

The Northern Times, 29th May 1937

FLYING THROUGH THE CENTRE
ADELAIDE-DARWIN AIRLINE EPISODES
LIVELY TENNANT CREEK

The following interesting letter, which was handed to us by Mrs Aubrey Hall of Carnarvon, written by her son-in-law, Mr Peter Donegan who last year was stationed here as mechanic for the Nor' West air service and is now engaged as mechanic and second pilot on the Adelaide-Darwin airline, gives a vivid description of places and things visited and seen on this journey:-

“Leaving Adelaide, the course runs over cultivated country for about 200 miles until we fly over the Flinders Range, high and rugged. From then on to Farina is sandy and arren looking. Farina is our first stop -- 360 miles -- which we cover in exactly two hours. It is a dead little town of rusty iron huts, similar to those on the Trans-line. It doesn't even run to a hotel, and is gradually being buried by sand drift, in most cases it is up to the windows and piled round the doorways. After refuelling, and a cup of tea and sandwiches we follow the railway line to Oodnadatta, which is a slight improvement on Farina. The country is flat and desolate. From there to Alice Springs is the next hop. Then country becomes more interesting. We cross the Finke River and approach the MacDonnell Ranges. The town is completely surrounded by the hills, and is really a small flat bottom to a rugged-rimmed basin. The approach to the aerodrome is over the hills, and is very tricky as is also the take-off. We go into the town for lunch at a hotel -- a single-storey, spread-out building. The food is good and nicely served. In the streets of Alice Springs there are trees in profusion, and at this time of the year it is warm and sunny -- a pleasant spot, and right in the centre. Then off to Tennant Creek.

‘This is a new mining town, all unpainted tin buildings and hessian ‘little-houses’ in very poor repair. Imagine the place on Saturday night, at which time we arrive. It is hot and the hotel is full. Outside in the wide roadway are an assortment of cars and trucks, and the air is thick and dusty. Inside there is the reverberating crash and tinkle of glasses, and the interminable rattle of the cash register -- the best gold-mine on the Tennant. And over all, the hum and babble of voices. There is generally a fight in progress, or the promise of one, and, in short, a pleasant time is being spent by all. We dine at a bake-house across the road, as the hotel fare is all cold meat. We order steak and eggs, and get about a pound of steak and two eggs and toast and a pot of tea. Afterwards there is a picture show -- open air -- the entrance marked by a string of coloured lights, and the

notice on a sheet of tin, 'The Pioneer Theatre'. Or else, more novel still, a dice game behind a billiard saloon -- absolutely unmolested by the police. Cook, the pilot, has lately lost 7 pounds in two trips there -- I have lost 7/-.

After having exhausted these entertainments one goes to bed -- but not to sleep, for there is revelry by night. The erstwhile combatants are reconciled, and are rendering a soulful duet; or else there is an interlude while about twenty dogs chase a cat round the verandah, on to the roof. When the cat is lost to them they start a fight among themselves. Gradually the noise subsides. But then everyone finds some difficulty in starting their trucks and cars, and there is much advice rendered by all present. About 3 a.m., when all is comparatively quiet, one settles to sleep, and at 5 o'clock the call to get up comes along.

'We leave Tennant at 6.30 a.m. The next stop is Daly Waters. Here there is quite a lot of life on the aerodrome, as there are three machines arriving at once -- the W.A. machine from Broome, the Qantas bus from Darwin, and our own Lockheed. I saw Jim Branch one week, and Cecil Clark the other. Then a short run to Katherine, and then on to Darwin.

"The country is now thickly timbered and most of the creeks contain water, and the banks are green. Katherine is the head-quarters of Dr Fenton, of whom you have heard, and is the centre of a small peanut-growing industry. The Darwin aerodrome is very well equipped. There is an administrative bungalow, which embodies the meteorological office, customs, quarantine, and post office and an official department of the Civil Aviation Board. Alongside it the big Qantas hangar, and at the back of that the Air Force direction-finding station. It looks well at night, with red obstruction lights on all high points most noticeable in a group of palm trees at one side near the beach. It is pleasant to see the green water once more. Incidentally we fly low over the leper island - the poor devils run out and wave. There is a row of huts along the beach. The inmates are mostly natives and half castes, but there is one white girl of 16; her parents were lepers also.

'We lunch at Darwin, and then after one and a half hours break fly back to Tennant Creek. It is much quieter this time. Of course it is hot, but the diehards of Tennant have just completed a rugby match (of all games) when we arrive. Last week one chap had an arm broken at it. The ground is as hard as cement, and red and dusty. After tea the girls have a basketball match, under a string of electric lights. The captain of one side hands

over her two months old baby to a friend while she dashes into the fray. The game is played just as keenly as the rugby, and there is much barracking from the male supporters -- and of course there is the inevitable dog fight!

‘And so, on Monday, we set off for home. At Alice Springs I encountered Bob Buck, who found Lasseter’s body, and has been in many searches and excursions of a similar nature. You will remember his mention in ‘Lasseter’s Last Ride’. A real bushman, with a ready wit and an unquenchable thirst -- and the most battered hat in all the Centre! Adelaide is reached at 3.30 p.m. There a detective meets the plane and takes charge of 8 thousand pounds worth of gold that we bring in from Tennant. And then, home again, and about three cups of tea and a bath.’