

## SIAI-MARCHETTI FN.333 RIVIERA IN AUSTRALIA

Only one example of the Italian SIAI Marchetti FN.333 Riviera amphibian was registered in Australia.

By Geoff Goodall



VH-SAV at Bankstown Airport, Sydney in April 1971, still in factory paint scheme. Photo by Mike Madden

The Riviera design goes back to 1952 when the Italian Nardi company produced a 3 seater light amphibian with a 145hp engine, which was testflown in prototype form on 4 December 1952. Development models were built by Nardi and Fiat before a manufacturing licence was negotiated with SIAI-Marchetti in March 1959 to place the FN.333 Riviera in production with an enlarged 4 seat luxury cabin and a more powerful 250hp Continental IO-470-P fuel injection 6 cylinder engine. The first of ten pre-production Rivieras built at the SIAI-Marchetti works at Sesto Calende, Varese near Milan was flown in February 1962, followed by a commercial production line. Some were shipped to USA for completion and fitting out to US standards by North Star Co of Newark, New Jersey and marketed as the *Lane Riviera*. By 1965 it was reported that 30 had ordered, most for the US market, however total production by SIAI-Marchetti appears to be 25 aircraft.

Transfield Pty Ltd was a successful Sydney steel fabrication and construction company. Aircraft designer Luigi Pellarini had approached Transfield with a proposal to put his revolutionary design PL-12 Airtruk agricultural aircraft into production. He was supported by one of Transfield's Directors, Mr Franco Belgiorno-Nettis, who, before migrating to Australia had planned a career in the Italian Air Force, but did not fulfil the recruiting requirements.

In May 1964 Transfield Pty Ltd formed a subsidiary Transavia Corporation Pty Ltd at Seven Hills, Sydney to build the Airtruk. The prototype was testflown at Bankstown in April 1965 and put into full production as the Transavia PL-12 Airtruk. In the meantime, Transavia took on the Australian sales agency for the Riviera and placed an order for a new aircraft.

Transavia's Riviera I-SIAO departed Italy in August 1964 on delivery flight to Australia, flown by experienced Sydney pilot Bob Shute. After flying Ansons in Papua New Guinea for Charter Air Services, he had returned to Sydney in 1951 and combined a career as a car salesman with regular flying for Marshall Airways on Anson charters and weekend joyriding at Bankstown. A year after the Riviera ferry flight Shute was killed in the crash of Meta Sokol VH-DEH at Wallacia NSW on 12 September 1965, the cause being traced much later to a mechanical design fault in the control lines.



Demonstrator SIAI Riviera I-SIAO arrives at Bankstown 29 August 1964 at the end of its delivery flight from Italy.  
Photo by Neville Parnell

I-SIAO arrived in Sydney on 27 August 1964 with a water landing at the Rose Bay flying boat base on Sydney Harbour. It was painted in a standard factory scheme of white with light grey, red and black trim. Two days later it was flown across to Bankstown Airport, and the following week was painted as VH-SAV when added to the Register on 4 September 1964 to Transfield Pty Ltd. The registration recognised the original name of the manufacturer, Savioa-Marchetti, famous in Italy for a long line of seaplanes and military aircraft.

The Riviera promptly made its public debut at an airshow at Pelican airfield near Newcastle NSW on 6 September. A blow came on 22 September during certification performance testflying at Bankstown when a heavy landing damaged the undercarriage and required checks for structural damage. The DCA accident report stated "*During performance tests at maximum weight, the aircraft sank quickly when power was reduced for round-out and struck the ground heavily, collapsing the undercarriage.*" The report noted that the pilot, Bob Shute, had 137 hours experience on the aircraft type. VH-SAV went into the Piper hangar for repairs over the next three months, being testflown on 23 December 1964. A sales demonstration tour around Australia followed, and over three months in 1965 the Riviera attended a series of country airshows, including Swan Hill, Horsham, Bathurst, and Tumut. The crowd at Horsham, Victoria on 21 March was entertained when its engine burst into flames during start up, and although quickly extinguished by the fire truck, the Riviera was towed away to a quiet corner of the airfield.



VH-SAV during demonstrations at Swan Hill, Victoria March 1965.

Photo by Geoff Godall



The Riviera shows off its distinctive lines at Swan Hill, March 1965.

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Transfield's hopes for Riviera sales in Australia were unfulfilled. A possible order in 1966 is indicated by Transavia Corporation requesting DCA reserve the registration VH-PDN late that year for a FN.333. However by now SIAI-Marchetti in Italy had all but discontinued Riviera production, and the registration reservation lapsed, VH-PDN being re-issued to a Piper Navajo for Mr. P. D. Naylor of Julia Creek, Queensland in May 1968.

VH-SAV was far from home at Jandakot Airport, Perth in June 1967 where repairs were done on what was reported as nose wheel problems. The work was delayed waiting for parts, and in late August the Riviera departed for Sydney. Transcorp maintained VH-SAV as a corporate aircraft until 1971 when it was sold to a Sydney company. The following year it moved to Moorabbin when purchased by well-known aircraft engineer and warbird restorer Ron Lee, then operated by a syndicate of local pilots under the name Riviera Flying Group. The amphibian was refurbished and repainted yellow and white. Used for pleasure flying, it received minor damage on Port Phillip Bay, Melbourne on 18 January 1973 and at Brampton Island, Queensland on 15 December 1975.

In January 1976 VH-SAV returned to Sydney when sold to South Pacific Airways Pty Ltd at Bankstown Airport. The owner of this company was Gregory R. Board, a highly experienced pilot adventurer whose aviation career includes being shot down in a RAAF Buffalo during the fall of Malaya, and later a Boomerang test pilot for CAC at Fishermans Bend. Postwar he established New Holland Airways, Sydney to carry migrants from Europe to Australia with a Lodestar, DC-2, DC-3 and DC-5, followed by a colourful flying career in Malaya, USA and Iran. In 1961 he and fellow pilot Martin Caidin were arrested in the Azors while ferrying Boeing B-17s to England for the movie *The War Lover* and in 1966 he was arrested in Miami, Florida while ferrying military Douglas A-26 Invaders to Portugal against a US embargo. After more adventures in the Caribbean, in 1969 Greg Board returned to his hometown Sydney and promptly established several new aviation companies. By 1976 he was operating as South Pacific Airways, with a fleet of Piaggio P.166s on freight work across Australia.

Greg Board kept VH-SAV at his house in the northern Sydney suburb Church Point, backing on to Pittwater. His back garden sloped down to a private boat jetty on the water line, and in 1970 he had purchased Republic Seabee VH-MJO, which he kept at this jetty for two years in a specially built mooring metal frame to allow for tidal movements. Board enjoyed flying boats, and earlier while living at Michigan City, Indiana, had purchased the two prototype US Navy Columbia XJL-1 amphibians and rebuilt one to airworthy with a B-25 engine QEC power plant.

Five months after purchasing the Riviera, Board took delivery of Grumman Mallard N121SP at Bankstown from USA in May 1976, and the 13-seater was registered VH-SPL to South Pacific Airlines. The Riviera was sold the following January to Ramsay Constructions Pty Ltd at Normanton, a small town on the Gulf of Carpentaria in outback Queensland. Over the years a number of floatplanes have been based at Normanton supporting fishing and prawning operations. In October 1980 VH-SAV was struck-off the Civil Register at owner's request, having been withdrawn from service.



VH-SAV in new white & yellow scheme, at Bankstown in December 1972. The code MK007 is a maritime licence number for operations on water. Photo by Mike Madden

By 1988 the Riviera had been acquired by C.W. (Bill) Riley of Tocumwal NSW and was stored in a large Liberator hangar at the sprawling former RAAF airfield, waiting for an overhaul. Bill Riley was another seaplane enthusiast who while living at Colac, Vic in 1965 had flown Australia's first Lake LA-4 VH-RZA from USA, reaching home and landing on Lake Colac on 17 November 1965. His company Riley Aeronautics imported Blanik metal gliders from Czechoslovakia which were assembled at Colac and Champion Citabrias which were assembled at Ballarat. At the end of 1967 Riley moved base from Colac to Coolangatta Qld, then to Tocumwal in 1970 where he established the large gliding operation Sportavia.

Bill Riley returned VH-SAV to the Civil Register in July 2000 in anticipation of getting it back into the air. Interestingly the registration VH-SAV had earlier been re-allocated to a Gippsland Aeronautics GA-200 Fatman (based on the PA-25 Pawnee design) for an agricultural spraying company at Naracoorte SA in November 1995, however the GA-200 was wrecked in a crash near Mount Gambier SA on 17 April 1998, making VH-SAV available once again. By January 2005 the Riviera was still

dismantled at Tocumwal for rebuild and repaint. Bill Riley reported that the inspection revealed no damage or corrosion, and the airframe had only logged 500 hours. The overhaul of its Continental IO-470-P and the propeller had been completed. The following year Riley sold the Riviera to fellow Tocumwal aviation enthusiast, George Schuit who had owned a Grumman HU-16 Albatross amphibian and a DH.104 Dove.

By 2012 our only SIAI Riviera VH-SAV is currently registered to Schuit's company Copper Creek Pty Ltd. Schuit confirmed that the Riviera is still under extended rebuild.

Registration	Date	Owner/Event
	.64	Manufactured by SIAI-Marchetti at Sesto Calende, Varese, Italy
		c/n 0101, but was the 16th Riviera built
I-SIAO	7.64	Registered <a href="#">SIAI-Marchetti, Varese, Italy</a>
	8.64	Departed Italy on delivery flight to Sydney
	27.8.64	I-SIAO arrived at Rose Bay Flying Boat Base, Sydney ex Italy. White with light grey, red and black trim.
	29.8.64	Flown Rose Bay-Bankstown. The following week was painted as VH-SAV at Bankstown
VH-SAV	4.9.64	<a href="#">Transfield Pty Ltd, Sydney</a>
	6.9.64	visited airshow Pelican NSW
	22.9.64	VH-SAV damaged on landing Bankstown: DCA report: <i>"During performance tests at maximum weight, the aircraft sank quickly when power was reduced for round-out and struck the ground heavily, collapsing the undercarriage."</i> Pilot was CPL TT 3500 On type 137. Moved to Piper hangar at Bankstown for repair
	3.10.64	noted Bankstown under repair in Piper hangar
	23.12.64	testflown Bankstown after rebuild by Piper Aircraft
	14.3.65	visited airshow Swan Hill Vic
	21.3.65	visited airshow Horsham Vic. Engine fire on startup for flying demo, fire truck attended promptly. Towed away for maintenance.
	28.3.65	visited airshow Bathurst NSW
	1.5.65	visited airshow Tumut NSW
	4.71	noted Bankstown
	15.11.66	noted Bankstown
	6.67	First noted at Jandakot, in Simpson Aviation hangar. Has had minor damage, waiting for parts
	30.7.67	noted Jandakot in Simpson hangar under repair for "nose wheel problems"
	6.8.67	noted Jandakot
	8.67	departed Jandakot late August on return flight to Sydney
	28.9.68	noted Bankstown
	3.1.68	noted Bankstown
	4.71	noted Bankstown, original factory colour scheme
	10.9.71	<a href="#">Piper Investments Pty Ltd, Sydney</a>
	2.72	noted Bankstown
	3.3.72	<a href="#">R. A. Lee, Melbourne</a> <i>Ron Lee, well known warbird LAME</i>
	13.9.72	<a href="#">Riviera Flying Group Pty Ltd, Melbourne Vic</a> <i>Also had Cessna 210D UNH, then 210K RTH in 1976</i>
	12.72	noted Bankstown, yellow & white, maritime serial "MK007"
	18.1.73	Minor damage accident Port Phillip Bay
	14.4.74	visited fly-in Morwell Vic
	2.75	noted Moorabbin, white & yellow "MK007"
	26.7.75	noted Moorabbin, yellow & white "MK007"
	15.12.75	Minor damage in accident Brampton Island Qld
	15.1.76	<a href="#">South Pacific Airways Pty Ltd, Sydney NSW</a>
	1.9.76	noted Bankstown "MK007"
	1.77	photo Bankstown, parked with a South Pacific Airways P166
	28.1.77	<a href="#">Ramsay Constructions Pty Ltd, Normanton Qld</a>
	1.78	noted Bankstown "MK007"
	24.10.80	Struck-off Register
	1.4.88	VH-SAV noted Tocumwal NSW
VH-SAV	11.7.00	Restored to Register: <a href="#">Charles W. Riley, Tocumwal NSW</a>
	1.05	Charles W. Riley advises that his VH-SAV is dismantled for rebuild and repaint. It is undamaged and has no corrosion, airframe time only 500 hours. The IO-470P engine and propeller have been overhauled
	23.2.06	<a href="#">W. Riley, Cobram Vic</a>
	5.12.06	<a href="#">Copper Creek Pty Ltd, Tocumwal NSW</a>
	12	Stored at Tocumwal pending restoration

SOURCES:

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