

BRYAN MONKTON- THE PILOT WHO...

BOUGHT AN AIRLINE BY MISTAKE



PAUL BACKSHALL

How to start an airline without really trying," might be the title if Bryan Monkton were to ever write a book. For back in the days immediately following World War Two, that's exactly what he did.

Bryan had agreed to go along to an Australian Air Force base with a friend who wanted to get his opinion on a couple of PBY Catalina air boats he was interested in buying. While there, he spotted five Sunderland flying boats sitting quietly at their moorings awaiting the auctioneer's hammer and he remarked that he would love to go aboard one to have a look around.

No sooner said than done and, to put it mildly, Bryan, who had spent the war years piloting small fighter planes and light bombers, was impressed.

"It wasn't so much an aeroplane, it was a ship. I saw this great cavernous interior with a wardroom, with portholes, where the crew sat down and ate their meals and then I climbed up on the flight deck and sat in the pilot's seat and looked out of this magnificent perspex windshield at the sparkling water ahead of us. The urge to fly the thing

was terrific and I just happened to say to someone: 'God, I wish I'd been able to fly these things during the war.' And he said: 'Well, why don't you buy one, they're going for practically nothing. You could have a lot of fun and perhaps even make some money.' "

So Bryan went home and casually said to his wife: "a chap up at the Air Force Base said I ought to buy a Sunderland. Well, she must have been thinking of something else, because she said 'Well, why don't you?'"

So Bryan thought about it for awhile and then decided to go and see the disposal people at the base and tell them he'd like to tender for one of the Sunderlands.

"Much to my horror, they said that I couldn't tender for one, but I could tender for all five since they were being sold off as a job lot together with a whole hanger of spare parts and engines."

Bryan took some forms home and just for the hell of it jotted down a "silly" figure and sent the forms in to see what happened.

"Three months later," said Bryan with a wry grin, "I

found I owned five-four engined aeroplanes."

Having got himself "lumbered," he had to do something about it. And here, some old Air Force buddies came to his rescue, replaced some of the engine parts with spares and one-by-one they flew their prizes down to Sydney. "Much to the horror of the commandant of the flying boat base there, because at that time there were a great number of flying boats being used by the commercial airlines."

Pretty soon Bryan's new Trans-Oceanic Airlines was island-hopping across the Pacific between Sydney and New Guinea, New Caledonia, Solomon Islands and the New Hebrides. "We did a lot of charter flying too in these aeroplanes, even out to the Marshall Islands, Carolina Islands, Tahiti, all those sort of places, on charter."

They had some opposition from Quantas, Australia's national airline, who paralleled their routes with PBY's, "and we slugged it out for quite a number of years. We had the edge on them though, because we were operating four engined aircraft while theirs were two."

The airline was finally bought out by Ansett in 1953 who continued to operate the Pacific routes and then gradually wound their operation down to flights to Lord Howe Island, some 450 miles off the Australian coast.

Eventually Ansett wanted to convert to an all-jet fleet and sold off the last two remaining flying boats (not those originally bought by Bryan) to Charlie Blair, President of Antilles Air Boats, who brought them out to the Virgin Islands.

It was just before Capt. Blair's first flight out of Sydney, that Bryan chanced to meet him and was invited to make the journey with Capt. Blair and his guests as copilot on the second delivery flight.

Bryan jumped at the chance of flying in a Sunderland, now converted into the commercial version and called Sandringham, once more and made his first trip to the Virgin Islands.

One look at the Antilles Air Boats operation here and that old fascination was rekindled.

"I had never seen anything like it. The frequency of movement of the aircraft and the whole concept of flying downtown to downtown with amphibians was marvellous. I'd never had very much experience with amphibians before and I'd always thought an amphibian was an aircraft that either landed on the water or landed on an aerodrome and I'd never thought of it as being used in this concept before — always landing on the water and getting itself ashore by means of its landing gear — and to me this was the most intriguing aspect of the whole thing. To see these aircraft landing and to see the passengers getting off about 60 seconds after they landed, right alongside the main street of town, was fantastic. And when Charlie asked me if I'd like to come back, I jumped at the idea."

Capt. Monkton went home, resigned from his job as a metric conversion officer with the Australian government and came back to work for Antilles Air Boats.

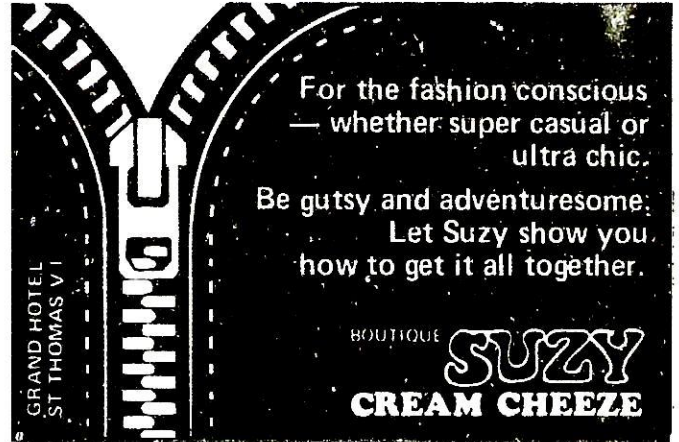
He still spends part of his time in Australia where he retains business interests and he does find the climate in the Virgin Islands a little too warm for comfort, but flying the Goose keeps him coming back.

So when passengers in San Juan or St. Croix hear a crisp, British accent saying "Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen," instead of the usual American "Welcome aboard folks...." they know they are being addressed by Bryan Monkton, ex-World War Two fighter pilot, ex-airline chief, ex-pilot for Sabina, Swiss Air and British Caledonian Airways and quite definitely a man who's still in love with flying boats.

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