

WHEN BOATS FLEW OVER THE CITY

from Stephen Berry



The sight of a TEAL flying boat alighting at Evans Bay was redolent of the early glamour of early plane travel out of Wellington.

TEAL's famous Solent flying boats served the Coral Route to the Pacific Islands out of Auckland, but they also flew the Tasman to Sydney, starting in late 1949.

The flying boats used to land in Evans Bay, in the days before Wellington Airport was built. At the beginning, flights to Wellington were intermittent and usually tied up with special events, but in October 1950 a regular flying boat service to Sydney was inaugurated.

The first flying boat to Sydney was ZK-AMM Ararangi and took off on 3 October 1950. heralded by a green signal rocket fired by Wellington's mayor, Sir William Appleton.

Flights left four times a week, and took around 8 hours, in what was considered luxury at the time - and indeed stands up well compared with economy-class travel today.

A Solent double-decker seated 45 people in padded leather recliners. with tables, served by stewards and an air hostess.

The flight included a 4-course meal, individually cooked on board, and it was even possible to smoke in a lower deck lounge.

A ticket costs 60 NZ pounds, one way, which is NZD1700 today. At the time it was considered both fast and convenient.

More than 300 people turned up to watch the first takeoff - all thinking it was "about time", according to the Evening Post newspaper.

"There was an atmosphere almost of relief" the paper said. "The years of waiting are over - Wellington has a direct link to Sydney at last".

Appleton, who was also pushing to get the airport open at Rongotai, said he hoped the land and sea runways would complement each other.

"This is a milestone, or should I say a landing stage. When Rongotai is developed, Wellington will be almost unique in the world in having two such facilities on its doorstep".

Initially the set-up for the Solents were makeshift - three garages underneath a block of flats hosted TEAL, Customs and Immigration officials. Later, a pontoon and a proper terminal were built to service the flying boats. As well as its passengers, *Ararangi's* first flight carried more than 50,000 letters. It was hoped the flying boats would speed up deliveries across the Tasman.

The pilot was Captain Christopher Griffiths, a mileage millionaire who had made more than 900 crossings. In its editorial, the Evening Post rhapsodized about the new service and bemoaned the delays in getting it set up.

"In air developments the capital city has previously been treated as a sort of poor relation, now the time has arrived for us to take our rightful place in the country's network of air services"

Sadly, this was not to be. The flying boat service was popular, but TEAL moved decisively into land-based aircraft in the years after the Wellington-Sydney route opened, scotching many of the dreams expressed by Appleton and the Evening Post.

The last Solent flight left Evans Bay on 25 June 1954. Wellington Airport did not open until five years later. Even then, it has never been the international hub Appleton and many

others since had hoped for. Debate over whether to extend its runway continues to this day.

