation, left a widow and 3 children.

Taylor and Ferguson were buried at Brisbane. Binning's body was flown to America for burial in the Arlington Memorial Cemetery, Washington.