



'The History of Flying Boats'

A presentation by Noel Phelan, 27th September 2023

Report by David Grundy

RSYS Member David Grundy writes "Noel Phelan is a well-known volunteer at the Australian National Maritime Museum who has researched and delivered numerous interesting and detailed presentations which Club Members have enjoyed over the years.

It was tremendous to see 27 active participants in this fascinating topic that touched many people within the audience from personal experiences.

Noel took us through a pictorial history of some of the achievements and failures of the very early Flying Boats that cut travel time without the expense and lack of runways being available, through to the more contemporary and more reliable flying boats that are still used for travel to remote areas as well as being used in firefighting.

The War Years and the Inter-War Years:

The early flying boats were used in both World Wars as surveillance craft in spotting enemy submarines that spent a large percentage of their time on the surface. During WW1 they were used to literally drop handheld bombs onto enemy ships as well as being the first planes to deliver an aeroplane-launched torpedo, although this was later seen as too dangerous.

In the inter-war years, Flying Boats or Seaplanes boomed with aviators and design firms pushing the limits of what these aircraft could do, with varying degrees of success.

Supermarine had been competing for the Schneider Trophy, an annual race for seaplanes started in 1912, since 1919 and by 1922 had managed to take home the title with a heavily modified version of their Sea King II. Less than a decade later, their S.6B would win the trophy once again with a world record-setting top speed of 357 miles per hour. Elements of that aircraft's design would become the blueprints of the legendary Spitfire which dominated the skies during WW2. With speed came endurance and distance connecting many of the world's large cities, that were located next to water, carrying airmail and wealthy passengers around the world.

The luxury aircraft (Clipper, Catalina's) only catered for the elite of society with fine dining, Crystal glassware, lounges, and beds to ensure the comfort of the Imperial Airlines / Qantas passengers. A flight from Sydney (International Airport located at Rose Bay) to

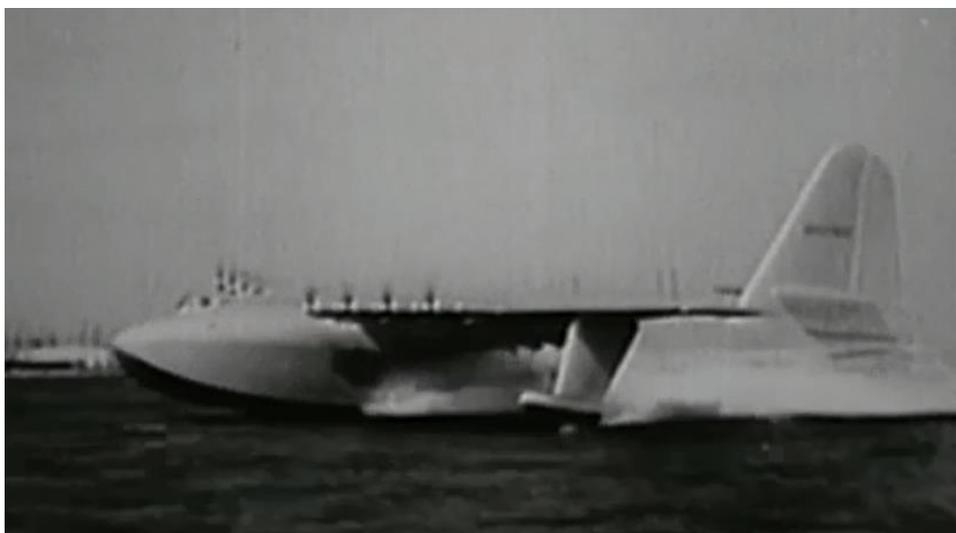


Southampton in 12 days would set the passengers back the equivalent of the average annual wage.



With the advent of WW2, many of these luxury Seaplanes were drafted into military service because of their massive range and heavy payload capabilities, but with a changing environment and logistical need to move troops around to inland locations, no expense was spared to building runways.

This didn't stop investment in flying boats, the US War Department tasked steel magnate and shipbuilder Henry Kaiser with developing a heavy payload flying boat that wasn't reliant on materials that the war made hard to come by. Kaiser turned to Howard Hughes, who by 1947, built a single H-4 Hercules constructed out of plywood and resin. The massive wooden aircraft dwarfed other aircraft of the day. It was nearly 220 feet long with a wingspan of 320 feet and was intended to carry more than 700 troops at once. Because of its wood construction, it was nicknamed the "flying lumberyard" and the "Spruce Goose."





From an Australian perspective the Catalina with its long-range capabilities of up to 24 hours, transported POWs from Singapore back to Australia after WW2

With the increasing development of jet engines during and post WW2, and the logistical demands for access to all parts of the world the investment in runways gradually took over with the need for flying boats reducing.

The future of flying boats is not dead with the development of firefighting craft such as the DHC 515 De Havilland Canada with the ability to deliver more than 5,000 litres onto a fire, filling up whilst in motion and being able to drop more than 200,000 litres before having to be refuelled.

There is of course the demand for short flights as we still have services from Rose Bay to our northern waterways and beyond for an experience.

At the end of the presentation, Noel opened the forum up to question time which was lively with not only questions but experiences dating back to those early days of international flights from Rose Bay.”