

AVIATION HERITAGE

The Journal of the Aviation Historical Society of Australia Inc.
Volume 52. Number 3
September 2021



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Piper PA-18 Super Cub, VH-LFA.



Piper PA-18 Super Cub, VH-ECN.



Piper PA-11S Cub VH-AKD

Proving that many light aircraft have fascinating histories, Geoff Goodall tells the story of a humble Piper Cub still flying in Australia today.

The Taylor J-2 Cub was originally designed by Clarence G. Taylor as a low-cost tandem two-seater of simple construction powered by a variety of economical 40hp to 75hp engines. The Taylorcraft Aircraft Company and its successor Piper Aircraft Corporation built a total over 23,000 models of the Cub line from 1930. This included large military orders during World War II.

After wartime military orders had been completed, Piper recommenced commercial production based on the J-3 Cub. It was given a new model designation **PA-11 Cub Special** with refinements including the engine angled lower, sloping windscreen, enclosed engine coving and the two seats moved a few inches aft. The empty weight was higher and engine choice in the 65hp-90hp range, giving a better performance and ability to operate in stronger wind conditions.

The subject of this story was the 894th production PA-11 Cub Special, completed at Piper's factory at Lock Haven, Pennsylvania on 14 January 1949. It was fitted with a 65hp Continental A65-8 engine and wooden propeller, a PA-11S model, which incorporated attachment fittings for floats to allow conversion to floatplane.

Piper's sales department sold this new PA-11S to a Fijian fishing business named South Seas Marine Products Ltd at Suva. The aircraft was test flown at Lock Haven on its standard wheel undercarriage, then dismantled and packed with a set of Edo Model 1400 floats for shipping to Fiji.

Fiji fish spotter

South Seas Marine Products was an ambitious business established in Fiji in 1948 by Australian Harold C. Gatty, who had settled there after the war to run a copra plantation on Katafanga Island. Born in Tasmania, Gatty was an adventurer who gained maritime shipping qualifications



Harold Gatty.

and worked on board Australian and NZ coastal shipping before moving his family to California in 1927 to develop his ideas on improved navigation methods for air and sea. His enthusiastic personality won friends among some high profile aviators of the era, resulting in him being asked to navigate on record-breaking long distance flights. The first was with Roscoe Turner in 1929 Los Angeles-New York in 19 hours, then a series of headline grabbing world flights. The best known was with pilot Wiley Post in in Lockheed Vega "Winnie Mae" when the pair flew around the world in 8 days from New York, returning to a ticker tape parade in New York City.

Despite declining to renounce his Australian

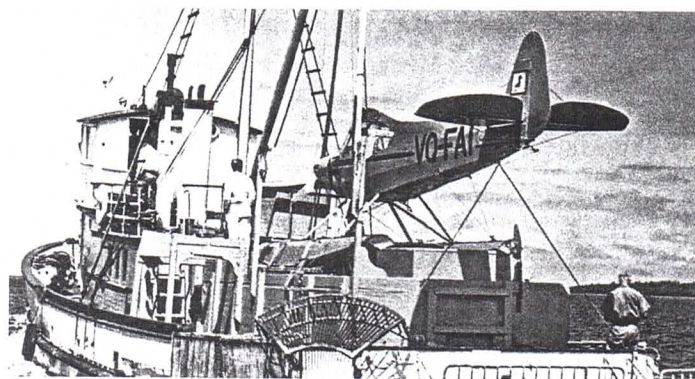
citizenship, Gatty's achievements led to an exception being made for him to join the US Army Air Corps as a senior navigation officer. Then in 1935 an offer came to join Pan American World Airways where he became a personal friend of the President Juan Trippe. In addition to revising the airline's navigation methods and standard routes, Gatty was sent to New Zealand and Australia to negotiate approvals for Pan Am to commence flying boat services across the Pacific Ocean. Services to Auckland NZ began in July 1940 but the Australian Government, heavily influenced by British plans for Pacific air services, refused Pan Am applications prior to World War II.

Less well known was Harold Gatty's key role in military air transport in Australia during the war. Under pressure from Major General George Kenney, Commander of the US Army Air Force in the Pacific theatre, Gatty a civilian, was commissioned during 1942 with Royal Australian Air Force rank Group Captain. Based at Victoria Barracks, Melbourne, he was tasked with coordinating the entire allied air transport role under the newly-formed Directorate of Air Transport. DAT took over the operations of all RAAF, USAAF and Dutch transport aircraft in Australia and established ground facilities for loading freight and personnel to the war front. DAT provided essential support for the New Guinea and Borneo campaigns, bringing back wounded servicemen on return flights. It was a massive effort for which he received little recognition.

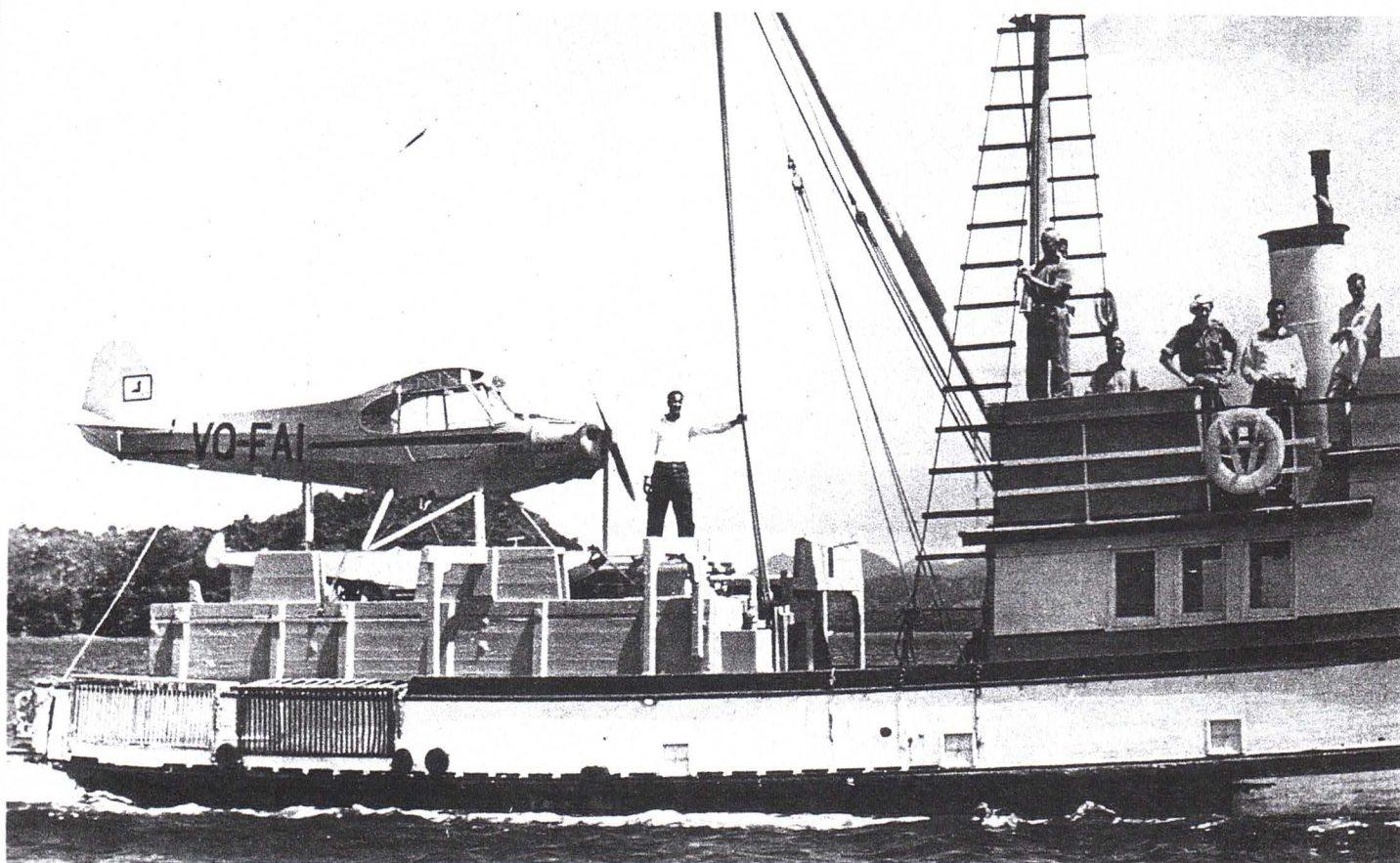
Living in semi-retirement on his Fijian island, Gatty saw a potential for large-scale fishing for deep sea tuna to be sold in American Samoa for the US domestic market. He established South Seas Marine Products Ltd at the port of Suva and with typical Gatty enthusiasm, purchased three tuna clippers from California and a large freezer vessel. To support the sea-going operation, a Grumman G.21A Goose amphibian was purchased in California, registered VQ-FAH in January 1949 and New Zealander Norm Lennon engaged as company pilot. A need was soon identified for a smaller floatplane, which could be carried on board a fishing vessel, and an order placed with Piper for a new PA-11S Cub with floats.

"Tuna Scout"

The subject of our story arrived at Suva, Fiji in August 1949 by sea freight from Piper Aircraft Corp in Pennsylvania. It was quickly unpacked, assembled on the floats and test flown by Norm Lennon, Fijian CofA being issued as VQ-FAI on



Piper Cub VQ-FAI stowed on the stern of fishing vessel "Senibua" setting off to sea from Suva, Fiji during 1949. (Allen Bovelt Collection)



Piper Cub VQ-FAI stowed on the stern of fishing vessel "Senibua" setting off to sea from Suva, Fiji during 1949. (Allen Bovelt Collection)

13 August 1949. The name "Tuna Scout" was painted on the nose cowling and the South Seas Marine Products vessel "Senibua" had fitting installed to allow the aircraft to be securely stowed on its stern. The Cub was lifted on board by the ship's crane, wings removed until reaching the ocean fishing grounds. There it was assembled and lowered down to the sea and flown as a spotter for the company's tuna harvesting vessels.

By early 1950 Gatty's ambitious plans for South Seas Marine Products were failing due a poor tuna harvest, staff problems and other complications. In a last ditch effort to use the company's assets, he approached the Australian Government for approval to fish for tuna along the Australian coastline. This was met with strong opposition, which played out in the newspapers for several months until Gatty compromised and joined forces with an Australian fishing company to operate under their approvals.

The Fiji tuna fleet slipped quietly into Sydney Harbour on 24 September 1950, including "Senibua" with the Piper Cub on its stern. Also carried were Cub spare parts, a Continental engine and spare control surfaces. For the next few months VQ-FAI was flown under its valid Fijian CofA for fish spotting along the NSW coast. However back in Fiji, South Seas Marine Products was being wound up and the Grumman Goose sold back to USA in September. Undeterred, Gatty went on to form Fiji Airways, which he managed until his death in 1957. The Cub floatplane was advertised for sale in Australia for £1,500.

New home in Australia

New owner was Mr. E. Brud Rees of Sydney who had the Cub inspected for Australian certification during December 1950. He was a pilot who had owned a Tiger Moth and was associated with a NSW commercial fishing operation. In fact, as early as June 1950, during the negotiations to get the Fiji tuna fleet to Australia, DCA had allocated registration VH-AKD at the request of Messrs E. B.

Rees and R. Herpes "who are importing PA-11S VQ-FAI from Fiji with valid Fiji CofA".

It was the first PA-11 model in Australia and was formally registered VH-AKD on 5 January 1951 in the ownership of Mr. Rees. On the same day DCA helpfully validated the Fijian CofA to allow it to be flown while the Department processed the requirements to issue a "first of type" Australian Certificate of Airworthiness (CofA). The following year ownership was amended to a partnership of E. B. Rees and R. J. Herpes, Sydney. Roland Herpes had owned three Tiger Moths around this time.

VH-AKD's main use was fish spotting at Merimbula and Eden on the NSW south coast and Lakes Entrance Victoria. Other flying included Brud Rees conducting fish spotting at Foster on the northern NSW coast in November 1951, towing water skiers on Narrabeen Lakes in March 1952 and dropping baits on schools of sharks off the NSW south coast during September 1952. Corrosion was found in the floats during annual CofA renewal inspection three months later. Rather than ground the aircraft, DCA renewed the CofA for 3 months to allow time for repairs between fish spotting requirements.

A short-lived Sea Otter venture

Seeing the potential for charter work for a larger seaplane, during 1954 Brud Rees formed a company named Air Sea Research, Sydney to purchase the sole remaining Royal Australian Navy Supermarine Sea Otter JN200, then being offered for disposal. It was ferried to Sydney for civilian overhaul at Bankstown Aerodrome, completed in December 1954 as VH-BQI. Their ambitious plans for the large biplane amphibian included commercial air sea rescue, forestry fire patrols and NSW coastal passenger airline services.

Unfortunately none of these plans came to fruition. Within months after entering service, VH-BQI was damaged during flying exercises at RAAF Rathmines flying boat base on Lake Macquarie near Newcastle. The damage was relatively



Supermarine Sea Otter VH-BQI briefly operated in 1955 by Brud Rees, was a much larger and complex seaplane than his Piper Cub floatplane (photo at Bankstown by Ed Coates)

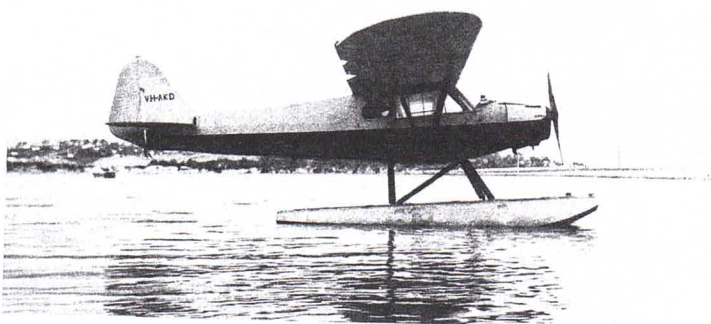
minor but beyond the financial means of the fledgling company. To store it away from water, the big aircraft was towed with wings folded along roads to a friend's farm ten miles inland at Awaba. There it sat in the weather for 20 years, the white paint fading to reveal its original Navy markings, until sold for scrap.

By 1957 Brud Rees' hard-worked Piper Cub floatplane, now repainted in a stark black and white scheme, was retired and cancelled from the Civil Register in August 1957. Mr. Rees, now with an address at Lakes Entrance, replaced it with an Auster J.5 VH-KSA landplane for two years before purchasing another floatplane, Piper PA-20 Pacer floatplane VH-AMA.



The Cub floatplane now registered VH-AKD, at Lakes Entrance fishing harbour, Victoria January 1967. (John Hopton Collection)

The retired Cub VH-AKD was made airworthy by Rees during 1960 for resale. It was restored to the Civil Register in December 1960 with new owners, a fishing syndicate of Messrs K. & M. Warren and M. Fourer at Eden NSW. During February 1962 the Cub floatplane was used for fish spotting in Tasmanian waters, carried on a fishing boat from Eden. During that year when maintenance was required, the floatplane landed on Pittwater alongside Cambridge Aerodrome, Hobart and was towed on wooden skids to the Aero Club of Southern Tasmania hangar. By now the Cub owners were quoted as Messrs Warren, Egan and Parr, all from Eden. Another inspection was completed by November 1962 when it was seen sitting on its floats inside the Cambridge hangar waiting to be collected. It continued fishing fleet support work until retired at Eden during 1965 and advertised for sale.



Floatplane VH-AKD at Pittwater, Tasmania in March 1962 during on a visit to adjacent Cambridge Airport (photo by Norm Weeding)

A new life as a fun floatplane

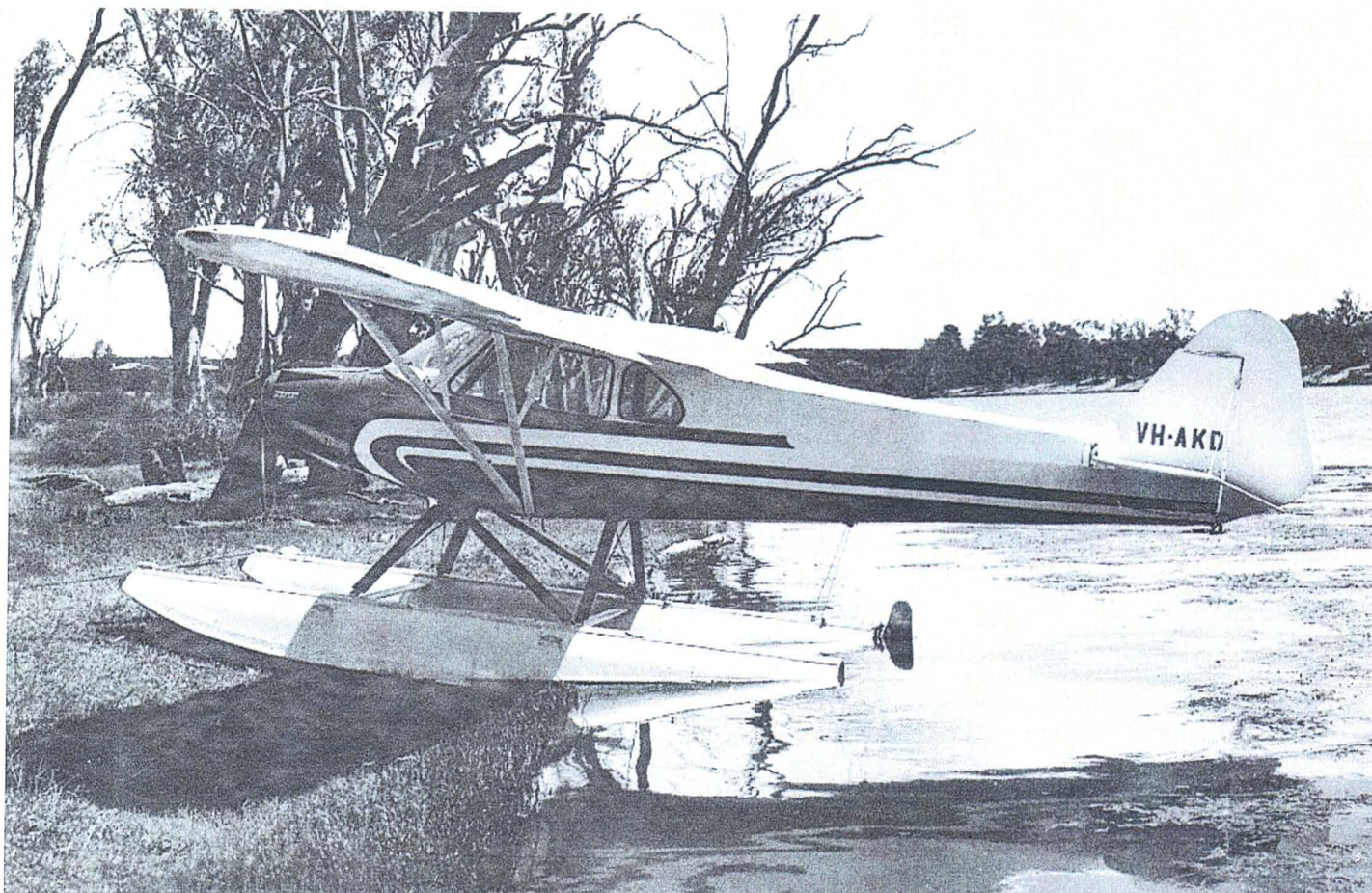
Next phase in VH-AKD's adventurous life began in October 1965 when the advertisement for the Cub floatplane was noticed by a group of aviators at the Latrobe Valley Aero Club, Morwell, Victoria. They purchased the Cub and flew it home to operate on recreational flying. Among known adventures was a 2 January 1966 flight from Morwell to land on Eildon Weir and 29 May that year when it was seen landing just offshore at Mordialloc Beach, Melbourne. Former Latrobe Valley Aero Club Chief Flying Instructor John Willis takes up the story:

"I was in that group of good old boys, the "Aeromarine Floatplane Group". Tony Kingham and his father Max, their cousin Bruce Hartwig and I were the partners. We bought the Cub floatplane from the fisheries folks at Eden. After very little fixing up, a check over by LVAC Chief Engineer Jim Brenton and a check-out flight for Tony and I, which consisted of two circuits each of Eden harbour, we brought it back to Victoria. The pilot who checked us had spent some hours in the water at sea off Merimbula following a multiple engine failure in a fish-spotting Piper Apache only a week or so before this. He was leaving Eden for a new flying job in Alice Springs and understandably was reluctant to do any more water flying.*

Around 9 October 1965 Tony ferried the Cub to Loch Sport on the Gippsland Lakes, where the Kingham family had a beach shack. We then proceeded to teach our selves to fly it. I must confess to having more serious frights in the 15 hours that I flew it than for the rest of my career. There is a lot more to seaplanes than this landlubber knew. We kept it variously at Loch Sport in the Gippsland Lakes or on the



The Cub at the Hazelwood Power Station pond, Morwell 1965 (photo by Graham Frederickson)



Tranquil scene, the Cub in her new red and white scheme, on the bank of the River Murray near Waikerie SA in November 1966 (photo by Geoff Goodall)

Hazelwood Power Station cooling pond near Morwell. The area on the shore of the pond where we kept it is still known as seaplane point, although not marked on maps.

After a while the aircraft seriously needed maintenance as the fabric was in poor order and the floats leaked badly. However without wheels, Hazelwood Pond was as close as we could get to a workshop. After fabric work it was repainted red and cream. We were of a mind to land it on the grass at Latrobe Valley airfield Morwell, which was nearly as wet as the Pond on occasions, but we could not summon the courage. The last time I flew it was 1st Sept 1966 when I had a bad scare with detaching fabric and a glassy water surface condition for landing. I was delighted when the Kinghams bought me out for what I had paid into the group, £150, and took it away to Bruce Hartwig's family property at Waikerie SA.

The ferry flight to South Australia was an epic adventure. Bruce was accompanied by Max Kingham, who was no lightweight, Bruce's toolbox (even heavier) and a spare prop. From Hazelwood he flew to Lake Glen Maggie and then across the ranges to Lake Eildon. He had to circle several times at the head of the Macalister River valley to get enough height to cross the ridge into the Eildon watershed. From Eildon he flew to Lake Eppalock and then to an overnight at Lake Boga. Next morning in the calm the Cub would not lift off Boga, so the ever-resourceful Bruce had two speedboat owners tow him aloft using a rope bridle around the float struts. The next stop was Lake Coleraine near Mildura but on take off he clipped the top of a dead tree tearing off the water rudder. On the last leg to Waikerie he encountered strengthening head winds. The Cub was flat out

at 68 knots on a good day so any headwind was a disaster. When it looked as though he would run out of fuel Bruce landed on the Murray River and floated the rest of the way to Waikerie sans water rudder.

I understand that later one of the Waikerie cousins had been caught in turbulence off the River Murray cliffs and made a rather heavy landing, which was the end of its flying days as a floatplane.

Rebuilt as a landplane

By early 1967 the Cub was retired at the Waikerie farm, in need of a complete rebuild. It was sold "as is" to Keith and Bruce Hearn, Melbourne. Their business was the long-running Hearn's Hobbies store in the city. Several members of the family were keen pilots who flew their DH.87B Hornet Moth VH-AMJ at Moorabbin Airport. It was all over blue with "Hearn's Hobbies" painted on the nose cowlings. The Piper Cub was moved by road from South Australia to Melbourne where restoration began at Keith Hearn's premises at Surrey Hills. Young cousin Geoffrey Hearn remembers as a schoolboy stripping the paint from the engine cowlings. However after a while interest in the Cub rebuild waned. In October 1969 the Hearn's purchased an airworthy Champion 7EC Traveller VH-PTP and advised DCA to cancel VH-AKD from the Civil Register that same month.

The Hearn's offered the Cub rebuild "as is" to Mr. Maurie Keating of Mackay Queensland, who they knew from his previous purchase of their Hornet Moth. Leaving behind the Cub's floats, Mr. Keating moved the Cub to Queensland where the restoration was completed with conventional wheeled undercarriage. VH-AKD was restored to the Civil Register in May 1975 as a landplane. It was painted in a



VH-AKD on the River Murray in South Australia 1966 (John Willis collection)

pleasing yellow and white scheme and based at Mackay Airport.

The pair of Edo floats remained in Melbourne. By 1978 they were seen at Casey Field, Berwick. Some time later Geoffrey Hearn was talking with well-known aircraft engineer Jim Williams, who was looking for floats for his Cessna Bird Dog warbird project. They were moved to his Albury hangar, but discarded in favour of amphibious floats with retractable wheels for his Bird Dog VH-XVN.

After 3 years with Maurie Keating at Mackay, the Cub passed to a local syndicate of four pilots including Barry Frederickson who later established a commercial charter business at Mackay with Beaver and Cessna floatplanes. The group took VH-AKD on some long trips such as visiting an airshow at Schofields NSW in October 1978.

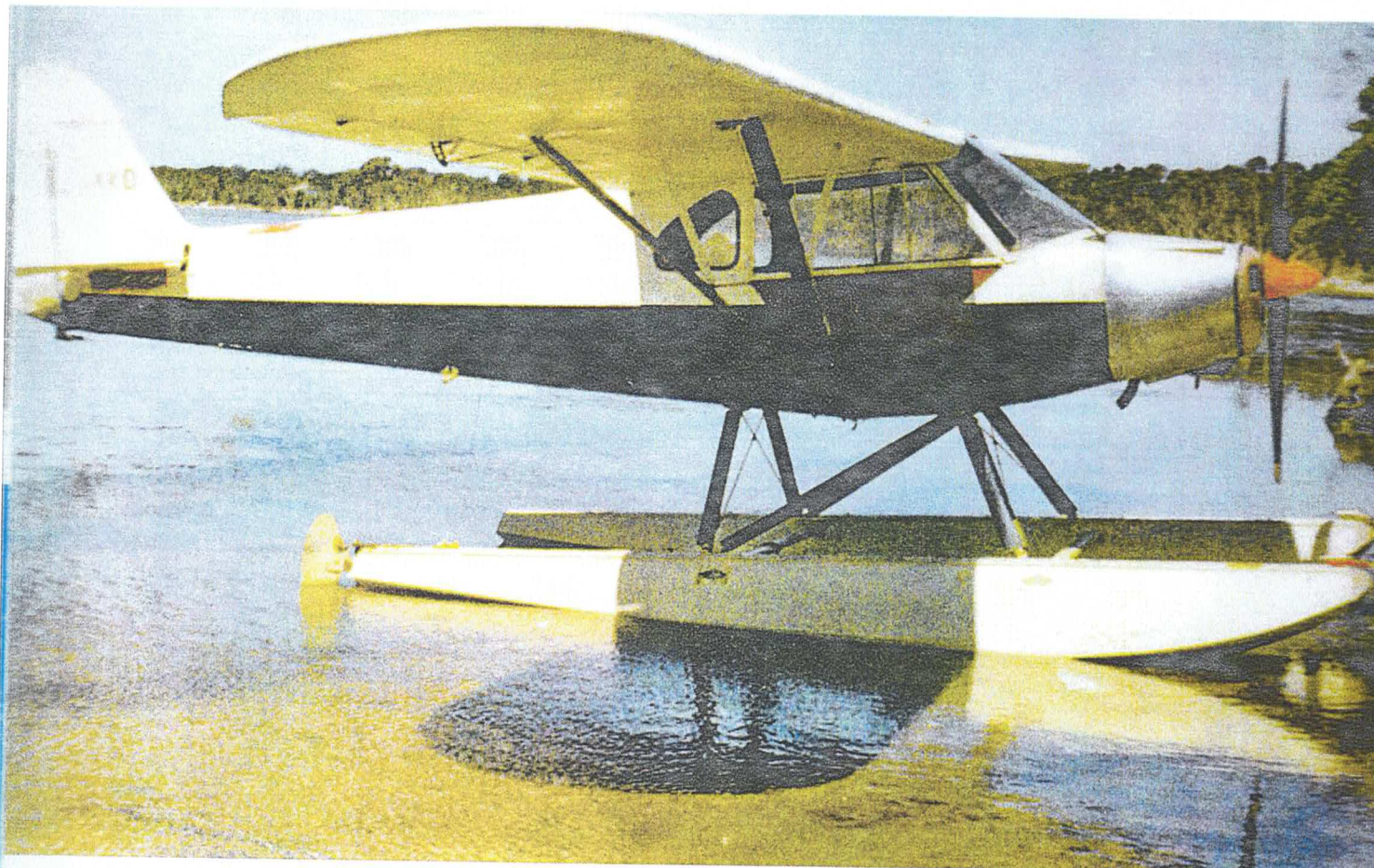
Our Piper Cub's last owner (at the time of writing) is Mr. Allan Chinn at Hamilton Island Qld. With an exotic mailing address of Yacht Whirlpool, Hamilton Island Harbour, he purchased VH-AKD in August 1985 and owns her today. Mr. Chinn's enthusiasm for his 1949 Piper Cub is clear from his long distance flights, including taking part in an air rally from Queensland to Ballarat Vic in March 2005 and

continuing on to that year's Avalon International Airshow. He returned for the 2007 and 2009 Avalon airshows and has been a regular visitor at the annual fly-in at Watts Bridge Qld.

(My thanks to fellow AHSA members John Willis, Geoffrey Hearn and Dave Prossor for their assistance with this story.)



VH-AKD at un known location.



VH-AKD at Loch Sport Victoria in October 1965 still in black and white paint scheme. Work is being carried out on the cowlings and propeller fitted with a Victa Airtourer spinner. (photo by John Willis)



Leaving Waikerie SA by road in 1967 bound for Melbourne for a rebuild (John Willis collection)



VH-AKD Mackay, Qld. 9 April 1978. Photo: Geoff Goodall.



Taylor Cub 2 April 1984. Photo: Geoff Goodall.

