

TEAL Proves Naysayers Wrong

by Stephen Berry

Evans Bay functioned as the preferred flying-boat alighting area in Wellington Harbour as early as the 1930s, and local officials promoted it through the decade as such. However, a 1938 report concluded that although Evans Bay was the best site for flying boats in Wellington Harbour, it was subject to strong winds that would make a regular service unviable. Visits from Imperial Airways aircraft took place in 1938 and in 1940 TEAL flew one of their two Short Empire flying boats to Evans Bay with dignitaries who attended the nearby New Zealand Centennial Exhibition located at Rongotai.

It was not until October 1950 that TEAL operated a permanent international service to Australia from Evans Bay. A temporary terminal was provided by using roadside parking-garages along Evans Bay Parade at the sheltered western end of the bay next to the Patent Slip, until a more substantial terminal was constructed for TEAL in 1952 on reclaimed land at what is now Cog Park.

At first passengers were transported by launch between the shore and the flying boats, but in 1951 a small jetty was built and connected via a gangway to a floating pontoon. made of 124 large square steel tanks connected together and ballasted with water. The pontoon was U-shaped, 110 ft long and 74 ft wide, and flying boats were winched tail-first into the U so that passengers could step straight onto the pontoon dock.

The pontoon also allowed light maintenance of TEAL's Solent to be carried out. Evans Bay could become rough in unfavorable weather conditions and at least two Solents were damaged during alighting, needing substantial repairs (see newspaper article below).

FLOAT RIPPED OFF

PA WELLINGTON, Oct. 17.

The port float of the Ararangi was ripped away by a heavy sea shortly after the flying boat landed in Evans Bay from Auckland this morning. Quick work by the Solent's crew saved the ship and brought her to a safe anchorage.

Piloted by Captain P. le Couteur, the Ararangi made a perfect landing through blinding rain in the teeth of a strong south wind and was beginning to lose way when a wave pounded the float to leave it hanging by a strut. Almost before the Solent had time to list heavily Captain le Couteur had "revved" up the port engines to stabilise his ship and the members of the crew were crawling out of the escape hatch on to the starboard wing to provide the ballast necessary to prevent her from rolling on to her port side.

Although assistance came quickly from the Civil Aviation Department's control launches, some of the men on the wing suffered fairly severe exposure and one of them almost slipped into the sea when he lost his hold on the wing.

Besides the damage to the float the port wing is buckled and pieces have been torn out of it. The exact extent of the damage cannot be ascertained until an improvement in the weather allows a proper inspection.

Because of the lack of facilities at the Evans Bay base it is thought likely that the flying boat may have to be taken up on the patent slip for repairs and that staff will have to be brought from Auckland. Meanwhile the Ararangi is moored off the Evans Bay clubhouse.

The Wellington-Sydney flight was cancelled today.

The air secretary, Mr T. A. Barrow, who was quickly on the scene after the accident, said the 35 passengers would be flown to Auckland by the Aotearoa tomorrow and transhipped there to a Sydney-bound Solent.

The Aotearoa, which arrived from Sydney today, will need to be serviced before making another Tasman crossing.

Besides Captain le Couteur, the Ararangi's crew included First Officer T. Brewer, Flight Engineer L. Goldie, Radio Officer D. Reid, Flight Stewards Gordon and Homling, and Flight Stewardess J. Kelly. TEAL's chief engineer, Mr G. B. Bolt, was also on the flying boat when it arrived.

Head winds delayed the arrival of the flying boat Aotearoa from Sydney by an hour and a-half today, and she did not touch down until 8.30 a.m.

The captain of the Aotearoa, Captain D. J. Keesing said that the conditions were the worst likely to be encountered in Wellington. Even then, he said, they gave no cause for concern, and pilots had landed in worse conditions at Auckland and Sydney.

It was stated that it was a small trough following a wave which sheared off the float, and this was not caused by the wind. Captain Keesing said that losing a float was quite a common happening. There had been two similar previous accidents to Tasman Airways. It happened in all parts of the world.

(A **patent slip** is an inclined slipway extending from shoreline into water, featuring a "cradle" onto which a ship is first floated, and a mechanism to haul the ship, attached to the cradle, out of the water onto a slip. The patent slip was invented in the early 19th century, as a cheaper alternative to dry docks for marine vessel repairs). To see a Solent flying boat on the Patent Slip would have been a unique sight, but in the event the repairs to the aircraft were carried out afloat by TEAL engineers.

Only two such accidents occurred during the three and a half years the Solents operated from Wellington. The first happened on 18 October 1950, just 15 days after the service began, and the second, almost a year later, occurred on 17 October 1951. Both incidents involved the same aircraft, *ZK-AMM Ararangi*. On the second occasion the damaged Solent was placed into the incomplete pontoon at Cog Park which greatly assisted and sped up the work.

So, the naysayers who believed Evans Bay to be unsuitable for a regular flying boat service were wrong, as TEAL's trans Tasman service operated successfully there from October 1950 to June 1954. It all ended when TEAL decided to move to land based airliners, not because of Wellington's often inclement weather. Auckland, where TEAL were based, often suffered from gale-force winds too and several Solents experienced float losses on the Waitemata Harbour

Personally, I am delighted that against strong opposition, TEAL decided to use Wellington as an alternative base for their Solents. Had they not done so, then this 5-year-old boy would never have become 'obsessed' with flying boats. Thank you, TEAL, for a lifetime of pleasure!



TEAL Solent *ZK-AMM Ararangi* anchored out in a stormy Evans Bay after her port float had been torn off while landing on 19 October 1950. To prevent the aircraft from capsizing, a bundle of heavy rope has hurriedly been placed on her starboard wing.



On 19 October 1950 a replacement float and propeller were trucked down from Auckland to effect repairs.



Jack Felton, assistant maintenance superintendent with TEAL, working on the damaged port float of Solent flying boat 'Ararangi' photographed 19 October 1950 by an Evening Post photographer.



The struts supporting the float were designed to easily detach from the wing without causing further damage. Repairs would take no more than three hours.



TEAL Solent ZK-AMM *Ararangi* pictured soon after her starboard float was torn off while landing at Evans Bay on 18 October 1951. Note the heavily weighted tarpaulin keeping her port float in the water and preventing the aircraft from capsizing. This was the second, and last, incident of this type to occur during the service's three-and-a-half-year operation.



TEAL Solent *ZK-AMM Ararangi* undergoing repairs in the incomplete pontoon at Evans Bay on 19 October 1951. ZK-AMO Aranui can be seen moored to a buoy out in the bay.



Another view of TEAL Solent *ZK-AMM Ararangi* undergoing repairs in the incomplete pontoon at Evans Bay.

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