

INDIVIDUAL HISTORY

BAC CANBERRA PR. 3 WE 139/8369M
MUSEUM ACCESSION NUMBER 69/A/695

- Mar 49 Ordered from English Electric to contract No.6/ACFT/3520/CB6 (b) as one of 130 Canberra aircraft including 34 of the PR.3 variant; these included the serial batch WE135 - WE151.
- 22 Jan 53 First flight (46 minutes) recorded in logbook of Test Pilot Jock Still – copy on file.
- 25 Jan 53 Two further test flights by Jock Still, totalling 1.35 hours, including 44 minutes night flying.
- 30 Jan 53 Off contract - awaiting collection.
- 3 Feb 53 To Handling Squadron RAF Manby.
- 21 May 53 To Bomber Command Acceptance and Modification Unit RAF Binbrook, Lincs.
- 12 Jun 53 To English Electric for modifications. Given autopilot, navigation aids to cover all areas of the route, including Marconi radio compasses, 'Rebecca' and periscopic sextant for astro navigation. Specialist camera equipment was removed and replaced by extra fuel tanks, including two additional tanks in the forward bay and one in the flare bay, making a total of eight fuselage tanks; the resulting increase in take - off weight required 'tweaking' of the engines to give extra take-off and maximum continuous thrust, and the fitting of larger main wheel hubs/brake units as installed on the Canberra B.6/PR.7.
- 10 Aug 53 To No. 540 Squadron RAF Wyton, Cambs as part of the NZ Air Race Flight, commanded by Wg Cdr 'Bob' Hodges, whose aircraft were on No.540 Squadron charge.
- 4 Sep 53 Flew pre air-race practice flight from Wyton via Shaibah, Negombo, Cocos Islands, Shaibah and Malta back to Wyton. Flight time 29 hours 10 minutes. Crew F/L Ronald L.E. 'Monty' Burton and the late F/L Don Gannon (DFC, AFC, who died 21 September 2006, aged 83). Flew over the Cocos Islands but did not land due to limited fuel supplies on the island.
- 18 Sep 53 Return flight to Warton.
- 1 Oct 53 Air Test on auto pilot- Flight time 1 hour 10 minutes.
- 3 Oct 53 Flown from RAF Wyton to London Heathrow - flight time 1 hour 20 minutes.

6/7 Oct 53 Further air tests on autopilot.

8/9 Oct 53 Bearing the race number 3, and standard light 'PR' blue lower surfaces and light grey upper surfaces, winner of the Speed Section of the 19,746 km (12,270 mile) London Heathrow- Harewood International airport, Christchurch, New Zealand International Air Race, flown by the late F/L Roland L.E. 'Monty' Burton AFC and Bar (who died in France 29 April 1999 aged 80) with F/L Don Gannon DFC as navigator. Elapsed time 23 hours 50 minutes 42 seconds (Airborne time 22 hours 27 minutes) at an average speed of 795.8 Km/h (494.48 mph) - a new world record. Leaving London Heathrow at 17.45, the first 4557 Km (2,875 miles) to the refuelling stop at Basra (Shaibah) were covered in 5 hours 13 minutes, at 875.3 Km/h (543.9 mph) - a new world record. Landing at Shaibah was an anxious time due to an airlock in the hydraulic system requiring the wheels to be pumped down by hand and a flapless landing made. Take off from Shaibah was delayed by 30 minutes whilst the airlock was located. The next 4332 Km (2,634 mile) stage was to Ratmalana, Colombo, Ceylon, for refuelling, (Which was particularly urgent since the Shaibah refuelling party had only put 189 litres (50 gallons) in the flare bay tank, leaving the aircraft 1,325 litres (350 gallons) deficient), followed by a 3 ¼ hour, 2,847 Km (1,771 mile) flight to the Cocos Islands in the Indian Ocean, at which point WE139 was over 30 minutes behind the leader, the RAF Canberra PR.7. Next stop was Perth, Australia, 2,940 Km (1,840 miles) away. During this leg the starboard engine went out at 9,144m (30,000 feet) during a tank change over, being restarted at 6,553 m (21,500 feet) after 4 minutes. At Perth, after a 18 minute turn round (part of just 90 minutes on the ground during the flight), WE139 took off to fly over the Tasman Sea to New Zealand, 3,150 miles away, arriving at dawn in heavy rain one minutes flying time ahead of the RAAF runner-up.

Also participating were RAF PR.3 WE142 and brand-new PR.7 WH773, and RAAF Canberra B.20s A84-201/202. Extra fuel tanks were carried in the flare/bomb bay; photographic, flare and special operational equipment was removed and extra navigational and radio equipment fitted, including a Marconi radio-compass. A total of eight aircraft participated – five of them Canberras. See Flypast January 2013 article; 'Globe Trotters'

Shortly afterwards WE139 had inscribed on her port and starboard nose 'Winner United Kingdom - New Zealand Air Race 1953 29 HRS 51 MINS.' The crew were awarded the Harewood Gold Cup as winners of the speed section. Six nations had originally entered 18 aircraft, 12 of them in the speed section. It had originally been intended to use all Canberra PR.7 aircraft, but these had been delayed by production problems.

Photos in race condition - English Electric Aircraft and their predecessors (022670) p.177; Canberra -The Operational Record (023533) p.85; The English Electric Canberra (024202) pp 32-33; The British Roundel Sep/Oct 2003 front cover; National Service Erk (Swain) p.238; Flypast January 2013 p.110; Great Aviation Collections of Britain (Ellis) p.152.

After the race all five participating Canberras gave demonstrations at Royal New Zealand Air Force stations and at Melbourne. WE139, WE142 and a third Canberra from England gave demonstrations and flights to officials at Bangkok, Rangoon, Delhi and Karachi.

- 11 Oct 53 Local demonstration flight.
- 17 Oct 53 Demonstration flight at Wenuapai.
- 19 Oct 53 Returned to Christchurch following visit to Wenuapai.
- 25 Oct 53 Flown to Perth.
- 26 Oct 53 To Singapore (Changi).
- 29 Oct 53 To Tengah, Malaya and return - local demonstration flight.
- 1 Nov 53 From Changi to Bangkok (Don Muang).
- 2 Nov 53 Local demonstration flying.
- 3 Nov 53 From Don Muang to Mingaladon/Rangoon (Burma).
- 6 Nov 53 From Mingaladon to New Delhi (Palam), followed by local demonstration flight.
- 9 Nov 53 From Palam to Karachi (Mauripur).
- 10 Nov 53 Local demonstration flight.
- 11 Nov 53 Flown from Mauripur to Shaibah, Iraq.
- 12 Nov 53 Flown from Shaibah to Luqa, Malta.
- 13 Nov 53 Flown from Luqa to London Heathrow for official welcome, then on to RAF Wyton.

To English Electric at Samlesbury.
- 11 Dec 53 Collected from English Electric at Samlesbury by F/L Burton and F/L Gannon.
- 16 Dec 53 To RAF Aldergrove, Northern Ireland.
- 17 Dec 53 To Gander, Newfoundland, and on to Kittyhawk, USA to attend the 50th Anniversary celebrations of the Wright Brother's first flight. Flight time 8 ½ hours.
- 20 Dec 53 To Langley Field, Virginia.

- 21 Dec 53 To Baltimore, Maryland, and on to Uplands Airfield, Ottawa, Canada.
- 22 Dec 53 To Gander from Uplands. Flight time two hours.
- 23 Dec 53 Intended for an attempt on the Gander to Aldergrove point-to-point record, but the starboard starter ran away and disintegrated on engine start and punctured the fuselage where navigator Don Gannon normally sat. (See also file letter by P. Hodson, Mar. 04)
- 19 Jan 54 Damaged - Cat.3R. Repaired on site at Gander by No.58 MU.
- 22 Feb 54 Repairs complete - returned to No.540 Squadron.
- 1 Oct 54 To No 69 Squadron, RAF Gütersloh, West Germany as part of the 2nd Tactical Air Force.
- 13 Dec 54 No 69 Squadron transferred to RAF Laarbruch, West Germany.
- 11 Nov 55 Damaged - Cat.3R.
- 24 Jan 56 Repairs complete - returned to No 69 Squadron.
- 28 Jan 58 Damaged - Cat.3R.
- 18 Feb 58 Returned to No 69 Squadron - repairs complete.
- Mar 58 Photographed in formation of four Canberras at Laarbruch, practicing for the farewell flypast prior to the move to Luqa – <http://www.bywat.co.uk/wf922.html>
- 1 Apr 58 No 69 Squadron moved to RAF Luqa, Malta.
- 1 Jul 58 Transferred to No 39 Squadron at RAF Luqa, and given the code 'C' – No 69 Squadron had disbanded on that date and renumbered as No.39 Squadron.
- 18 Jul 58 To No 49 Maintenance Unit RAF Colerne, Wilts for special equipment fit.
- 9 Sep 58 Returned to No 39 Squadron at Luqa. The aircraft was in overall silver with No 39 Squadron's yellow/black arrow markings on the tip tanks. Photo – The British Roundel Nov 2003 p.167.
- 5 May 60 To English Electric for modifications.
- 21 Oct 60 To Boulton Paul Aircraft at Seighford Airfield, Staffs for further modifications.(Boulton Paul undertook considerable Canberra modification work at this time).
- 25 Oct 60 Returned to No 39 Squadron at RAF Luqa.

- 1 Aug 62 Damaged - Cat.3R.
- 11 Sep 62 Repairs complete - returned to No.39 Squadron at Luqa.
- 19 Dec 62 With the arrival of Canberra PR.9s at No. 39 Squadron, to No.231 Operational Conversion Unit at RAF Bassingbourn. This was the Canberra conversion and photographic reconnaissance training unit. Photo of WE139 in service with this unit - Aircraft Illustrated Jul 79 p.332;
- 10 Sep 63 Damaged - Cat 3R. Repaired on site by No.71 MU.
- 19 Nov 63 Repairs complete - returned to No.231 OCU. Seen in overall silver paint scheme with large fuselage serials and No. 231 OCU's cheetah head badge in a white shield on the fin. Photo - The British Roundel Sep/Oct 2003 rear cover.
- 16 Sep 67 Photographed at RAF Leuchars in all-grey paint scheme with air race markings retained on the port nose. Photo - Air Pictorial Dec 1967 p.450 - described as 'a worthy candidate for the new RAF Museum'!
- 14 Jun 68 Displayed in static park at RAF Abingdon for Royal Air Force Golden Jubilee display. Colour Photo - Supplement to Aeroplane April 2001 p.36.
- Photo on line at Bassingbourn 1 Feb 69; The British Roundel Sep/Oct 2003 rear cover.
- 23 Apr 69 Last flight - flown that afternoon from Bassingbourn to RAF Henlow, Beds for storage for RAF Museum.
Total flying hours 4,260; landings 2,017. Photo, possibly at Henlow; Air Pictorial Nov.72 p.418.
- 14 Jan 71 Moved to RAF Museum Hendon by road by No 71 MU Bicester; reassembly completed by 25 Mar 71. Displayed in Main Aircraft Hall (Historic Hangars) ever since. Photo – Royal Air Force Celebrating 90 Years p.124.
- Servicing documents held by DoRIS, ref B3183, Boxes 198-201.
- 5 Sep 73 Allotted RAF Instructional serial 8369M.
- 3 Aug 98 One of a number of aircraft donated to the RAFM by the MoD. Photo as currently displayed at RAFM Hendon – Aeroplane October 2008 p.9.
- The only other complete preserved Canberra PR.3 is WF922 at the Midland Air Museum, Coventry. Norfolk and Suffolk Aviation Museum at Flixton are creating a replica PR3 nose section with instruments and fittings from now scrapped PR3 WE 168.

TEXT; ANDREW SIMPSON

