MEMORIES OF AN ANTARCTIC AVIATOR

Peter Hugh Clemence
1925 - 2019

Peter saw his first aircraft, a biplane, when he was 8 from his aunt Laura's house in Ivanhoe. Soon after, a visit to Essendon aerodrome on the arrival of Kingsford Smith after his solo flight from England, and a joyride for 5 shillings, had him hooked for life. For young Peter, school meant sport – tennis, cricket and footy – and in 1941 he started work in a city accountancy firm. But the lure of flying was always there.

In 1942 he joined the Air Training Corps where he learnt Morse code, navigation and map reading. At 18 he received his call up into the RAAF, followed by medical & fitness tests, drill routine and finally pilot training in Benalla on Tiger Moths and Oxfords at Point Cook – receiving wings after 120 hours of flying. Then it was off to "the pointy end" as Peter called it – overseas to war. A ship to San Francisco, train to New York and troop ship bearing 8,000 troops to Liverpool. In the UK there followed many postings, training courses and as the end of the war rapidly approached he ended up without seeing any action. VE day celebrations marked the end of hostilities in Europe.

Peter in England during WW2

He was repatriated back to Australia, and despite wanting desperately to get back in the air, there was no flying training being done. RAAF's aircraft numbers were reduced from the 5,500 in wartime to 500 and pilots were in over-supply. Peter was posted to Laverton as a Flight Controller, then Sale. Finally, after 4 years he was posted to Amberley as a pilot on Avro Lincolns. This involved long hours of freezing navigation flights using maps and astro-fixes cruising at 20,000ft - not much fun. Then back as a flying instructor to Sale on Tiger Moths and Wirraways, and later to Archerfield. Peter loved teaching students.

In 1953 he was posted to Fighter Operational Training at Williamtown with conversion to Mustangs and Vampires – air to air and air to ground shooting, rocketry, dive bombing and low-level navigation. With intensive training he was ready for a posting in Korea where he spent 12 months – not particularly eventful as the armistice had been declared, except when they strayed over the De-militarised Zone in the RAAF's Meteors, a no man's land where they were fired upon.

Top Gun **Peter in a Meteor after the Korean War during the victory lap of Australia with 77 Squadron**

ANTARCTIC RECCE - 1956

On return to Australia, one of the pilots in his squadron, Jim Haywood, was selected to join the 1956 RAAF Antarctic Flight under the command of Squadron Leader Doug Leckie. The plan was for Jim to spend 4 months in the Antarctic over summer and then return to Australia to form the 1957 Flight that would relieve Doug and his crew. Sadly, Jim was killed in a flying accident and, as fate would have it, Peter was selected to replace him.

The aircraft hanger under constuction at Mawson under the supervision of the doctor Don Dowie. The first such to be built in Antactica, it still stands on the edge of Horseshoe Harbour.

In late 1955, Peter and the Leckie crew left Melbourne in the Danish polar vessel *Kista Dan* under the leadership of Phillip Law, Director of the Antarctic Division. When they arrived, a hanger was built at Mawson to protect the aircraft from the Antarctic elements.

After a 4-month recce down south, Peter returned to Australia to prepare his crew and equipment for the following winter – choosing a pilot Doug Johnstone, and two aircraftmen (Neville Meredith and Ron Pickering). Aircraft were ordered with Antarctic specs.

the end of that year they only had 130 gallons of fuel left at Mawson and this was kept as a reserve in case of an emergency. Amazing stuff in a continent where more people have died because of aircraft accidents than any other cause.

HELICOPTERS & PRINCE CHARLES MOUNTAINS

Back in Australia, Peter and family returned to the world of fighter aircraft at Williamstown, followed by a posting to Butterworth in Malaya.

Peter and his 1957 RAAF Flight Crew at Mawson with the two DHC Beaver aircraft from Canada and the Auster.

ANTARCTIC WINTER - 1957

Peter's year at Mawson - the International Geophysical Year - was outstanding for science and exploration with flights between Mawson and the newly established base of Davis, 400 miles to the east. Davis was without a doctor. So, the RAAF maintained a flying doctor service between the two bases. On one flight they had to land in the dark guided in by flares.

Another highlight was a flight to the Russian base of Mirny, 800 miles east for physicist Jim Goodspeed to do a gravity measure. They stayed almost a week, established great friendships and Peter made a lasting impression. The Russians always asked "where is Clementy" whenever they landed at Mawson – perhaps as a mark of how much vodka he could drink, and still stand.

For Peter, the 25th of August 1957 is unforgettable – his English-born wife Patricia gave birth to the first of their 4 children, a beautiful girl they called Amanda. On that day Peter was flying a geological recce in Prydz Bay near Davis and they noticed a discoloration in the sea ice adjacent to the coast. Closer examination revealed an Emperor penguin colony – which would later be named and officially accepted as the Amanda Bay Rookery.

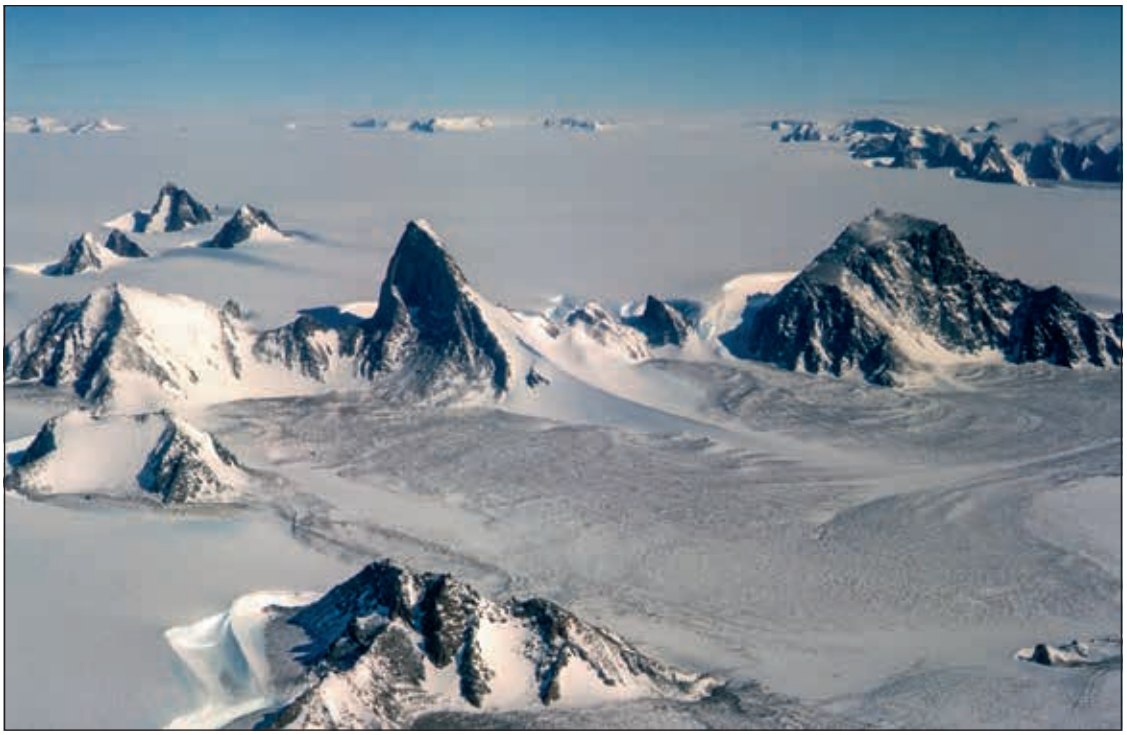
During the year Peter and his fellow pilot made 213 flights covering 548 hours in the air and 63,000 miles. By

His change-over to rotary wing aircraft came from his interest in the RAF equipped Bristol Sycamores helicopters that were at Butterworth. He was fascinated by their operational flexibility.

Peter and a visiting Russian aircraft

In 1965 he and the family were posted to Fairbairn in Canberra where Peter moved to helicopters. After 2 years,

and with the threat of a desk job, he retired. Peter adapted well to civilian life – first a job with the Tasmanian Hydro, and then he joined Jayrow Helicopters in Moorabbin in 1968. The following year Jayrow won the first of two, 3-year contracts with the Antarctic Division and thus began more Antarctic geology and survey work in the Prince Charles Mountains to the south of Mawson, territory Peter was well familiar with. He led the Jayrow team during 4 summer campaigns.



Prince Charles Mountains, an area Peter knew well

David Parer: "1969 was my first trip south, travelling on the Nella Dan, it was a storm-tossed voyage of two weeks to the Amery Ice Shelf to off-load a field team, and then on to Mawson. I was 24 and just at the beginning of my first career as a cosmic ray physicist, while Peter was 44, and now well into his second career in commercial aviation.

"Peter is someone you never forget – a broad smile, friendly manner and those sparkling blue eyes held you in their thrall. For a young and sheltered science graduate just out of university like myself, the trip down south was a boy's own adventure - polar ships, helicopters and pilots that had served in the war."

Eventually the team and cargo got ashore at Mawson – but due to bad weather, it took two weeks to get the field parties into the Prince Charles Mountains, where conditions restricted flying to two days in every five. And here was coined the meteorological term "inclemence weather", meaning not-flyable.

Ian McLeod was one of the geologists on that trip and recalls a trip into the mountains with Peter when, at several thousand feet, the engine stopped and all Ian can recall is "the eerie silence". Peter wind-milled the main rotor, gliding it towards the ground, and at the last moment changed the blades to climb pitch and made a perfect soft-landing. Peter checked the motor for snow (which had probably caused the flame-out), restarted the engine and flew sideways back to Mawson to prevent any further snow entering the engine.

Another incident happened that year – geophysicist Mal Robertson was struck in the head by a rotor blade while unloading a chopper on a steep incline – and lived to tell the tale. Mal recalls that every time he saw Peter at a function, Peter remembered him as "the man who survived a near-death experience".

Then the fixed wing aircraft damaged a ski and Des Lugg, the leader of summer operations and medical officer, ordered the field work to be wound up. It took a further two-weeks to get everyone back to Mawson. In the middle of that, the field officer, Kevin (Mumbles) Walker, had to be evacuated to the station for an emergency appendicectomy. The incidents and conditions were a classic case of "the unexpected", known down south as "the Antarctic Factor".

Des Lugg: Des recalls his impressions of Peter. "Peter pioneered the use of the Hughes 500 helicopters in the Antarctic. They are powerful machines, were used in Vietnam, and proved to be great people movers under polar conditions." Des said that Peter was "a careful pilot, measured in what he did and was happy to say,' that can't be done'. He was always jovial and good for a laugh."

Two summers later Peter was once more back in the Prince Charles Mountains with Jayrow for the summer – this time with the Blue Streak, John Manning, a surveyor who worked for National Mapping. John was a great field man, experienced bushman and climber who worked with Peter both in the central desert area of Australia and in the Antarctic. He recalls one incident with Peter on the highest

peak in the Prince Charles Mountains, Mt Menzies at 3,300 metres. “I wanted to be dropped on the top of Mt Menzies, notoriously difficult because of the local winds. After much discussion we hatched a plan to fly up a particular ridge-line and we accomplished our mission. He was a careful pilot, and very skilled.”

Manning added “Peter also liked his creature comforts. While in the Antarctic field camp, the pilots slept in the comfort of a large Parcol field tent, while we slept in Polar Pyramids. And in the Simpson desert, while we slept in swags on the ground, Peter insisted on a tent.”

Helicopters were ideal for getting surveyors and geologists into every part of the Prince Charles Mountains. Field parties were dropped on remote peaks with their survival gear and equipment where they would camp for several days before being moved into the next survey station.

OTHER MEMORIES

David Parer: My second career - a wildlife film-maker with the ABC - began after my second winter in the Antarctic in 1972 and whenever I’d see Peter at a mid-winter’s dinner or down the shopping centre in Mt Eliza he’d say – “You know, one of the best flying jobs I ever did was with the cameraman Keith Wagstaff filming the horse-run scenes for The Man from Snowy River.” Jayrow had for many years, the rental rights on the Tyler vibration free filming mount and Peter often did the filming jobs – and he continued teaching.

Brent Crockett: An active cine-cameraman, Brett Crockett posted this on Facebook a few days ago; “Peter was a great pilot and a great bloke, I had many flights with him filming around the skies of Melbourne.”

Ian Harris: A fellow helicopter pilot who was taught to fly by Peter, “RIP CLEMO. You taught me to fly along with Roger and those lessons have kept me safe and incident-free for 9000 plus hours. RIP mate. You are sadly missed. A great life flying and I would be more than happy to make the same innings. God speed old friend.”

Dick Willing: Dick Willing was the medical officer at Mawson in 1957 and recalls the following, “Peter flew well into his 70’s - he loved flying and was loathe to stop. With increasing age Peter’s close vision became compromised and he did not wish to wear bifocals, so he settled for a monocle which he had on a loop around his neck. When he was flying he could see where he was going with one eye, and his instrument panel through his monocle.”

Carl Nilsson: Carl wintered as a radio-physicist with Peter in 1957 and wrote the following to his family, “You are well aware that your father lived a full and vigorous life and helped many of us.

He saved my life at Mawson in 1957, flying Bernie Shaw and me out of Bretangen camp after a terrible accident and in the face of an oncoming blizzard."

Carl went on to detail the incident "Petrol had been experimentally mixed with kerosene (enigmatically called "range fuel") in a pressure light that exploded one night, burning down our only tent. We spent the night without sleeping bags or full clothing at about -25 C with a gale blowing, huddling in a half-built igloo that I had been building for just such an emergency. Luckily, we had dragged the radio out once we were outside the tent, although all the external wiring was burned off and we had to wait for 12 hours before it was light enough to safely assemble and use it to call Mawson."

"Peter contributed immensely to the general good humour of the 1957 Mawson team, and the exploration-flying by the RAAF team that year was outstanding. He was held in high respect and often referred to as "Sir", both in the general informal atmosphere of Mawson and because of his decisive manner. As leader of the RAAF Flight, Peter led by example. When Philip Law spoke at our reunion in 2007, he paid tribute to the amount of flying the RAAF did in that year, and its superb record without accidents."

Peter liked to keep up the standards of the officer's mess and Carl remembers one of his endearing habits "He had a soft side and was quite particular about his appearance - as befits a RAAF officer. He was notable for doing his ironing on a regular basis - which I remember as a time-consuming business during my short time in the RAAF reserve. This care about his appearance was just as much a part of Peter as his dedication to flying operations and good aircraft maintenance. Things needed to be done right!"

Carl added "As a young man in the Antarctic, I managed to get an entirely undeserved reputation for "breaking things" which did not go either unnoticed or unremarked by Peter. I took up private flying relatively recently, little more than two decades ago. Despite my several invites, Peter managed to avoid ever flying with me. After surviving a lifetime of piloting, often in difficult and dangerous circumstances, Peter was determined not to end his life being "one more thing that Nilsson managed to break". If there is one life that I think we can say should be celebrated, not mourned, it is that of "Sir" Peter Clemence."

Collated by David Parer & Liz Parer-Cook, ANARE Club, for the Clemence family.