

JUST ANOTHER AUSTER

*Over 300 Austers were imported to Australia and many are still flying.
This is the story of just one, the much-modified Auster 5 VH-SEB*

Geoff Goodall.



VH-SEB displayed inside the Port Lincoln SA airport terminal building in February 2019.

Auster Aircraft Ltd at Rearsby Aerodrome, Leicester evolved from the pre-war Taylorcraft Aeroplanes (England) Ltd, which marketed British variants of the popular American Taylorcraft range. British military requirements during WWII for Air Observation Post (AOP) sturdy light aircraft resulted in the development of military models and large-scale production of the 2 seater Auster Mk.III powered by the reliable 130hp deHavilland Gipsy Major. From late 1944 the RAAF received 56 reconditioned former RAF Auster IIIs shipped to Australia and deployed to support Australian forces in New Guinea, Borneo and Solomon Islands.

The next military Auster models AOP. Mk.IV and AOP. Mk.V were designed as 3 seaters with expanded "glasshouse" transparent perspex areas to improve field of vision. They were powered by US-built Lycoming O-290 flat-four engines, which had recently been made available as American Lend Lease equipment to Britain. The Auster Mk.IV and Mk.Vs were used extensively as the standard British AOP aircraft for D Day and the subsequent allied invasion of Europe.

The subject of this story was an Auster AOP Mk.V produced to a late WWII order for an additional 200 Mk.Vs and Mk.VIs. It was built by Taylorcraft Aeroplanes

(England) Ltd – often referred to as "British Taylorcraft" - at their works at Thurmaston, Leicester and like all previous wartime Auster production transported by road to nearby Rearsby Aerodrome for final assembly and test flights. Two were completed as **Auster AOP Mk.V Seaplanes** fitted with floats incorporating wheels. The pair was assigned RAF serials TW521 and TW522, our subject being **TW522** with Taylorcraft construction number 1916.

TW522 made its first flight at Rearsby on 7 March 1947 flown by experienced Auster test pilot George Edwards. Flight-testing on ground and water followed. TW522 was taken on RAF charge on 8 May 1946 and on that day it was ferried from Rearsby to No.47 Maintenance Unit at RAF Sealand.

RAF Command had issued TW521 and TW522 to Singapore for evaluation as seaplanes to support RAF units under Air Command South East Asia (ACSEA). The brand new pair was dismantled and boxed by 47MU and on 11 July moved by road to Birkenhead Docks. They were loaded on board the ship *Samoa* which sailed on 21 July, eventually reaching Singapore 30 August 1946. The Auster seaplanes were reassembled at RAF Seletar where Sunde rlands used a slipway to the waters of the Straits of Johore.



Auster 5 VH-SEB at Parafield Airport, Adelaide in June 1963, painted green and white. Photo: Geoff Goodall

TW522 commenced the flying trials. Unsurprisingly the RAF report stated that the floatplane was totally unsuitable for operational waterborne use due to its marginal performance in the high temperatures of the Far East. TW522 was held by 390MU at Seletar until listed for disposal and struck off RAF charge on 29 July 1948.

Military disposal records have not been found, but TW522 reappears nine years later when it was civil registered in May 1957 as **VR-SDY** by Royal Singapore Flying Club at Paya Lebar Airport, Singapore. However its new flying club life was cut short on 16 February 1958 when badly damaged in a forced landing after a section of propeller detached in flight.

A new stage of our Auster's life now commenced. The damaged aircraft was acquired by Flight Sergeant John C. Doudy, an Australian with the RAF in Singapore during the Malayan campaign. He set about having it rebuilt in the Royal Singapore Flying Club hangars. He and an aircraft engineer friend did much of the work. The twisted fuselage frame was replaced by the frame of another AOP.5 held by the club in a stockpile of former RAF Auster AOP.5 and AOP.6 airframes. Port and starboard wings were replaced by an AOP.6 set including the wing struts. The wings were modified to accept AOP-5 split flaps and other differences. They were the same wingspan but had the advantage of being fitted with 12 gallon auxiliary fuel tanks. By September 1958 the rebuild was completed. All military transparent perspex panels behind the cabin were covered over with fabric, while the windscreen and cabin side windows were framed in a civilian style. The aircraft was painted in an attractive green and white scheme, which it was to retain for many years.

John applied to the Singapore Department of Civil Aviation for issue of a new Certificate of Airworthiness. The airframe inspection report listed the source of all components of the rebuilt aircraft. Noted as coming from VR-SDY were tailplane, rudder, ailerons, flaps, fuselage fittings and cabin parts including cabin floor, cockpit items and control column assembly. Many unused British Taylorcraft parts were listed with their part numbers. The Certificate of Airworthiness was issued on 6 December 1958 but because

of the changed fuselage frame, the Department insisted on a new registration **VR-SEB** with a new identity TAY983D, which was the British Taylorcraft part number of the fuselage frame used.

John "Jack" Doudy was keen to fly the Auster to home to South Australia for Christmas with his family. After local flying to check fuel consumption figures, on 10 December 1958 he departed Singapore for Australia flying solo. Doudy's log book records the flight stages:

December 10 Singapore-Djakarta
 December 12 Djakarta-Den Pasar
 December 13 Den Pasar-Kupang
 December 14 Kupang-Darwin
 December 15 Darwin-Tenant Creek
 December 16 Tenant Creek-Alice Springs-Oodnadatta
 December 17 Oodnadatta-Leigh Creek-Adelaide (Parafield)
 (Flying Time 44 hrs 55 mins)

His next flight in VR-SEB was on 10 January 1959 when he flew from Parafield to his hometown Port Lincoln SA. For the rest of January and February he flew it regularly, often between Port Lincoln and Adelaide carrying members of his family. However the aircraft had to be certified in Australia. On 27 February he arrived at Parafield from Port Lincoln to have the Australian airworthiness inspection carried out by South Australian Auster agents Aviation Services (SA) Ltd. Here it came under the scrutiny of DCA airworthiness inspectors who were perplexed at the many modifications incorporated during the Singapore rebuild. Internal memos in the DCA file reveal that the Adelaide Regional office considered the effect of the Auster 6 wings and other modifications on airframe integrity had not been sufficiently investigated. The reports also refer to "general poor flying characteristics", which do not appear to have bothered the owner on the flight from Singapore.

After months of delay the file was referred to DCA Head Office Melbourne, which took the pragmatic view that Singapore DCA investigated the modification issues and issued a Certificate of Airworthiness, so Australia would do the same. The Auster was finally test flown at Parafield on 21 September 1959 by Aviation Services pilot Graham Doherty and pronounced airworthy.



VH-SEB at St. Arnaud, Victoria. 19 November 1989. Photo: Geoff Goodall

DCA issued Australian Certificates of Registration and Airworthiness as **VH-SEB** on 1 October 1959 as type "Auster 5 (Modified)". The registration had been requested by the owner to reduce paintwork on the aircraft. That same year Doudy set up the first flying training school at Port Lincoln in conjunction with Aviation Services (SA) Ltd at Parafield, which supplied Tiger Moths and Chipmunks for several years. He is credited with the foundation of the Port Lincoln Aero Club.

Port Lincoln's growing tuna fishing industry was asking to evaluate aerial fish spotting. John and his wife Rosemary established the town's first air charter company **Commodore Aviation Ltd**. With financial backing from the tuna canning plant, a Republic Seabee amphibian VH-WWA was purchased in March 1961. Business was good and the following year Auster Autocar VH-WWB and Aero 145 VH-WWC were added, followed by two more Czech Aero 45 series. Their endurance of 10 hours allowed tuna spotting operations for the Port Lincoln fishing fleet as far as Kangaroo Island, the edge of the Continental shelf and along the Great Australian Bight. Catches increased and fishing seasons were extended. Commodore Aviation also operated tuna spotting from Eden NSW each year.

Meanwhile the Auster VH-SEB was briefly sold to an Adelaide owner in January 1960 before returning to Port Lincoln under the ownership of Blacker Motors Ltd for the next five years. Jack Doudy was seen flying it into Parafield on occasions. It has been reported that VH-SEB was fitted with Auster J.5F Aiglet Trainer wings during the 1960s. These were designed for aerobatics and had an 8 feet shorter wingspan.

It was sold in Victoria during 1966 and was to have two other Victorian owners before being purchased in May 1972 by Dr. Ian V. Allen of St Arnaud Vic. By now it was painted a more sedate silver with red trim. Doctor Allen was an enthusiastic pilot, being reported in the local newspaper as saying "flying my Auster is more therapeutic than valium". He held a fly-in for Auster owners on the St Arnaud airfield that was so successful it became a regular two-day event in November each year for over a decade. The occa-

sional Cessna would arrive but sometimes had "Cessna J.1 Autocrat" or similar temporarily applied with black tape!

After Doctor Ian Allen's unexpected death in 1991, VH-SEB was left in the small hangar at St Arnaud while his affairs were settled. Various parties approached his sons with offers for the aircraft until January 1995 when it was sold to Colin Bridgeman of Maitland SA. Twenty years later, after learning the background to his Auster, Mr. Bridgeman approached the Doudy family and the Port Lincoln council with the idea of displaying it in the airport terminal building as a tribute to John Doudy's role in the development of Port Lincoln and the West Coast.

Not all councilors were enthusiastic but after lengthy consideration the council agreed. In a community effort, the Auster was purchased by the District Council of Lower Eyre Peninsula with funds provided by tuna fishing companies and the local chapter of the Sport Aircraft Association of Australia. On Thursday 28 February 2019 VH-SEB was lifted into place suspended in flying attitude above the passenger check-in counter of the terminal. It had been refurbished for display and accurately repainted in the green and white scheme John Doudy chose in Singapore in 1958.

Just another Auster.....

References:

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- correspondence with Chris Doudy, son of John C. Doudy