

# VISION v. SURVIVAL

## OPERATING A COMMUNITY AVIATION MUSEUM IN THE REAL WORLD

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On behalf of the Queensland Air Museum, I thank the Australian Aviation Museums Association for this opportunity to present our story in such distinguished company. When Mark Clayton rang me recently to advise that he was on his way to the printer with the conference brochure and that he needed a name for this paper, a hurried discussion with our Treasurer, Cliff Robinson, produced "Vision v. Survival - Operating a Community Aviation Museum in the Real World". Possibly it was Mark's academic training that caused him to balk at "Real World", but he eventually agreed to use it if I undertook to define it! In attempting to do so, I propose to continue a fine tradition from the inaugural conference in 1989 when Joe Drage and Ken Clarke spoke on "The Wangaratta Experiment" - warts and all.

Like our kindred spirit, the Moorabbin Air Museum, QAM grew out of the undeservedly much-maligned Aviation Historical Society of Australia, when a small band of enthusiasts resolved that while it is vital to record our aviation history, there is no substitute for preserving real aeroplanes. Their resolve was hardened by the realisation that apart from a couple of small private collections, Queensland did not have an aviation museum comparable with those of the southern states. The parlous nature of private collections was soon to be demonstrated with the dispersal of the famed Sid Marshall collection and others were to follow. From the outset, it was always intended that our's should be a "people's museum" in the best traditions of "for the people by the people". At about this time the RAAF began disposing of its Canberras and this provided the stimulus to get serious. After a series of negotiations which were anything but straightforward, Canberra A84-225 became the first exhibit of a fledgling museum which had neither a site nor a name. In reality, there were bounds to our naivety, for we did have a storage site on offer and we did have a name of sorts. With a working title of Aviation Historical Society of Australia Queensland Branch Museum Group it is hardly surprising that when the museum came into being it did so under the more manageable handle of Queensland Air Museum. Although QAM is by no means the oldest aviation museum in the country, it might surprise some that we date back to horse and buggy days. Although this was June 1974, they were horse and buggy days to us for our first home was a museum devoted to horse-drawn vehicles. It has been said that this was an appropriate venue, given our cart before the horse beginnings! Naive we may have been, but we never seriously expected that the various tiers of government would begin showering us with money. What we did expect however, was that what we were doing would be seen as being worthwhile and proper and that it would attract the encouragement of the Federal Government. How wrong we were! Our attempts to establish the Museum at either Archerfield or Brisbane Airports were frustrated time and time again, principally through excessive rental demands. We considered it fundamental that an airport was the logical place for an aviation museum and many years were wasted trying to secure such a site in Brisbane.

The first of several crises arose in 1977 with the financial failure of our first host venue, thrusting QAM into a nomadic lifestyle which was to last for another ten years. The Canberra was moved to a disused orchard not far from Brisbane Airport where a "grazing lease" was the closest thing available to the desired "peppercorn rental". The Canberra, along with a Meteor and two Sea Venoms which were acquired subsequently, continued to graze on this

site for another three years while the fight for an airport site continued.

Crisis number two was one of those "good news - bad news" situations. The good news was that QAM was to be on an airport. The bad news was that the airport was moving to QAM, not vice versa. As fate would have it, QAM's grazing lease was in the way of a proposed floodway for the new Brisbane Airport. Following a series of appeals which ultimately went as high as Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, QAM was allowed to move its aircraft on to Eagle Farm Airport proper where we occupied a so-called "temporary holding area" under conditions ominously described as "permissive occupancy". During this period, the Canberra suffered the indignity of being fired upon by a felon seeking to demonstrate what he would do to an airliner if he were not paid a large sum of money. Fortunately, damage was confined to one bomb door which was subsequently repaired by the RAAF. Not long after this incident, it emerged that extortion was to be an ongoing feature of this "temporary holding area" for the bureaucrats in Canberra sought to have the Museum pay an annual rental of \$40,000.00 for an uneven, boggy site which was inaccessible to the public. Clearly the Museum was unwelcome at Brisbane Airport! It should be said at this juncture that the local officials of the Department were always sympathetic and helpful.

Subsequent publicity resulted in many offers of sites from various parts of Queensland. The most attractive offer was from what is now the Caloundra City Council who proposed that QAM relocate to Caloundra Aerodrome where the Council would erect a hangar on crown land. Despite the negative aspects of being 100 km away from Brisbane and close to the sea, the positive aspects were enough to sway a decision in favour of Caloundra. The advantages of the Caloundra site were perceived to be:

It is in a tourism growth area.

It is on an aerodrome which is not owned by the federal government.

A building was provided.

The Caloundra area has a large retired population many of whom are ex RAAF or ex airline.

Consequently, the courageous decision was taken to relocate what was essentially a Brisbane-based organisation 100 km to the north.

Almost exactly twelve years after its founding, the Museum moved to its first permanent site on 14 June 1986 when a midnight convoy transported the Canberra, Meteor and two Sea Venoms to Caloundra. By this time, only the Meteor was presentable for it had been recently repainted by apprentices at RAAF Amberley with paint purchased with a grant from the Queensland Government. Thus the Museum had only one aeroplane with which to impress its new hosts. Happily, the local community rallied to the cause and the Canberra and one of the Sea Venoms were soon made presentable. To the immense satisfaction of long-serving members, a Vampire which had been stored dismantled since its purchase ten years earlier, was reassembled and repainted. This gave the Museum the nucleus of a respectable collection which has continued to grow ever since. In the hope that nobody in this audience subscribes to the "see one aeroplane seen 'em all" theory, I will provide an illustrated synopsis of the aircraft collection at the end of this presentation. That briefly is the history of QAM.

With a stated intention of being a "people's museum", perhaps I should explain our concept of a people's museum and why we consider this to be a desirable objective. We take considerable pride in the fact that nothing in the collection belongs to an individual member. Therefore, should one of our leading lights decide to enter the "World Dummy Spitting Championship", he will take nothing with him when he leaves. If he does, he will incur the wrath of the local constabulary. Thus, a member who may contribute a large part of his life and in some cases a large part of his income to the Museum, can take consolation from the fact that there is a better chance of the collection surviving than if it had been his personal

property. As the Museum is properly constituted as a non-profit society with membership open to anyone, it is not unreasonable to claim that the collection is held in trust for the community in perpetuity. We have always taken the view that as many of the aircraft in the collection are ex military, they were originally purchased by the taxpayer and thus it is most appropriate that these aircraft should be returned to the taxpayer for the benefit of the community. As an extension of this philosophy, we have great difficulty with the Federal Government's "highest bid" tender method of disposing of surplus military aircraft. This policy often results in aircraft being sold to private speculators whose sole motivation is personal profit at the expense of established museums. Queensland Air Museum has always maintained that it should be possible for the Australian Government to donate aeroplanes to accredited museums, as indeed they have done to overseas museums. It is ironic and indeed a constant source of embarrassment to our members that while the British Government has donated a Meteor and the United States Government has offered to make available an F-4C Phantom, the Australian Government has yet to contribute anything to Queensland's only community-owned aviation museum, an anomaly which amazes and disgusts visitors to the Museum. Without wishing to dwell unnecessarily on the political aspects of museum life, two recent disposal episodes illustrate the problem. I refer to the Iroquois and the Mirage. In the case of the Iroquois, it is probably fair to say that it would have been more palatable politically if the surplus Iroquois had been gifted to Australian museums, such is the extent of the infamy they have brought upon the nation since their disposal. In the case of the Mirage, Queensland Air Museum, and no doubt other established collections, were highly insulted by the sale of Mirage A3-59 to Malaysia for the princely sum of 20 cents! This is not to say Malaysia was undeserving of a Mirage, but Australian museums should have been afforded similar opportunities. It is to be hoped that the Mirages will not bring dishonour upon Australia at some time in the future, for a federal minister who consistently denied Queensland Air Museum one of these aircraft has recently gone on record condemning other nations for being involved in the arms trade. While QAM may have to be content with displaying its "Stealth Mirage", otherwise known as "The Invisible Illusion", we do at least have a pair of Mirage supersonic tanks, which paradoxically, were donated by a well-known scrap merchant long thought to be the number one enemy of the preservation movement!

Earlier I referred to our decision to relocate what was essentially a Brisbane based organisation to another city 100 km away. This experience may be unique amongst Australian community aviation museums, so it might be helpful to discuss the results in some detail. As would be expected, there have been problems arising out of our self-imposed "tyranny of distance". Although it was anticipated from the outset, we have had to be constantly on guard against the development of an "Us and Them" attitude amongst the membership. Thanks to the maturity of our members we have been mostly successful in this regard. As things have developed, our Brisbane members have become responsible for administrative functions and long-term planning whilst our Sunshine Coast members have assumed responsibility for the day-to-day running of the Museum and maintenance of the collection. Recovery expeditions are usually planned and staffed by Brisbane based members. Regular committee meetings are held twice a month in Brisbane while the Sunshine Coast members meet at the Museum every Wednesday to work on various maintenance tasks. Our Annual General Meeting is always held in Caloundra as are the occasional planning meetings as deemed necessary. One of the keys to our survival in these difficult times, and this is not uncommon amongst similar museums, is that we have no paid staff and indeed we intend to defer this step for as long as possible. Even though our regular opening days are limited to Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday, we would have to admit that staffing the Museum is a problem at times. This function falls principally on the shoulders of our Sunshine Coast members, although a handful of Brisbane members are rostered for weekend duty. We anticipated from the outset that Brisbane members would find the long commute unattractive and that Sunshine Coast members would find it impracticable to attend late night meetings in Brisbane, and indeed this has been the case. However, one Brisbane member recently hit upon an elegant solution to his problem. He is selling his house in Brisbane and moving to Caloundra!

To this point I have dealt in some detail with what we might claim to excel at - survival! Given that we have managed to survive, how is our vision splendid faring? Probably we all share

similar visions which might be loosely defined as "Smithsonian" or "Hendon" with perhaps the added embellishment of flying exhibits depending on one's doctrine. This latter activity has never been a problem for QAM for it has always been rendered academic by financial considerations. Nevertheless, we have no constitutional problem with flying our aircraft, we just find it difficult to justify when we have aircraft displayed in the open. Given that we would all seek to display an aeroplane to its best advantage, it is sometimes necessary to explain to visitors why this is not always practicable. Such was the case with a fellow I met at Caloundra one afternoon while I was working on a Sea Vixen fence. Actually it was not an aerodynamic fence but rather a crowd control fence and I was grappling with the technical problem of persuading a wire to assume the shortest possible distance between two posts when this fellow came up and said: "They look better in the air don't they?". Casting aside thoughts of feeding two thirsty Avons in an aeroplane unique outside the U.K. and with no local operational experience, I exercised remarkable restraint and refrained from commending his grasp of the obvious. He was of course right. They do look better in the air and perhaps one day QAM will have to face up to this but for the time being there are some of us who are tempted to think that there are very rare occasions when it is a good thing not to have a lot of money! (At least in so far as a Sea Vixen is concerned).

If we accept that flying is out of the question for the foreseeable future and that we can't offer new members the left hand seat of a B-25 by next Tuesday, what is our shorter term vision. Certainly, what might be loosely termed the "pristine restoration" is foremost in the minds of all of our members but realistically we usually have to settle for something less in the short term, for in many cases, having saved an aeroplane from destruction is a significant achievement in itself. As late starters, we have not had the luxury of choosing our aircraft for some were literally saved from the clutches of scrappers while others are the aircraft no other museum wanted.

This brings us to the topic of "Collecting Policy". It might surprise some that QAM does have a collecting policy and that it does not consist solely of the word "Yes"! Given QAM's comparative infancy and the limited collecting opportunities in this country, a policy may well be redundant. Indeed there is the risk that a collecting policy may evolve as something so restrictive that it will be ignored. Taken to the other extreme, an all-embracing policy will be similarly ignored. The fact that QAM has a collecting policy at all is largely a result of external pressures rather than a desire for self regulation. In determining what will be collected, we are usually guided by the obvious questions: "Have we got one or do we need a better one?" together with our ability to acquire, shift and store the aeroplane. Provided that these requirements can be met and provided that there are no restrictive donor conditions attached, the acquisition will usually proceed on the basis that we can always dispose of the aircraft at a later date if it is subsequently determined to be surplus to requirements. In approaching any potential acquisition we are very conscious of the axiom that nobody can restore that which no longer exists. We also acknowledge that having set ourselves up as custodians of our aviation heritage, we have a moral obligation to pursue the preservation of even the unloved (provided that the viability of the Museum is not compromised). Such a case in point is the Beech 18 VH-CLG which we recovered from the Northern Territory. This aeroplane was actually the first of type on the Australian Register and during its service with Thiess Brothers, featured prominently in the nation's resource development. Sadly however, its poor condition provides us with something of a dilemma. Given that Beech 18 parts are relatively plentiful overseas, any reconstruction of VH-CLG will probably entail the destruction of a better example! Not surprisingly, VH-CLG is regarded as a long term project. Lest we be accused of presiding over the aeroplane's further deterioration in the meantime, QAM will happily give consideration to any restoration proposal from external sources. However, the significant point is that what is left of the airframe is in the hands of people who understand its value and it will no longer serve as a source of sheet metal. Another case in point is the three aeroplanes which we imported from Singapore (Meteor, Hunter and Sea Vixen). At the time, we incurred some isolated criticism because it was alleged that the Hunter and Sea Vixen "had no relevance to Australia". To this we can only say "Why should they?" While we are fully seized with the desirability of acquiring Australian designs, and those with significant Australian connections, we also accept the desirability of having something different from other Australian museums - something which people will pay to see. Furthermore, as I

indicated earlier, QAM has had great difficulty acquiring aircraft locally, so a foray offshore was a logical progression. It is interesting to note that each of the three "Sentosa Orphans" was landed for somewhat less than we would expect to pay for aircraft in similar condition under the tender scheme.

Whilst tremendous progress has been made since our move to Caloundra and our members are fiercely proud of their achievements, they make no grandiose claims to having restored aeroplanes. It is freely acknowledged that, for the time being at least, any restoration has been of a cosmetic nature. This is not to say that we do not aspire to greater things, but it is important for a museum, like any other business, to identify its market. Our's is clearly the tourist for they are the ones who make up the majority of visitors and therefore they are the ones who will fund any restoration. As much as we all love aviation enthusiasts and as much as we strive to please the purist in them, we all know how frugal they are! Certainly we have purists of our own, and while some aspects of a display might offend their eye or cause anguish and frustration, it probably will not matter to the lay visitor, for if he has derived enjoyment or educational benefit from the exhibit, we will have fulfilled our primary objective.

Earlier this year, our members were greatly encouraged by the awarding to QAM of first prize in the Environment/Heritage Category of the Suncorp Sunshine Tourism Awards. This was a most pleasing result for 1992 was the first year that such a category was recognised and it is most gratifying to be recognised by our peers as making a contribution to the local tourism industry.

One aspect of our operations which can be covered very briefly is that of income. Our principal source of revenue is gate takings and although they are modest, we have come to accept that we are certainly doing better than if we had been located at Brisbane Airport, because the last place a tourist wants to be is a big airport. At \$22.00 annually, membership fees are only a small component of income, for we recognise the need to keep this charge within the reach of the average enthusiast. Recovery expeditions are usually funded by the members who participate - such is their demented idea of a holiday! One member in particular, although of modest means, has personally funded many of our acquisitions. I don't propose to embarrass the gentleman by naming him but he is usually known to us as Sir!

Having made earlier reference to the three tiers of government, it might be appropriate to report briefly on our relations with them. QAM has nothing but praise for the Caloundra City Council, for apart from funding the original building with a \$50,000.00 grant, they have always been most sympathetic when it comes to negotiating leases and rates and providing assistance with services such as earthmoving. The Queensland Government has also been most co-operative. For several years now, QAM has been a beneficiary of their "Assistance to Local Museums Scheme" which provides an annual grant in the order of \$3,000.00. Although cynics outside the Museum might cry "chicken feed", these grants are greatly appreciated, for they have facilitated a number of important projects such as painting the Meteor TT20 and cataloguing the library. We come now to Federal Governments past and present. Suffice it to say that their only contributions over the years have been negative. This is probably symptomatic of a serious national malaise which is beyond the scope of this conference.

It will be immediately apparent to anyone who visits the Museum that our building is filled to capacity. Currently we find ourselves on a plateau in our development where we cannot undertake any serious restoration because of a lack of covered workspace and any aircraft we are able to refurbish must be displayed in the open. It's a familiar problem that can only be remedied by erecting a larger building and this is our number one priority. We have deliberately delayed the launch of our fundraising campaign to coincide with what we perceive to be the deepest point of the recession so that the challenge to our members is maximised! Preparatory to the formation of a fundraising committee, we have constructed a model of the proposed Stage II building and have begun production of a promotional video. Both of these activities are being undertaken in-house. It might well be argued that the formation of a committee is not necessarily the most auspicious start to a project and indeed I have been reminded that a committee is a cul-de-sac down which ideas are lured and quietly stranded. Nevertheless, we are hopeful of securing the services of several dynamic business

identities to guide us in our fundraising endeavours. For reasons of functionality and economy we have fully embraced the "Big Shed" concept although the new building will eventually incorporate toilets, sales shop and conference facilities. Ultimately, the new structure will feature a Don Bennett Memorial in the form of a replica of his Deepwood office. This will include many of Don Bennett's personal effects and items of furniture which were recently imported from England. It is intended that the Stage II building will release our existing hangar for workshop and storage. I know you will all wish us luck!

It has been suggested that I make some reference to NASMA and its possible effects on existing museums. It goes without saying that QAM supports the concept of a national collection and quite clearly the NASMA proposal is our best chance yet for Australia to catch up with many smaller, poorer countries which already have established national aviation collections. Because of its remoteness from the proposed NASMA site, we do not envisage any negative effects on QAM and indeed we agree with NASMA's view that one will serve to encourage visits to the other and vice versa. We do however acknowledge that some museums may be less enthusiastic about NASMA and can only sympathise with their prospects of having a larger competitor set up in their "patch". Hopefully NASMA will be mindful of the long-standing contributions made by these established museums. Much has been said of NASMA's so-called "shopping list". On this subject, although perhaps we should be flattered that some QAM aircraft feature in the list, we are honest enough to admit that we don't really have anything that NASMA is likely to want. In spite of this, we are assured that NASMA sees a place for QAM in the "big picture" and hopefully this will be so for all the museums that have kept the flame for so long.

Our recent success in the Suncorp Tourism Awards has prompted some introspection in the form of a survey of comments in our Visitor's Book. Although some of these comments are not "of the real world" they are interesting nevertheless. I have attempted to categorise them as follows:

**The Prophetic:**

Great place but you may end up needing more room.

**On Fulfilling Our Educational Obligations:**

Didn't know the RAAF had F-4's.

**On Collecting Policy:**

Get a Hawker Demon.

How about an Me-262? *[Donor did not leave a contact]*

Needs a Spitfire or similar. *[There is nothing similar]*

Needs F-18

Would like to see Mirage. *[We see them all the time]*

Pink planes please. *[We had one but we rendered it non-pink]*

**On "Why Didn't We Think of That?":**

Put Hunter under cover.

Build cover over planes at rear.

**On Funding:**

Such enterprises should be government funded.

You need the sponsorship of Federal Government AND a wealthy tobacco company.

The Coke is cheap. *[Refers to sales of the popular beverage, not some nefarious fundraising scheme!]*

True labour of love. Wish I could give you \$1M.

**On "How Long is a Piece of String?":**

Will be good when it's finished.

Keep going and you will beat RAF Hendon.

**On "Who Do We Sell First?":**

Staff are worth weight in gold.

**The Mysterious:**

Very interesting but fail to see how the ALP has anything to do with the engine not fitting your truck.

Prior to concluding this presentation with a brief selection of slides, I am reminded of my obligation to define "Real World". To those of you who are satisfied that I have fulfilled this obligation, I express my thanks (and surprise). To those of you who feel that I have merely sidestepped the issue I can only say "Welcome to said Real World!"

***Ron Cuskelly***

***November 1992***

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**Researchers are welcome to quote from this paper provided that appropriate acknowledgement is given to the author and publisher.**

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