

# CHARLES ULM

## MASTER MIND OF EARLY AUSTRALIAN AVIATION

Christobel Mattingley tells the tale of a great air services pioneer

Early in life, Charles Thomas Philippe Ulm (1898–1934) showed the daring, courage and persistence which were to make him one of the giants of Australian aviation. Six weeks after World War I began, giving a false name and age, 15-year-old Ulm enlisted in the 1st Battalion, Australian Imperial Force. Early ashore at Gallipoli, he was wounded, sent home, and discharged. Re-enlisting under his real name, he served on the Western Front and was severely wounded. Then, at an English officer training school, he illegally made his first solo flight, setting him on his life's course.

After demobilisation, Ulm survived eight years of temporary jobs, divorce, and litigation. Five failed aviation enterprises included a barnstorming episode ending in a tragic crash. But tall, dark, good-looking Ulm still impressed with his self-confident air. Tough-minded and ambitious, early in 1927 he approached Charles Kingsford Smith. Smithy had had his own marital and business problems and court cases. Nevertheless, he was still keen for his latest company, Sydney-based Interstate Flying Services, to succeed.

Smithy had no aptitude for marketing, and the company was deep in debt when Ulm suggested bidding for a government contract



for an Adelaide–Perth air service. Smithy, excited by the proposal, persuaded his fellow board members to hire Ulm as business manager. Although they did not win the contract, Ulm did gain some charter work.

Then, in May 1927, American Charles Lindbergh's solo trans-Atlantic flight motivated Ulm and Smithy to fulfil their joint dream of being first to fly the Pacific. To promote themselves and attract sponsors, Ulm proposed a round-Australia flight to beat the 1924 23-day record. With characteristic drive he organised free fuel from Vacuum Oil, and a deal with Sun Newspapers to publish daily progress reports.

Although Ulm at that time had neither pilot nor navigator qualifications, with Smithy at the controls of the Bristol Tourer, and after only 12 landings en route, they arrived back in Sydney on 29 June 1927, ten days and five hours after leaving it. They received a heroes' welcome, and Ulm married his second wife the same day. But the

above:  
Unknown photographer  
*Portrait of Charles Ulm c.1930*  
sepia-toned photograph  
15.3 x 20.3 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-vn3723092

below left:  
Unknown photographer  
*Charles Ulm with His Mother and Father 1914*  
b&w photograph; 20.3 x 25.8 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an24808557





above:  
*Sydney Morning Herald/  
 Sydney Mail*  
*Charles Kingsford Smith with  
 Charles Ulm, Taken Just after  
 the Trans-Pacific Flight, 1928*  
 b&w photograph  
 11.3 x 16.0 cm  
 Pictures Collection  
 nla.pic-an2411366

below:  
 Sir Charles Kingsford Smith  
 Logbook of the *Southern Cross*  
 1928  
 Manuscripts Collection  
 nla.ms-ms209-1

Ulm had to borrow his fare to America, where he negotiated the loan of an aircraft with another adventurous Australian, Arctic explorer Hubert Wilkins. With £4500 promised by the New South Wales Government and £1500 from magnate Sidney Myer, the Fokker three-engine monoplane, which they renamed *Southern Cross*, was being modified. But before the long-range tanks, flight instruments and wireless could be fitted, the government changed. The grant was cancelled.

Confronted with massive, steadily mounting debts, Ulm trudged San Francisco, knocking on corporate doors seeking sponsors, scrounging meals, and dossing down at airports. But the loss of 11 aircraft and 12 lives in the recent Dole air race

original members of Smithy's group, pilot Keith Anderson and mechanic Bob Hitchcock, had been excluded from the success—sowing the seeds of future discord.

Ulm's and Smithy's next venture was the trans-Pacific flight. Chronically short of money,

from California to Honolulu had squelched interest in long-distance flying. Only the Vacuum Oil Company's west coast manager, Locke Harper, continued to support Ulm and Smithy, from his own pocket.

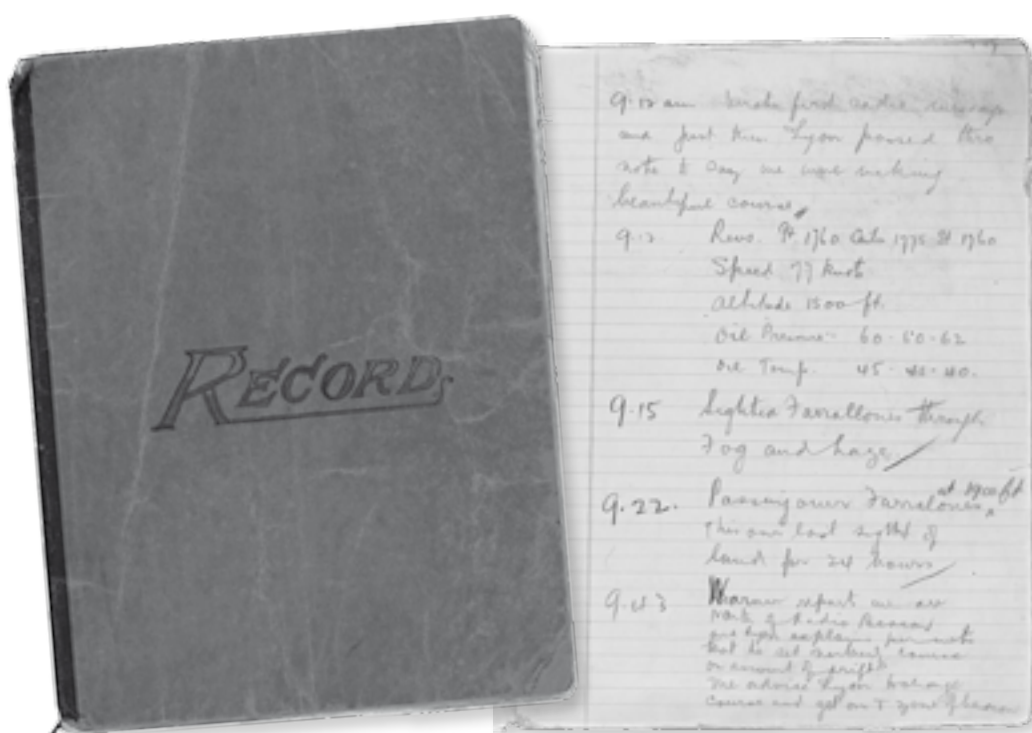
Seeking advice of the California Bank, Ulm discovered a fortuitous Australian connection in president Andrew Chaffey, son of the Murray Valley irrigation pioneer. Chaffey introduced Ulm and Smithy to millionaire Allan Hancock, who, after thoroughly scrutinising the pair, their plans and plane, became their saviour, paying their debts and underwriting the flight.

So, on 31 May 1928, almost 10 months after their hopeful arrival in America, and thanks to Ulm's dogged refusal to give up, the aircraft at last set off from California, farewelled by several hundred well-wishers. With Ulm as co-pilot, and almost four tons of fuel on board, *Southern Cross* took off on the journey's first leg—to Hawaii.

Ulm kept the log in an exercise book, and had to write notes to the two American crew members sitting behind. Two-way radio enabled them to keep in touch with their sponsors, and commercial and amateur operators across the world tuned in to follow their progress. But it was not without difficulties. Radio operator Warner, deafened by relentless engine noise, had difficulty hearing signals, while cloud formations confused navigator Lyon into thinking they were Hawaiian islands, causing him to alter direction, thus wasting valuable fuel.

*Southern Cross* touched down in Honolulu 27 hours and 20 minutes after take-off. In a triumphant cablegram to the press, Ulm exulted, 'Smith and self very elated. Success attaining first hop I attribute to our careful organization, Smith's skill as pilot, my ability relieve him occasionally [sic] and Lyon's and Warner's ability as navigator and radio operator ... Received tremendous welcome ... decorated with leis ... Smith and self now going to bed for few hours.'

In atrocious weather on the second leg, Smithy and Ulm created another record—for



I've got a feeling we're  
going to make it with  
flying colours.

Receiving Beacon OK  
Getting Distinct "A"  
indicating we are little west  
of ~~some~~ Radio Beam  
Hurry Tally

25-0'  
Please get me  
Greenwich mean  
time from  
Pioneer  
out of range  
No hurry

long-distance non-stop flying—almost 3300 miles (5280 km) to Fiji. Despite radio and engine trouble, without life jackets, dinghy or safety harness, and with only 48 sandwiches and 18 litres of coffee and water, they were aloft for a gruelling 34 hours and 50 minutes. A hair-raising landing on the tiny Suva airstrip displayed the exhausted pilot's superb skill. Then, on 9 June 1928, after another 24 storm-wracked hours they were escorted in over Brisbane by a fleet of biplanes, to be met by an excited crowd of 15 000.

Another euphoric welcome by over 200 000 well-wishers followed in Sydney. Ulm and Smithy were awarded the Air Force Cross. But, determined to retain the glory for Australia, and the financial rewards for themselves, they treated their colleagues Warner and Lyon very shabbily.

Hungry for more success and fame, in September the pair set off in *Southern Cross* on another epic flight, crossing the Tasman. A ferocious storm battered the flimsy little plane and, with radio and other vital instruments unserviceable, survival against the elements depended on human skill. Panic almost overwhelmed the four aviators, flying blind. But at daylight the welcome sighting of the coast ensured that *Southern Cross* would make another triumphant landfall, the first plane to reach New Zealand from overseas. The prime minister presented them with £2000. Again the canny Ulm had ensured that only he and Smithy would benefit, having made navigator Litchfield and radio operator McWilliams sign similar contracts to those he had perpetrated on the Americans in the earlier Trans-Pacific flight.

Ulm also used the time in New Zealand to better himself, by completing the formal instruction entitling him to the long-coveted pilot's wings. On return, although they had decided against night flying, their troubles

continued. A violent headwind slowed the plane and heavy fog made Sydney invisible. After 23 grim hours only three gallons (13.65 l) remained in the fuel tanks when they finally landed.

In December 1928, Smithy and Ulm formed Australian National Airways (ANA), their own intercity airline for mail, freight and passengers. Charismatic Smithy took no interest in the business, preferring to bask in the ongoing adulation. But hard-headed, hard-working entrepreneurial Ulm spent long hours lodging tenders for airmail between capital cities, pursuing contracts, seeking passengers for the fledgling service, and arranging yet another international flight—this time to Britain.

On 30 March 1929, ignoring unfavourable weather reports, they set off non-stop to Wyndham, Western Australia, in 'the old bus' as Smithy dubbed *Southern Cross*. Flying into torrential rain and blinding cloud they became totally lost and after 28 terrifying hours made a forced landing in a coastal swamp. Stranded for 12 days, they were finally rescued, to public jubilation. But, tragically, Keith Anderson and Bob Hitchcock, who had set out to find them, died in the attempt. The ensuing inquiry into the two disasters did nothing to enhance Ulm's reputation, as he was accused of planning their disappearance as a publicity stunt.

However, undaunted and hard-nosed as ever, Ulm pursued his plans for ANA. Five Avro tri-motor planes, capable of carrying eight passengers each, were purchased

Charles Ulm (1898–1934) and Sir Charles Kingsford Smith (1897–1935)  
Notes passed between the cockpit and the navigation cabin during the *Southern Cross* Trans-Pacific Flight, 31 May – 9 June 1928  
pencilled notes on paper; various dimensions  
Manuscripts Collection  
nla.ms-ms1925



above:  
Broughton, Ward Et Chaseling  
*The Southern Cross on Its  
Arrival in Sydney from the  
Flight across the Pacific,  
10 June 1928*  
b&w photograph  
30.9 x 38.6 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an24664462

below right:  
Unknown photographer  
*Stella Australis, an Airspeed  
Envoy Monoplane, VH-UXY,  
Prior to Charles Ulm's  
Attempted Trans-Pacific Flight,  
Oakland Aerodrome, California,  
United States, December 1934*  
b&w photograph  
20.5 x 27.9 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-vn3930677

and named *Southern Cloud*, *Southern Star*, *Southern Sky*, *Southern Moon* and *Southern Sun*. Pilots were engaged, and on 1 January 1930 daily services commenced, departing Sydney at 8 am and arriving Brisbane at 2 pm; single fare £9/13/–, return £18/7/6. Using *Southern Cloud*, the Sydney–Melbourne route opened six months later, and the route to Tasmania in January 1931. In its first 90 days, ANA completed 183 single trips, 182 of them to schedule. It had flown 91 700 miles (147 000 km), carried 1244 paying passengers, and 102 175 letters, without accident.

But within nine months another tragedy occurred. En route to Melbourne on 21 March 1931, *Southern Cloud* disappeared in bad weather. Eight people were aboard. The plane was not to be found for 27 years, discovered in the Snowy Mountains.

The loss of the aircraft, the search costs, plus the effects of the Depression, were devastating for the company. Ulm's appeal for a government subsidy was rejected, and in July 1931 a receiver was appointed. Smithy had completely lost interest, but Ulm persevered in trying to trade ANA out of debt. In December 1931 he organised the first airmail flight: Australia–England return. But even Ulm's determination could not overcome the depressed interest in aviation. Early in 1933, ANA went into voluntary liquidation.

Ulm subsequently bought one aircraft, renamed it *Faith in Australia*, and set numerous flight records in 1933—including

another Australia–England return trip, and carrying the first female passengers to New Zealand. In 1934, he carried the first official airmail from Australia to New Zealand return, and from Australia to Papua and New Guinea and back. His historic flights have since been celebrated with commemorative stamps and covers.

Ulm formed Great Pacific Airways, to establish an Australia–North America service, and on 3 December 1934 set out in his new plane, an Airspeed Envoy, *Stella Australis*. But somewhere between California and Hawaii, *Stella Australis* went missing. It has never been found.

Ulm's only child, John, by his first marriage, was just 13 at the time his father disappeared. Indefatigable in compiling material relating to Charles, he donated his extensive collection to the National Library, where it is held as MS 9923. John Ulm was a major informant for Ian Mackersey, whose authoritative biography, *Smithy, The Life of Sir Charles Kingsford Smith* (1998), reveals much about both aviators. On Ulm's death, his contemporary, pilot and aircraft designer Lawrence Wackett (see my article in *National Library of Australia News*, October 2007), wrote: 'He was probably the greatest living exponent of the future of aviation. Only those who were privileged to have intimate dealings with him will appreciate what a really great Australian he was.'

CHRISTOBEL MATTINGLEY's book *Battle Order 204*, the story of her husband's years as a RAAF pilot flying Lancasters during World War II, was published to acclaim in 2007

