

AIR AUSTRALIA

In creating an Australian aviation industry, a handful of extraordinary individuals changed the nation.

TEACHERS NOTES



AIR AUSTRALIA

SERIES SYNOPSIS

Australia's airline history is a saga of daring feats, can-do attitude, pig-headed visionaries, iron-fisted politicians, warring pilots; of humble beginnings and mega deals.

The story begins in World War One with the death-defying exploits of four bold young airmen—Norman Brearley, Charles Kingsford Smith, Wilmot Hudson Fysh and Paul McGinness—who would go on to establish Australia's first airlines.

Encouraged by Prime Minister Billy Hughes, they were among the brave and stubborn men responsible for conquering the “tyranny of distance”, within our vast continent and between it and Europe.

They faced difficult, often dangerous conditions—marred at the start by accidents and fatalities, but highlighted by ground-breaking, headline-grabbing flights.

Behind the scenes, however, battles were fought in boardrooms and with backers and bureaucrats to keep the airlines aloft. Gradually, businessmen replaced aviators at the helm of the companies, and take-overs rather than take-offs became front-page news. In an era of corporate giants like Sir Reginald Ansett, Sir Peter Abeles, Robert Holmes a Court and Rupert Murdoch, the stakes climbed even higher...

Air Australia revisits this grand but turbulent history.



CURRICULUM LINKS

Curriculum links include History, Studies of Society and Environment, Science & Technology, English, Media and Business Studies.

The Office of Film and Literature Classification has classified the program PG (parental guidance recommended) with the consumer advice: mild themes, mild violence, infrequent mild coarse language.

EPISODE 1: CANVAS AND STICKS

The first episode of *Air Australia* covers the formative years of Australian aviation, from 1916, during World War One, to the historic trans-Pacific flight from the USA to Australia, of the *Southern Cross*, piloted by Charles Kingsford Smith in June 1928. The episode introduces us to the pioneers who brought an aviation industry to Australia, who struggled to create the first passenger and mail airline companies, such as Qantas, and who, without necessarily intending to do so, played an important role in helping to tame the nation's “tyranny of distance”, the sense of physical and psychological isolation Australians not only felt from the rest of the world, but from each other across the land.

AUSTRALIA AND THE “TYRANNY OF DISTANCE”

The first historically-recognised aeroplane flight, by Orville and Wilbur Wright, took place in America in 1903. The invention was quickly recognised by the military, not only of the United States, but of other industrialised nations, as a means to wage war. In general, as with other new technologies of the early 20th century, such as radio, the outbreak of European war in 1914 hastened advancements in the power and function of the aeroplane. At the end of the war in 1918, though, the role of aeroplanes in civilian life was almost non-existent; in Australia the “tyranny of distance” was still evident in daily life, and as we discover from the program, it took a year for some people living in the remote outback to receive supplies. It was increasingly clear that aircraft were to become a vitally important tool in connecting Australians to one another and to the outside world.

- In pairs research and write a commentary on the “tyranny of distance” and its relevance to most Australian citizens in the early decades of the 20th century, before aeroplane flights became an accepted mode of passenger and postal transport. For example, how long did it take for steamships to travel to and from England, Europe and the USA? If you posted a letter to England (then a standard destination for most Australians), how long might you have to wait before receiving a reply? What were the general conditions of road and rail travel between towns and cities in Australia? If you lived in rural Australia, did you have regular access to daily newspapers from your capital city? (Remember that in the early 20th century, few Australians had telephones in their homes, or owned their own cars.)

- Imagine you are living in a small rural Australian community in 1920. The first plane you have ever seen flies over your rooftop. The pilot waves at you, then disappears into the distance. In writing, describe the experience to a friend, and offer some ideas as to the potential of aeroplane flight to your community and how it might even affect your own life.

ADVENTUROUS AUSTRALIAN AVIATORS

The first episode of *Air Australia* looks at the exploits of four early aviators: Norman Brearley, Charles Kingsford Smith, Hudson Fysh and Paul McGinness.

- Discuss in class the personality and behaviour traits of these four men, based on your viewing of the episode. For example, what impression do you have of Brearley and Kingsford Smith after viewing the re-enactment aerial combat scenes in the episode? Look at whether the episode draws similarities between the men. Do their wartime experience, attitudes and behaviour affect and influence their lives in the years following the war? Were they reckless, unconsciously in the grip of a “death wish”? Do you think luck and chance played a role in their success, and in their lives generally?
- Taking the personal qualities of the early aviators into consideration, plot and write a short fiction story about a former World War One pilot who tries to earn a living at local bush fairs, performing aerial stunts and taking people for “joy rides”.
- Draw and label a “typical” pilot and single-passenger aircraft of the early 1920s. Include details such as size, engine power, flying speed, fuel usage and flight range, details about its construction of “canvas and sticks”, and extent of flier comfort level in the open air. (You may have to draw more than one picture from different angles or of specific sections of the aircraft in close-up.)
- Carry out research, then on poster paper construct, with written details included, at least one map displaying a mail or passenger route undertaken by any of the aviators during the 1920s in rural Australia.
- We are informed in the program that Kingsford Smith went to Hollywood for a short time as a stunt pilot. Research and present an illustrated magazine article about the activities of 1920s Hollywood stunt pilots, the films in which they appeared, and the dangers they undertook.
- “Visionary and adventurous heroes or selfish, self-obsessed individuals?” From your viewing of this first episode, and any further research you have done, write an argumentative essay on this topic in 600-800 words, about one or more of Brearley, Kingsford Smith, Fysh and McGinness. Present it with a main and secondary headline, as though it were a feature article for a newspaper.

THE EARLY YEARS OF QANTAS

The formation of airline company Qantas was beset with obstacles in its early years, with the founders

encountering an initial lack of interest and assistance from the federal government, a lack of finance and even a lack of paying customers.

- In pairs devise a timeline from 1918 to McGinness’s eventual departure from Qantas in 1923, showing significant events in the creation and development of the company. You may wish to illustrate the timeline with photographs of important “players”, such as prime minister Billy Hughes, and images of the first Qantas buildings and aircraft.
- Although reasons are offered in the program it is not fully clear why Paul McGinness resigned just as Qantas was about to commence its first flights. Fictionalise the reasons from his viewpoint in a set of personal diary entries. Follow this with one or more diary entries fictionalising the response of Hudson Fysh to the resignation. (Take into account the fact that the two men had once been World War One comrades—pilot and gunner.)



EPISODE 2: AUSTRALIA’S OWN

The second episode begins in 1928, with the historic flight of the *Southern Cross* across the Pacific Ocean, followed throughout the 1930s by the continuing struggle to maintain an Australian-owned aviation industry in the face of powerful international airline businesses, concluding in early 1942 with the bombing of Darwin by the Japanese air force during World War Two. As the title of the episode suggests, a central theme running through many of these events is Australian national patriotism and pride. Another

related issue, also relevant to us today, is the role not only played by the Australian news media in keeping the public informed about the exploits of the nation's aviators, but in evoking and driving that sense of patriotism, and the ways in which the aviators themselves took advantage of the mass media of newspapers, radio and cinema newsreel for their own purposes.

FLIGHT OF THE SOUTHERN CROSS

Various combinations of reasons can be argued as to why Charles Kingsford Smith and Charles Ulm attempted to be the first to fly an aeroplane from the USA to Australia: adventure, instant fame, publicity for their aviation businesses, a desperation to pull themselves out of financial disaster, to prove that such a flight could be successful, and to open up the possibility of more mail and passenger routes connecting Australia to the world.

- The program informs us that American pilot Charles Lindbergh's solo flight in 1927 across the Atlantic Ocean from New York to Paris was the "trigger" for Kingsford Smith and Ulm's attempt to cross the Pacific a year later. Research and write a short account, in your own words, of Lindbergh's flight in the *Spirit of St Louis*. You may want to include illustrations of the pilot and his aircraft.
- Discuss in class the naming of the *Southern Cross* aeroplane, and what it is meant to evoke for Australians. Make a commemorative poster of the aircraft, incorporating in written text the symbolic relevance of the aircraft's name. Would you think it necessary to include the Australian flag?
- Debate in class then write an argued viewpoint as to whether you believe the two Americans on board the *Southern Cross*—Harry Lyon and Jim Warner—should have been included in the celebrations when the plane arrived in Australia. Include a discussion on the Australian government's motives for intervening in this issue, and whether they should have done so.
- The program states that 300,000 people turned out to witness the *Southern Cross* touch down in Sydney. Imagine that you were in the crowd. Write a letter to a friend elsewhere in Australia, or overseas, describing the event, the atmosphere, the excitement and your impressions, feelings and thoughts.

ROLE OF THE MASS MEDIA

With the coming of public radio broadcasting to Australia in the 1920s, the spread of daily newspapers and the huge popularity of weekly movie newsreels, the exploits of aviators such as Kingsford Smith, Ulm and others quickly entered the consciousness of the greater Australian public to become national icons of the late 1920s and into the 1930s, along with star cricketer Don Bradman and champion racehorse Phar Lap, to rank in estimation with the best from overseas.

- In pairs, prepare and produce a front page report of the successful flight of the *Southern Cross*, as though for an

American newspaper, remembering that two Americans were on board the aircraft. What emphasis would you give it, in comparison to a report in an Australian newspaper? Produce your report of the same event for an Australian newspaper. (An alternative may be to produce and record both reports as radio news broadcasts.)



- This activity requires access to the internet. Download and play Jack O'Hagan's popular song, *Kingsford Smith, Aussie is Proud of You* (National Film and Sound Archive - see Kingsford Smith NFSA website reference).

In class listen to the lyrics carefully. Discuss the way the song reflects, creates, reconstructs or reinforces the public image of Kingsford Smith, his exploits, and the events of the flight from America to Australia. Compare the attitudes and sentiments expressed in the song to more recent, contemporary popular songs by Australians, such as Paul Kelly, about other Australians. (As a further comparison you may also wish to listen to O'Hagan's 1930 song, *Our Don Bradman*.)

In pairs, compose at least two verses for a popular song that celebrates the achievements of a famous Australian, and either perform it to the class, or record it for playback to the class.

- News media reports and commentaries have the power to build or diminish, even to destroy a public figure's reputation. Examine the sequence in Episode Two referring to the deaths of aviators Keith Anderson and Bob Hitchcock, and the response of a Western Australian newspaper to this. Write a newspaper editorial questioning whether the "publicity-seeking" Kingsford Smith and Ulm were responsible for the deaths. Then write a newspaper letter to the editor in reply, refuting the suggestion.
- View then write a review of the 1946 Australian feature-length film, *Smithy*, commenting on the accuracy of the story of Kingsford Smith's biography, and the extent to which it is presented as dramatic, patriotic and romanticised Australian myth. An alternative to this is to review the 1985 TV mini-series about the same topic, *A Thousand Skies*. (see references)

INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION

We are informed by the program that international aviation giants British Imperial Airways and Dutch company KLM were eyeing the Australian market. The question was whether Brearley's Western Australian Airways, Kingsford Smith and Ulm's Australian National Airways, and Fysh's Qantas would survive the competition.

- Research and draw a world map showing the major mail and passenger routes of British Imperial and KLM from Europe into the Pacific region during the 1930s.
- Construct on display poster paper a timeline from the late 1920s to the beginning of World War Two showing the rise of Qantas, the decline of other Australian air companies, and significant events such as the beginning of the Great Depression, the deaths of aviators in plane crashes, and the outbreak of war in the Pacific. Include additional text where necessary.
- Look at examples of luxury aircraft travel posters of the era, then create your own travel poster to promote any one of the off-shore flight routes taken by the Qantas flying boats in the late 1930s.
- Plan and write an adventure short story about a Qantas flying boat, the crew and its passengers. Perhaps the theme may be about the end of an era in travel history, as the threat of war approaches, and the world is about to change.



EPISODE 3: WAR IN SUITS

The third episode backtracks a little to 1936 to chart the rise of Ansett Airways from local regional to national status, and to its traumatic corporate collapse, coincidentally one day after the terrorist events of September 11, 2001, when two passenger airliners were deliberately crashed into the World Trade Center towers on the other side of the world, in New York. In between these years it examines how the Australian aviation industry survived the difficult times of World War Two, and looks at the post-war era of the “two airlines policy”. A continuing theme is the way in which control of Australian airlines increasingly shifted away from entrepreneur aviators and those risk-takers who flew “by

the seat of the pants” (without instruments) to become the preserve of powerful and wealthy business shareholders in global boardrooms.

PORTRAIT OF THE BUSINESS ENTREPRENEUR

From what we see in the program, although Reginald Ansett was not an ex-World War One “bush pilot” entrepreneur, he demonstrated similar characteristics of individualism and personal drive to those of Brearley, Kingsford Smith and Fysh in building his airline business from the ground up, overcoming official and governmental obstruction and looking out for the “main chance”.

- Construct a timeline showing the significant events in the rise and fall of Ansett Airways, from 1936 to 2001.
- In episode three we see how Reg Ansett circumvents government regulations to organise a bus service from Hamilton, in western Victoria, to Melbourne. This anecdote also involves the politician who 13 years later would become prime minister, Robert Menzies. Discuss in class the possibilities for a fiction short story, then plan and write the story, based in any way you see fit on these events and real-life characters. For example it may be presented as a series of letters, phone conversations or diary extracts, or even a fictionalised face-to-face meeting between the two ambitious men.
- In pairs, research and present a two-page article for a magazine aimed at young teenagers about how Hudson Fysh attempted to keep Qantas “alive” and in operation during World War Two, including his flight to England and back to secure a sales contract. Ensure that the text is presented in desktop publishing format, with columns, headlines and captions, and that the article contains illustrations such as images of the Catalina aircraft that Fysh purchased. Consider your audience, and style your presentation accordingly.
- Debate in class whether those who managed and owned Ansett, Qantas and Australian National Airlines profited from war or performed important and essential services for the benefit of the Australian people and the nation.
- Research the Deborah Wardley case of 1979. Prepare and write a newspaper letter to the editor about the case, as though you were an interested observer at the time. You may support either the Wardley or Ansett viewpoint, or present a dispassionate opinion. (See “Equal opportunity” in the website references.)
- Examine the scene in this episode where Ken Bond describes visiting Reg Ansett after Ansett has lost control of his business. Imagine that after many decades of building an airline this happens to you. Write a set of personal diary entries reflecting on it and on your life's work.

THE KANGAROO HOP & THE TWO AIRLINES POLICY

Under the post-war Chifley Labor government, in 1946 a new, nationalised, Australia-wide passenger air service, Trans Australian Airlines (TAA), was quickly set up to

compete with Ivan Holyman’s domestic airline, ANA (not to be confused with Kingsford Smith and Ulm’s 1930s air service of the same name). Qantas, Australia’s only international service, was also nationalised. The “two airlines policy” began when Robert Menzies’ Liberal Party defeated Labor at the 1949 federal election, allowing the privately-owned ANA to compete on an identical basis with TAA at almost every level of operation. Although ANA did not survive, and was bought out by Ansett Australia, this policy led to a somewhat farcical situation until it was revoked some 38 years later.

- Devise an advertisement for the first of the Qantas “kangaroo” flights to London in 1947. In order to be accurate, you should research the model and type of aircraft used for these flights, the passenger regulations, the cost of the flight, the on-board comfort, the fashions of the cabin crew, the food provided, the length of the flight and the number and location of stop-overs.
- The program refers to the Qantas kangaroo flights as an “Australian rite of passage”. Discuss in class what this might mean, then write a short story drawing on this theme about a party of young Australians leaving home for the first time en route to London.
- In pairs or small groups, using the program as a starting point, research the two airlines policy then write, prepare and produce a humorous account of it directed at a radio listening audience, titled *The Heavenly Twins*. You should include some explanatory background information as to the situation before the policy was instituted. As well, you may wish to include mock interviews with politicians, flight crew and members of the travelling public to create an impression of how the policy affected everyone.

AIRLINES AND BOARDROOM TYCOONS

From the 1980s onwards, some of the most powerful names in Australian corporate history became involved in the airlines industry: Peter Abeles, Robert Holmes a Court and Rupert Murdoch.

- Research, discuss in class and then write short biographical profiles of Abeles, Holmes a Court and Murdoch, explaining their interest and purpose in acquiring control of Ansett Airways. (For example, you should examine Murdoch’s mass media communications interests and ask in what way these may be relevant, if at all, to ownership of an airline.)
- Carry out research, then in small groups prepare and produce a set of about four or five newspaper reports, with headlines, text, and photos and captions where appropriate, of the main events, turning points and outcomes of the devastating pilots’ strike of 1989. (For this activity ensure you understand the term, “deregulation of the marketplace”.)
- From what you have discovered about the closure of Ansett Australia on September 12, 2001, and its political, social, economic and personal aftermath, write a short

fiction story about any aspect of it. You should first discuss the possibilities for style and approach, plot, characters, settings and themes in class.

AIR AUSTRALIA — AN OVERVIEW

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Alan Lindsay, the writer/director of *Air Australia*, says, “I couldn’t tell the story of every individual who made Australian aviation history. So I focused on individuals who were crucial agents of change.”

- Research at least one of the following Australians who are not featured in the series, and write a short description of their contribution to Australian aviation history:
 - * Bert Hinkler
 - * Ross and Keith Smith
 - * Amy Johnson
 - * John Flynn
 - * Nancy Bird Walton
- Write an essay discussing the developments in Australian aviation history that you believe have been of benefit to the Australian public in general.
- Discuss in class then, in pairs, present a poster display of what you believe the future holds for the Australian aviation industry. (You may guess and fantasise upon this topic.)
- Using the *Air Australia* program as a basis, in small groups devise a board or card game about the history of Australian aviation, its struggles and triumphs, its main players and the central themes of challenge, the opening of the land and the development of the industry as an essential part of Australian life. Make sure that the rules of the game are clear to understand, and printed for player convenience. Test the game with another group of students to make sure it is suitable and revise if necessary. (Those with computer programming expertise may wish to plan and present to the class a concept for a computer game.)



