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THE COVER STORY

NEW ENGLAND AIRWAYS AVRO ANSONS

Geoff Goodall



It wasn't all just business. Here three New England Airways Ansons make a formation take off at Casino.

Our cover picture shows two Avro Ansons of New England Airways at Casino NSW in early 1948 while on passenger services. The photograph was taken by Jack Hazzard and is courtesy Allan Sheppard, who has researched his father John "Milty" Sheppard's flying career with the Casino Aero Club. Milty and his wife operated the Airline Booking Office in Centre Street, Casino and Milty did some flying in the Ansons. This post-war New England Airways had no connection with the pre-war pioneer airline of the same name, founded at Lismore by G.A. Robinson and Keith Virtue with Avro 10s, restructured in 1935 as Airlines of Australia and taken over by Australian National Airways in 1942.

The genesis of the post-war New England Airways Anson services in NSW was a small charter company **Shark Patrol Service Company**, founded in Sydney only weeks after the end of World War Two. In those heady days of military disposals aircraft available at low prices, and an abundance of demobbed military pilots eager to commence a civil flying career, numerous similar enterprises were hastily formed. Their applications lodged with DCA for charter and airline licences were based on ambitious plans, which in many cases had little hope of commercial success.

Shark Patrol Service Co was established by Messers W. R. Spalding and J. Bridgewater of Bridgewater Amplivox Sound System, Sydney. The company's plan was to fly patrols along Sydney beaches during the summer months, on contract to municipal authorities and radio stations. Their aircraft would be fitted with loudspeakers to allow warnings of sharks to be broadcast to swimmers.

Based at Airflite Pty Ltd's hangar at Mascot Aerodrome, from October 1945 three former RAAF Tiger Moths and three RAAF Dragons were purchased from Commonwealth Disposals Commission. They were ferried to Sydney for civil conversion by Airflite. In a letter to DCA dated 12 February 1946, De Havilland Aircraft Pty Ltd at Mascot reported that Shark Patrol Service Co's Dragon VH-AFK had been test flown with amplifier equipment with 3 speakers in a jettisonable box beneath the fuselage, plus a fourth speaker in rear of fuselage. The aircraft handled normally except that stalling speed with both power on and power off was 3 to 4 knots higher than normal. "In conclusion, the general flying characteristics of the aircraft have not been greatly interfered with by the fitting of this speaker box."

Meanwhile in early 1946, Bill Spalding and George Christie who were partners in Christey's Motor Auctions, Broadway, Sydney were planning to start their own airline. Registering the catch-all name **New England Airways Aerial Ambulance and Air Freight Service**, a valuable contract was negotiated to deliver Sydney Morning Herald newspapers from Sydney to northern NSW towns six mornings each week. As Spalding was also a director of Shark Patrol Service, and part-owner of their Dragons VH-AFK, VH-AHY and VH-APP, Shark Patrol Service was merged into New England Airways Aerial Ambulance and Air Freight Service. Former RAAF pilot James A. Marks was employed as Flight Operations Manager. He had prewar commercial experience as principal of Motor Development Ltd, Sydney, which in November 1936 took over the Sydney-Broken Hill air mail service with Tugan Gannet VH-UVU when WASP Airlines shut down.

The company soon changed its letterhead to the more practical name New England Airways, although its aircraft were registered in both company names. Operations commenced with charter and air ambulance flights using the Dragons. But Spalding and Christie wanted Avro Ansons. While waiting for large-scale RAAF Anson disposal sales, they seized the opportunity to acquire a Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm Anson Mk.1 NK950, part of the British military build-up in Australia towards the end of the Pacific War for the planned British advance on Japan. In the event, MacArthur's US forces beat them to the Japanese homeland, while the massive British force was still being assembled in Australia. This left many hundreds of Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm aircraft stranded in Australia.

NK950's logbook records its construction at Avro's satellite factory at Yeadon, West Yorkshire was completed in July 1944, and made its first test flight on 19 July. Taken on charge by the Royal Navy on 28 July 1944, it was dispatched from England to Sydney on 22 April 1945 as cargo on the merchant ship *SS Empire Captain*. With several other Ansons, it was used on courier services between the Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm stations of Nowra, Schofields and Bankstown until replaced by Royal Navy Beech Expeditors.

NK950's civil conversion was carried out by Airflite Pty Ltd at Mascot. The cabin was fitted with seating for seven passengers and the military glasshouse was replaced by side panels with seven individual windows. DCA issued its Certificate of Airworthiness as VH-ARL on 28 June 1946. A week later the Anson made its first newspaper run from Sydney to Casino.



New England Airways first Anson VH-ARL seen at Casino in December 1946. It retains the original bomb aimers nose and helmet cowlings. Photo: Capt. Russ Stapleton.

In August 1946 New England Airways commenced moving from Mascot to Bankstown aerodrome, which had been released by the military for civilian use. All operations switched to Bankstown in October, where a hangar had been leased and the company employed its own engineering ground staff. Administrative headquarters remained at Christey's Motor Auctions at Broadway, Sydney.

Also in October 1946 two more Ansons were purchased, VH-ASZ (freighter) & VH-AVS (passenger) from Aircraft Disposals Co at Mudgee NSW, which was marketing large numbers of disposals Ansons. At the same time, bids for retired RAAF Ansons in Commonwealth Disposals Commission auctions resulted in ten being sold on 4 October 1946 to W.R.Spalding of New England Airways. All were stored at RAAF Station Mallala SA, and were ferried to Bankstown for civil conversions by the company's own engineering section.

A fierce hailstorm on New Years Day 1947 damaged the fabric of a number of these RAAF Ansons parked outside the Bankstown hangar, as well as VH-ARL. They were quickly

repaired and the first of the civil conversions was rolled out as VH-AKU a few weeks later. Civil conversions by New England Airways were to a high standard, resulting in orders to convert additional Ansons for Aircraft Disposals Co and other owners. The engineering section carried out modifications to the airline's own Ansons, fitting freighters for passenger use, replacing the military "helmet" engine cowlings with smooth Oxford style cowls to improve air cooling, and installing a pointed civil nose design with baggage locker.



VH-ASZ immediately after civil conversion by Airflite at Mascot in October 1946 fitted as a freighter. Photo: The Geoff Goodall Collection.

New England Airways was well aware that the *Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper delivery contract was only temporary until the publisher, John Fairfax and Sons, established its own aerial newspaper delivery service. Using military disposals Lockheed Hudsons and Dakotas, the operation was run by pioneer airline pilot Captain Harry Purvis. Bundles of newspapers were air-dropped at dawn on show grounds, race tracks and ovals across NSW, collected by waiting news agents. The aircraft also landed at key towns to unload larger orders.

New England Airways submitted applications to DCA for airline licences and was awarded the route Sydney to Kempsey, Coffs Harbour, Grafton and Casino. The inaugural passenger service to Casino departed Mascot on 22 March 1947 in Anson VH-ARL flown by Flight Superintendent Jim



VH-AVS Spirit of Coffs Harbour at Kempsey 1947 with civil pointed nose. Photo: Howard Quinlan.

To celebrate the occasion, two freighter Ansons were also sent, all three arriving at Casino at 8.40am. The Casino Aero Club held a field day with visiting light aircraft, aerobatics and joy rides. The Mayor of Casino named VH-ARL *Spirit of Casino*. (Interestingly, the same Mayor had named it simply *Casino* the previous December). The three Ansons then did a formation takeoff, flew to Evans Head and return, when Jim Marks gave a flying display in VH-ARL.

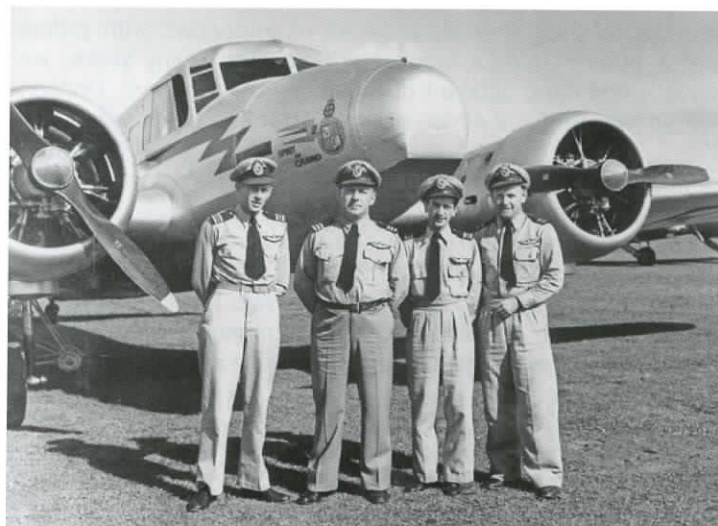
Despite the bad weather often encountered on the northern coastal route, the Ansons had only two accidents, neither weather-related. First was a ground collision at Mascot on 30 May 1947. Their Anson VH-AKU was taxiing from its parking area when it struck a parked US Navy Beech SNB-2 Bu Aer 39194 in use by the US Naval Air Attache to Australia. The Anson was not fitted with radio but Captain Tony Dobson received a flashing green light from the Tower clearing him to taxi under his own observation. The Anson's port engine struck the nose of the Beechcraft, causing serious damage to the starboard fuselage extending six feet aft of the nose. The pilot told DCA investigators that despite having moved around the parked Beechcraft over previous days, he simply did not see it on this occasion. The Anson was quickly repaired but the US Navy considered their SNB-2 to be a write off and it was sold, in damaged condition, by the US Foreign Liquidation Commission. It was rebuilt at Archerfield to become Beech C18S VH-BJJ with Theiss Brothers Construction, Brisbane.

The second event resulted in an Anson being damaged beyond repair, although without any injuries. Anson VH-BCH was landing at Kempsey NSW after a short flight from Taree. A tyre blew out in landing, resulting in a severe swing during which the undercarriage collapsed. The structural damage made the aircraft uneconomical to repair.

Daily advertisements in the Sydney newspapers by July 1947 promoted New England Airways' passenger and freight services daily (except Sundays) to Kempsey, Coffs Harbour, Grafton, Casino. An airmail contract had also been awarded for the route. In December 1947 an additional route Sydney-Cessnock was being flown. By now New England Airways had sold its Dragons and Tiger Moths, and owned a total of 13 Ansons, including those under civil conversion or waiting their turn at Bankstown.

In a significant route expansion, in February 1948 New England Airways took over the Casino-Brisbane route previously operated by Aircrafts Pty Ltd. The first official New England Airways Anson service departed Casino for Brisbane on 28 February 1948. In preparation for the new port, Ansons made several flights from Casino to Brisbane in the preceding weeks. Milt Sheppard of the Casino Aero club flew one of these visits to Brisbane. Because they were non-airline flights, to save the company pilots for the scheduled services, he was endorsed on Ansons and flew VH-AVS Casino-Brisbane on 25 February 1948 in 1 hr 35 minutes, returning to Casino the next day with a flight time 1 hr 20 minutes.

Cessnock-Brisbane was commenced on 27 March 1948. However, at this time, behind the scenes, the Directors of New England Airways were considering an offer from Butler Air Transport Pty Ltd to buy their operation, including aircraft assets and route licences. Arthur Butler confirmed that pilots and engineers would be offered employment with BAT. On 8 May 1948 BAT announced that they had merged with New England Airways. BAT took over the New England Airways services effective 17 May 1948.



New England Airways pilots with Anson VH-ARL Spirit of Casino on the occasion of the inaugural Sydney-Casino service on 27 March 1947. Left to right; Captains Neville Twyford, Jim Marks, Russ Stapleton, and Tony Dobson. Photo: Greg Banfield Collection.

DCA's annual airline statistics published in June 1948 listed New England Airways as carrying 4,818 passengers during the previous year. Anson Captains included Jim Marks, Russ Stapleton, Tony Dobson, Nev Twyford, Ron Keys, Robert Gray and Dennis Godfrey.

There is little doubt that Arthur Butler's key objective was the route licences which provided Sydney-Brisbane via ports, which Butler Air Transport used to great effect to survive in the airline route battles that were to follow.



Two views of VH-ARL at Eagle Farm Airport, Brisbane in 1948. By now New England Airways had fitted Oxford style cowlings and the civil rounded nose modification. Photo: Gus Grulke Collection.

Thanks to Greg Banfield's series of interviews with airline pilots published in *Aviation Heritage* over many years, we have a first-hand account of those days: Anthony C. Dobson joined New England Airways shortly after Bob Gray:

"I was discharged from RAAF in June 1946. Two months later, I went walking around Mascot, calling in at every hangar to see if there was anybody who could use an Air Force pilot looking for a job. Sitting in the New England Airways office was Jim Marks, whom I knew from the Air Force when I was instructing down at Point Cook. He had been a Flight Commander there and he remembered me. We sat chatting for a while and he asked, "Can you fly a Dragon?"

And I said, "Yes, sure Jim, I've flown a Dragon." In fact, I had been in Ferry Flight at Richmond when some six months before, there was a Dragon to be taken to Cootamundra and parked there. I was asked to take it there. In the typical ferry system manner, we didn't have to have endorsements on particular aeroplane types, we just went up to whatever was to be flown, had a look at the book and found an engineer who told us how to start the engines. So I had three hours on the Dragon I flew to Cootamundra, but as far as I was concerned, I wanted a job and I could fly a Dragon.

I mentioned to Jim that I hadn't flown a Dragon for six months or so. The Dragon was over at Bankstown and he told me to go and pick it up that afternoon, do a couple of circuits at Bankstown for practice, and bring it over to Mascot ready for the departure at 5 o'clock the next morning. Although they were starting to move their engineering facilities to Bankstown, New England Airways continued to depart from Mascot for the next couple of months. So I went to Bankstown, got the aeroplane and did a couple of circuits before bringing it back to Mascot.

At 4 o'clock the next morning, I presented myself at the office to do my first flight to Kempsey and Coffs Harbour. On this particular flight, there was a passenger who wanted to go to Old Bar, which is near Taree. I don't think it was legal for us to carry passengers in those days but I dropped this fellow off at Old Bar and continued on with my full load of papers. When I finished the run, I came back to Sydney empty, which was the usual thing.

The Herald was published only six days a week and didn't have a Sunday paper then. New England Airways employed just four pilots, two of whom worked one Anson and one Dragon for six days before alternating with the other two pilots for the following week. We worked for six days and then had a week off but it was a hard six days' work. We were up at cock's crow and, with the Dragon, we would take off at 5 am for Kempsey and Coffs Harbour, working all that day, flying in all sorts of weather with no aids, before getting back at about 3 pm. It was the same with the Anson. Although it was faster, it went further, so it got back about the same time. Although the Herald paid for the return flights, the planes were coming back empty, so the company had applied for permission to fly ambulance patients back from the four towns we serviced and we did start to bring an occasional stretcher case back on the flights.

The company received notice that the Herald contract was not to be renewed so a passenger licence was arranged, again for Kempsey, Coffs Harbour, Grafton and Casino.

The Dragons were sold off in 1947 and New England Airways converted four Ansons to passenger interiors, seating eight passengers. They were quite well done out inside and the company even put electric motors on the undercarriage (which used to take 150 turns to wind up manually). We used to go up to

Casino, night-stop and come back to Sydney the next day. The load factors were quite good but the one thing that did cause problems was that the Ansons were not IFR aeroplanes. There was no such thing as single pilot IFR and we didn't use any radio other than for take-off and landing permission at Mascot. We talked the company into putting in an ADF but it was really only useful unofficially.

There were many times when, with a weather report of reasonably clear air to the north, we just climbed to about 3,000 feet and sat in cloud for an hour or two. The aeroplanes were instrumented for flying in cloud and we were all ex-Air Force pilots who could fly instruments but the aeroplanes didn't have all the necessary equipment and weren't officially recognised as being capable of flying IFR. At other times, when we had day after day of rainy weather, it was a fairly common procedure to fly up the coast at about 200 feet with the storm window open, just watching the beaches. We knew the route pretty well and the white sand of the beaches showed out.

Even so, there were still a lot of flights cancelled, because the Department of Civil Aviation had the ability to prevent us from taking off by not giving us a clearance. This was the one factor which made it a chancy sort of operation from a financial point of view, because once we failed to make one or two flights, we lost passengers for the next few. People lost confidence in us and decided it would be better to go by train. After a spell of fine weather, people would forget the cancellations and the loads would build up again, until the next spell of wet weather. This sort of operation was really just too difficult and I think George Christie and Bill Spalding were quite happy when Butlers eventually offered to buy them out.

There were three or four engineers, who were taken over by Butler's and eventually they came to Ansett's too. The engineers were good and the aeroplanes were always kept in tip-top condition. When they converted the Ansons into passenger planes, they did quite a good job on them and the Ansons really looked nice."

Avro Ansons operated by New England Airways:

VH-ARL	6.46	ex NK950 Royal Navy. To Butler Air Transport	4.5.48
VH-AVS	10.46	ex RAAF W2657 Retired Bankstown	9.47
VH-ASZ	10.46	ex RAAF LV287. To BAT	4.5.48
VH-AKU	1.47	ex RAAF DG895. To BAT	4.5.48
VH-BCH	6.47	ex RAAF DG869. Crashed landing Kempsey	8.8.47
VH-BFI	9.47	ex RAAF AX148. To BAT	4.5.48

Seven other ex RAAF Ansons were under civil conversion by the company, or had been sold, at the time Butler Air Transport took over. Some were completed for BAT services.

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A young Howard Quinlan poses next to the Ansons steps at Lismore 1947.

Captain Jim Marks displays VH-ARL at Casino 22 March 1947. Photo: Alan Sheppard.



Anson VH-ARL parked among DC-3's at Mascot seen from the control tower. Photo Max Dupain.