

# R.A.F. WELLESLEY VISIT 1938

by G. Goodall



During 1938 Britain claimed the World Long Distance Record with an epic non-stop flight from Egypt to Australia by a formation of three Vickers Wellesley bombers. At the time the flight was headlines news around the world, and it was of enormous value to Great Britain's prestige to regain one of the four 'absolute' air records.<sup>1</sup> It was considered of equal merit to that of the famous Supermarine S6 seaplane racers winning the coveted Schneider Trophy outright for Britain seven years earlier. After their flight, the three Wellesleys made a triumphant tour around Australia where they were displayed before huge crowds and their crews feted at civic receptions in a period of fierce pro-Empire fervour.

This story describes the record flight, as well as the around Australia tour that followed, which saw two of the three aircraft lost in forced landings, and also reveals the little known fact that one of the Wellesleys was used by the RAAF during World War Two.

## THE AIRCRAFT

The Vickers Type 287 Wellesley bomber went into production at Weybridge in January 1937. The most novel feature of the Wellesley was undoubtedly its revolutionary light-weight geodetic structure developed by Vickers Chief Structural Designer, Barnes Wallis.<sup>2</sup> The germ of the idea

for a geodetic type of structure for aeroplanes was originally conceived by Wallis from the wire-mesh netting he developed to contain the gasbags of the airship R.100. When the British airship construction program was abandoned in 1930 following the R.101 disaster, Wallis joined Vickers, Weybridge, as Chief Structural Designer and proceeded to put his ideas into practice. With the Vickers M.1/30 biplane he applied many features of his airship design to an aeroplane. The wings featured spars of double duralumin tubes with 'W' type webs built up from lightened diagonal channels, as in airship members. The fuselage also featured an advanced structure using Wallis' ideas borrowed from airship practice.

In his second aeroplane, also a biplane, the G. 4/31, Wallis took his ideas a stage further. Although this machine reverted to a more conventional wing structure it was the fuselage which broke new ground. Around the longerons were wrapped spiral channel members in opposing directions, clockwise and anticlockwise, to form a type of multiple lattice structure of curved members. In this new type of structure Wallis sought to dispense with the conventional primary and secondary structural members by substituting a lattice system of main members only. Although the fuselage of the G. 4/31 biplane was only a part step it was immediately recognisable as the forerunner of the structure to become known by the name 'geodetic', a name derived incidentally

from the term for the shortest line connecting two points on the surface of a sphere.

Although the G. 4/31 biplane was by no means unsuccessful, Vickers had felt that a monoplane would provide a better solution to the Air Ministry's requirement and had initiated private development of such an aeroplane. Wallis applied his geodetic principals fully to the complete structure of this machine and when flown it proved to have a greatly superior performance to the biplane, somewhat embarrassing the Air Ministry who had already placed an order for 150 of the biplanes. In the event this order was cancelled and a revised specification, 22/35, drawn up around the monoplane. The monoplane was extensively modified and as K7556 became the prototype aircraft for what was to become known as the Wellesley. Considering the amount of research and development that had to go into the design, progress was fairly rapid and the first production Wellesley was test flown at Brooklands on 30 January 1937.

The first aircraft to be delivered to RAF, was the third production machine K7715, which was handed over to No. 76 (Bomber) Squadron at RAF Station Finningley in Yorkshire on 22 March 1937 for service trials. This was a significant event in RAF history, the first of more than 12,000 geodetic aircraft to join RAF strength over the next decade. The metallurgical research and structural test equipment required for the geodetic construction

led to the sophisticated equipment used in the British aviation industry today. The production line machinery to produce the special framework of the Wellesley was developed into the highly specialised equipment used to produce fuselage frames for Vickers aircraft up to the VC.10 airliner.

A total of 176 Wellesleys were produced at Vickers' Weybridge works between January, 1937 and May, 1938, equipping bomber squadrons in the U.K. and Middle East. Large bomb containers were carried under each wing, with space for four 250lb bombs in each pannier. Powered by a Bristol Pegasus XX nine cylinder radial engine of 950hp, the Wellesley had a maximum speed of 228 mph at 20,000 feet, and a service ceiling of 32,500 feet.

## THE LONG RANGE DEVELOPMENT UNIT

With the darkening war situation in Europe, the RAF was very interested in exploring the limits of extreme range with military aircraft, and three Wellesleys, K7734, K7735, and K7748 were allocated for long range experiments. This led to the formation of the Long Range Development Unit in January 1938 at Upper Heyford under the command of Wing Commander O.R. Gayford DFC, AFC.<sup>3</sup> An additional five Wellesley bombers L2637, L2638, L2639, L2680, and L2681, were issued to the LRDU direct from the production line.

Bristol had developed a special version of its Pegasus engine for the project, the Pegasus XXII, with higher compression and a smaller supercharger, and developing 1,010 hp. The new engine was enclosed in a special cowl to reduce drag and increase cooling air flow over the motor. Rotol constant-speed propellers replaced the standard deHavilland-Hamilton 2-pitch type, and all military equipment was removed from the aircraft. Automatic boost and mixture control was incorporated, to ensure that pilots neither wasted fuel by faulty manual control or damaged the engine by too weak a mixture. This device was later applied with great value to operational aircraft generally. Fuel and oil tankage was increased, and a rest position incorporated for a third crew member. A strengthened undercarriage was used with heavier tyres to carry the increased weight. The five aircraft of the LRDU were modified to this standard and redesignated Vickers Type 292 Wellesley.

In February 1938 it was announced that the RAF would attempt a non-stop flight from Egypt to Australia later that year, to break the World Long Distance Record.

## TRIAL FLIGHT TO EGYPT

At Upper Heyford, the LRDU conducted extensive flight tests of its modified Wellesleys to enable the three man crews to perfect their economic cruising techniques.<sup>4</sup> These flights were of increasing range to test the selected crews' navigation skills, and on one of these the Unit suffered its only casualty while in England. On 24 February 1938, Wellesley K7734 was on an exercise over the North Sea when radio contact was lost after 20 hours away from base; no trace was ever found of the aircraft or its crew. It was commanded by Flt Lt F. Gardiner, an Australian serving with the RAF. Several days later the RAF announced that the loss of this aircraft would not affect the plans for the record flight later that year, and this was widely reported in the Australian newspapers.

A trial flight from England to the Middle East was planned to test aircraft and crews prior to the Australia flight. Under the command of Sqn Ldr R. Kellett four Wellesleys, L2638, L2639, L2680, and L2681 departed Cranwell Airfield, Lin-



Sweeping the runway at Ismailia prior to the Wellesleys' departure for Australia. (Vickers)

colnshire on 7 July 1938, following a route to the Persian Gulf, and from a point between Kuwait and Bahrain doubling back to Ismailia in Egypt where they landed 32 hours later, after covering 4,300 miles at an average ground speed of 135 mph. This was the longest non-stop formation flight on record up to this time. Later the Wellesleys flew non-stop back to Upper Heyford to make final preparations for the world record attempt scheduled for early November.

The original concept of a flight non-stop from England to the Far East, to land in Malaya or Singapore, was changed to the Egypt to Australia route for several reasons. The longest runway then available in England was Cranwell, whose 6,000 feet was considered insufficient for the heavily laden Wellesleys. Ismailia in Egypt however provided a runway of 3,600 feet which had been specially extended to give a takeoff run of nearly two miles, and was also free from the uncertainties of the English winter weather. The route from Egypt to Australia enabled a modified Great Circle course with favourable prevailing winds over mainly British Empire countries, avoiding diplomatically 'difficult' countries and the high terrain of the Himalayas. Anglo-Egyptian political relationships also influenced the choice.

The flight would be made without oxygen and parachutes, due to weight considerations. The lack of oxygen effectively limited the height to be flown to 10,000 feet en route. Even the crews' personal luggage was left behind at the last minute. It was planned to fly to Darwin, and then, if fuel calculations in flight showed a sufficient margin remained, to continue on to Brisbane. If this could be achieved, a total distance of over 8,000 miles would be covered.

## AUSTRALIAN PREPARATIONS

Flt Lt P.G. Heffernan of the RAAF was placed in charge of the RAAF supporting unit for the LRDU's record attempt. His initial task was to arrange all fuel, accommodation and entertainment for the Unit while in Australia, as well as to transport the RAF ground crew who would maintain the Wellesleys on their around-Australia tour.

Heffernan was allocated four RAAF Avro Ansons, A4-23, -28, -30, and -45, and three Anson crews from No 4 Squadron, Richmond, NSW, while he himself was to captain the fourth machine. Each Anson carried a pilot, radio operator, and a second pilot whose training had been either as a fitter or a rigger. On 29 October 1938 the four Ansons left Laverton RAAF Station, near Melbourne, for the flight up to Darwin to meet the Wellesleys. They positioned via Richmond, Archerfield, Cloncurry, Daly Waters and Katherine, checking the special stocks of aviation

fuel laid down at each of these points for the Wellesleys in case they continued on beyond Darwin.

The RAAF team arrived in Darwin on 1 November, and after various arrangements had been made locally, Heffernan flew his Anson back to Cloncurry next day, leaving the other three Ansons at Darwin with their crews on five-hour standby awaiting word of the arrival of the Wellesleys. He decided to wait at Cloncurry as a base in case the Wellesleys overflew Darwin. Heffernan's Anson suffered damage to its tailplane from a stone thrown up on takeoff and this required two day's repair work in the open with temperatures well over 100 F, as the only hangar at Cloncurry was too small for the Anson. Each morning he visited the DCA Aeradio shack to check if the Alert Signal had been sent from Egypt to indicate that the Wellesleys were on their way. He was joined at Cloncurry by Frank Wright of the Shell Oil Co. and John Ryland (later General Manager of TAA) who had flown up in the Shell Co.'s Percival Gull VH-ABS.

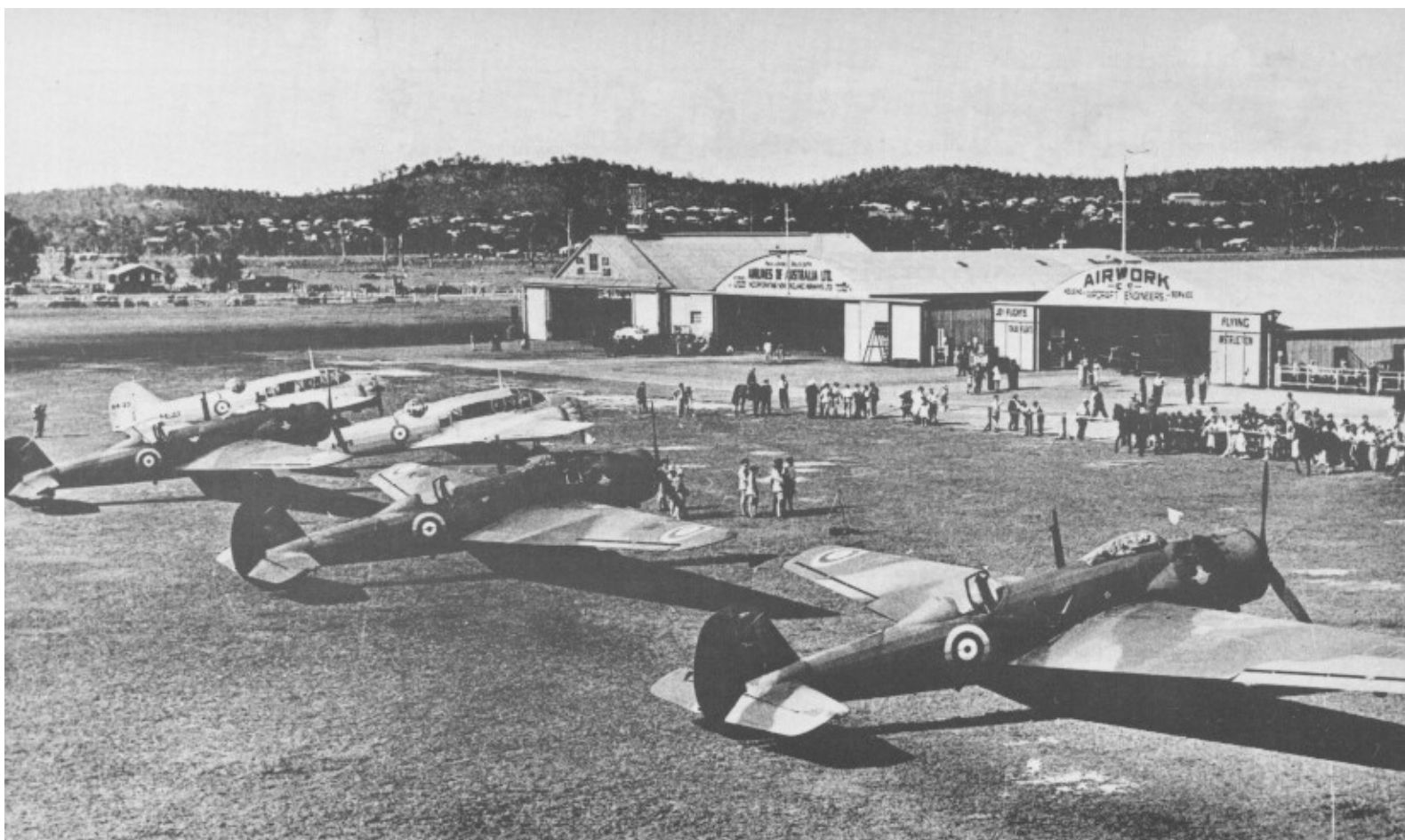
## THE FLIGHT

During October, 1938 the LRDU had finalised preparations for the Australian flight, and the three Wellesleys to carry out the flight were ferried from Upper Heyford to Ismailia by their crews on 25 October, to await favourable conditions to commence the record attempt. The aircraft and crews were:

L2638	Pilot and Flight Leader Sqn Ldr R. Kellett
	Second Pilot and Navigator Flt Lt R.T. Gething
	Unit Signals Officer Plt Off M.L. Caine
L2639	
First Pilot	Flt Lt H.A. Hogan
Second Pilot and Navigator	Flt Lt R.G. Musson
Wireless Op and Mechanic	Sgt T.D. Dixon
L2680	
First Pilot	Flt Lt A.N. Combe
Second Pilot and Navigator	Flt Lt B.K. Burnett
Wireless Op and Mechanic	Sgt H.G. Gray

On 5 November, 1938 the three Wellesleys took off from Ismailia at 3.55am (GMT) to commence the flight. The aircraft took off individually then formed for the climb out. Each Wellesley carried four tons of fuel and their takeoff weight was 18,400lb, which was a 7,900lb overload compared with the standard Wellesley bomber. The crews wore special Irvinsuits, which were thermally heated and made of Grenfell cloth with a satin





covered lining of kapok to give additional warmth. Special anti-glare goggles were provided. Food taken including chicken, fresh and dried fruit, chocolate, coffee and orange juice.

An elaborate en route communications network was established for the flight. Principal DF stations were set up along the route, at Shaibah, Jask, India Coasts, Malaya, Timor, Darwin, and Cloncurry. Three naval vessels were stationed along the route to act as operational links in the communications chain: HMS *Deptford* in the Arabian Sea, HMIS *Investigator* in the Bay of Bengal, and HMAS *Swan* in the Timor Sea. During the night these vessels operated their searchlights to provide an additional navigation aid for the Wellesleys.

The F.A.I. (Federation Aeronautique Internationale) was to oversee the record attempt, and it required that the aircraft carry two sealed barographs and seals be placed on airframe, engines, and petrol tanks. These arrangements were made by the Royal Aero Club of Egypt, which also officially observed the departure of the aircraft.

Squadron Leader Kellett's report on his arrival in Australia, best describes the progress of the flight:

*"We turned straight on to our course and climbed to 10,000 feet. This height was reached about 45 minutes after the takeoff and maintained throughout the flight. We had hoped to obtain a following wind of useful strength as far as India, but after this the prospects were that there would be light adverse winds until the Australian end of the route was reached. As it turned out, we obtained little or no help from the wind for the first 12 hours, and adverse winds were experienced for the rest of the route. Over Arabia, unusually cloudy conditions were met and the bumps experienced were unpleasant under our heavily loaded conditions.*

*The Persian Gulf was reached after about six hours flying, and darkness fell after the aircraft had been ten hours in the air. After passing Jask, the moon gave us sufficient light for the Indian coast to be picked up after 14 hours flying. Very little was seen of India owing to cloud, and we depended for course keeping on celestial navigation. The East Coast of India was reached at dawn on November 6 after 19½ hours flying. A distance of 3,000 miles had then been covered.*

*The weather began to deteriorate over the Bay of Bengal with headwinds and occasional thunderstorms. The Andaman Islands were picked up, and the flight was continued to the coast of Siam which was reached after 28 hours in the air. Soon after crossing the Malay Peninsula the second night fell, a distance of 5,000 miles having then been covered. The position of Anambas Islands was observed by lights picked up halfway across the South China Sea.*

*For the next 1,200 miles flying conditions were exceedingly unpleasant; cloud, heavy rain and lightning were continuous, rendering wireless inoperative and navigation possible only by dead reckoning. When dawn came on the third day, November 7, we found we were approaching Masassar, at the southern end of the Island of Celebes. We were then within sight of breaking the Russian record of 6,306 miles, which we shortly afterwards did.*

*On reaching Lomblen Island in the Dutch East Indies it was realised that No.2 aircraft might not have a sufficient supply of petrol to cross the Timor Sea and to reach Darwin with an adequate margin for safety. A precautionary landing was therefore made at Koepang by this aircraft, and the other two Wellesleys continued their flight to*

*Darwin, where we landed at 0400 (GMT) on November 7. We had been just over 48 hours in the air. No.2 aircraft, which had been refuelled at Koepang, arrived at Darwin a few hours later.*

*The engines and aircraft behaved faultlessly throughout the flight, and they never caused us a moment's anxiety. The crews were comfortable throughout the flight and arrived quite fresh at Darwin."*

Sqn Ldr Kellett and Flt Lt Combe landed their Wellesleys at Fanny Bay Aerodrome at Darwin at 1.30pm (local time) on 7 November after their two days in the air. Kellett's L2638 had 44 gallons of fuel left, while Combe's L2680 had a mere 17 gallons left in its tanks, a very marginal reserve indeed. Flt Lt Hogan arrived later after refuelling in Timor.

The FAI promulgated the world record created by the LRDU as 7,158.7 miles. For the greater part the flight had been made against adverse winds so the "air miles" would have been somewhat greater. Measured by the great circle or shortest possible distance between take-off and landing points, they had covered 7159 miles, although they had actually covered a distance of 7350 miles on the actual route flown. The record stood for eight years until broken by a USAAF Boeing B-29 in November 1945.<sup>5</sup>

Among those at Darwin to greet the RAF pilots was *Aircraft* magazine which reported:

*"After completion of quarantine formalities, about one minute for each machine, the crews moved about smartly, supervised arrangements for refuelling and inspection, met their RAAF colleagues, and then were driven off by army officers to the garrison corps staff mess. In the evening they were fresh enough to attend a cocktail party aboard the French sloop 'Rigault de Genoully.'*



**OPPOSITE PAGE: Triumph.** The three Wellesleys and their RAAF Anson escort at Archerfield Airport, Brisbane, on 14 November 1938. (Vickers)

**LEFT:** Two fashionable ladies of the day admire one of the Wellesleys. (via B. Flood)

**BELOW:** Several personnel make use of the ample shade provided by the Wellesleys large wings. (via K. Isaacs)



*Inspection of aircraft and engines at Darwin revealed the need for only trifling replacements, such as two or three valve springs . . . . Special lead free fuel of 100 octane rating was used. (So far as we know, no other engines using this 'liquid dynamite' have previously been seen in Australia.)"*

The following day Flt Lt Heffernan returned to Darwin in his Anson after a six hour flight from Cloncurry. After renewing acquaintances with the Wellesley crews, whom he had met while stationed in the UK earlier that year, he supervised the servicing of the aircraft while the pilots had three days well deserved rest. RAF groundcrews had arrived by civil airline in Darwin several days ahead of the Wellesleys, and these men worked on the aircraft in the open on Darwin airfield.

The month-long tour of Australia by the Wellesleys and their pilots was to be a finale to a year's celebrations of 150th Anniversary of the founding of Australia. It was to be a major patriotic affair, with visits to all capital cities, and it received major coverage in all Australian newspapers, with large souvenir lift-outs.

## AROUND AUSTRALIA TOUR

On 13 November the Wellesleys and Heffernan's Ansons departed Darwin for Brisbane as the first stop of the tour. After an overnight stop at Cloncurry that night they took off for Brisbane at 7.45am next morning and landed at Archerfield Aerodrome at 3pm to be met by a large cheering crowd. The Wellesleys were lined up in front of the crowd, and after welcoming speeches by the Governor of Queensland, Sir Leslie Wilson and the Mayor of Brisbane, the pilots began a busy round of official receptions and other civil and social functions. The three Wellesleys were hangared at Archerfield in the Airlines of Australia hangar, their first night under cover since they left Egypt.

The Commanding Officer of the LRDU, Wg Cdr O.R. Gayford flew from Egypt to Australia by scheduled KLM service to join the tour. On his arrival in Darwin on 15 November on the KNILM Lockheed 14, PK-AFP, he gave a speech to local dignitaries, saying in part:

*"It was a jolly fine show all round, although I had every faith that my pilots*

*would fight their way through. I think they made the finest peacetime flight in the history of the RAF."*

Gayford flew on to Sydney next day on the KLM flight, and then proceeded up to Brisbane to join his men, and to take over command of the remainder of the tour. He was also to lead the formation on its return flight to England, which was proposed to be a two stage long-distance flight.

On 17 November the Wellesleys flew to Sydney, reaching Mascot Aerodrome on schedule at 12.30pm after circling low over Newcastle en route. They made a low run across Mascot escorted by a V formation of RAAF aircraft, 2 Ansons and 13 Hawker Demons, as well as 11 civil aircraft including the Avro Ten VH-UXX *Faith In Australia*. Over 2,000 people greeted them on the ground, and a loud cheer went up as the RAF crews left their aircraft. The pilots were then introduced to civil leaders, and Sir Keith Smith, the Vickers Australia representative, who was the pilot of the first aircraft to fly from England to Australia in 1919. (Vickers Vimy G-EAOU). At 2.30 pm they took off from Mascot for the short hop across to RAAF Station Richmond where the Wellesleys were to be based during their two week stay in Sydney. The aircrew were then treated to a busy round of tours, mayoral receptions, and even a procession through Sydney streets.

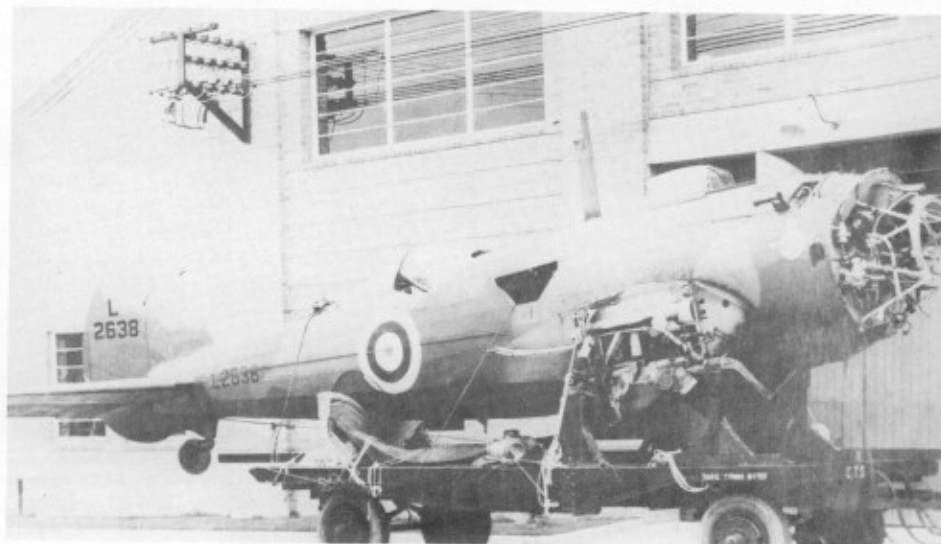
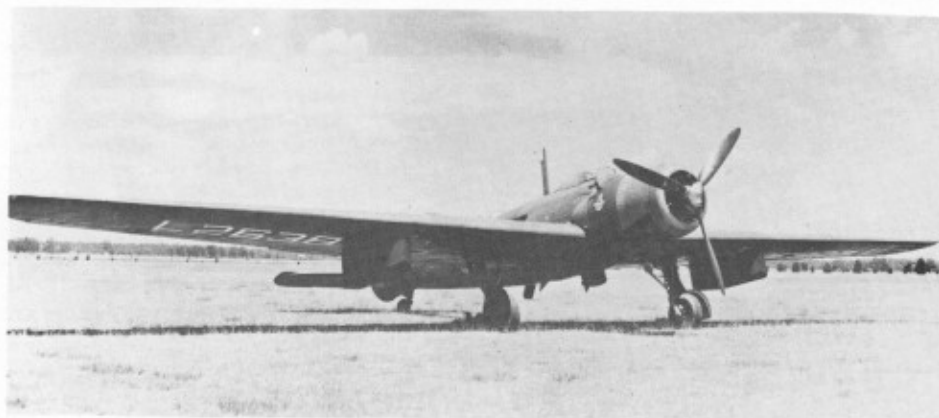
## THE RICHMOND ACCIDENT

The day before their scheduled departure from Sydney for Melbourne, one Wellesley was badly damaged in a forced landing during a testflight at Richmond. The aircraft was Sqn Ldr Kellett's L2638, however Kellett has been hospitalised in Sydney with an undiagnosed illness, and the Wellesley was being piloted by Flt Lt Richard Gething.

After taking off from Richmond at 2pm on 28 November for the testflight, Gething was flying in extreme turbulence underneath a thunderstorm a mile from the aerodrome when there was a severe power loss. A forced landing was made in a tomato field two miles from Windsor: the undercarriage was extended for the landing but it collapsed after running a short distance along the soft ground, and the aircraft crashed through a barbed-wire fence before coming to rest in a cloud of dust. The Wellesley was badly damaged but Gething and his co-pilot Plt Off Gaine, along with three hitchhiking RAAF airmen passengers, were all unhurt.

As the aircraft was landing, its wing had narrowly missed farmer Mr Malcolm Smith who was ploughing the field at the time. He looked up to see the aircraft approaching and fell to the ground as the wing passed over him. By coincidence Mr Smith's father had been killed ten years earlier in the same field when struck by a RAAF D.H.60 Moth making a forced landing.



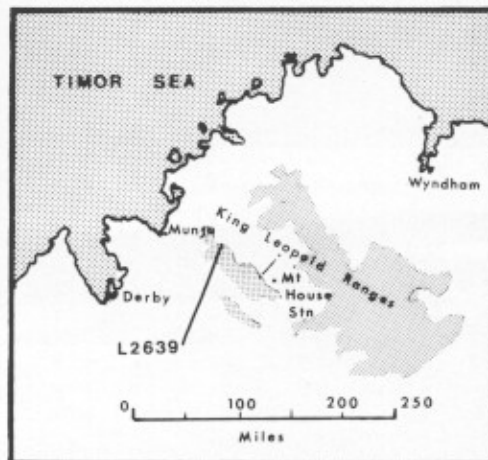


An hour after the Wellesley's forced landing, the aircraft was being dismantled by RAF and RAAF mechanics from Richmond and was trucked back to the base that afternoon. At Richmond the Pegasus engine was run on a test rig and it gave full rpm, however a valve of the constant-speed propeller unit was found to be scored, and it was considered that the power loss was probably caused by the propeller going into full coarse pitch during the testflight. The crew later returned to England by ship along with Kellett, recovered after three weeks in hospital.

The press made little of the forced landing, and it had no effect on the rest of the tour. The remaining two Wellesleys visited Melbourne, Hobart, Adelaide and Perth, with the usual round of celebrations in each city. While in Hobart, Hogan received news of his promotion to Squadron Leader. They reached Perth on 12 December, landing at RAAF Station Pearce still accompanied by Heffernan with his Anson escort.

### THE FORCED LANDING AT DERBY

Three days later Heffernan left Pearce in his Anson for the last leg on to Darwin, the Wellesleys being due to depart Pearce early the following day to fly direct to Darwin. The Ansons overnights at Port Hedland then next morning 16 December, continued on to Derby and Darwin where they were to meet the Wellesleys. However, L2639



under command of Wg Cdr Gayford with a crew of Hogan, Musson and Dixon, suffered a power failure, just past Derby, due to a broken oil line, and a forced landing was made in desolate scrub. Heffernan describes the events that followed:

*"While we were refuelling at Derby, my radio-operator intercepted an S.O.S. from Hogan to the effect that he was making a forced landing somewhere in the Leopold Ranges between Derby and Wyndham. Luckily the direction finding station at Port Hedland got a snap bearing on the aircraft's signals as it was coming down and the other plane, Combe's, watched Hogan land on about the only open space in that area. As soon as I heard that Hogan was*

#### TOP TO BOTTOM:

The ill fated L2638 at Richmond before its accident. Underwing panniers have now been fitted. (via K. Isaacs)

After the accident, L2638 is trucked back to Richmond on 28 November 1938.

(A. Wood via Hopton Collection) L2638 is greeted by a large crowd at Essendon, Victoria. (AHSA C.D. Pratt Collection, No. 160).

The Wellesleys and their Anson escort at Cambridge Aerodrome, Hobart. (P.G. Heffernan)



**ABOVE:** The two remaining Wellesleys, L2639 and L2680 on arrival at RAAF Pearce on 12 December 1938.  
(via G. Goodall)



**LEFT:** The ill fated L2639 photographed from Heffernan's Anson on 16 December 1938, after its forced landing northeast of Derby.  
(P.G. Heffernan)

**BELOW LEFT:** Crews at Derby after the rescue. Left to right: Gayford, Burnett, Combe (obscured) and Heffernan.  
(P.G. Heffernan)

**BELOW:** Combe, standing on the wing, with two of the crew he flew out on Christmas eve 1938. Musson, left, and Dixon in rear cockpit.  
(P.G. Heffernan)



down safely I took off and flew along the bearing line until I located the plane, about 130 miles north-east from Derby. They were down on an old dry swamp site and about 100 yards from a water-hole. As they were carrying emergency rations, there was no panic about food and water, so I dropped a note telling them that I would be over the next day with food and details of any rescue that would be arranged. It should be explained that the radio sets in the Ansons were not equipped for voice transmission, otherwise we could have talked to them. I directed them to the water-hole.

That night we had a conference with the police and other officials in Derby and two possibilities for rescue were discussed. First, we could contact Mount House Station on the pedal radio and get them to take a party to the crash, about sixty miles, but after being rescued the crew would have to travel by rough road back to Derby, and this would take up to three weeks. The alternative was to contact the aborigine station at Munja, on Walcott Inlet near King Sound, and see their assistance. This station had an airstrip which could be used to pick up the crew. It was reckoned that we could get the crew out in under a fortnight using Munja. So Mr Burgin, the manager of the station, was contacted and he agreed to go to the crash.<sup>6</sup> He gave us the dimensions of the Munja airfield, and Andrew Combe calculated that, by lightening the Wellesley to bare essentials he could land and takeoff safely.

After these details were complete, I discussed with Combe what should be dropped by way of provisions. My suggestion was some flour, meat, tea, sugar, and a couple of billys and a water-bag. Combe asked me what the flour was for, so I explained what a damper was. He was aghast at such a suggestion and explained that there were no cooks in the party. I thereupon told him to prepare his own menu and we would deliver it. He produced a list of tinned meats, fruits, asparagus, bread, butter, tea, sugar, a tin opener, a billy, and sundry small tins of savoury content — and to cap it all, a bottle of whisky and a block of ice! As we had no supply-dropping 'chutes in those days we had to improvise. We packed the tins into a sugar sack with sawdust and straw, and then put that sack into a bigger one and kept the two apart with small branches and more straw. The ice was just chucked out of the window of the Anson.

The next day I took off at first light and flew over the stranded aircraft and dropped the supplies with a message giving details of the rescue arrangements. From there I flew towards Munja and identified Burgin's party by a smoke fire. He had made good time and was already about five miles from Munja. He had for company two aborigines and a dog, and his tucker consisted of some flour, meat, tea and sugar. As soon as I had identified Burgin, I claimed to 5,000 feet and flew directly towards the aircraft, and so gave Burgin a course to walk. He covered the distance in three days, and each day one of the Ansons would repeat the procedure of checking his course. After leaving Burgin on the first day I flew over Mount House station had dropped a message thanking them for their offer of assistance and told them of the arrangements.

Burgin told me later that he was met at the aircraft with an iced whisky and water and



dined in style off the tinned delicacies that we had dropped to the airmen. We did a supply drop each morning, and a check on the distance covered by the party each evening. The visibility remained excellent throughout the whole operation and, as the smoke from camp fires could be seen for at least thirty miles, identification was very easy. Occasionally we were foxed by other native camp fires, but generally hit our marks first time.

One very funny incident that sticks in my mind occurred on the third day of the return trip. I arrived over the party and found them making a brew on some big flat rocks in fairly open country. Dropping the bag of supplies, I then came round for the ice drop. Through some fluke, the angle at which the ice hit the rock was such that it did not break up but slid along at the rate of knots. We were dropping from twenty feet and at about 80 mph, which was as low as we could throttle the Anson back to with safety considering the very turbulent flying conditions. The next thing I saw was the dignified and portly figure of Wing Commander Gayford sprinting across the rocks and being rapidly overtaken by a 56lb block of ice. Luckily the ice broke up before overtaking him but the picture of 'Ossie', with shirt tails flapping, will always stay with me. Incidentally, the ice we dropped was the first that the aborigines had ever seen, and they were mystified as to what it was. They called it hard water. For the record, we dropped three bottles of whisky and, despite the primitive methods, all arrived intact.

That night Sergeant Dixon upset a billy of hot tea over his foot. Although his boot saved him from serious burns, the burns that he did get slowed up the marching pace of the party. Despite this they arrived back at Munja on the afternoon of Christmas Eve, and Andrew Combe made two trips, bringing out two on each trip. Even though Munja had only about 1,000 feet run, the Wellesley had no trouble in landing or taking off.

To celebrate the safe return of the wanderers, the publican of the Derby Hotel turned on a 'niner', and so we had a very happy Christmas Eve."

Dixon's burns were not serious and the local Derby doctor soon patched them up. During the last stages of the trek back to Munja, Dixon had been carried by the natives in the party because of the pain from his foot. The crews lived with the Derby Shell Oil agent Mr Bob Rowell who provided transport for them to the airfield, which has seven miles from town, as well as organising shooting trips for the RAF men who bagged several kangaroos and crocodiles.

On 27 December they all left Derby to return to Perth. Gayford flew direct to Pearce in L2680, but Heffernan's Ansons were quite overloaded with their full crews plus the crew from the downed Wellesley, and reached Pearce the following day. Heffernan then parted company with the RAF men, and flew his Anson escort back to Laverton, arriving there 29 December.

At first it was intended that Andrew Combe would fly the remaining Wellesley from Pearce to Darwin then Singapore and in easy stages back to England, however it was later decided not to proceed with this single aircraft flight, and instead L2680 was dismantled at RAAF Station Pearce for shipping back. Gayford and his two crews sailed

for England from Perth in January 1939.

L2680 was dismantled and packed into wooden crates at Pearce by RAAF fitters during January. It was originally planned to merely remove the two wings, and tow the fuselage on its wheels through Perth to the Fremantle docks, but a survey revealed that the width of the wheel base would not get past numerous narrow bridges and culverts along the route. The fuselage was then dismantled and packed into a large wooden box, while each wing was packed into a separate crate. The three large crates were trucked from Pearce to Fremantle between midnight and dawn on the morning of 4 February 1939 to avoid road traffic, and were then loaded aboard the S.S. *Jervis Bay* on consignment to the RAF at Port Said, Egypt.

## L2639 SALVAGED

The RAF decided that L2639 was a write-off due to its inaccessibility 130 miles north east of Derby on the fringe of the Kimberley Plateau. The spot where the Wellesley had force landed had been named "Rotol Reach," by the grounded crew, a reference to the aircraft's special propeller. When they left the site to walk to Munja with the ground rescue party, Gayford had painted down the side of the aircraft "Do Not Touch — Air Ministry Property".

In fact, all that was required to make the engine serviceable again was a six inch length of high pressure rubber hosing to mend the broken oil line, and four gallons of oil to top up the tank. The only damage in the forced landing was a punctured tyre.

Early in 1939 the Air Ministry called for tenders for L2639, "for purchase of the aircraft as scrap". The successful tenderer was Mr Harry Falconer of Broome, WA. He later sold his interest to a group in Derby which formed The Wellesley Bomber Salvage Syndicate, which included a retired RAF airframe fitter whose knowledge would be useful in dismantling the aircraft. A road was plotted, then cut through the scrub out to the aircraft, using dynamite to blast through rough terrain. The Wellesley was found to be in excellent condition, and over a period of weeks was carefully dismantled in extremely difficult conditions by the members of the Syndicate. The dismantling was completed in October, 1939 and then the big job of trucking the aircraft in parts back to Derby began. When the whole aircraft was back in Derby and in storage, the Syndicate approached the RAAF in Canberra to purchase the bomber.

In August 1940 the RAAF finally agreed to purchase the Wellesley to be used as an instructional airframe. The reported price paid was £500. The aircraft was shipped from Derby to Melbourne in a total of 29 packing cases, the last craft of parts arriving in Melbourne during December 1940.

The Wellesley was taken to the Melbourne Showgrounds, where the RAAF had established temporary quarters for No. 1 Engineering School. There were several aircraft parked out on the oval of the showgrounds for engine running and taxiing, and others dismantled inside a pavilion for airframe and engine instructional work. The Wellesley was reassembled inside the pavilion by the trainee mechanics and the whole fuselage was completely restored. Its geodetic framework, as well as the modern engine, instruments and design were of great value to the training programme at IES.

L2639 remained as an instructional airframe at IES along with numerous other grounded RAAF aircraft, including a Hawker Demon, Westland, Wapiti, DH.82 Tiger Moth, DH. 94 Moth Minor, North American NA-16, and Avro Avian. The Wellesley was finally broken up for scrap in 1944.

## WELLESLEYS RETURN TO ENGLAND

L2638, damaged in its forced landing at Richmond, was shipped back to England in crates early in 1939. It was not to fly again, being held by No. 10 Maintenance Unit in England as an instructional airframe, allocated Maintenance number 1856M.

L2680 however returned to front line RAF service in the Middle East after it was shipped to Port Said from Perth. Wellesleys equipped four RAF bomber squadrons in North Africa and Egypt, flying successful bombing missions against Italian and German forces until 1941, although several continued on in Egypt until 1943 when the type was finally withdrawn from RAF service.

The Air Ministry aircraft records show the following details for the Wellesleys of the Australian flight:

L2638	16.3.38	Brought on RAF charge: L R D U
	10.8.39	Issued to 10MU, to 1856M (Maintenance Airframe)
	9.4.40	Reduced to produce
L2639	18.3.38	Brought on RAF charge: L R D U
	16.12.38	Forced landing near Derby, WA
	31.1.39	Struck off RAF charge.
L2680	24. 3.38	Brought on RAF charge: L R D U
		Middle East service
	8.7.40	Struck off RAF charge.

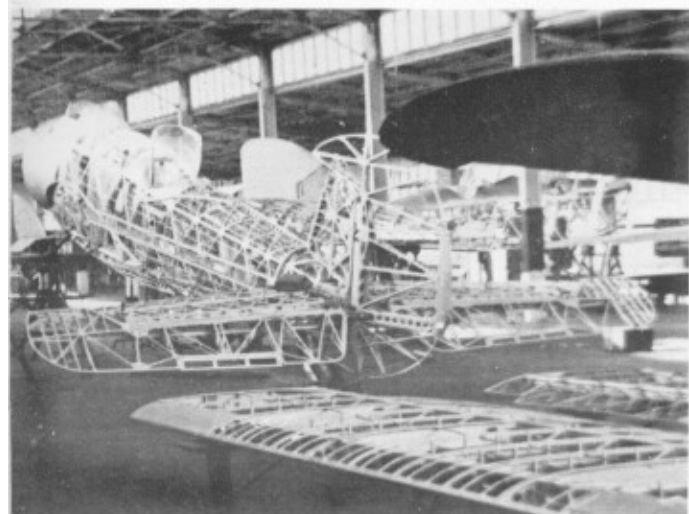
## DECORATIONS AWARDED

The LRDU record flight gained the Britannia Challenge Trophy, awarded by the Royal Aero Club for the most meritorious performance of 1938 by British airmen. In June, 1939 the Air Force Cross was awarded to Squadron Leaders Kellett, Combe and Burnett, Flight Lieutenant Gething, and Pilot Officer Gaine. The Air Force Medal was awarded to Sergeant Gray.

In addition, RAAF Flight Lieutenant "Paddy" Heffernan was awarded the Air Force Cross for services rendered as Liaison Officer attached to the LRDU while in Australia. The Air Ministry also sent a letter of commendation to Mr Burgin of Munja Station for his great efforts during his eight day overland trek to find the grounded fliers of L2639 and bring them back to Munja.

The LRDU was disbanded in 1939 when the crews returned to England by sea from Australia. The gallant men of the record flight went on to distinguished RAF careers:

Gayford	Retired as Air Commodore and died August, 1945.
Combe	Retired as Air Commodore.
Gething	Retired as Air Commodore.
Burnett	Became Deputy Chief of the Air Staff, promoted to Air Chief Marshall, retired in 1972, and Knighted.
Hogan	Retired as Air Vice Marshall.
Kellett	Shot down early in the war, became POW. Retired after the War.
Musson	Killed in Coastal Command in 1943.
Dixon	Killed in a flying training accident, South Cerney, UK during war.
Gray	Executed by the Japanese in Hong Kong. Posthumously awarded the George Cross.



L2639 at N.I Engineering School at the Melbourne Showgrounds, circa 1942. Fuselage fabric has been removed.

(via D.J. Vincent)



The Wellesley crews at Hobart. Left to right: Dixon, Bennett, Combe, Gayford, Hogan, Musson, and Gray.

(P.G. Heffernan)

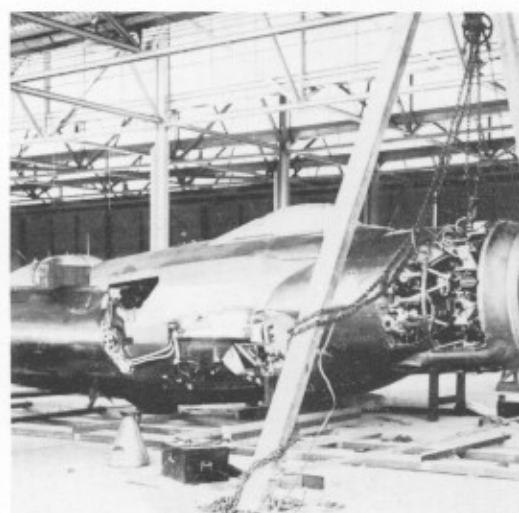
## FOOTNOTES

1. The records were: speed, height, distance over a closed circuit, and distance in a straight line. The Russians broke the distance in a straight line record on 11 July 1937, with a 6,306 mile flight from Moscow to California, via the North Pole.
2. Barnes Wallis later achieved fame for his 'bouncing bomb' used by No. 617 Squadron, 'The Dambusters', in their famous raids against German reservoirs; and more recently for his development of the 'swing wing' concept.
3. Gayford was well experienced with long distance flying, having broken the distance record in 1933. Then a Squadron Leader, he had flown a special Fairey Monoplane, with Flt Lt G.E. Nicholletts, from Cranwell to Walvis Bay in South Africa, covering 5,339 miles in a flight of 57 hours 25 minutes. It was this record that the Russians broke in their flight to California in 1937.
4. Normally a two seater, the Wellesleys were modified to accommodate a third crew member to make possible a rotation of duties during the long flight, and to provide space for the off duty member to sleep or relax at full length.
5. It is interesting to note that the B-29 weighed ten times the gross weight of the Wellesley, and had four engines each developing more than twice the horsepower of the Wellesley's single Pegasus XXII.
6. The Manager of Munja Station was in fact a Mr Harold Reid. Burgin was the senior stockman on the property. Reid remained at the homestead to provide radio contact for Burgin's rescue party.

This fine study of L2639 at RAAF Pearce shows many of the salient features of the LRDU Wellesleys. (F.M. Halls)

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10. Information supplied by: M.R. Davis, F.G. Harris, J. Hopton, K. Isaacs, R.L. Macdonald, N.M. Parnell, B.A. Pattison, D.L. Prossor.



The sole remaining aircraft of the epic flight is dismantled at Pearce prior to being shipped home. Surely a disappointing way to return to Britain after the heady success barely two months ago.

(via F.G. Harris)

