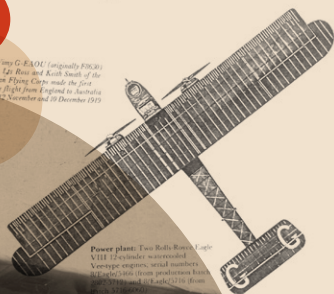


# Centenary 1919 - 2019





#### SIR ANGUS HOUSTON: PATRON

Air Chief Marshal Sir Angus Houston AK, AFC (Ret'd)

Sir Ross and Sir Keith Smith were Australians of outstanding ability and courage. Their epic flight from England to Australia was extraordinary given the scarcity of airfields in 1919. The remarkable flight paved the way for the modern air travel we all enjoy today. In 2019, we celebrate these great Australians and their mechanics Wally Shiers and Jim Bennett. And we inspire a new generation.

#### DR ANDY THOMAS: PATRON

Dr Andy Thomas, Nasa Astronaut (Ret'd)

The pioneering flight of Sir Ross and Sir Keith Smith and their two mechanics was as significant in its day as the moon landing just 50 years later. It was a great honour for me to carry the pilot 'wings', worn by the Smith brothers, into space on the shuttle Endeavour in 1996, and it is an honour to be bringing their incredible achievement back into the light.



#### LAINIE ANDERSON: AMBASSADOR

Lainie Anderson, columnist and author of *Long Flight Home*

The 1919 Air Race from England to Australia was like something out of a Jules Verne novel, with six Australian crews and one plucky Frenchman racing across the globe. Only one aircraft made it home in the required 30 days – the Vickers Vimy. I want every child across the state to learn this story, and to know that we South Australians can achieve anything if we dream big and work hard.

#### GREG MACKIE OAM: CHAIRMAN

Greg Mackie OAM, History Trust of South Australia CEO

The History Trust of South Australia is proud to bring together a group of passionate, enthusiastic stakeholders to highlight this great story and raise awareness about one of the world's most awe-inspiring aviation feats. Supporting the Epic Flight Centenary 2019 is another way we contribute to our mission: 'Giving the past a future – now!'



## The Great Air Race

It was March 1919. The world was still reeling from a devastating war. And Australian Prime Minister Billy Hughes was flying between England and France for the Paris Peace Conference.

Hughes quickly realised the potential of aviation to promote his young nation and unite the empire. So he offered a £10,000 prize for the first Aussie airmen to fly from London to Darwin in a British-built plane. The catch? They had to land on home soil within 30 days.

The critics called the race a "circus" that would surely end in tragedy. Despite technological advances during the war, aircraft of the time were rudimentary, fashioned from wood, wire and fabric with open cockpits and only basic navigation. Along parts of the route, crews would need to land on racetracks and jungle clearings.

Yet six Australian crews took up the challenge, and four were led by South Australian men who'd proven their skill and daring on the ground and in the air in World War 1. Between October and December 1919 they took flight from Hounslow, bound for a finish line on the other side of the globe. Two crews perished and two others crashed out. Frenchman Etienne Poulet also took off from Paris, determined to be the first to Australia. He made it all the way to Burma (modern-day Myanmar) before being overtaken.

Only one aircraft reached the destination in the required 30 days – the Vickers Vimy, flown by South Australia's Ross and Keith Smith.



**Above:** WWI official Australian war photographer, South Australian-born Hubert Wilkins, led the Blackburn Kangaroo crew who made it as far as Crete before crashing into a ditch.

**Below:** Adelaide's George Matthews and his mechanic Tom Kay suffered a series of disasters in their Sopwith Wallaby. They finally crashed out in Bali, just a day away from Australia.



**Above:** Adelaide-born Cedric Howell and mechanic George Fraser both perished when their Martinsyde A1 crashed into stormy seas off the island of Corfu.

**Below:** The Alliance P.2 Endeavour left Hounslow a day after the Vimy, and within minutes the aircraft crashed into an orchard. Pilot Roger Douglas and his navigator Leslie Ross were killed instantly.







## The team to beat

Ross Smith was always the leader, despite being two years younger than his brother (and Vimy navigator) Keith. As boys in the 1890s they were inseparable, growing up on the outback station of Mutooroo, near the NSW border, with their younger brother Colin always close behind. They hunted rabbits and kangaroos, rode horses and camels, and set up a huge flying fox to "fly" from a towering gum tree.

When the war broke out in August 1914, Ross immediately signed up with the Light Horse and told Keith to stay home and look after their mother. Both boys were close to their parents Andrew and Jessie, whose families had emigrated separately from Scotland in the 1800s.

**Below:** Wally Shiers and Jim Bennett often worked all night on the Vimy's Rolls-Royce Eagle VIII engines. Some of their improvised repairs were genius: in Cairo, they used chewing gum donated by race sponsor Wrigleys to fix a cracked aluminium induction pipe.

SLSA PRG 18/9/1/5C

**Above:** Ross Smith, pictured in his Bristol Fighter in WW1, started as an observer before gaining his pilot's wings. By the end of the war he was credited with shooting down 11 enemy aircraft.

SLSA PRG 18/4/18

**Opposite:** Ross Smith was awarded the Military Cross twice, and the Distinguished Flying Cross three times.

Gary Lloyd



After fighting with the Light Horse in Gallipoli and at the battle of Romani, Ross joined the fledgling Australian Flying Corps (AFC) in Egypt in 1916. By war's end he was an Air Ace, one of Australia's most decorated airmen and had even served as pilot to Lawrence of Arabia.

Keith had travelled to London and joined the Royal Flying Corps, where he served mainly as an instructor. He was fastidious with maps and compass, and would prove the perfect companion for Ross during a gruelling race that would test endurance and skill.

The war introduced Ross to two handy air mechanics, Jim Bennett and Wally Shiers. Jim, an auto mechanic in Victoria, was among the first to enlist with the AFC at Point Cook. Adelaide-born Wally was an electrician and joined the Light Horse before transferring to No.1 Squadron in Egypt. Both men joined Ross Smith on the very first Cairo-Calcutta flight after the war, for which they all received Air Force Medals and which provided invaluable reconnaissance for the Air Race.



Wally Shiers, Ross Smith and Jim Bennett at Cobbs Creek, NT.

SLSA PRG 18/9/1/32E



# God 'Elp All Of Us



Vickers Vimy G-EAOU (originally F5030) in flight. Sir Ross and Keith Smith of the Australian Flying Corps made the first non-stop flight from England to Australia, between 12 November and 30 December 1919.

**Cylinders:** Bore 6.3 in, stroke 6.3 in, volume 20.72 litres  
**Ignition:** Four six-terminal high tension  
 magnets per engine  
**Lubrication:** Pressure-fed dry sump system  
**Carburettors:** Four Bohn-Becker  
 Claudel-Holman carburettors per engine

**Propeller drive:** The propellers are driven by the engines through a system of gears and shafts. The propellers are 18 ft 6 in (5.64 m) in diameter and weigh 112 lb (50.8 kg). The propellers are made of wood and are covered with a special lacquer.

**Main:** Wally Shiers, Ross Smith and Keith Smith at Hounslow, England.

SLSA PRG 18/7/2

**Inset:** SLSA

The Vickers Vimy was designed as a strategic bomber to attack German cities, but arrived too late to enter active service in WWI. With a 68ft (20.7m) wingspan, the huge biplane had a fuselage that looked like a long, thin cigar. At first sight, mechanic Wally Shiers noted to his fellow mechanic Jim Bennett: "My God Benny, fancy trying to fly this to Australia ... she'd never last half the journey." The crew also joked that the Vimy's registration letters G-EAOU stood for "God 'Elp All Of Us".

Powered by twin 360-horsepower Rolls-Royce Eagle Mark VIII engines, the Vimy was largely made of spruce pine covered by Irish linen. Twenty-five women workers were in charge of the fabric covering, sewing huge sleeves for the wings which were then stitched together with 10,000 knots. Water was used to shrink the fabric over the wooden skeleton before the plane was covered in multiple layers of dope – a kind of lacquer that was so toxic the women were ordered to drink lemonade to stop them from fainting.

Despite the crew's trepidation, the Vimy proved her worth, guiding the crew safely home in 27 days and 20 hours. Ross Smith wrote of his admiration for the aircraft in his book *14,000 Miles Through The Air*: "Not once, from the time we took our departure from Hounslow, had she ever been under shelter. And now, as I looked over her, aglow with pride, the Vimy loomed up as the zenith of man's inventive and constructional genius."

Today, only two original Vimy aircraft remain in the world – Alcock and Brown's Vimy at the British Science Museum (where it was installed soon after the famous Atlantic crossing in June 1919) and the Smith crew's Vimy at Adelaide Airport. Smithsonian Air and Space Museum curator Alex Spencer believes Ross Smith's Vimy should be as iconic to Australia as Charles Lindbergh's Spirit of St Louis is to the United States.

**Below:** In 1994, Australian adventurer Lang Kidby flew a replica Vimy from London to Darwin and described it as a "dog of a plane to fly". He recalls how the two propellers spun very close to the cockpit, setting up pressure waves. "It was like having someone drumming their fingertips on the top of your head. After nine hours of that, it was like Chinese water torture."

Bev Kidby





## "Totally unfit for all flying"

The weather report in Hounslow, England, was dire on the morning of 12 November 1919: "Totally unfit for all flying." Ross Smith took off anyway, fearing worse weather with the oncoming European winter, and knowing his French rival Etienne Poulet was already well on the way to Australia.

The snowstorm they encountered that first day over France was so fierce he was forced to fly at 9,000 feet (2,740 metres). Their goggles and cockpit dials froze. Even their sandwiches froze. After six hours of flying blind, they spotted a hole in the clouds and flew down to earth, discovering they were just 40 miles from Keith's predicted location of Lyon, France.

For the next 28 days, they overcame adversity with ingenuity. Near Baghdad, 50 Indian cavalrymen weighed down the plane

to protect her in a sandstorm. In Singapore, Jim Bennett slid along the fuselage to weigh down the tail as they landed on a tiny racecourse. In Surabaya, Indonesia, villagers took the bamboo matting walls from their homes to lay a 300m runway over soft mud (pictured below).

No crew knew the route quite like the Smith brothers. Having served with the Royal Flying Corps in Britain, Keith was experienced at flying in freezing temperatures, while Ross knew the deserts of the Middle East like the back of his hand. Directly after the war Ross had flown from Cairo to Calcutta before scouting possible landing sites by sea all the way down to Timor.

Soon after 3pm on 10 December 1919, the Vimy touched down on a makeshift air strip near Fannie Bay Gaol. Darwin was an outpost of just 1500 people but the townsfolk raced to greet her, carrying the exhausted crew shoulder high. At Government House, they received hundreds of telegrams – including messages from King George V and Australian Prime Minister Billy Hughes.

## Into Darwin and into history

The journey however wasn't over. The 3,000-mile (4,800km) flight south to Sydney, Melbourne and finally Adelaide was another series of aviation firsts, but the Vimy was close to collapse. Plagued with breakdowns, the journey took three months - three times longer than the entire flight across the world.

The Smith crew's fame by now was unparalleled, feted in newspapers across the globe for their achievement. Ross Smith was hailed as a latter-day Captain Cook. The *New York Times* said he was 'the foremost living aviator'. He arguably became his young nation's first international superstar.

In Melbourne, the crew received their cheque for £10,000 from Prime Minister Billy Hughes before Ross had it evenly split four ways. The Smith brothers received Knighthoods, while Jim Bennett and Wally Shiers both received bars to their Air Force Medals and were later promoted to lieutenants.

A certain race mania ensued after the epic flight. Smith was taken on a world speaking tour using aerial cinematography by his friend and war photographer Frank Hurley. Souvenir badges and programmes were distributed across the country. People even played the Sir Ross Smith Aeroplane Race Game.





## "There she comes..."

Keith Smith was employed in the merchandise department at Elder Smith & Co. before the war, and Ross worked in the warehouse for Harris Scarfe. They returned in 1920 as conquering heroes.

The Vimy was spotted low and to the left of Mount Lofty at exactly 1.38pm on 23 March 1920, with *The Advertiser* reporting that "instantly there was a cry from thousands of throats of 'there she comes'". The Vimy charted a course down Cross Road, where family friends had hung welcome signs from balconies, before heading north over the city centre. The crew waved handkerchiefs in response to the "cheer upon cheer" which "rent the air".

More than 20,000 South Australians were waiting to greet them at fellow aviator Harry Butler's Northfield aerodrome. Tens of thousands more, including school children who were given the day off, climbed onto rooftops and into trees, or trekked into the Adelaide Hills for a view of the record-breaking Vimy.

Ross Smith's old comrades from the 3rd Light Horse Regiment arranged a lavish welcome reception at the Tivoli (now Her Majesty's Theatre). *The Advertiser* reported "a scene of such enthusiasm and gaiety ... as the theatre has rarely seen", with Ross Smith telling the crowd the night was "quite the happiest he had ever spent in his life, because he was back in his native city".

## "Now he belongs to the empire"

Tragically, Ross Smith and his mechanic mate Jim Bennett died just two and a half years after the epic flight, while test-flying another Vickers aircraft ahead of an attempt to circumnavigate the globe. Keith Smith was running late for the test flight in Weybridge, England, and watched as the plane spiralled to the ground.

The extent to which Ross was adored in Adelaide was never more evident than the day he was buried, on 15 June 1922. The funeral cortege of more than 100 vehicles, headed by a guard of airmen with the casket borne on an aeroplane trailer, was watched from planes flying overhead and crowds more than a dozen deep lining the streets all the way from St Peter's Cathedral in North Adelaide to North Road Cemetery.

More than 100,000 people (one fifth of the state's population) lined the streets. His grieving mother Jessie insisted on sharing condolence messages from world leaders with the wider public, noting: "Before Ross died he belonged to us, but now he belongs to the Empire."

Sir Keith Smith continued working in aviation, representing the Vickers company in Australia, before dying of cancer in 1955. Lieutenant Wally Shiers ran a garage and got his pilot's licence. He lived out his last years in Hilton, Adelaide, and died in 1968.

ROSS  
SMITH



# The Epic Flight

## Centenary Trail

- 1 Adelaide Airport**  
Vickers Vimy aircraft display
- 2 Army Museum of South Australia, Anzac Hwy**  
Permanent display including Ross Smith's pistol
- 3 Semaphore**  
Birthplace of Ross Smith
- 4 SA Aviation Museum, Lipson St, Port Adelaide**  
Giant Vimy mural and permanent display
- 5 Lightsview, near Hampstead Rd**  
Adelaide landing site marked by historic pine
- 6 North Road Cemetery, Nailsworth**  
Resting place of Sir Ross and Sir Keith Smith
- 7 Aviemore: 159 Stephen Tce, Walkerville**  
Former family home of the Smith family
- 8 Queen's College: Barton Terrace, North Adelaide**  
Former private school attended by the Smith boys
- 9 St Peter's Cathedral, North Adelaide**  
Ross Smith's body lay in state here before his 1922 funeral
- 10 Sir Ross Smith Memorial, War Memorial Drive**  
Bronze statue unveiled on 10 December 1927
- 11 Centennial Park Cemetery, Goodwood Road, Pasadena**  
Resting place of Vickers Vimy mechanic Wally Shiers





# Inspiring a new generation

The legacy of Sir Ross and Sir Keith Smith should not be underestimated. Their epic flight highlighted that a 'Kangaroo Route' between England and Australia would one day be possible. It inspired a series of endurance flights around Australia and the South Pacific which reinforced that aircraft could overcome the tyranny of distance in the southern hemisphere. It also illustrated the need for a Royal Australian Air Force, which was established only 15 months later in 1921. The clearing of airfields from Darwin to Brisbane also led to the creation of Qantas in 1920.



In South Australia, the Smith brothers' triumph helped to forge an entrepreneurial, can-do mindset in aviation and defence that continues to this day. In the 1950s and '60s, South Australia was at the forefront of air and space research and development at the Woomera Test Range (the largest land test range in the world). Over the last 30 years we've been at the forefront of development and operations of over-the-horizon radar, and in November 2018 Adelaide was announced as home to the first Australian Space Agency.

For weary Australians devastated by war, the epic flight provided a badly-needed source of inspiration and pride, showing that anything is possible with visionary thinking, courage, hard work, determination and audacity. For children raised under the South Australian sun, the sky is no limit.

#### Investing in future generations:

When Keith Smith's widow Lady Anita Smith passed away in 1986, she bequeathed her entire estate to a special fund in memory of the pioneering aviators. The Sir Ross and Sir Keith Smith Fund remains dedicated to encouraging scientific study, research and education in disciplines related to aeronautics and aerospace technology in South Australia. [www.smithfund.org.au](http://www.smithfund.org.au)

SLSA PRG 18/14/4

# All South Australians should be proud

In May 2019, it was announced that a new state-of-the-art home will be built for Sir Ross Smith's Vickers Vimy aircraft at Adelaide Airport.

Announcing a \$2m funding commitment by the federal Government, South Australian Senator Simon Birmingham said it was a major win for South Australia's cultural heritage, for tourism, and would serve to educate generations to come of our state's pioneering and aviation history.

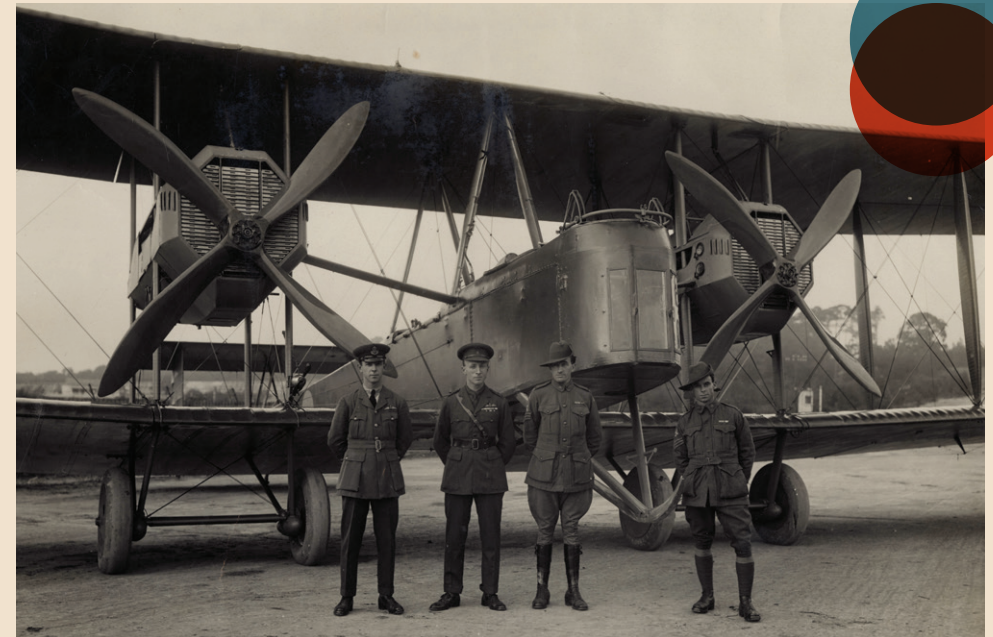
The \$2m commitment was matched by both the South Australian Government and Adelaide Airport Ltd, taking the combined total for the rehousing project to \$6m.

"This funding will ensure the safe and careful transfer of the Vickers Vimy to a prime location at the new Adelaide airport terminal, where it will be displayed prominently in a purpose-built facility to be viewed and admired as a symbol of courage and ingenuity."

South Australian Premier Steven Marshall said the historic flight of the Vickers Vimy undoubtedly ranks in the highest echelons of human achievement.

"All South Australians should be proud of this remarkable piece of aviation history, and the people behind it. Moving the plane will allow us to showcase this enduring symbol of our country's contribution to the world's aviation history in a prominent location that will be seen every year by millions of South Australians, tourists and business travellers."

The Vickers Vimy is scheduled to be relocated by 2021.





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