

Lest such be forgotten -The ones who flew the Double Sunrise

The commercial record for aviation's longest non-stop flight is 32 hours and 9 minutes

My memory fails me at times for dates, but I think this happened more than 40 years ago. Someone had visited my home in Moratuwa and left a parcel for me.

"Tell the Captain it is a special gift from me for the favor he did."

I only opened the package a few days later. To my absolute astonishment the gift was a flight computer that was used by pilots and navigators during the Second World War. I had no clue as to who the generous donor was. He had said he came from Galle, and he had only come to Moratuwa to hand over the gift. The old computer had been in his home for a very long time, discarded and asleep, ignored by the house-dwellers who perhaps had no clue as to what this contraption was. Maybe someone thought this had something to do with flying? Maybe that is why the man from Galle brought it to me in return for something I had done for him.

In the picture below is the gift from Galle, an ancient flight computer that had flown in skies giving all the calculations that helped the airmen of a long-gone era in their rudimentary navigational calculations. The fascination of it all was the computer worked in perfect order with smoothly moving dials and pointers. This to me was straight from a treasure trove. The back of the computer was engraved that it was made in 1929. By the year 2029 this magnificent machine will be 100 years old. That is just 5 years away. Many a time I have taken this computer out and worked a triangle of velocities and come up with answers of ground speeds and drift angles, just for the heck of it. Its precision is perpetual, perfect even after all these years in Rip Van Winkle mode.

As things stand now, I am wading in my twilight years and I walk under different skies with little to do with aviation. This old Galle computer and a very old wooden Tiger Moth propeller are all I have left from a long-lasting aviation career.

Of course, I carry aeroplane memories that are the incomparable luxuries of my life. More than enough to last me the rest of my days and to share some too, with others who love the sky.

Let me get back to the 'gift' computer story. I had the magic ancient path-finder and I knew it was found in some silent



Flight computer found in Galle

corner in a house in Galle. The question was how did it get there? In no time I homed in on a possible answer. Qantas Imperial Airways in the early 1940s flew a marathon non-stop flight from Perth to Koggala Lake and the crew had their layover in the New Oriental Hotel, the best in Galle, which had been in existence from 1865. I assumed that my gifted flight computer would have left the flight bag of one of the pilots and found its way to a house in Galle. Let's not squabble about how it got there, but that is the nuclear part of the story.

Long before the computer fairy tale in Galle, Qantas Imperial Airways flew from Sydney to London with multiple stops. It was the late 1930s and the trip so flown was called the Kangaroo Flight. This was a commercial passenger venture, also a major carrier of mail between two continents. The initial routing was Sydney, Perth, Singapore, Calcutta and Karachi onwards to the middle east and then to Europe.

At the onset of the Second World War the men from the 'land of the rising sun' marched out of the Japanese Islands to conquer Asia. Their Axis partner Germany was battering Europe. The Malayan peninsula fell to the Japanese and so did Singapore. The Kangaroo flight lost its 'pit stop' at Singapore to continue to Calcutta. The vitally important link between Sydney and London was lost with the Japanese occupation of Singapore. Qantas needed a replacement refueling stop between Perth and Calcutta. It had to be in British territory, safe from the Japanese fighter planes roaming the Asian skies. It also had to be within the range of the available Qantas aeroplanes which could fly non-stop from Perth to wherever the Singapore 's replacement landing port was located.

This was 'rule Britannia' time and other than the parts invaded by the Japanese the rest of Asia belonged to the Colonial United Kingdom.

The Brits scouted and calculated every possibility. They were 'world owners' and had their imperial tentacles spread far and wide in most continents. In no time they found the perfect answer. Koggala Lake in the south of Ceylon, just 10 miles from the city of Galle. It was approximately 3,100 nautical miles as the crow flies from Swan River in Perth to the Koggala Lake. Qantas had Catalina Flying Boats that had a range of 3,600 nautical miles. With a bit of luck and a prayer they could fly from Perth to Koggala Lake and then skip Calcutta and go directly to Karachi.



Koggala Lake

The flight from Perth to Koggala Lake was pure oceanic. The pilots had to find their track to fly by dead reckoning using the same type of computer as my gifted one from Galle. Of course, they had sextants and were conversant with astro navigation by the stars, same as what Capt. James Cook did when he first sailed from Mauritius to discover Australia. The route the Catalina was going to fly would have been engulfed by bad weather and the crew had to fly through the monsoons in a cloud-filled sky. They had no radar and were guided by the naked eye and weather diversions had to be made with absolute caution and accuracy to stay on track to Koggala. All this was in an unpressurised aeroplane that cruised around 9,000 feet of altitude which is the worst possible level to fly in bad weather.



Oceanic flight route of Perth-Koggala

The flying I am attempting to describe here would have been so demanding that to call it incredible would be an understatement of limitless enormity. It would have been that hard.

They meticulously calculated the fuel they needed to fly this trip. They first frugally made sure they had enough in the tanks to fly from Perth to Koggala Lake and onwards to their alternate which was Ratmalana. Then they fattened the figure with contingency fuel for weather diversions en-route and also holding fuel at the destination and the alternate. They took every drop of fuel available to the aeroplane's tank limit.

Though the alternate used was Ratmalana at the initial stages it changed to Katukurunda when that airport opened in 1944. This was a Royal Navy airfield which was called HMS Ukussa. The Ukussa runway was closer to Koggala Lake than Ratmalana and that gave the pilots a slim advantage in distance but a massive relief to have two alternate aerodromes to choose from in case of a weather diversion. This was a considerable relief for a pilot flying from Perth to Koggala.

The fuel capacity was not that bad. Range of proposed aeroplane was 3,600 nautical miles and the distance to fly from Perth to Koggala was 3,100 nautical miles. It was the route that was daunting. Totally oceanic, hampered often by monsoon weather and needing precision navigation and the possibilities of Japanese fighters on the starboard sky were the multiple burdens the crew had to carry on their weary shoulders. Purely from a pilot's point of view this was nothing less than tempting providence. One can say whoever flew that Perth to Koggala sector knew what he was doing and had all his marbles in place to take a calculated risk. The one solace for that captain flying this Icarian route being that the aeroplane was an amphibian, and she could land anywhere there was water. That was the Ace of trumps the captain carried. He had the whole Indian Ocean as his alternate aerodrome.

Qantas made a valiant decision to continue the Kangaroo flight from Sydney to London. Beyond Perth, they planned to fly a more southerly route all the way above the Indian Ocean to the coast of Ceylon and onwards to Koggala. Radio silence had to be maintained as the threat from Japanese aircrafts was always there in the middle part of the route. The aeroplane Qantas was using for this sector was a Catalina flying boat with two Pratt and Whitney Wasp engines. The max weight of the Catalina was 16,000 kgs and it carried 2,000 imperial gallons of fuel. The cruising speed was 98 knots. The aeroplane carried an average of 3 passengers per flight. The main cargo load was the all- important mail.



Catalina flying boat

At the Koggala end the British authorities went into fast action. The first order was to remove any locals living within a 5 mile radius from the Koggala Lake. They were all forced out of their homes and had to vacate the area within 24 hours. The Village Mudaliyar and his family were allowed to stay on the lake. They occupied an island called Madin Duwa which later changed name to a more touristic identity where it was called Bird Island. A windsock was erected amidst a collection of rocks and the longest stretch of the lake was marked with buoys to depict the runway. A repair site was erected on the western bank of the lake which is now the tarred runway on grass at the Koggala airport.



Capt. Russel Tap

Everything was ready for the Qantas Imperial Airways flight to come from Perth.

On the 30th of June 1943, Captain Russel Tap flew the first flight of Qantas Imperial Airways from Perth to Koggala. He took off from the Swan River and flew a long oceanic route to Ceylon and Koggala. Astro navigation helped him to stay on course and combined with dead reckoning and plotting his aircraft position on navigational charts he made it to the southern coast of Ceylon and flew onwards to Koggala Lake to land safely. The task itself was Herculean. The courage to dare the impossible and come out a winner was almost a miracle in the annals of aviation. Captain Russel Tap was the first to fly the unknown and carve a path for others to follow.

The flight between Perth and Koggala was known as the "Flight of the Double Sunrise." Passengers saw two sunrises in this sector. The average flight time was twenty-eight hours and the longest on record was an astounding thirty-two hours and nine minutes. This is the longest non-stop flight made by a commercial aeroplane.



The Secret Order of the Double Sunrise certificate that was given by Qantas to all passengers on the Double Sunrise service

The modified Kangaroo route via Koggala flew 271 times and carried 648 passengers. There were 5 Catalina Qantas Imperial aeroplanes that operated this sector. They were all named after the stars, Antares, Rigel, Spica, Vega and Altair were their names. The last flight via Koggala Lake took off with 3 passengers and 69 kgs of cargo on 18 July 1945.

In that entire operation of flights that arrived and departed from Koggala, there was never a single incident or an accident. With humble appreciation I salute those magnificent airmen who flew the star-named Catalina Flying Boats. Their standards of safety achieved are unbelievable. 28 plus hours to sit in a cramped cockpit and fly an unpressurised propeller plane navigating with the most mediocre methods is as close as you get to a modern-day myth.



Two Catalinas 'Altair' and 'Vega' getting ready to depart

But they did it and today I write my sincere words of appreciation when we come to the 30th of June, the 81st anniversary of the first flight that landed at Koggala flown by Captain Russel Tap.

After the war all 5 star-named Catalina aeroplanes were scuttled and they went to oblivion below the deep blue sea. One Catalina aeroplane is still alive, a replica of the ones that flew to Koggala and is currently on display in a museum in New Zealand.

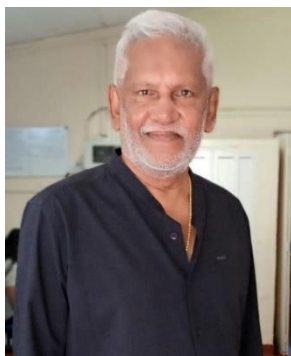


Plaque at Swan River

As for remembrances, most have forgotten that this flight from Perth to Koggala took place. Even less know there is a world aviation record connected to Koggala. On the banks of the Swan River in Perth there is a plaque displayed prominently giving details of the 'Flight of the Double Sunrise'.

Back in Koggala, the lake sleeps preserving its bucolic beauty. The solitary fisherman in his dugout canoe ripples the waters with his home-made oar. He does not know that once upon a long-ago time aeroplanes came from a faraway shore and landed in his beloved lake.

I am sure he also does not know anything about aviation world records



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