

Last update 20.6.14

## SAAB SAFIR IN AUSTRALIA

*A single example of the Swedish SAAB Safir was imported from the total of 323 constructed in Sweden and Netherlands*

By Geoff Goodall

Australia's sole SAAB Aircraft Co Safir ("Saphire") was shipped to Australia in May 1954 to be displayed at a Swedish Trade Exhibition held in Sydney. It was the latest model Safir 91C, and first aircraft of a third production batch of 4 seater all metal aircraft powered by a 6 cylinder 190hp Lycoming O-435-A. Safirs were constructed at the Svenska Aeroplan A.B. factory at Linköping, Sweden but 120 were built in Netherlands under licence by N.V. Koninklijke Maatschappij de Schelde at Dordrecht. The demonstrator Safir 91C SE-BYZ was Netherlands built and had previously toured the United States before being sent to Australia.



The Safir demonstrator SE-BYZ prior to being shipped to Australia. The snow covered airfield would indicate this photo was taken in Europe or on the US sales tour. Geoff Goodall collection

After the Swedish exhibition in Sydney, the Australian agents Howard F. Hudson Pty Ltd, Sydney arranged demonstration flights at Bankstown to prospective customers. Their sights were set on a sizeable RAAF order for the Safir, and wrote to RAAF Director of Training pointing out that seven air forces already used the Safir as a standard trainer and stating "the Saab 91C Safir is believed to be the most versatile light aircraft now in existence". Senior RAAF officers were invited to participate in demonstration flights, however no orders were forthcoming for the Safir, no doubt because the CAC Winjeel was at that time tooling up at Fishermans Bend for production as the RAAF's basic trainer.

The demonstrator Safir then did a country tour, giving flights to members of the Canberra Aero Club on 18 August 1954 before continuing to Wagga and then Melbourne. It flew its demonstration flights under its Swedish CofA which was valid until 12 March 1955.



Safir demonstrator VH-BQK at Bankstown during 1955.

Photo by Ed Coates

The Safir was submitted to DCA for "first of type" Certificate of Airworthiness inspection at Bankstown, and its Australian CofA was issued on 10 June 1955. It was added to the Civil Register as VH-BQK the same day with owner the agents Howard F. Hudson Pty Ltd, Sydney and flew with titles "Safir" on the fuselage for further promotional work.

With no orders for new production Safirs forthcoming, the agents sold their demonstrator in December 1956 to Mr. Leslie G. Mahon of Launceston, Tasmania. He operated the Carlisle Ballroom in Launceston and was an active local pilot, becoming president of the Tasmanian Aero Club.

At the beginning of World War II, Les Mahon had attempted to enlist in RAAF but failed the medical examination, so paid his passage to England where he successfully applied to join the RAF. He was a Lancaster bomber pilot in Britain and after his discharge returned to live in Geelong. He purchased a succession of three Ryan STMs from Brown & Dureau Ltd who were giving civil conversions to RAAF disposals aircraft at Geelong's Belmont Common airfield. In March 1946 Mahon was fined in a Geelong court for striking a boat mast while low flying over a Geelong beach. Two months later he purchased Tiger Moth A17-731 from Commonwealth Disposals Commission sales at RAAF Western Junction, Launceston and it was registered VH-AUI with CofA issued 28 May 1946, at which time Mahon's address was "Crystal Palais" Ballroom, Launceston. He sold the Tiger Moth the following year to an ANA employee at Launceston.

The Safir replaced Les Mahon's last Ryan STM VH-AGZ which he based at Launceston and was sold to Victoria in the same month that he purchased the Safir. In January 1958 Mahon requested DCA to change the Safir's registration to VH-AHA, the significance of which is not known. The following year he transferred the ownership of the Safir to the Tasmanian Aero Club based in the the same hangar at Launceston Airport. The Tasmanian Aero Club used VH-AHA for training and travel flights for the next 5 years.

Mahon retained his ties to Geelong and in 1962 he and his wife were to returned there to live. That year he purchased a new Beech B33 Debonair VH-TIM and acquired land to develop a new airfield at Grovedale in conjunction with Moorabbin Cessna dealer Arthur Schutt. Mahon built a house and hangar on the airfield and flying training was provided by Schutt Air Academy. Mahon later purchased several Cessnas based at Grovedale.

The Safir was popular with Aero Club members for travel flights, crossing Bass Strait to the mainland, and attended an airshow at Wentworth NSW on 28 August 1960, at which time it was painted with Tasmanian Aero Club vertical fin stripes on the tail. It was among visiting aircraft at the Avalon International Air Pageant held on 25-26 February 1961, where it took first place in the *Mobilgas Closed Circuit Air Race*. During September 1962 VH-AHA gave joyrides at an airshow at

home base Launceston on 9th September, before attending an airshow at Mildura, Victoria on September 30.

However its longest trip away from Tasmania was in March 1964 when club member R. D. Huntingdon entered the Safir in the three day R. M. Ansett Air Race from Brisbane to Adelaide, reaching Parafield with the other 140 aircraft to complete the course on Tuesday 31 March 1964. It carried race number 48 and a sponsor's message "Launceston Bank for savings". After the race, the Safir then did a tour of the mainland, even doing flypasts at an airshow at Condobolin NSW on 18 April 1964.



VH-AHA at Parafield on Tuesday 31st March 1964 on the final day of the R. M. Ansett Air Race from Brisbane. Owned by the Tasmanian Aero Club, it had race number 48 and a sponsor's message "Launceston Bank for Savings". Colour scheme was pale green and metallic. Photo by Geoff Goodall

The Civil Register records the date of next change of ownership as 30 June 1964 to World War Two RAAF fighter ace Robert H. "Bobby" Gibbes with addresses in Sydney and Goroka, New Guinea and reregistered from VH-AHA to VH-RHG the same day.

Bobby Gibbes had founded Gibbes Sepik Airways at Wewak in 1947, commencing charter operations with Austers, later standardising on Noorduyn Norseman and Junkers Ju 52s until selling out to Mandated Airlines in 1958. Gibbes remained in New Guinea developing his Tremearne coffee plantation near Mount Hagen and hotel interests. He owned a series of private aircraft all using his initials as the registration, VH-RHG: a Cessna 180, Cessna 185, then a Noorduyn Norseman to carry bulky goods between his coffee plantation and Lae.

In his autobiography "You Live But Once", Gibbes writes:

*"The road from Lae to our plantation near Mount Hagen had improved sufficiently for the carriage of fertiliser in by truck, returning with a load of coffee. This was much more economical for us than carrying by air, so I bought a five-ton Thames Trader truck and sold the Norseman in Sydney. We then bought a Saab Safir. low-wing, four places, aerobatic monoplane for transport in new Guinea. I flew it from Tasmania, refuelling at Sale in Victoria and was relieved to have the sea crossing behind me. It proved to be a very useful little machine and it was eventually replaced with a Twin Comanche."*

It would appear that Bobby Gibbes' delivery flight from Launceston was several weeks before the official ownership change date, because VH-AHA was seen passing through Wagga NSW on 20 June 1964. The Safir was an unusual choice for Gibbes, perhaps influenced by

having seen this local design in use during the time he spent in Sweden purchasing the three Gibbes Sepik Airways Junkers Ju 52s from a Swedish airline in 1955.

Balus Volume 2 records *"For some years Bobby Gibbes flew a private Saab Safir VH-RHG to which he was very attached."* Gibbes was also a keen sailor and his autobiography describes flying the Safir to Horn Island in Torres Strait to inspect a mission motor yacht at nearby Thursday Island that was available for sale. He by now had built the Bird of Paradise Hotel-Motel at Goroka and was diversifying into other business interests.



Now owned by New Guinea aviation veteran Bobby Gibbes and registered with his personal initials VH-RHG, seen at Goroka PNG during 1966. Photo by Al Bovelt via The Collection p6982-0004-004

In April 1967 Gibbes requested DCA change the registration to VH-BHG which still reflected his ownership but required minimum paintwork. This allowed his personal registration to be transferred to a newly imported Piper PA-30 Twin Comanche 160 VH-RHG in April 1967, giving him improved twin-engined performance.

The Safir then commenced a major airworthiness inspection by East West Airlines at Tamworth, where it was seen dismantled by July 1967. It remained in the back of the airline hangar with both wings removed for over a year. When the extended maintenance was completed in early 1969, the Safir changed ownership to Mr. S. Jennings of Melbourne and it has remained in the family's ownership at the same Melbourne address until 2012. The Civil Register records changes between family members, and it is reported that the Safir was lately stored dismantled, pending restoration.

During 2012, negotiations to purchase VH-BHG were completed by James Geordon Investments Pty Ltd, Drumcondra Vic. This company is owned by Wendy Mahon and her husband Jim Mahon, son of the earlier owner Les Mahon.

Currently in June 2014 the Safir is under restoration in a hangar at Bacchus Marsh, Victoria

**SAAB Safir 91C c/n 91-276:**

Registration	Date	Owner/Event
SE-BYZ	Built 18.10.53	SAAB

VH-BQK	10.6.55	Howard F. Hudson Pty Ltd, Sydney NSW
	4.12.56	Leslie G. Mahon, Launceston Tas
VH-AHA	6.1.58	Leslie G. Mahon, Launceston Tas
	22.10.59	Tasmanian Aero Club, Launceston Tas
VH-RHG	30.6.64	Robert H. Gibbes, Sydney & Goroka
VH-BHG	5.4.67	Robert H. Gibbes, Sydney & Goroka
	27.3.69	S. Jennings, Melbourne Vic
	19.1.88	M. J. Jennings, Melbourne Vic
	8.8.06	Merna & Erik Jennings, Melbourne Vic
	22.11.12	James Geordon Investments Pty Ltd, Drumcondra, Vic
		<i>Currently registered</i>

#### References:

- Civil Aircraft Register: Department of Civil Aviation and its successors
- National Archives of Australia: RAAF file: Replacement training aircraft
- National Archives of Australia: DCA file for initial registration of VH-BQK
- AHSA Journal: various issues 1960-64: airshow reports
- Canberra Times newspaper 18.8.54 "Swedish Plane at Canberra"
- Balus Volume 2: The Aeroplane in Papua New Guinea, James Sinclair; Robert Brown & Associates 1988
- You Live But Once, Bobby Gibbes. 1994: self-published
- This Flying Business - A Life of Arthur Schutt, Wal Davies, Thomas Nelson (Australia) 1976
- Let There Be Flight - A history of flying in western Victoria, Kenneth R, Riches, self published 2009
- correspondence with owners Erik Jennings, Wendy Mahon



The Safir, now registered VH-BHG taking part in another air race. Pictured at Jandakot WA 19 October 1976 at the start of the 1976 Benson & Hedges Australian Air Race from Perth to Sydney. Sponsors insignia for *Bonds Gotchya* underwear is on the fuselage behind the race number 234. On the tail fin is the infamous *Dick Smith zap* when stickers promoting Dick Smith Electronics were applied overnight to every race entrant. Photo by Neville Parnell



VH-BHG flying near Kyabram Victoria 3 April 1988, with a revised colour scheme and SAAB titles on fuselage.  
Metallic with blue trim. Photo by Neville Parnell