

Spa, Station and Runway Dinner Fly Away – June 2018 by Colin & Britta Bruce

At our first flyaway dinner, somewhere between the second glass of red wine and desert, this member of the Dreamliner crew (Colin and Britta Bruce) managed to 'volunteer' to be the scribe for an article for the Club newsletter of the Spa, Station and Runway Dinner flyaway that was about to begin. This was such a fabulous flyaway it will be hard to capture the spirit, the friendship and the fun that we all had in this adventurous week. David Ind (Sparky) had been scratching around for a while to put together a club flyaway that would start at Lighting Ridge, with relaxation in the artesian thermal springs, a visit to historical Ray Station in outback Queensland, and finally wrapping the week up with the annual Runway Dinner at Shute Harbour/Whitsunday Airport.



Although Sparky may not have had success at fossicking for opals at Lighting Ridge, as evidenced by his desperation to dig deeper in this picture, David and Vicki put together a fabulous week of flying adventure for our Piper aircraft and crews. A sincere Thankyou to David and Vicki for this.

The fleet comprised of 10 Piper aircraft, ranging from the elegant vintage Piper Pacer tail dragger, to Archers, Arrows, a Pathfinder, a Saratoga, a Seneca and a Cherokee 6 - all much loved Piper aircraft. Club members came from Devonport Tasmania, Lilydale (Vic), Bankstown and Wedderburn in Sydney, Orange, Tamworth and Cairns (QLD).

Some of us like to 'add on' to trips or leave more buffer time for weather uncertainties, and so there were four aircraft that joined up at Bourke a day earlier for a Darling River cruise and dinner at the pub.

Lighting Ridge

Even though we came from all directions, we arrived at Lighting Ridge reasonably around the same time in the early afternoon of Sunday the 17th June. The 'Piper Shuttle Bus' was kept busy with crews and bags to be taken into the Wallangulla Motel. A lovely welcome dinner was had at the new Confusion Café, and although the name is not inspiring, the food and service was great! The following day two tours were planned, a local 'city' tour and the Black Hand Tour, finishing off with a twilight visit to the artesian springs.

Naturally, somewhere during the day there would be time for a visit to the John Murray iconic art gallery, the opal shops and the incredible hardware shop that truly sells everything!

The city tour included the original settlement of Lighting Ridge which is a few kilometres to the west of the current town. The original settlement has innovative rusty relics (some still used) reflecting the 'make do' of times past with shanties around diggings that also reflect the humour of isolation and hope/hopelessness of opal fever.



The Black Hand Tour went to the Chambers of the Black Hand Opal and Mine Art Carving site on the edge of the original settlement. There are 84 steps down to the mine which is now a labyrinth of art carvings created by Ron Canlin. Ron Canlin turned his attention to sandstone carving after the mine was a flop in yielding any opals for him. The mine also has the only underground opal shop, which was well supported by our ladies. At the end of a dusty day it was time to go to the Artesian Springs. In true Piper club spirit, swimming togs were donned for a soak in the 40 deg C natural springs; luxury at the end of a great day. Dinner that night was at the delightful Bruno's Restaurant.



Ray Station

Tuesday saw the Piper fleet departing for Ray Station, about 42 km west of Quilpie. Some chose the Lightning Ridge - Charleville route to Ray Station, others chose the Lightning Ridge - Quilpie - Ray Station route. Subject to route, flying was about 225 to 240 nm for the day.

Quilpie for us was interesting; the airport had quite a bit of historical information on Amy Johnson who landed there on her flight from England to Australia. Also of interest was a Cessna that was configured for bait dropping (for dogs) on remote properties. A very smelly and unpleasant sight. We would see this Cessna again at Ray Station.



Ray Station is a long 1.5 km strip, not that easy to identify from the air, however the already parked Piper aircraft and station rattle bus certainly made it easier! The strip is about 1km from the homestead with the shearer's quarters a bit further on. Mark and Sandra Tully provided fantastic hospitality to our group. Even though Mark was still recovering from a major fall a few

weeks earlier, he still managed to entertain us on the outdoors piano, helped by our fleet musician, Cath, from the Doc crew.

Ray Station was settled in 1874 and it remains one of a few properties that has retained ownership within the original family (Tully and Durack families).



The feeling of vastness, drought, history, sadness, survival, and beauty all came through in the amazing sunsets each day. The colours as the sun sets in the west each afternoon was incredible as was the singing of a flock of budgerigars bathing and drinking from a small pond of water that was dripping from the irrigation pipes which serviced the accommodation. These things are made for memories.

Memories always come back to the campfire each evening, of stories told 'true or false', sharing of flying experiences, wine enhanced poetry - you have to love the Australian outback!



Our two nights at Ray Station meant we had a full free day. This started with a tour of the homestead. The homestead is a museum in itself, with pictures and documentation gathered over the generations. Mark and Sandra have a completely open, warm and humble way of sharing their life story, whilst entwining their heritage into it. Also included was a visit to the family cemetery, the shearing shed, an out country tour to unique rock water holes and opal fossicking. After a wonderful home cooked meal by Mark and Sandra, it was movie time. Mark had digitised many hours of film into a 45 minute movie capturing his childhood and their life at Ray Station. A great way to finish our stay and understanding the tough times that the droughts and 'privately owned' stations have in the outback. Australia so needs to support them!

Winton

After a country-style breakfast it was time to bid farewell to Mark, Sandra and Ray Station. The flight to Winton was about 225nm. It was re-fuel on arrival for the majority of us. Most of the group jumped on the bus at the airport and headed off to Dinosaur Country! A smaller group went to check in at the North Gregory Hotel, relax with a café moment, stroll the main street of Winton and take in the new Waltzing Matilda Centre. In the afternoon, there was an excellent Banjo Patterson Poetry recital in the courtyard. Dinner that night was enjoyed in the dining room of the hotel. Oh, how good to be able to connect to the internet world again!



Shute Harbour

Friday was the flight to our final destination for this fly away. Winton to Shute Harbour was 341 nm, weather and visibility was good during the first half of the flight but further on in the flight the coastal clouds made themselves obvious. Those with capacity went direct, while a few of us chose to go in for extra fuel at Charters Towers. These less frequented airfields always have points of interest. Charters Towers had plaques outside and pictures inside the terminal of their links with the US Air Force Bomber Command during the WW11.

Anticipation! Detailed arrival information for Shute Harbour had been provided, the GPS system now had Cannonvale and Pioneer Points loaded as waypoints as this was to be our flight path into Shute Harbour, then the airfield came into view and landing was a doddle! On arrival, we had the buggie pick-up, registration bag for the runway dinner on the Saturday night, and we were driven into our hotel in town!. All very smooth and efficient.

Accommodation was in the centre of town so easy to walk everywhere. Saturday was a relax day before the Runway Dinner that night. Some of us went to the Oz Runways presentation at the Airport, some went to the markets, some went to the laundromat, some went to..? Overall a very relaxing day. The weather was superb! Beautiful and warm.

The Shute Harbour Airport had been closed since 3.00 pm in preparation for the runway dinner. What a great setting! It was a fabulous night, atmosphere was great, food was great and the companionship of flying friends really made it a memorable last night for our week of adventure together. The following day would see us head off in many directions to our hangar bases. The following pictures I hope capture what is a great aviation themed event.

