

Ray Parer was one of those airmen who simply went ahead and carried out his impossible aviation dreams, when people said it couldn't be done. He was the first man to fly a single engined aircraft from England to Australia, and the second man ever to fly from England to Australia. The first man to fly over the 14,000ft Owen Stanley ranges, the backbone of New Guinea. Asked why he chose a single for the air race, when twins had been available, he claimed if you have two engines, you have double the chance of an engine failure. Given the lamentable single engined performance of machines in 1919 it was a fair call.

He flew his first solo at Point Cook in a Graham-White Boxkite, a machine we would now classify as a homebuilt ultralight. He failed his theory of flight exams, and would have been rejected as aircrew until his instructor, a Frenchman, threatened to resign unless such a natural pilot was accepted. He was an extremely competent mechanic, and designed blueprints for the construction of a diesel rotary aviation engine, and a delta shaped aircraft wing, almost 60 years before these were manufactured, after WW2.

After completing his training, and being transferred to England, he was banned from combat flying, having been deemed medically unfit to fly above 10,000ft, because of mild asthma. Parer distinguished himself, after being seconded to Central Despatch, as a Test Pilot. This involved the dangerous work of delivering new machines from aircraft factories, to the combat units at the front, and flying back battle damaged machines to depots for repair, where possible. Battle damaged machines needed to be test flown, to assess whether they could realistically be safely ferried for repairs, or would need to be disassembled, and trucked or railed to the repair depots.

He found himself ferrying brand new fully armed fighter bombers to Ireland. He was curious, since the War was at the other end of the compass, in Europe. Since he was from a devout Catholic family, after finding out that Black and Tan Occupational Army were using the bombers to enforce British Rule, against rebellious Irish peasants, he was outraged, and went straight to his British CO, threatening to not only turn the next new bomber over to the Rebel South, but also to fly it for them.

The only thing which saved him from a Court Martial, and possible death sentence by firing squad for treason, was that the British Flying Corps knew they would never find another test pilot of his calibre. He had the knack of able to listen carefully to an aircraft engine, and know ten minutes in advance, when it was about to fail. This uncanny ability many times saved his life, and those of his co-pilot and passengers.

In 1919 faced with demobilisation, he teamed up with a Scot, John Macintosh, and found backing to enter the first England to Australia Air Race from Peter Dawson, a Whisky millionaire. Way ahead of his time when it came to product promotion, Dawson realized that he would reap huge amounts of free publicity, by financing an Air Race competitor. He asked that Parer and Mcintosh deliver a bottle of whisky to his friend, Australian Prime Minister, Billy Hughes.

They made it after nine months, well after the race was officially over, and rebuilt the aircraft three times after crashes. The last over ocean leg was extremely dangerous, as the DH9

engine, a Hawker Siddeley Puma would be asked to deliver power for 7 plus hours, from Timor to Darwin, the longest leg of the journey.

At this time, a Hawker Siddeley Puma had never run for seven hours before, having been designed for missions across Europe of two to three hours, maximum. With a raft tied to the wing in case of a forced landing in the Timor Sea, the pair left after one false start, caused by a fuel line blockage, which turned out to be a piece of perished rubber. Over the ocean, near Darwin, Parer was preparing to ditch in the ocean, because he had calculated there was seven hours fuel and no land was in sight. Just minutes later, they sighted a smudge on the southern horizon, which proved to be Bathurst Island, and tracked down the coast to Darwin Airport. After landing the engine stopped, unable to taxi to the hangar, because the tanks were dry. Parer later worked out that he had seriously miscalculated the fuel flow and throttled back enabling the old bus to fly for 9 hours. Most of the journey had been flown using a school atlas for navigation, as the aeronautical charts had been blown out of the cockpit over France.

On the way out at Calcutta, Parer and McIntosh had barnstormed for money, doing aerobatics in Calcutta. When the machine was restored, to be presented to the Canberra Way Museum for display, it was alarmingly evident that the wings were held in place by two inch bolts ! Eric Counahan, the aviation historian, whose genius orchestrated the restoration, commented when the PD was about to be presented to the Australian War Museum, that if he had had a magneto, the old PD could have taken to the skies, that very day. The PD almost ended her days wrecked, after a forced landing in a ploughed field at Culcairn, in Victoria, just before their final goal, Melbourne. Fortunately, the entire airframe was kept reasonably together, before being lovingly restored to pristine condition, which took more than ten years.

Parer then went on to pioneer much of the aviation infrastructure in New Guinea, during the 1920s Gold Rush era. In the 1930s New Guinea consistently uplifted more air freight, than the rest of the world, combined.

Parer was one of the last people on earth to talk to Amelia Earhart. The evening before she flew out of Lae, on her ill fated flight to Howland Island she asked him, " Ray, do you think it's better to die by water or by fire ?" Parer answered that he thought it was better to die in your own bed, which he eventually did. He felt that Earhart knew she would not return from the Lae to Howland Island flight, her last, when she disappeared. Bystanders thought she had crashed on departure, when her Lockheed 10, heavily loaded with fuel, lifted over the hump at the end of the airport and created a huge splash in the ocean, by the beach. It turned out that the water was thrown up by propwash as the Lockheed would have flown a long way in ground effect, skimming the waves before burning off enough fuel, to be able to climb to a safe cruising altitude.

In 1934 he again travelled to Britain, to compete in the 1934 McRobertson Miller England to Australia air race. Despite having earned around 1.5 million pounds in the previous fourteen years, he was broke, and lacked the money to finance his own air race entry. Parer was backed by a syndicate of Gold miners from the Morobe district, who passed around the hat for him. His second competition aircraft, a Fairy Fox was truly a jinxed pig. It was plagued by

fuel contamination and overheating troubles all the way to Melbourne, and took four months, arriving three months after the Air Race had finished. Parer though, thought he had done fairly well his previous best time being 9 months to. He flew the Fox back to New Guinea and one day in a fit of rage when it refused to start yet again, sold it to an itinerant drunk for ten pounds, glad to be rid of the troublesome beast. The drunk sold the petrol in the tanks, the seats, tyres, and propeller, for around two hundred pounds and was very pleased with the deal. In an age before swing tail aircraft Parer managed to shoehorn a huge dredge mining part into the fuselage of his Fokker Universal, by taking the fuselage apart, and rebuilding it around the massive part, with inches to spare, and doing the same thing in reverse, on arrival at Wau.

Parer and Hemsworth had managed to get photographs of the Italian Gun emplacements at the naval base in La Spezia when they were lost and forced down to fly at low level by the deteriorating coastal weather. These guns, designed and built by Krupp, were cutting edge Naval artillery, two 16 inch guns in a turret, protected by armour plating inches thick. Parer managed to hide the film in the Fairy Fox cockpit, and six years later, presented the developed film and negatives to a representative of the Australian Intelligence Bureau, the predecessor of ASIO, at a clandestine meeting with one of their agents at the Clock Tower of the Australian Hotel, in Broadway, Sydney. The Allied Naval intelligence, were very keen to have the photographs of these guns, prior to the Allied naval operations, in the early forties, for their planned assault.

He returned to PNG in the Fox, and until the war commenced with the Japanese invasion, continued Gold mining and flying . His younger brother Kevin, was the first civilian killed in PNG at Salamaua, by marauding Japanese Zeroes, while evacuating civilians to Moresby in his De Havilland Dragon.

Parer enlisted, and was briefly seconded to the US Army Air Force, to tutor a core unit of their more experienced C-47 pilots, in the treacherous nature of the weather in the PNG highlands. It usually closes in very quickly mid-afternoon, and can make flying anywhere in the Highlands, suicidal for the uninitiated.

Throughout his flying career, Parer was acutely aware of the need for a reliable instrument flying system. He experimented with suspending a spanner from the top wing of a biplane, reasoning that if the spanner was hanging down straight, then the aircraft was erect, and flying safely as it should. This worked after a fashion, until he emerged from cloud one day inverted, and he realised an attitude indicator, and more functional instruments were essential, for flying in cloud, and at night.

He was offered an instructor's position by the RAAF which he refused, signing up for the small ships, a fleet of vessels engaged in the hazardous work of keeping supplies rolling to the Allied forces on the North coast of PNG. He tells this story in a hand written diary which his son Mike, presented to the Australian War Memorial, in Canberra recently. It relates a gruesome account of his fight to the death with a Japanese officer, while lost in a swamp. This experience haunted him for life.

After the war, family mythology suggests that he might have somehow reclaimed his aviation medical, and returned to PNG flying a Supermarine Walrus amphibian catering to mining exploration outfits around the coast, however, no one seems to know if this really happened. His son Mike, discovered a wrecked Walrus at Lae in the early 60s with some clues that it could have been flown by Ray. He was medically grounded due to high blood pressure in the late forties, and never flew again. He then went back to school and obtained a Master Mariners ticket, then Captained small ships around PNG, for the remainder of his working life.

He did not keep a current log book record for the last twenty years of his flying career. When he was not Gold mining at Wau or Edie Creek, he flew Lae/Wau shuttles, from sunrise to sunset, and estimated he would have flown a total of 30,000 hours when he stopped flying. Quite a record, when you consider the machines he flew were unreliable and navigation charts basic, all happening by dead reckoning. Parer had more than his fair share of accidents but never killed anyone in an aircraft. He claimed that the best aircraft he had ever flown was a World War 1 Sopwith Dolphin fighter. His advice to student pilots? Never fly slow in the circuit, until you're sure you are very close to the ground and landing.

He became a reclusive hermit at his cottage in Mt Nebo, near Brisbane, in his later years, and was a democratic socialist, with an active interest in Marxism and Communism, despite being a practicing Catholic. He died in 1967 aged 73 having crammed the adventures of many lives into one. A real Harrison Ford and the Temple of Doom with stories which were all true.

He is survived by a son who shares his passion for aviation, aerobatics, socialism, beautiful women, and mechanical gadgetry.