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NAVION RANGEMASTER IN AUSTRALIA

By Geoff Goodall

*Despite the large numbers built, no Navion models were imported to Australia during the 1950s.
However two of the much-upgraded Navion Rangemasters arrived in the esrly 1960s*



Seen a long way from its North Queensland home, Navion Rangemaster VH-WWE was visiting Canberra Airport in February 1966.

Photo by Bob

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In 1946 North American Aviation entered the postwar civil light aircraft market to keep its aircraft factories going with a brand new design, the *North American NAVion*, marketed as such to take maximum advantage of North American's good name with wartime aircraft production. It was a 4 seat cabin monoplane with sliding canopy and retractable undercarriage, powered by a 185hp Continental engine. In flight with gear retracted, the family remblance with the P-51 Mustang was striking. The *NAVion* went into full production and 1,109 built in the first year, including a military L-19 version for the US Army.

When North American needed factory space for military jet orders in 1948, the production rights to the Navion were sold to Ryan Aeronautical Corporation who continued production at San Diego, California building an additional 1,238 aircraft as *Ryan Navions* (dropping the capital "A"). Ryan instroduced more powerful engines and other refinements as *Navion A* and *Navion B*. At the end of 1952 Ryan discontinued building Navions, despite their success and full order books, because their construction was so strong that they were expensive to build an a profit could not be made on civil sales alone. It was reported at the time that each Navion cost \$15,000 to build but because of competition in the civil market, new base model Navions had a market price of \$10,000. Other manufacturers, TEMCO and TUSCO then took over production of the Navion during the 1950s, producing models with a variety of enhancements, marketed as *Navion D, E and F*.

Early attempts to import Navions

The Navions were among a wide range of production American light aircraft types not seen in Australia during the 1950s because of Australian treasury currency restrictions on purchases in US dollars. Another significant reason was the Department of Civil Aviation's strict and conservative airworthiness standards which dissuaded eager private owners wanting to upgrade from Tiger Moths and Austers. Such production types as Navions, Aircoupes, Luscombes, Temco/Globe Swifts, Bellancas

were not imported, the inhibiting factor being the expensive and time consuming Australian type-certification process which required submission of extensive manufacturer's design calculations and performance data. The absence of such light aircraft which were seen in large numbers on overseas airfields led to a belief within the industry that American types were frowned upon by the Department. Whether this was based on fact or not, it was bureaucratically successful in limiting the range of light aircraft being certified in Australia.

Kingsford Smith Aviation Service Pty Ltd at Bankstown Airport, Sydney was a thriving business in the postwar years, being Australian distributor for hundreds of new Auster aircraft from Great Britain. It was also engaged in extensive sales and maintenance work and large scale aircraft imports and exports. The company was formed in 1945 by aircraft engineer John T. Brown with the purchase of a total of 91 RAAF Wackett Trainers from the Commonwealth Disposals Commission.

Kingsford Smith Aviation Service were leaders in innovative aircraft modification, such as installing American engines into Austers, fitting agricultural gear to aircraft and even fitting nosewheel trigrig to an Auster J4 Archer in an attempt to modernise Austers. After building the prototype Pellarini PL-7 Tanker, forerunner to the successful Transavia PL-12 Airtruk, in 1957 Kingsford Smith Aviation Service commenced an ambitious project to convert CA-6 Wacketts for agricultural work, resulting in the KS.3 Cropmaster, which later evolved into the all metal YA-1 Cropmaster. Through all this design work, the company had close dealings with DCA airworthiness sections and one would assume there were discussions with DCA before committing to importing a new aircraft type to Australia. Nevertheless, Kingsford Smith Aviation Service Pty Ltd applied on 30 April 1956 for DCA Import Permits for three *Ryan Navions*. The Import Permit was issued by DCA on 8 June that year, but the aircraft failed to arrive in Australia and nothing more was heard.

Two years later, Perth pilot Gladwyn B. Brandon-Brown, who owned an Auster and a Miles Gemini VH-GBB for his private flying, applied to DCA for an Import Permit for a *Ryan Navion 205*. His application was dated 19 September 1958 but no Permit was issued by DCA. Brandon-Brown commenced negotiations to purchase a Beech C35 Bonanza from USA that same year for which he requested DCA reserve VH-WBB, but it, too, failed to arrive. In 1961 he used VH-WBB on a more mundane Cessna 175B purchased from Cessna dealers Rex Aviation, Sydney.

The next planned Navion import came on 24 November 1959 when a company named Tasman International applied to import a *Navion D*. The Import Permit was approved on 23 December 1959 but again, no Navion arrived in Australia. It is not known what went on behind the scenes but this hardened the impression in the aviation industry that DCA did not encourage the Navion.

Enter the Navion Rangemaster

Tubular Service Engineering Co (TUSCO) at Galveston, Texas had established a new division named Navion Aircraft Company, to continue building Navions. In 1960 they created the prototype *Navion G* by modifying a Navion F with a redesigned enlarged 5 seat cabin, replacing the sliding canopy with a conventional car-like entry door. It featured improved performance and an exceptional range, gained by combining the main fuel tank with centre-line wing tip fuel tanks. The Navion G was marketed under the name *Navion Rangemaster G*, stretching the range from the original Navion's 500 miles to 1,800 miles.

The prototype *Navion Rangemaster G* first flew on 10 June 1960. An improved version with redesigned small tail surface designated *Rangemaster G-1* began production in October 1961 and production at Galveston increased to an aircraft each day. Power was a 260hp Continental IO-470H fuel injected engine with constant-speed propeller. Navion Aircraft Company then produced the ultimate model, the *Rangemaster H*. After selling 170 *Rangemasters*, production rights passed through six small companies who assembled some from components while offering modifications to existing Navion owners.

In USA as the sport aviation movement grew, Navions were often referred to as "everyman's Mustang" and the sophisticated *Navion Rangemasters* achieved a cult status and are still in demand among knowing Navion buyers. Numerous modifications for the entire Navion range were produced by US aviation companies, offering improvements to engines, cowlings, canopy, tailplane design in a range of certified modification kits. Navion owners are well known for enthusiasm about their aircraft and most are members of Navion associations. Colourful US aviation engineer and pilot Jack Riley produced a twin engined *Twin Navion*, which went into production by TEMCO and later Camair as the *Camair 480*.

The first Rangemaster comes to Australia

By 1962 an Australian dealer was prepared to import, certify and market the *Navion Rangemaster* - World Wide Aeronautical Services Pty Ltd, Sydney. This business had been established during the previous year by Mr. R. G. Douglas, who in recent years had owned Percival Prentice VH-BAO and Fairchild Argus VH-BVF for his private flying. To start off the new enterprise, World Wide imported three second-hand aircraft from from USA in early 1962, Piper Comanches VH-DBW and VH-DOL and a Beech G35 Bonanza VH-WWK. In addition, World Wide Aeronautical Services were appointed Navion distributors for Australia, New Zealand and New Guinea.

TAKE THE SHORT CUT IN THE BIG, ROOMY, 5-PASSENGER NAVION RANGEMASTER



Travelling by NAVION is like having your own private airliner! Head rests . . . arm rests . . . individual ash trays (5) . . . individual reading lights . . . airline-type ventilators . . . thick carpeting . . . 5 adjustable, reclining, individual seats. Navion doesn't believe you have true comfort if you must share a seat with another passenger!

And if you're interested in **maximum** economy range (at 177 mph) you can fly even farther — 1858 miles, still with a safe 30-minute fuel reserve! No other plane in its class gives you such ability to "fly around" unexpected weather.

You get all this equipment as STANDARD on the NAVION . . .

Directional gyro, artificial horizon, magnetic compass, electric turn and bank indicator, rate-of-climb, air speed indicator, heated pitot tube, sensitive altimeter, clock, outside air temperature, Tachometer, manifold pressure gauge, metered fuel pressure indicator, cylinder head temperature gauge, oil pressure gauge, vacuum gauge, ammeter, three fuel quantity gauges, Continental 10-470-H-260 horsepower fuel-injection engine, exhaust manifolds, mufflers with heater and tail pipe, down-draft cooling system, dual purpose electric boost pump and fuel system, GMC integral oil cooler, heavy-duty engine mounts, vibration insulators, McCauley constant-speed propeller, Woodward governor, propeller spinner, complete dual flight controls, dual toe brakes, Vernier throttle control, Vernier fuel pressure control, Vernier constant-speed propeller control, Delco-Remy heavy-duty starter, Bendix magnetos, external power plug, 50 amp. generator and voltage regulator.

Test fly the new Navion Rangemaster

WORLDWIDE AERONAUTICAL SERVICES PTY. LTD.

Hangar 131 Bankstown Airport.

Phone 70-1153

Australian Flying magazine May 1964 full-page advertisement. Courtesy Dave Prossor

On arrival in Sydney, the Comanche 250 VH-DOL was immediately sold to Walter D. Barrett of Orange NSW. The Barrett family ran a frozen food business from their cool stores in Orange, Walter and Tom Barrett having continuously owned a variety of aircraft going back to a Hillson Praga in 1942. Tom Barrett expressed interest in the superior performance of the Rangemaster, and World Wide purchased a current model *Navion Rangemaster G-1* N2403T from Western Navion, a dealership at Long Beach Munciple Airport, California. Advertising at the time stated that the Rangemaster had the longest range of any single-engined aircraft type in Australia.

World Wide decided to have the Rangemaster flown to Australia on delivery to promote its long-range capabilities. The dealer requested an Australian registration in the VH-WW block and DCA issued VH-WWE and approved the ferry flight under Australian registration. Wearing the factory yellow and white colour scheme, VH-WWE was flown via San Francisco, Hawaii and Noumea in November 1962 by US ferry pilot Clarence Burke. At Noumea the temporary ferry fuel tanks were

removed from the cabin so that the last leg to Australia would demonstrate the standard aircraft's long range capabilities.

VH-WWE arrived at Sydney Airport on 14 November 1962, the delivery flight having taken 54 hours and 45 minutes flying time from San Francisco to Brisbane. Flight tests commenced at Bankstown as part of the performance requirements for the DCA Type Approval, flown by Victa Aviation's approved test pilot Randy Green. During those trials, the Rangemaster flew to Adelaide in January 1963 and was parked overnight inside the TAA hangar. The sale to Tom Barrett was not completed, and it was used initially as a demonstrator. World Wide Aeronautical Services' advertising stressed its long-range, roomy cabin with five reclining seats with arm and head rests each with individual airliner type air vents and lights. The dealer planned to market the Rangemasters in Australia in a completely equipped form, including dual controls, full instrumentation, Mitchell Executive autopilot, HF and VHF radio, rotating beacon, dual brakes as standard equipment. They even threw in a navigation computer and picnic basket with a thermos flask!

In the March 1963 issue of *Aircraft*, No.49 of the magazine's air test series by experienced Sydney flying instructor Keith Robey featured the Rangemaster. He flew VH-WWE from Bankstown Airport. Some extracts from that flight report:

"The Rangemaster has a large cabin and the wide side windows give the passengers better than average visibility. A certain amount of luggage may be stowed in the rear of the cabin alongside the single rear seat and this can be loaded through a separate luggage door on the port side. The interior trim is of a high standard, the cabin furnishings are of good quality and the comfortable seats are trimmed with nylon and genuine leather. The upper surface of the wing is used as the cabin floor which leaves the cabin free of cross members. Design of the wing features a dihedral angle of about 7.5 degrees.... and permanently attached cylindrical wingtip tanks each of which has a capacity of 34 US gallons. As its name implies, one of aircraft's outstanding features is its range which is quoted as 1475 statute miles at 65% power, or 1,858 miles at 50% power.

Flap was not required for normal takeoff and with only two on board and a light fuel load the Rangemaster broke ground cleanly after a comparatively short run. There was little tendency to swing and once airborne the speed built up rapidly.

The Rangemaster has most docile stalling characteristics. With power off and flaps up I found that the stall occurred at approximately 64mph indicated airspeed, and in the approach configuration with flaps and undercarriage extended and a little power added, the stall did not occur until until the aeroplane had assumed a most exaggerated attitude with the speed back at 53mph. Carrying out a flapped takeoff and a short-field landing, I was impressed with the ability of the Rangemaster to operate out of the shortest strips."

In August 1963 VH-WWE was sold to Mr. Don Walker of Herberton, a small town in northern Queensland. He was a businessman who operated the town timber mill and other ventures including exporting lead-tin ingots smelted at his local mine. In 1951 he had cleared the first airstrip at Herberton and learnt to fly in Cairns in North Queensland Aero Club Tiger Moths with instructors Neville Mitchell and Bob Norman.

By 1966 the Rangemaster was operated for charter under the name Great Northern Airways based at Cairns Airport. In 1969 it was flown to Sydney for resale, commencing a series of ownership changes. It was seen at Broken Hill NSW on 5 November 1978 as reentrant No.95 with many other aircraft participating an air race event. Since 1990 it has been owned by Victor Kaye of Maldon, Victoria and is a regular visitor to Bendigo, where its still impressive design and bright red and white paint scheme attracts much admiration.



The Rangemaster's sleek lines with its distinctive wing tip fuel tanks can be seen in this photograph of VH-WWE soon after delivery, parked overnight in the TAA hangar at Adelaide in January 1963. Photo by Geoff Goodall



This sunset shot at Adelaide, January 1963 accentuates the small vertical tailplane. Photo by Rod Adam



VH-WWE at its Cairns base in Far North Queensland, August 1966.

Photo by Roger McDonald



Parked at Bankstown in November 1969.

Photo by Eric Favelle



Excellent picture of VH-WWE at Bendigo, Victoria in October 2010.

Photo by Phil Vabre

A second Rangemaster

During 1963 World Wide Aeronautical Services received an order for a second *Rangemaster G-1* from charter operator Carnarvon Air Pty Ltd at Roma, Queensland. A near-new aircraft N4239T previously owned by Executair of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania was acquired and flown out on delivery. In early February 1964 N4239T left California on the long first leg to Hawaii. It had a red, black and white paint scheme and later that month was added to the Australian Register on 21 February as VH-WWL to Carnarvon Air. The Rangemaster's career was cut short when it was destroyed by a fire which burnt down Carnarvon Air's hangar at Roma Airport on the night of 13 November 1966. The company lost two other aircraft in the fire, Cessna 210A VH-PUT and Piper Tri-Pacer VH-CMD, with total damage estimated at over \$70,000. Firemen wheeled four other aircraft from an adjacent hangar in case the fire spread.

Despite their impressive performance, these two Rangemasters were the only examples imported. Their features and competitive price should have made them an Australian sales success, but potential buyers probably preferred the strong back-up support afforded by the American "big Three" Cessna, Beech and Piper.



Australia's second Rangemaster, the short-lived VH-WWL seen on a dull day at Bankstown in 1964, with its owner's name on the fuselage sides *Carnarvon Air, Roma Queensland*. Photo by Bob Neate

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VH-WWE	Navion Rangemaster G-1	c/n NAV-4-2403			
.62	Manufactured by Navion Aircraft Company at Galveston, Texas				
.62	Registered N2403T Western Navion, Long Beach CA				
6.11.62	Registered VH-WWE World Wide Aeronautical Services Pty Ltd, Hangar 120, Bankstown Airport, Sydney NSW				
14.11.62	VH-WWE arrived at Sydney Airport on delivery flight from USA				
23.8.63	D. R. Walker, Herberton Qld trading as Great Northern Airways, Cairns Qld				
6.2.70	A. G. Ducker, Sydney NSW				
22.7.71	R. Gregory, Sydney NSW				
18.6.75	Jack Brabham Aviation Pty Ltd, Bankstown Airport NSW				
4.8.75	K. Hayes, Sydney NSW				
30.11.82	Struck-off Register, withdrawn from service				
14.11.83	Restored to Register: K. Hayes, Airlie Beach Qld, later Bundaberg Qld				
15.4.85	Gaffey Pty Ltd trading as Warrego Air Taxis, Cunamulla Qld				
10.9.85	Burnett Exploration Pty Ltd trading as Warrego Air Taxis, Bundaberg Qld				
8.10.87	Essendon Aviation Engineering Pty Ltd, Essendon Airport Vic				
14.11.89	H. K. Osborn, Harcourt Vic				
15.8.96	A. J. Osborn, Bendigo Vic				
29.2.00	Victor S. Kaye, Maldon Vic				
	<i>Currently registered</i>				
VH-WWL	Navion Rangemaster G-1	c/n NAV-4-2439			
.63	Manufactured by Navion Aircraft Company at Galveston, Texas				
.63	Registered N2439T Executair Inc, Pittsburg PA				
21.2.64	Registered VH-WWL Carnarvon Air Pty Ltd, Roma Qld				
13.11.66	Destroyed in hangar fire, Roma Qld				

References:

- Australian Civil Aircraft Register, Department of Civil Aviation and its successors
- DCA Aircraft Import Permit register, courtesy Melvyn Davis
- US Civil Aircraft Register, FAA, 1st July 1963 & 1st January 1964 editions
- *Aircraft*, monthly magazine, Melbourne, March 1963
- *Australian Air Log*, monthly journal, 1965-1968, various references
- *AHSA Journal*, monthly, November 1962, November-December 1966
- *Air Britain Digest*, December 1965: Where Are They? N2439T
- *The Aircraft of the World*, William Green & Gerald Pollinger, McDonald, London 1965
- *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Aircraft in Australia and NZ*, Dave Eyre, Sunshine Books 1983