

A Unique Aeroplane – Lockheed Vega VH-UVK

By Geoff Goodall

Lockheed Model DL-1A Vega Special NC372E was built in Los Angeles in 1929 with the constructor's number of 155. The seven-seat aircraft was powered by a Pratt & Whitney Wasp SC1 radial engine and had a published maximum speed of 178 mph (286 km/h). The impressive range and speed of the Vega Special attracted the interest of British long-distance pilot Lieutenant Commander Glen Kidston who purchased this aircraft and arranged to have it shipped to England for a planned series of record attempts.

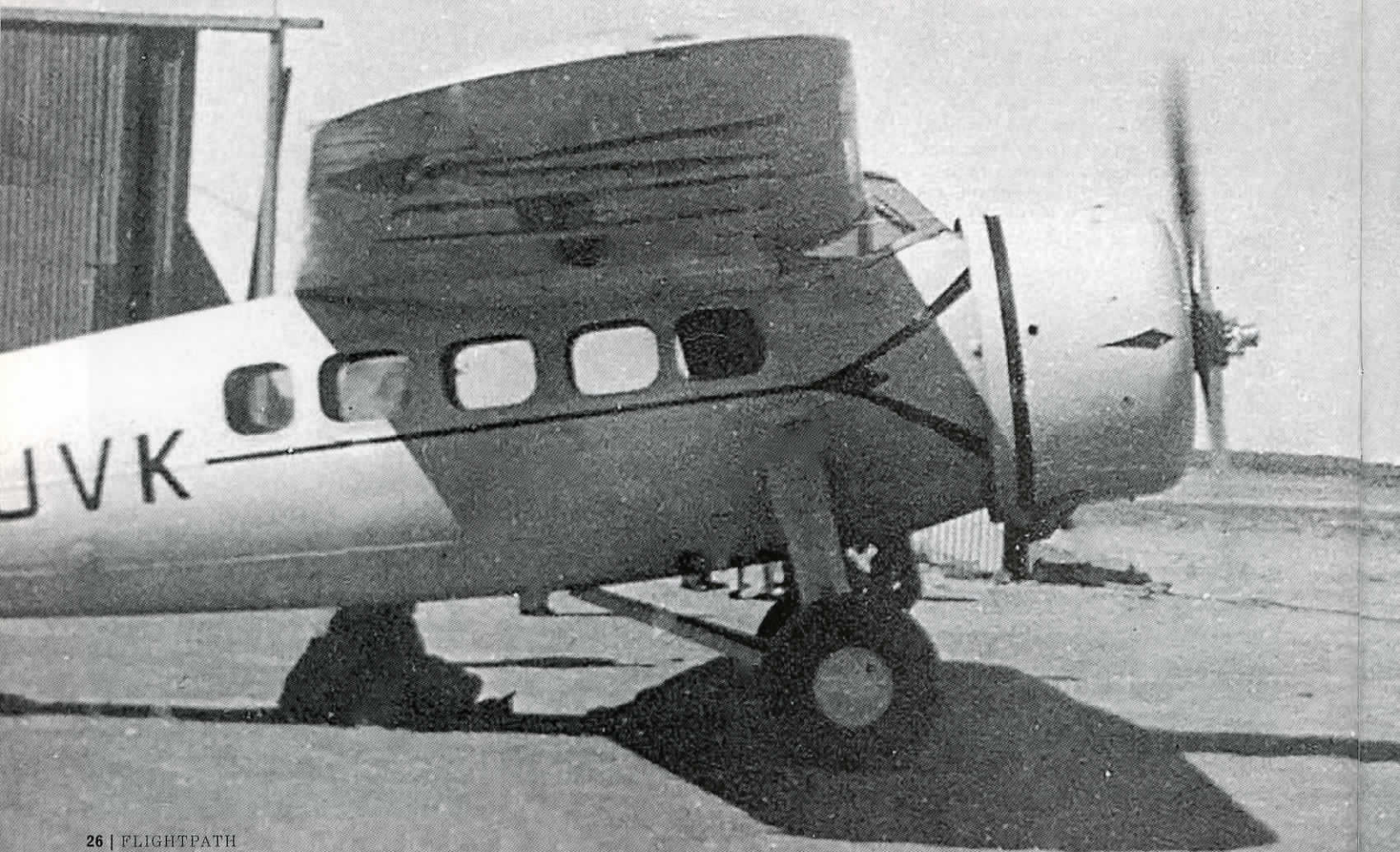
On 16 December 1930 the Vega was added to the British Civil Register as G-ABFE. The aircraft arrived by sea from America in January 1931 and was quickly assembled at Croydon Aerodrome, London, where it was test flown by Kidston on January 31. Its British Certificate of Airworthiness, Number V-45, was issued under a new registration, G-AB-

GK, that had been requested by the owner to incorporate his initials. This was a very rare departure from the strict sequential registration allocation used by the British authorities of the period. The date of issue of its CofA is variously recorded in official records as 3 or 17 January 1931. Either of these indicates a backdating of the issue date as the aircraft was still under assembly at that time.

The next flight for the aircraft was on 14 February 1931 when Kidston and his partner, Lieutenant O. Cathcart-Jones, with two other crewmembers, made a local endorsement flight from Croydon. A similar exercise was flown on 20 February. The next day they flew a trial cross-country flight from Croydon to Le Bourget, Paris, in a record time of one hour and twelve minutes. Kidston, very satisfied with the Vega, returned to Croydon two days later and, after some local flying, had long-range fuel tanks fitted inside the spacious cabin. The aircraft was then test-flown at Croydon with these additions on March 19.

On 31 March 1931 Kidston and Cathcart-Jones departed Netheravon for a much-publicised attempt on the Cape Record. Following a route that took them via Naples, Malta, Cairo, Kosti, Malakai, Kisuma, Salisbury, Bulawayo and Pretoria, they reached Cape Town on April 6 and successfully lowered the Record to six days and nine hours at an average flying speed of 134 mph (216 km/h). They beat the previous record by two days. The only incident along the flight had been the previous day when a forced landing was made at Lichtenberg, Pretoria, due to engine trouble, and the propeller was damaged by running through two wire fences. They were able to depart after only a short stay when Dutch farmers cleared a strip for them. After several local flights in the Vega in April, tragedy struck when Kidston and Captain T.A. Gladstone were killed on 5 May when their DH-80 Puss Moth, ZS-ACC, crashed in the Drakensberg Mountains near Van Reenen.

The Lockheed was shipped back to England and test-flown, after re-assembly, at



Hamble Aerodrome on 5 December 1931. On the same day it was ferried to Hanworth by Cathcart-Jones at an average speed of 196.4 mph (316 km/h). In April and May 1932 he flew the Vega during Sir Alan Cobham's National Aviation Day Displays and then began a busy round of visits to air pageants throughout Britain for the rest of the year. On 25 October Cathcart-Jones flew demonstration flights for His Highness Maharajah of Jodhpur, and Sir Frank Spickwell of Imperial Chemical Industries, for a possible sale. No firm negotiations were entered into and, after a trip from home base at Hanworth to Liverpool to visit the Grand National on 24 March 1933, the Vega was retired and parked in a hangar at Hanworth awaiting disposal.

When Sir MacPherson Robertson, the Australian chocolate magnate and philanthropist, announced, in 1933, that he would sponsor an air race between England and Melbourne in October 1934, he captured the imagination of the world's aviators and public alike, and soon a large field of aircraft ranging from Moths to a Boeing 247 and Douglas DC-2, had been entered. With over 15,000 Pounds in prize money for the 12,300-mile (19,795 kilometres) race, to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the foundation of Victoria, the MacRobertson Centenary Air Race was destined to become one of aviation's most historic events.

It was inevitable that Robertson's aviation protégé, Horace Clive Miller, would enter the air race. Robertson had given financial

G-ABGK at Mildenhall prior to the commencement of the MacRobertson Air Race.



G-ABGK at Aleppo, Syria, after turning over when the undercarriage collapsed on landing during the 1934 MacRobertson Air Race.



VH-UVK and MacRobertson-Miller Aviation's DH.86 VH-USD at Port Hedland in November 1938. [All images via AHSA]



backing to Horrie Miller back in 1927 to purchase DH.61 Giant Moth VH-UTL, 'Old Gold', to establish airline services in South Australia as MacRobertson Miller Aviation Co. Ltd (MMA). The company was now operating passenger services between Adelaide and a number of South Australian country centres. After giving much consideration to what aircraft to enter in the race, Miller purchased, sight unseen, the Vega Special G-ABGK languishing at Hanworth.

Horrie Miller was to have a memorable 1934 for, not only was he eagerly preparing for the air race but, on the home front, he had won the Government Air Mail Contract for an air service from Perth to Daly Waters from West Australian Airways Ltd. (WAA). MacRobertson Miller Aviation Co. had specified carrying out the service with three new de Havilland DH.84 Dragons, and these were immediately ordered from England with the new service to commence on 3 October 1934. The Adelaide base of MMA was to continue its South Australian airline services as a separate operation from the Perth base. Miller was unable to fly the Vega in the race due to the immense amount of organisation necessary to begin the Western Australian route. He engaged the services of veteran WAA pilot Captain James Woods whom he had known for some time from his regular visits to Parafield flying the WAA

de Havilland Hercules and Vickers Viastras on the Perth-Adelaide service.

Jimmy Woods was no stranger to the route of the air race, for he had left Perth on 3 July 1933, flying his modified DH.60M Moth VH-UPD, 'The Spirit of Western Australia' in an attempt to break James Molli-son's Australia-England record of just over eight days. Bad weather and a petrol leak, which eventually caused a forced landing in India, frustrated the record attempt, but Woods flew on to England and, after being unable to raise a suitable price for his Moth, had it shipped back to Perth, where he resumed regular airline flying for WAA, and sold the Moth locally.

Now a year later, Woods sailed back to England to take charge of Horrie Miller's Vega Special for the MacRobertson race. He test flew the Lockheed at Hanworth on 15 August 1934 and, the next day, flew G-ABGK from Hanworth to Heston and then on to Rotterdam, where he remained for nearly a month, before returning to Heston on 14 September. The Vega's next flight was from Heston to Mildenhall on 20 October to position for the start of the Race. Its race number, '36', was painted on the tail and 'Puck' was painted on the nose in honour of Hugh Grosvenor (whose nickname it was) the ADC of the South Australian Governor, who had been a close personal friend of Miller's until his death in an RAAF seaplane off Point Cook in 1930.

At 06:39 GMT they departed Mildenhall to commence the race and reached Athens that night via Marseilles and Rome. The

Vega departed Athens next morning at 03:11 GMT but hopes were dashed just after dawn when the aircraft crashed on landing at Aleppo, Syria, at 07:50. Don Bennett gives the following account of their flight in his book 'Pathfinder':

"Eventually the great day arrived, and it was certainly a magnificent sight to see the aircraft taking off in an English early morning on a race half-way around the world. We had no radio, and 90% of the first leg was over the top of clouds, so that we had to rely entirely on dead reckoning. All went well and we landed at Marseilles 3 hours and 45 minutes after take-off from Mildenhall, a fast trip for those days. Incidentally, Jimmy Woods has implicit faith in my navigation, and was under the happy delusion that a navigator could work magic.

Fortunately the fates were kind, and his reliance on my navigation did not go astray. We pressed onto Rome and thence in the dark to Athens. As we were doubtful of our range being sufficient to reach Aleppo, and as the only intermediate stop Nicosia had no night-flying facilities whatsoever, we decided to sleep a little in Athens. The Greek Air Force put us up in the local barracks and after a few hours' sleep we pressed on to Aleppo. As we took off I was under the impression that the undercarriage oleo leg had jammed again as it had done several days earlier at Hanworth, when we had worked late into the night to release the gland that had been binding and put it together again.

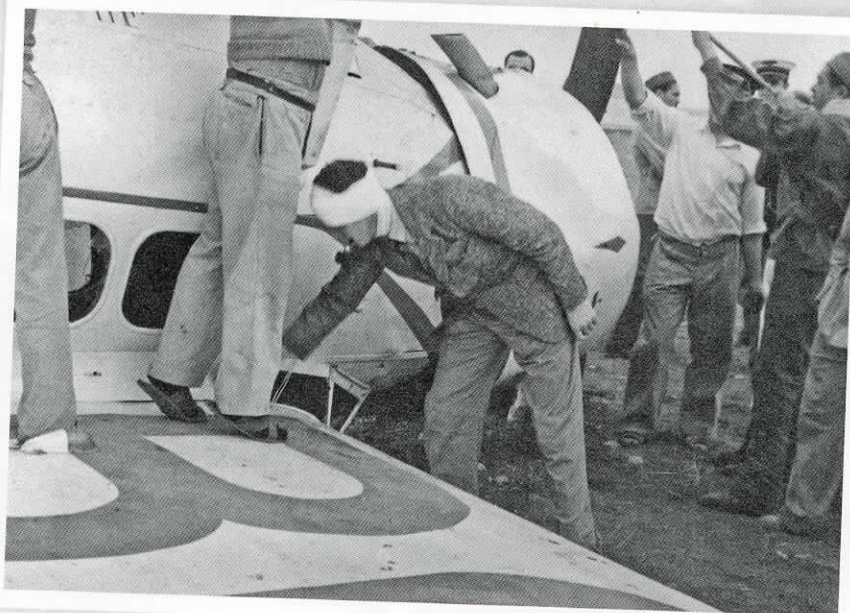
VH-UVK at Maylands,
Perth, 22 August 1935, still
carrying its race number.



On arrival at Aleppo Jimmy brought the Vega into land, whilst I took up my position as far aft as possible. He hit the ground with a fair wallop and the undercarriage collapsed; down she went, and the nose went in as we whipped over on to our back. I was in the tail of the machine and my velocity from one end of the cabin to the other was remarkable. I rolled out into the dust of the aerodrome and then helped Jimmy Woods out with his forehead bleeding rather badly. He looked an awful mess, but was not really as badly bent as I was. I had done a fair bit of damage to one knee and could not move my head and shoulders. We were taken to a convent, and some Syrian nuns patched us up. The Air Attaché had come down from Beirut, and drove me, a very forlorn character, down to Beirut where I caught an American ship to Naples and back to England. I had to leave poor Jimmy Woods with practically no money, and a badly broken aircraft, waiting for funds to be cabled to him from Australia."

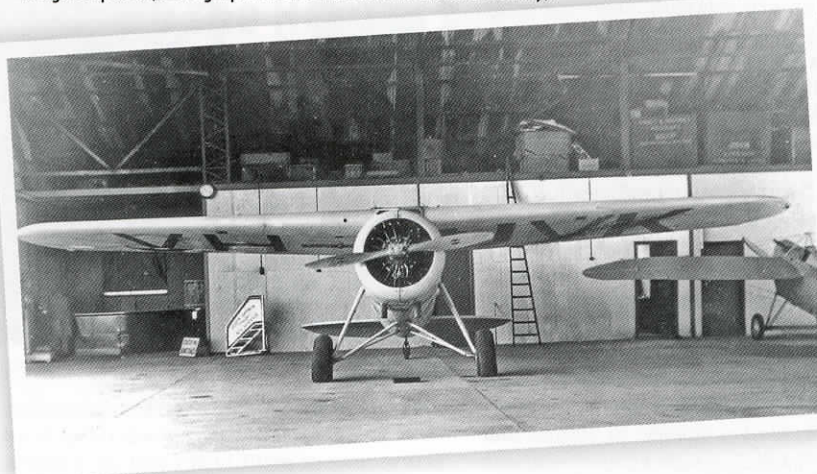
Bennett resumed flying with the RAF immediately and, after an impressive career of military and airline flying, rose to the rank of Air Vice-Marshal in the wartime RAF and achieved fame as the founder of Bomber Command's Pathfinder Force. Jimmy Woods returned to Perth to take up the position of Operations Manager with MMA's Western Australian airline service.

At first Horrie Miller intended to have the Vega shipped to America for repairs and then shipped onto Perth for his use with the WA service. However it was decided that the

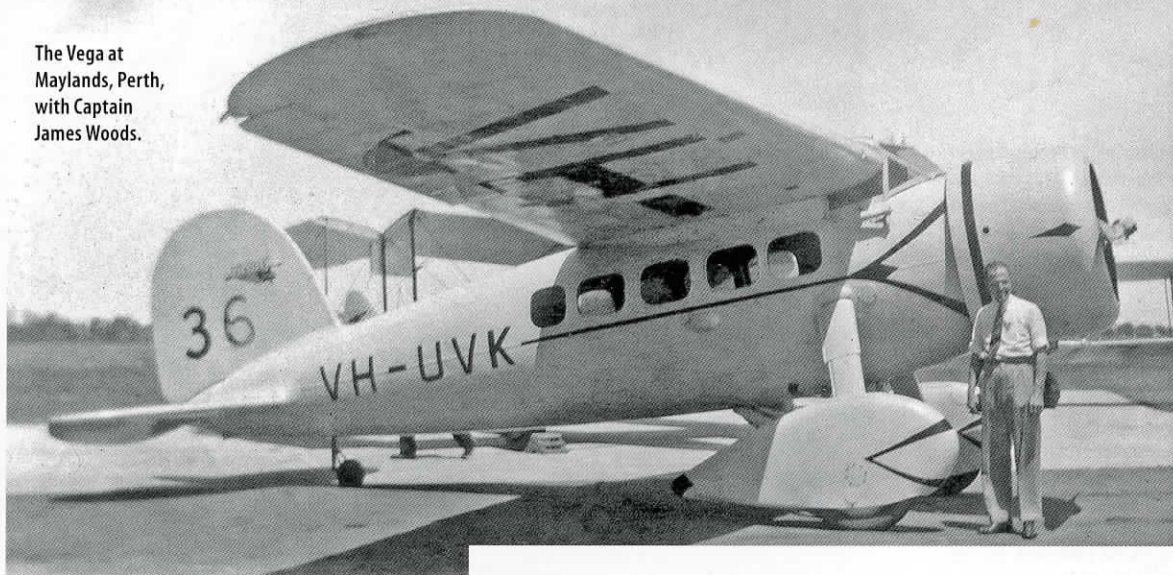


ABOVE: Captain James Woods, with bandaged head, inspecting the Vega at Aleppo.

BELOW: In a hangar at Maylands, 1941, prior to RAAF impressment as A42-1. Note the Bristol MC-1 at right of photo (see Flightpath Vol.26 No.2 for this aircraft's history).



The Vega at Maylands, Perth, with Captain James Woods.



repairs could be done in Perth so the aircraft was shipped from Greece to Fremantle and taken by road to the MMA workshops at Maylands Aerodrome, arriving there in early January 1935. The rebuild of the big Lockheed was a major job that was to take eight months. Miller requested the Australian registration VH-BGK for the aircraft because the British markings across the mainplane and on the fuselage were extremely difficult to remove. The Civil Aviation Branch (CAB) would not comply with his request, however, and allocated VH-UVK instead. Later photographs show that the British registration was only slightly erased from the upper surface of the wings and, several years later, could still be clearly read.

Miller taxied the Vega out for its first test flight at Maylands on 22 August 1935. Further test flights were made in August and September while a complex paper war was fought with the CAB over validation of its British and American Certificates of Airworthiness. This was a common problem with all foreign (i.e. non-British) aircraft imported into Australia at this time. Miller himself was very experienced with these difficulties for, in 1929, he had helped his friend Hugh 'Puck' Grosvenor order a similar Vega for a proposed attempt on the Australia-England record. At the same time Miller himself ordered a Vega hoping that Lockheed might find a way around the Australian embargo. The company did its best, and even opened a branch in Canada in an attempt to get around the regulations but, after a year, Miller was forced to cancel the order. Meanwhile, a compromise was reached in the airworthiness dispute over the former G-ABGK at Maylands and, although the CAB refused to add the aircraft to the Australian Civil Register, approval was given to operate the Vega initially on its current British C of A.

On 13 October 1935 the Vega made her first commercial flight in Australia when she departed Maylands, under the command of Captain Woods and carrying two passengers, at 05:15 bound for Adelaide on a charter for MMA. Parafield was reached at 15:45 that afternoon, after refuelling stops at Kalgoorlie, Forrest and Ceduna, in a flying time of seven hours and 55 minutes. Woods set off on the return trip to Perth on 20 October but was delayed at Forrest for two days while waiting



VH-UVK at Maylands, Perth, 22 August 1935, with a fading registration but still carrying its race number 36.

for the airfield's dirt surface to harden after heavy rains. He eventually reached Perth in a flying time of eight hours and 55 minutes. This was still an impressive time when compared with the two full days' flying of the WAA Perth-Adelaide DH.89 Rapide service.

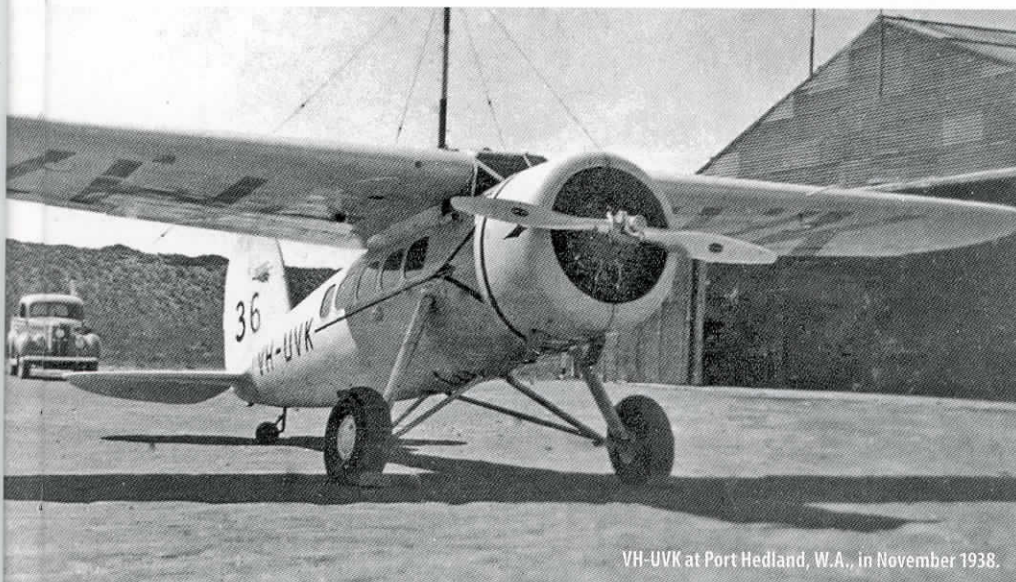
Soon after its return to Maylands Woods flew the Vega in the Perth Aerial Derby and put up a better time than a visiting RAAF Hawker Demon fighter! The Vega was now stored in the MMA hangar at Maylands for eight months awaiting clarification of its airworthiness status. On 19 June 1936 VH-UVK was test flown by Miller for formal granting of its Australian C of A and it was finally officially added to the Australian Civil Register on 23 June. After several local flights, the Vega was off to Adelaide again on 5 October. Captain Woods flew the trip in seven hours and ten minutes and even landed at Blyth, S.A., on the last leg into Parafield from Ceduna. On the way back to Perth, four days later, Woods spent thirty minutes searching in the Zanthus area, near Kalgoorlie, W.A., for the visiting Dutch fliers W.D. Rous and H.J. Van Beckman who were missing in their DH.87B Hornet Moth PK-WDR. (They were later located on a clay-pan where they had forced landed without damage.)

The Vega now settled into the role that Horrie Miller envisaged, that of occasional charter work and fast communications flights between his two MMA bases in Perth and Adelaide. It was uneconomical to use on the regular airline routes, although its performance would have considerably reduced the

flying time to Daly Waters, which was serviced by the plodding Dragons. The big Lockheed ranged all over Western Australia. It regularly flew charters and sometimes picked up mail from delayed scheduled flights and delivered it to Perth. The next Adelaide trip was 17 November 1936 to take a Mr and Mrs Newman from Kalgoorlie to Parafield. It returned to Perth three days later with a Mrs Boeri who was bound for Bunbury, W.A. She was transferred from the Vega to a Fox Moth at Maylands for the last leg of her journey.

Horrie Miller flew VH-UVK in the Aerial Derby at Maylands on 9 January 1938 and, on 5 May, he flew the Vega into the newly built RAAF Station at Bullsbrook (soon named RAAF Pearce). On 10 November James Woods took the Vega from Perth to Darwin in fourteen hours and twenty minutes, stopping en route at the MMA ports of Geraldton, Port Hedland, Broome, Noonkanbah, Fitzroy Crossing and Wyndham, and returned three days later via Wyndham, Halls Creek, Fitzroy Crossing, Noonkanbah, Derby, Broome, Port Hedland, Whim Creek, Roebourne, Onslow, Carnarvon and Geraldton.

This was to be the aircraft's last long flight for some time because, apart from occasional test flights at Maylands, and even a day's joyriding on 13 April 1940, the Vega remained in its hangar. On 2 June 1941 Miller flew up to Geraldton, returning to Perth the following day, and in August MMA applied, for the first time, to have the Vega included on their airline licence as losses of their fleet to RAAF impressments had criti-



VH-UVK at Port Hedland, W.A., in November 1938.

“ the Vega was accepted by the RAAF at No. 1 Aircraft Depot, Laverton, Victoria, on 11 November 1941 and taken on charge the next day under serial A42-1 ”

cally reduced their ability to carry on their north-west service which had extended from Daly Waters through to Darwin. However, the Vega was not to enter airline service because, in November, it was taken from MMA for the RAAF under Requisition Number 9020. A C of A renewal was carried out in the MMA workshops at Maylands for the last time prior to the handover to the RAAF. The logbook showed that VH-UVK had flown only 246 hours.

At the end of its ferry flight from Perth, the Vega was accepted by the RAAF at No. 1 Aircraft Depot, Laverton, Victoria, on 11 November 1941 and taken on charge the next day under serial A42-1. After being painted into a camouflage scheme at Laverton, A42-1 was issued to Northern Area HQ, in need of a fast communications aircraft, and was ferried up to the Northern Territory in late December.

The Vega ground-looped violently on 17 June 1942 while landing at Cairns, Queensland. The rear wing spar was broken and the ailerons and wing tips were damaged. The damaged aircraft was trucked to Townsville where it was stored under the care of 24 and 33 Squadrons before being trucked the thousand miles (1600 kilometres) to Brisbane where the aircraft was received by the oddly named Aircrafts Pty Ltd in their Archerfield hangar on 12 October. The lengthy repair job by APL, under contract to the RAAF, was finally completed on 10 November 1943 and later that month the Vega was issued to No. 3 Communications Unit (3 CU).

After several months on general communication duties with 3 CU, the Vega was declared surplus to RAAF requirements and issued to the Department of Civil Aviation (DCA) on 9 March 1944 for disposal. At first it was intended to issue the aircraft to Ansett Airways to supplement their Airspeed Envoy on their Hamilton-Melbourne service. The DCA, however, was concerned by RAAF reports that pilots had experienced longitudinal instability when flying the Vega. A series of flight tests were conducted on the aircraft, and as a result of these tests it was decided not to issue the Vega to Ansett. It was to be held by 3 CU at Mascot Airport, Sydney, awaiting a decision on its fate. Its transfer to the DCA was delayed

again in October while awaiting the installation of a new Wasp engine. Lengthy correspondence began between the RAAF and the DCA as the aircraft was now unserviceable, due to the engine and other maintenance requirements, and the RAAF did not wish to carry out any further work as it was due for disposal. The DCA felt that, if the aircraft was sold to a civil purchaser, stability tests would have to be carried out and probably would require a major rebuild of the airframe. The Department, therefore, recommended to the RAAF that the aircraft should be scrapped.

On 28 August 1945 Butler Air Transport wrote to the DCA expressing their desire to obtain the Vega which had been standing in the weather at Mascot for over six months. On 12 October, however, the RAAF allotted the aircraft to No. 2 C.R.D. at Richmond for conversion to components and on that day the old aeroplane was dismantled at Mascot and trucked to RAAF Richmond for scrapping.

Three days later James Woods in Perth telegraphed DCA advising that he wished to purchase the ageing Vega. He had inspected his old aircraft at Mascot when he passed through earlier that year in February and March while ferrying ex-RAAF DH.86s VH-USW and VH-USF from Brisbane to Perth for MMA. Woods was no doubt interested in the Vega for his Perth to Rottnest Island airline that he wished to establish as soon as wartime aviation restrictions were lifted. His later plans to import a Republic RC-3 Seabee amphibian were thwarted by the period currency exchange restrictions and his one-man-airline finally began operating over the 25-mile (40 kilometre) route in March 1948 with two Avro Ansons.

When the DCA replied to Woods that the Vega was to be scrapped because of its alleged stability problems, Jimmy Woods angrily telegraphed, "Having flown this machine more than anyone else in Australia I am fully aware of its capabilities and cannot see any justification for any such action." However the DCA remained firm and bluntly advised Woods that "the Department will not renew the C of A of Lockheed Vega VH-UVK."

In October 1945 the once proud Vega was broken up, with axes, for scrap metal in a far corner of Richmond RAAF Base.

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A.H.S.A.