

The Catalina team preparing to continue the adventure from Seia da Rhodes.

Chris engrossed in navigation duties. The GPS for example made it possible to negotiate the restricted airspace around Athens with ease.

Catalina

COMES DOWN UNDER

by Roberto Yarez, of Volar Magazine Spain

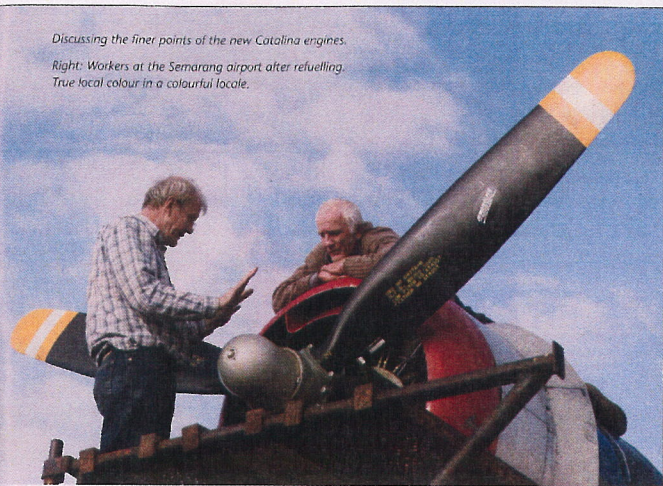
Last December, Sydney finally welcomed a much anticipated guest with the arrival of only the country's second airworthy Catalina flying boat. The history making light of a PBY-6A Catalina from Portugal to Australia, was the kind of epic flight which seldom seems to be made nowadays. Or at least seldom receives anything other than minor exposure outside local circles.

Some years ago a group of Australians wanted to pay tribute to the hundreds of their fellow countrymen who lost their lives flying Catalina combat missions against the Japanese during the Second World War. They founded Catalina Flying Memorial Limited (CMFL) for the purpose of buying and operating in Australia one of the world's few Consolidated Catalina PBY-6A

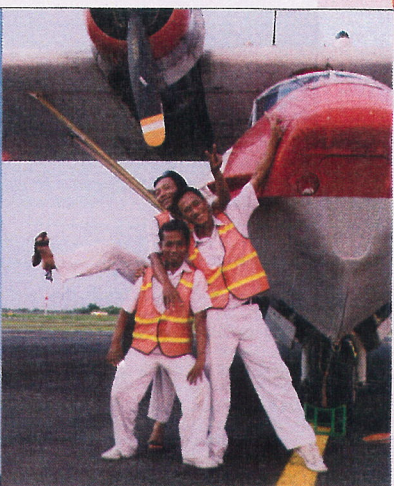
flying boats in airworthy condition. The group decided to buy the last of the three Chilean Catalina's, which had been operated in Spain under charter for firefighting services in Spain during the 1990s. That was until government tender specifications for firefighting equipment changed in favour of more modern and dependable aircraft. The three Catalina's were then purchased by a Portuguese aviation company, which used them in the same role until the end of the decade, when they were retired from service. One of these three machines returned to Chile some years ago, another has been operated since October 2003 by The Historical Aircraft Restoration Society (HARS) while the third was left abandoned on the Seia aerodrome in Portugal. In July 2007 CMFL bought this third aircraft for US \$250,000.



The "steering wheels" are an immediately noticeable feature of the 60-year-old cockpit. For ease of access to the forward section of the aircraft, the gas and propeller pitch levers were placed on the cockpit canopy, above and behind the instrument panel.



Discussing the finer points of the new Catalina engines. Right: Workers at the Semarang airport after refuelling. True local colour in a colourful locale.



FIRST ATTEMPT

After its purchase, the aircraft was registered with the Australian call sign VH-CAT, replacing the previous badge it had worn during its Chilean incarnation (CC-CNP). With everything in readiness in late October 2007, CASA granted the permit for the ferry flight from Portugal to Australia.

The crew, assisted by the Edwards brothers from Edwards aviation, experts in radial engines, and Dutch PBY Association member Roger Leeflang, conducted a series of local test flights in preparation for the lengthy ferry run.

Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately depending on your point of view, the aircraft had a serious engine failure during its takeoff run on the third and final test flight before departure.

The onset of winter and the snowfalls on the Sierra de la Estrella, coupled with the lack of a hangar to allow work on the aircraft, meant postponing any further efforts until at least the northern spring of 2008 when hopefully kinder weather conditions in the area would reward the patience of the Australian mechanics.

During those intervening months the team returned to Australia where they began a complicated search for two P and W 1830-92 engines to replace the existing power plants and hopefully avoid further delays in their next ferry attempt. An intense search turned up a pair of recently reconditioned engines in Texas and after negotiating an acceptable price, the units were purchased and shipped to Portugal in the northern summer of 2008.

THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

The crew entrusted with taking a Catalina to Australia was made up of Jim Hazelton, Geoff Hazelton, (Jim's nephew, a former flight mechanic for Cathay Pacific Airways and also an experienced ferry pilot), Richard Purdy (a pilot and Jim's companion on other flights), Chris Goezinne (747 pilot and member of the Dutch PBY Association), Hal Griffiths (ex Qantas B-744 pilot) and Bernie van Surksun (flight assistant with the Dutch PBY Association).

In late summer 2008, Geoff travelled to Seia to begin replacing the engine and propeller. Jim and Richard arrived later to lend a hand in the final phases of the work. Chris, Bernie and Hal all arrived practically at the same time in Lisbon in October, and so travelled by train to Seia to assist with the finishing touches.

In order to reduce costs, it was decided to temporarily deregister the Australian call sign in favour of provisional US registration, N160AT. With all the work now practically complete, an FAA inspector travelled to Seia from Frankfurt to give the final all clear and issue the necessary ferry permit. The go ahead was received on November 15.

As Hal Griffiths told Volar, "Chris and I flew on the only test flight that we did. The only problem we had during the thirty minute circuit over the Seia aerodrome was faulty operation of the landing gear. Since there was no nitrogen, the batteries had lost their initial charge so we had to lower the gear by hand, but we landed without any problems. Convinced we

really could manage the flight, we decided to load everything into the aircraft to start the first leg of our trip to Salamanca. The takeoff was really emotional, surrounded by a bunch of Portuguese enthusiasts from Seia and the rest of Portugal, all there at the field to see us off..."

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When it came to drawing up the flight plan, there were two fundamental questions to be addressed: the availability of fuel, and the daytime flying hours the crew could count on for each leg, given that the aircraft was only equipped for VFR. With the European autumn already well underway, the number of daylight hours was low and it meant the first few legs were necessarily short; however the available flying time would gradually increase as the aircraft made its way south. "The weather was generally good",

relates Hal. "The European legs were pretty cold because we would normally be flying at around 7500 feet. However we managed to put up with it pretty well with the help of warm clothing, although occasionally Bernie and Chris had to dance around in the cabin to warm up..."

"We flew into an area of heavy rain and low cloud to the west of the Greek island of Corfu, which forced us to drop to 500 feet to stick to VFR conditions. However, that afforded us some fantastic views of the Gulf of Corinth. Between Athens and Colombo the weather got considerably better, and on each leg we were flying most of the time with a 10 to 15 knot tail wind and making an average speed of 130 knots."

"We left Colombo in the midst of a pretty heavy rainstorm, and had the same conditions when we got to Banda Aceh but with a crosswind as well. The water was coming into the aircraft through the windows and portholes, so by the time we arrived we were all soaked.

"Once on the ground we had to open the water drain holes on the underside of the aircraft fuselage, which had at least showed us that the aircraft hull was watertight".

The rest of the flight progressed without any major weather incidents, and the longer days in the Southern Hemisphere made for longer flight hops.

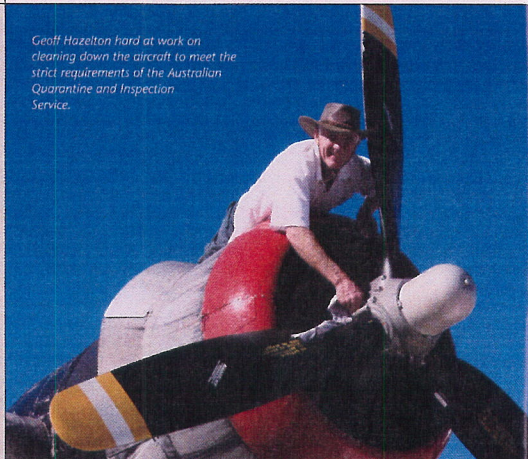
"However our problem wasn't the cold any more, but the heat", notes Hal "and so most of the time we had to fly with the cabin windows open and the emergency landing gear flaps lowered to improve ventilation".

ITINERARY

- 15 November:** Test flight and first leg from Seia (Portugal) to Salamanca (Spain)
- 16 November:** Salamanca (Spain) - Cannes (France)
- 17 November:** Cannes (France) - Naples (Italy)
- 18 November:** Naples (Italy) - Rhodes (Greece)
- 19 November:** Lay day
- 20 November:** Rhodes (Greece) - Luxor (Egypt)
- 21 November:** Luxor (Egypt) - Bahrain
- 22 November:** Lay day
- 23 November:** Bahrain - Muscat (Oman)
- 24 November:** Muscat (Oman) - Bombay (India)
- 25 November:** Bombay (India) - Colombo (Sri Lanka)
- 26 November:** Lay day
- 27 November:** Colombo (Sri Lanka) - Banda Aceh (Indonesia)
- 28 November:** Banda Aceh (Indonesia) - Medan (Indonesia)
- 29 November:** Medan (Indonesia) - Palembang - Semarang (Indonesia)
- 30 November:** Semarang (Indonesia) - Bali (Indonesia)
- 1 December:** Lay day
- 2 December:** Bali (Indonesia) - Darwin (Australia)
- 3 December:** Customs inspection and aircraft cleaning
- 4 December:** Darwin (Australia) - Cairns (Australia)
- 5 December:** Cairns (Australia) - Bowen - Maroochydore (Australia)
- 6 December:** Maroochydore (Australia) - Caloundra (Australia) - Coffs Harbour (Australia) - Kempsey (Australia)
- 7 December:** Kempsey (Australia) - Port Macquarie (Australia) - aquatic touchdown at Rathmines (Australia) - Bankstown (Sydney, Australia).

Donations

Large or small, any donations to the CFML will truly help keep this particular Catalina in the air, and be keeping a part of our history alive, because of the role this aircraft played. If you can lend a hand, visit: www.catalinaflying.org.au



Geoff Hazelton hard at work on cleaning down the aircraft to meet the strict requirements of the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service.



The welcoming crowd at Caloundra Airport, on the final stop before the long journey's end.



The historic aquatic touchdown, witnessed by almost 3000 people gathered on the shores of Lake Macquarie around the old Rathmines RAAF flying boat base. Seasoned pilot Chris Gaeziane, from the Dutch PBY Association had no qualms about indulging in a "Splash and Go" to show off the magnificent condition of the aircraft.

Apart from the changing climatic conditions – something to be completely expected in such a long trip - there were of course other various issues for the crew to deal with.

"The only mechanical problem we had during the whole trip was a slight oil leak from one of the engines. The left engine was using slightly more oil than the right one, but that's really only a quibble. Both engines were working perfectly, and using less fuel and oil than we had expected".

However, the major problem on most flight legs was the availability of aviation fuel, while the only real predictability about its cost was its general tendency to increase.

"For example, instead of completing one of our legs in Iraklion (Greece), we had to divert to Rhodes because there was no fuel where we initially intended to land. Prices were also a big factor - we ended up paying US \$5/litre for avgas on our stopover in Luxor (Egypt). Not only that, in most places the airports had the fuel stored in 200 litre drums and lacked the facilities we needed to pump it up to the filling ports on the upper surface of the wings. This forced us to spend many hours pouring fuel into 20 litre jerry cans and then hoisting them up to the filling ports by rope. On one occasion it took us 4 hours to take 2800 litres of fuel on board using this method, out there in the burning sun and with shade temperatures reaching 35 degrees."

If that were not enough, travelling through different countries meant payment details could be tricky.

"In many places they wanted cash in US dollars, which meant we also had to spend a lot of time looking for the best local exchange rates for US dollars through automatic teller machines. In fact several times various members of the crew had to pay for the fuel with their own credit cards, just so we could keep going".

Meanwhile, the lack of donations to fund the project's fuel expenses proved to be one of the greatest headaches for CFML management back in Australia, since the sponsors who had initially committed to most of the US\$150,000 budgeted for fuel costs, failed to come through.

This uncertainty led to discussion among the crew about which might be the best airport to park the aircraft until they could get the necessary cash to continue.

"We had no problems at all with the immigration or customs authorities in any of the countries that we travelled through, until we got to Australia. Unfortunately, as

soon as we touched down in Darwin we lost an entire day on Customs paperwork because they immediately hit us with a \$15,000 GST bill on the importation of the Catalina.

This setback caught us completely by surprise, because the CFML is a non-profit foundation. Furthermore, we had to clean down the aircraft completely in order to meet the strict rules set by the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service."

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HOME AT LAST

After its arrival, the Catalina featured in various flyovers and landings at places of particular significance for this type of aircraft in Australia, concerning both its former military duties and passenger airline role with Qantas.

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After this historic event, the aircraft continued on to Sydney's Bankstown Airport, to be greeted with champagne and a throng of enthusiasts and eighty-year old Catalina veterans to cheer home the crew.

"This has been the most important aviation experience in my life, and the most enjoyable one of my 23,000 hours flying time", says Hal.

"The whole trip has been fantastic, despite the hard work involved (no automatic pilot, manual refuelling, etc), and all the stress from lack of proper sleep, getting up early and getting to bed late so as to leave everything in readiness for the next day. But, there are just so many great memories. Winging at low level (about 20 feet) over the masts of fishing boats off

the Italian coast was just spectacular. The view of Vesuvius we had from the air, the wonderful scenery around the banks of the Nile in the middle of the desert, our first major over-water leg from Muscat to Bombay, flying down the Queensland coast over the Great Barrier Reef... while even just a dip in a hotel swimming pool, buying some clean clothes, or simply getting a haircut in places like Bali were savoured as real luxuries..."

PERFECT FUTURE

Thus far the efforts by the members of the CFML, together with the unconditional support of the Dutch PBY Association and the Catalina Club of New Zealand, have been an unqualified success. However the task now awaiting them is by no means less daunting – namely, gathering the financial donations needed to keep this wonderful project alive. The aircraft will be undergoing a general fit-out commencing in October this year, which will include the removal of the fire fighting equipment and re-installation of the gunnery positions and characteristic viewing blisters on the rear of the fuselage. After this "makeover", the aircraft will probably be repainted in the distinctive black livery of the RAAF "Black Cats" squadron. Also in the pipeline are plans to build a new hangar at the old Rathmines flying boat base, which will serve the combined purpose of both housing the Catalina and establishing a museum to pay tribute to the crews who flew these machines during the Second World War.

Once the installations are completed, the idea is to offer enthusiasts an opportunity to take adventure flights, and the proceeds will help to keep this historic aircraft in the air. ■

For more information about the progress of the Catalina, visit: www.catalinaflying.org.au