

Clearing Country and Opening the Skies: Aboriginal Workers and the Australian Aviation Industry

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Abstract: Much has been written about the ‘pioneering’ movement of white Australians and the aviation industry. This article aims to give a different account of the aviation industry by showing how Aboriginal Australians provided essential infrastructure: as available labour, and also importantly for their specific expertise about the terrain and knowledge of weather patterns. The article focuses on the period from the 1930s to the 1940s and the small aviation outpost of Daly Waters in the Northern Territory. It outlines how Aboriginal labour was used to prepare and maintain airstrips and provide crucial support for the aviation industry. It was through local knowledge and the labour of the Aboriginal people that the aviation industry in Australia could operate and expand, and in many instances, ensure the safety of those flying.

Keywords: Australian Aboriginals; aviation; Daly Waters; Indigenous knowledge; labour

Aboriginal people were among the first to witness aviation in Australia, after all, they had been looking to the skies for thousands of years as they navigated their way across land and sea. In the twentieth century, they were instrumental in providing the labour and knowledge to enable civil and military aviation to operate across the country. While Aboriginal workers in the pastoral industry have been well documented (see Bird Rose; Bunbury; Jebb; May; McGrath, *Born in the Cattle*), the role of Aboriginal workers in the aviation industry has received little attention. To date much historical writing about Australian aviation has been about mythologising heroic white male figures and their role in developing the industry. This article argues that Aboriginal labour played a significant part in that pioneering history with critical preparation for building airstrips to make the country accessible for civilian, and exploration purposes, and then, during the WWII, for the construction and maintenance of military airstrips in the far north of Australia Bunbury 43; George 128).¹ In the early years of aviation, Aboriginal people were also relied on for providing surveillance and assisting with the tracking of missing aircraft. Like many industries in Australia, the airline industry was built on and profited from the efforts of Aboriginal people who were often unwaged.

Colonial records outlining the specific details about this labour force are scarce, and this research is an attempt to provide some examples of Aboriginal workers in the aviation industry by discussing the roles some individuals played, and the specific skills they brought to bear, not only building the infrastructure but in applying local knowledge to help keep the airstrips and the airways operational. By way of example, this account will focus on Daly Waters, the small aviation staging post situated almost 600 kilometres south of Darwin, in the Northern Territory. A number of Aboriginal communities lived around Daly Waters, with the first significant colonial impact occurring when the Overland Telegraph Line was built between Darwin and Port Augusta, South Australia. The telegraph line was completed in 1872 and by

¹ For example, Edgar Birch worked for Arthur Bruton at Six Mile Hotel, Wyndham, during WWII servicing and refuelling aircraft (see “Edgar Birch: Second World War” in Shaw 166-167).

the end of the following decade pastoral occupation of the area had begun. Cattle stations such as Victoria River Downs, Elsey Station and Newcastle Waters were established using Aboriginal people as a key source of labour (Anthony). In 1919, Daly Waters was named as an aviation landing site (along with Elsey Station, Newcastle Waters and Brunette Downs) in preparation for the Great Air Race between the United Kingdom and Australia. Paul McGuinness, who surveyed the route, demonstrated the benefits of a Northern Australian air route. Just over ten years later, in February 1930, an aerial mail service began between Daly Waters and Camooweal, Queensland. Once it had been delivered to Daly Waters, the mail was taken by mail truck to Birdum and then loaded on to a train where it would take over two days to reach Darwin. At the same time, Daly Waters aerodrome became known as Australia's first international airfield. It was where Amy Johnson refuelled on her record-breaking flight in 1930, and in 1934 it became a refuelling stop for planes on the Imperial Air Route between Australia and the United Kingdom, and from 1938 Royal Netherland Indian Airways (KNILM, later known as KLM) would stop there as well.

A photograph taken in 1935 illustrates Aboriginal Yangman elders 'King' and 'Prime Minister' standing alongside passengers who were stranded at Daly Waters after the engine failure of the Avro plane 'Faith in Australia.' Giving white names such as 'King' and 'Prime Minister' to the two men was a common practice, and in this instance, it indicates something of their status within their own community and to a lesser extent that of the white community. It was rare for the Aboriginal people to be called by their tribal names by the colonisers, with a single European nickname as the easier default option in this context of white colonial condescension. 'Faith in Australia'—also named within the same ideology—was owned by Australian Transcontinental Airways, and was on a return flight to Adelaide after its inaugural mail flight to Darwin. Some of the passengers had been taken to the nearby 'native reserve' where 'King' and the 'Prime Minister' lived. The men had been coerced to pose for the photo by Bill 'Boss' Pearce with the offer of a plug of tobacco, as we learn in Elisabeth George's 1945 account in *Two at Daly Waters* (86). Bill Pearce and his wife Henriette lived in the Daly Waters homestead, and the camp was nearby their home. The Pearces had moved from Maranboy tin mine to Daly Waters in 1930, having bought land there the year before (in July 1929) with the expectation that a town would develop once the North-South railway line between Port Augusta and Darwin was finished. The Depression put an end to the extension of the railway line beyond Birdum (70 km north of Daly Waters) and it became known as 'The Line to Nowhere.' With not much else on offer, the Pearces became responsible for running the wayside store. Their fortunes improved when Bill Pearce became the agent for the Shell Oil Company initially supplying aviation gasoline (avgas) for the mail planes, and then later for the passenger services en route to Europe.²

The Daly Waters aerodrome, which had been completed in October 1928, was a mile away from the Pearce's home. In 1930, a hangar was constructed by Sidney Williams and Co. for LASCo Air Services, which was flying air mail along the Camooweal/Daly Waters/Birdum Creek route.³ The airmail service improved communication considerably across the Northern Territory with residents receiving mail every week instead of every four weeks ("North Australia Service" 7). The following year the first experimental airmail service between London and Australia took place, and then in 1934 Qantas Empire Airways with Britain's

² KNILM also started a service flying from Sydney to Batavia via Daly Waters in July 1938.

³ The site was selected in December 1927 with Francis Cain securing the contract for clearing, grubbing and fencing for £1,048.00. Tenders for the aerial service between Brisbane and Daly Waters closed 28 July 1928, and was won by Larkin Aircraft Supply Company (LASCo) (Alford 3-4).

Imperial Airways began a regular airmail service between Australia and the United Kingdom, flying into Daly Waters. In 1935 a passenger service was added, and Daly Waters, with its central position, became the junction for airmail and passenger services coming from the north, south, east and west. By January 1937, Daly Waters was receiving ten regular landings a week (QANTAS, Guinea Airways, MacRobertson Miller Airlines (MMA)) and the following year in July 1938 KNILM (Airline of the Dutch East Indies) flew there. An article in *Queensland Country Life* from 14 January 1937, described the service at Daly Waters:

The refuelling of planes is attended to by Mr Bill Pearce, a very old northern identity. The catering for the passengers is undertaken by Mrs. Pearce, a hostess of hostesses, who is so well known and remembered by the overseas passengers for her bright smiles of welcome and never-to-be-forgotten meat pasties. The only other occupants of Daly Waters township are the telegraph officers. (Chisholm 5)

The article makes no mention of the Aboriginal community and labourers who were living and working there, even though Aboriginal labour had been used at the Daly Waters Overland Telegraph Station since 1887 (Alford 2). A different account comes from Henriette Pearce who in 1945 relayed the story of her life for Elisabeth George's book. She makes much of the importance of the relationship between her family and the local Aboriginal community where the Aboriginal labour was used in many different ways. When the Pearces first arrived in Daly Water they had to collect water from a rock hole in the Daly Creek which was five or six miles from the homestead. By 1935 it was reported in the *Daily News* that an 18 foot deep well was "dug by aborigines," and was expected to be operational as long as it was cemented before the wet season (Brown 16). As well as general labouring work, it was also mentioned that the 'blacks' had herded 106 goats from Roper River (100 miles away) to provide fresh milk, which would be used to provide refreshments for any travellers (Brown 16). While the work for many of the Aboriginal labourers in the pastoral industry was often seasonal and casual the Pearce family relied daily on the local Aboriginal families who lived in the area (Brock 112). Henriette Pearce describes the slow growth of the population at Daly Waters but also acknowledges something of the knowledge and humour of the Aboriginal workers at Daly Waters:

With the development of the airport, the white population of Daly Waters, so long stationary as just ourselves, the postmaster and linesman, increased by two. A meteorological station was founded, and a young meteorologist was sent to Daly Waters and made his home with us (c.1938). Then came the radio station, and the radio officer also became a permanent border. Our natives promptly named the meteorologist Rainmaker. Micky, whose father was a real rainmaker, remarked critically that the newcomer had "Number 1 job; all day play about with balloons." (George 120-121)

While Henriette Pearce makes much of the relations and value of the Aboriginal labour used at Daly Waters the colonial and possessive nature of calling the Aboriginal labour "our natives" indicates more than just labour relations: it implies that there was a type of servitude in relation to the local workers. Even the title of the book *Two at Daly Waters* fails to acknowledge the number of Aboriginal women and men who helped daily over many years at the homestead and aerodrome at Daly Waters. The men, who were mostly young, fuelled the planes, and provided general help and invaluable local knowledge as the planes landed and departed. For example, local Aboriginal knowledge about the weather conditions was evident at Daly Waters aerodrome. The practice of Aboriginal 'rainmakers' and the locations of specific rainmaker sites has been well documented throughout the Northern Territory (McCarthy, "Aboriginal

rainmakers and their ways Part 1” 249; McCarthy, “Aboriginal rainmakers and their ways Part 2” 302; Merlan 75).

Local Aboriginal knowledge about the weather patterns was used for many years by the aviation industry. For example, MacRobertson Miller Airlines (MMA), a regional Western Australian airline, which commenced flights to Daly Waters in October 1934, did not have weather radars on their planes until 1957 when they started flying the Fokker ‘Friendship’ F-27’s (Black 99). Prior to the planes being fitted with weather radars, travel through the north-west of Western Australia and the Northern Territory was particularly challenging in unpressurised planes as they flew below 10,000 feet to maintain adequate oxygen levels. With no radars, the planes would often encounter unexpected turbulence, in particular clear air turbulence (rapid movement of air with no visual cues such as clouds). MMA air hostess Elizabeth (Betty Bartlett) Foster recalls the difficulties of flying through outback Western Australia on the Douglas DC-3s with no weather radars: “We were always late ... But some of the experiences were terrifying. We never really knew about cyclones until we blundered into them. There were so few ships to radio us of their approach, but the Aboriginals knew (qtd. in Black 98).

This local knowledge about conditions was important for white settlers, especially in isolated regions. As mentioned above, there had been long-term relations between the white settlers at Daly Waters and the Yangman and the Jingili people (from further south near Elliot). When the Pearces moved to Daly Waters they brought with them Aboriginal workers known as Micky and Lennie and their wives Kitty and Nellie (most likely from the Djuan tribal area around Maranboy), and they were soon joined by other local Aboriginal families to work at the homestead. It was not unusual to take Aboriginal workers from one place to another as white labour was expensive and scarce. Removing the workers from their tribal communities was seen as a way to distance them from their tribal affiliations and thereby make them more reliable, but also more dependent (Gleeson 13). The Pearces’ staff were most likely subject to conditions similar to Aboriginal pastoral workers, typically working for rations of food, tobacco and clothing rather than a fixed wage. This was despite the recommendations of the 1928 Bleakly Report, written by the Chief Protector of Aborigines, who argued that a wage of 5 shillings a week along with food and clothing were satisfactory remuneration, with 2 shillings of that payment placed in a bank trust account (Bleakley 7).

Despite this report, it would not be until WWII, when the army employed Aboriginal people to assist in the war effort, that fixed working hours and regular and fixed cash payments were received. This was a time when 300 Aboriginal men were sent down ‘The Track’ from Darwin to a labour settlement at the Mataranka Siding to build airstrips and other infrastructure. During the war huge workforces were required to clear land and maintain airstrips, and this applied to creating infrastructure in airfields not only in the Northern Territory but in Queensland, Western Australia and Papua New Guinea. By the end of WWII the Royal Australia Air Force (RAAF) maintained 317 mainland and regional airfields (Dunn). The availability of Aboriginal labourers was crucial, as many of the RAAF airfield construction workers struggled in the harsh conditions, to such a degree that in 1940 they went on strike for better pay and better conditions (“Darwin Notes” 15).

With reliable white labour difficult to come by in the outback, it can thus be safely assumed that local Aboriginal workers were essential for the Daly Waters airstrip. The Northern Territory, which had been under the administration of South Australia until 1911, had attempted to encourage cheap (white) labour to settle in the Northern Territory to foster

economic development, but it was the local Aboriginal peoples (who, incidentally, were overlooked in the planning) who ended up providing the crucial support to the region (Donovan 186). For example, in 1937, 3,000 Aboriginal workers were employed on Northern Territory cattle stations (McGrath, "The History of Pastoral Co-Existence" 11). The report of the *Aboriginal Welfare: Initial Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities Canberra 21 to 23 April 1937* recognised the superiority of Aboriginal labour: "perhaps the most important asset of the Commonwealth, the pastoral industry, would be a sorry plight if deprived of its native labour in outback places where white labour is not only difficult to obtain but of an inferior quality" (Commonwealth of Australia 8). Aboriginal workers would be expected to undertake challenging work. For example, in 1943 Aboriginal workers helped construct the airstrip at Milingimbi, on the coast of Central Arnhem Land. To keep the airstrip operational, they would undertake the difficult task of swimming out to retrieve barrels of aviation fuel, which had to be thrown off the ships because tidal conditions prevented landing. The workers would roll the barrels of fuel along the beaches, "losing fingernails and toenails and [even] toe joints" (Gerry Blitner qtd. in *No Bugles, No Drums*).

During war time, efficiency was of prime importance. A review of the book *Two at Daly Waters* describes the period in this way:

With the entry of Japan, Daly Waters changed overnight. Squadrons of planes left Australia to fight in Singapore, planes loaded with refugees came in from Darwin flying south, and these, in addition to regular airmail services. Then American airmen took over, to be replaced later by soldiers. In praise of the natives Mrs Pearce relates an incident concerning the twelve Hudson bombers with their crews totalling 48 men who stayed the night. Within two hours all aircraft had been refuelled, and the men, having had their supper, were either in bed or on night duty. Two thousand gallons of petrol had been handled by one white man and several highly-trained natives. ("Anecdotes of Life" 38)

The review adds that "She [Mrs Pearce] gives innumerable other incidents which go to show that the aboriginal, properly and intelligently trained, can be a real asset to Australia" ("Anecdotes of Life" 38). The intelligence of the Aboriginal people, and their suitability for certain types of work, had been the subject of comment and criticism for decades. The intelligence of Aboriginal people was often put in a 'relative' context of comparing white knowledge and skills rather than any actual understanding of what a broader intelligence might mean. In 1931, the representative for the Northern Australian Workers Union had argued at the Wage Hearing that "no Aboriginal worker should be given any responsibility for running power plants or engines because they were presumed illiterate and would fail to understand how machinery worked" (qtd. in Bunbury 31). This was despite evidence to the contrary where Aboriginal workers, through example, would challenge these beliefs. During the war at the Mataranka army camp, Aboriginal workers would be employed to dismantle car and truck engines and they would work on the assembly lines constructing engines (Morris 109). What the Workers Union statement makes clear is the inherent racism that existed despite the fact that Aboriginal workers could and did easily adapt to work with machinery.

Plane passengers and other visitors to Daly Waters would witness other capabilities of the local staff. In 1940, Gordon Elliott wrote in the *Burra Record* about his 27-day flight around Australia:

Daly Waters presented two features of interest. In the first place, I believe Daly Waters to possess the best natural aerodrome in Australia, and, secondly, the refuelling service is carried out by two full-blooded aborigines, 'Stumpy' and 'Brumby', who handled Shell's modern aircraft refuelling equipment as efficiently as their bush brothers cook the succulent possum. (Elliot 4)

In *Two at Daly Waters*, Henriette Pearce was also reported acknowledging the importance of the Aboriginal staff in achieving the quick twenty-five-minute turn around it took to refuel the planes, feed the passengers and change over the mail before the plane was off the ground again.⁴ As she said: "This was a record, and it was carried out by one white man with the help of black boys. Jerry, Lennie, Stumpy and Micky were the plane boys, and each had his duties, which he carried out with unfailing promptness and faithful care" (qtd. in George 73). Once again, the terminology used to describe the workers has to be understood in context. The term "black boys" aligns with similar usages in other colonial and slave cultures, explicitly designating these "boys" as occupying a subservient position in every respect. As well as clearing the land for the Daly Waters aerodrome, in the wet season the Aboriginal workers would be expected to clear ant hills, which could grow at the rate of three inches a day, creating dangerous conditions for landing.

Another newspaper article about life at Daly Waters challenged the view that Aboriginal people could not work machinery: "For staff, there were four intelligent black mechanics for Mr Pearce, and their lubras, well trained, neat and devoted, for the house" ("N.T. Air Hostess Pioneering at Daly Waters" 13). Tambo, known as the Boss's 'best boy' was responsible for the driving and looking after the car. He would also refuel aircraft and operate the electric light plant. Henriette Pearce also recognised the mechanical capabilities of their staff when she stated, "They have no awe of machinery, these Stone Age men, and having accepted the fact that the white man can do anything, are not much impressed by his later achievements" (George 75).

Working with Aboriginal staff for many years Henriette also had an understanding of Aboriginal culture such that "when a boy is employed, his wife helps in the house and all his dependants are fed, whether they are few or many" (George 105). At one point in the book she mentions the Aboriginal "picaninnies and youths" had a "taste for modern devices" and would often borrow tools, but she stressed that this was not thieving; "how could they, who had all things in common" (George 98). As well as understanding the culture of sharing she understood the importance of the so-called walkabout ritual. Out of the four couples working for them, she mentioned that one was always on holidays: "As time drew near for the yearly walkabout' said Mrs Pearce, Joey's wife would say to me, "Me tired fellow," I would say, "All right, go and find the other two" ("N.T. Air Hostess Pioneering at Daly Waters" 13). And Henriette Pearce had her own opinion about racist views regarding Aboriginal knowledges and the way their intelligence was routinely called to question:

Estimates of aboriginal intelligence have often been made falsely by those who cannot distinguish between innate ability and the habits and beliefs imposed by a primitive culture. Thus, the black boys at Darwin thought [famous aviators] Ross

⁴ Daly Waters was a busy hub. A KNILM plane had to stay in Darwin as the hotel already exceeded its accommodation limit of ten, and 'the proprietor' refused to allow the plane to fly on from Darwin and accommodate the four extra people, even though they offered to sleep in the plane ("Dutch Plane Delayed"13).

and Keith Smith were ‘debbil debbil’ because air goggles had not yet entered into their own experience, yet bush natives at Daly Waters accepted with nonchalance the requirements of aircraft, and when properly trained were as good as any white men at their work. (George 75)⁵

Indeed, it was the white settlers such as the Pearces who stood to gain from their positive interactions with the local Aboriginal community. Henriette Pearce recognised their easy adaptability to modernity:

Our simple bush ways were not completely changed by the coming and going of people from the world’s great town. If we needed anything to remind us of the ancient simplicities, we could have always found it in Stumpy, Jerry and Micky, Lilla and Kitty, who passed serenely through the age of flying without losing a jot of interest in the earth beneath them and in the living things on bush and tree. (qtd. in George 97)

In conclusion, the point to be made here is the Aboriginal workers in the aviation industry were never ‘stuck between’ two cultures—as they have been defined by others—never quite being able to catch up with the modern, they understood the technology of power, speed and travel (Muecke 128). Henriette Pearce alludes to the way the Aboriginal workers at Daly Waters were valued also for leading positions, and in some ways her attitudes and experience help challenge the patronising and racist attitudes of the time, where Aboriginal skills, knowledges and intelligence were regularly being challenged by white people. In arguing that racial stereotypes were counteracted by the Aboriginal workers in the Australian aviation industry, this article shows how they consistently showed diligence, skill and resourcefulness. It is hoped that this account of the Aboriginal workers at Daly Waters helps break from the racial narratives of the past by uncovering a forgotten labour sector and highlighting how everyday knowledges and practices were used, valued and essential in outback Australia in the early years of aviation.

Postscript

The use of Aboriginal labour in the aviation industry continued from the 1930s, and by 1982 there were four Aboriginal owned air companies (two from the Northern Territory, one each for Western Australia and South Australia) operating under the umbrella company of Aboriginal Air Services, which closed in 2006. In 2017, an Aboriginal flying school Dreamsky Aviation was started in the Hunter Valley, New South Wales, to train young Aboriginal pilots, and in 2019 the Djarindjin community, 200km north of Broome, Western Australia, became—after paying off a \$6 million loan—the owners of the Djarindjin Airport (Qadar).⁶

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⁵ The pilots Keith and Ross Smith and mechanics Walter ‘Wally’ Shiers and James Bennett flew the inaugural flight from England to Australia arriving in Darwin on the 10 December 1919 (see Anderson 285).

⁶ In 2017, out of 11,000 professional pilots in Australia, there were only 5 Aboriginal pilots who worked for the major airline Qantas (Qadar).

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