



OPAL Classic Flight 2017

Departing Yarrawonga over Lake Mulwala, VIC/NSW border



Departing Narromine Airport, NSW

Earlier this year, Peter and Roy Counsell (nicknamed 'Toucans') announced they were flying to Lightning Ridge in far north NSW during May, and any other pilots were welcome to come along. This is the story of our extraordinary trip.

by Ian Rees

First, some background about Lightning Ridge. It is located about 30nm south of the Queensland/NSW border and about 100nm west of Moree. For us Victorian pilots, it is 530nm north of Latrobe Valley where my trike is hangared with Ken Jelleff's. Lightning Ridge, is the home of the unique Black Opal. The town has a population of an unknown amount of people, according to the road sign as you drive into town. This is the allure of the Ridge, that many who initially planned to stay a day or so as part of travelling around Australia, end up staying a lifetime without being able to understand the exact reason.

On this trip, we had no ground support vehicle. We were fully self-sufficient, everything had to be packed into the aircrafts – clothes, tools, aircraft covers, tie-down kits, fuel cans, funnel, oil, snack food, water, etc. I had previously flown my trike on weekends away without any ground support and felt comfortable without a support vehicle. In fact, it is a good opportunity to demonstrate how suitable microlight trikes are at being used for cross-country flight without ground support, but it did need very careful planning.

The pilot list for the trip was just six: Peter and Roy Counsell in their Airborne XT912 Arrow, myself, Ian Rees, in my XT912 Arrow, Ken Jelleff in his new Rotax powered BRM Aero Bristell and Ray Peterson and Philip Olsen in their Piper Arrow GA registered IFR equipped aircraft. The weather leading up to the start of the trip was looking just great. The seven-day forecast in NSW and at Lightning Ridge for the week we would be there was for sunny weather with a top of about 25°C, just perfect. As it turned out, we had some interesting flying weather to contend with during the week though.

Arrival Day: Flying from Latrobe Valley to Yarrawonga, Distance 155nm (287km)

Our departure point was Yarrawonga airport, my trike is hangared in Latrobe Valley. Pilots familiar with Latrobe Valley will tell you that at this time of the year, it can be a bit tricky flying over the hills to the north west to get to Yarrawonga. My main concern was being able to fly out of the valley on the Saturday 13th May to join the team in Yarrawonga for our departure on Sunday. Those who know Latrobe Valley will say the chances of flying early are at best 50/50 at this time of year.

I departed home at 5:30am after checking NAIPS for weather and NOTAMs to allow enough time to organise and pack the trike for the trip. Fog is usually present on the calm Spring mornings which was exactly what occurred driving to the airport on that day. Along the highway, visibility was down to 25m. Anyway, I was well prepared with a trailer to pack up and drive to Yarrawonga if necessary to get to the starting point for a departure on Sunday.

After I had arrived and started setting up the trike in the hope the fog would lift, Ken arrived and prepared his new Bristell. Fortunately, the sky gods looked down kindly on us both and I was in the air by 10:30am on my way to Yarrawonga. Ken departed about an hour later.

There were scattered cu's in the Latrobe Valley, one to four octas, with a cloudbase at 3,000ft and a clear sky above – just perfect for us to depart the valley by climbing over the tops of the clouds to stay clear of the hills. My flight path was via the towns of Neerim, Warburton, Narbethong, Marysville, Buxton, Cathedral Ranges, Alexandra, Lake Eildon, and Benalla to Yarrawonga. Along the way, I had radio contact with Ken in his Bristell as he made up ground on my trike.

We both landed at Yarrawonga into a light southerly on Runway 19. It was great to be met by Peter and Roy Counsell and also Peter McLean at Hangar 19, Yarrawonga. Ray and Phil had arrived earlier in the Piper Arrow from Wollongong. Ken landed about half an hour before I arrived and the Opal Classic Team parked their aircraft in Lawrie Thompsons hangar for the night.

That evening we had the traditional pre-flight dinner and Megafauna Movie night at Burkes Hotel in Yarrawonga. The movie is put together with great editing and humour by Roy and Peter from the previous year's trip. Everyone enjoyed the night's entertainment.

Day 1: Yarrawonga to West Wyalong to Narromine, Distance 250nm (463km)

The forecast was for a 15kt north-easterly wind, which was a direct headwind for our flight to Temora then Narromine on the first day. Additionally, the forecast predicted a low-pressure trough line,

running along our intended route to the north, with showers and thunderstorms. I suggested the weather would be better on the west side of the trough and we changed our track more west than Temora and agreed to track via West Wyalong.

The winds at Yarrawonga were light and allowed a departure on runway 19 and we climbed to 2500 to overfly Lake Mulwala and soon found the headwind as we headed north. Passing Lake Cullival the winds reduced our ground speed to as low as 43kt at times, which was unfortunate as this leg of the flight was 138nm, but at least the air was smooth. Flight time to West Wyalong was three

hours and seven minutes. The two trikes joined crosswind for runway 09 and landed in smooth laminar air. I was carrying 20 litres of extra fuel, and based on our headwind, we put 10 litres into each of the trikes to ensure we would get to Narromine without needing another fuel stop. The Bristell and Piper Arrow overflew West Wyalong and went directly to Narromine.

While tracking from West Wyalong to Narromine, it became clear that the decision to fly further west was a very good choice. The more easterly passage would have taken us into more clouded development and showers. However, we



Gold Mine at Lake Cowa

All photos: Ian Rees

SKYSAILOR 17



Over-flying the Cathedral Ranges, VIC



Over-flying Walgett, NSW

still had four light rain showers to fly around while heading to Narromine. As we flew further north, large cumulonimbus clouds formed enroute with tops way over 10,000ft, as predicted by the chance of thunderstorms. Our arrival into Narromine was carefully considered by watching the development and ensuring we were on the ground while the winds remained light and without precipitation. We landed at Narromine, and after tying down the aircraft for the night and fitting full covers, we heard cracks of thunder and witnessed the energy released from a massive black cumulonimbus west of the field.

Our accommodation was at the airfield in on-site cabins with meals planned at the gliding club which

meant that with AV-GAS, accommodation and a BBQ right at the field, we were all organised for the night. The gliding cub put on a magnificent BBQ and we enjoyed each other's company while a lightning show lit up the night sky. That night, the local thunderstorm dumped widespread rain across the region.

Day 2: Narromine to Coonamble to Lightning Ridge, Distance 168nm (311km)

The forecast for day two was for a six-knot westerly tailwind for this sector. With the trough-line now further away, the weather was sunshine and light winds. We wanted to make an early start so that we arrived in Lightning Ridge for a pre-arranged lunch

at the famous Lightning Ridge Castle. A lot of rain fell overnight, but the trike and wing covers kept the trikes completely dry. Peter and Roy launched first and made a few circuits around town, followed by myself. Ken stayed back with Ray and Philip in the faster aircraft so that we all arrived together at Lightning Ridge.

I was airborne off runway 29 at about 7:30am into still conditions. The two XT912 Arrow trikes flew together and enjoyed the calm smooth air. There were some local light fog patches to welcome us into the air while we enjoyed flying together in such ideal conditions. En-route, we flew over predominantly flat farmland, tracking north over the small town of Collie, before landing on runway 05 to the north-east at Coonamble in a flight time of one hour and 40 minutes. After a 30-minute rest stop, we departed to the north for Lightning Ridge following the Castlereagh highway out of town.

En-route we flew over the small town of Walgett which has an excellent airfield. Based on the radio communications, a lot of aircraft fly into Walgett on their trips in the area. Heading into Lightning Ridge on the last leg of this flight, the ground changes to sparse, open fields with several kilometres between fence lines. The town of Lightning Ridge quickly comes into view after overflying Walgett. Roy and Peter were keen to fly straight in and land. I decided to do a local flight over the town and take some photos. The crisp-white tailings from the opal mines mark the landscape, it is very unique. In town,

Pilots, Peter Counsell, Ken Jelleff, Philip Olsen, Ray Peterson, Roy Counsell

I can see the vivid blue outdoor Olympic swimming pool as it stands out against the background. There is also a massive caravan park on the edge of town which is still expanding with new camping sites for travellers.

I join crosswind for runway 28 and have an interesting landing due to the runway being rather undulated and care was required to put the aircraft down on an upslope if possible. The size of the airport is impressive. We taxied off and tied down for the day under a suitable shady tree at the terminal building. Total flight time for the day was three hours and 30 minutes.

Ted Counsell was waiting for us at the airport in his Toyota pick-up van, and we drove to the castle which would be our home for the week. After we find our rooms, we all look around the amazing castle, followed by a home cooked lunch of magnificent food provided by Shirley.

That afternoon we went on a local walk of the surrounding area and found out why the Ridge has become known for the unique characters that make this such a special place to visit. We soak in the Bore bath on sunset before a wonderful dinner back at the castle.

Days 3 and 4: Lightning Ridge Exploration

While staying at the Ridge, we experienced the most amazing attractions, such as an underground Opal mine complete with hundreds of sculptures carved into sandstone walls, houses made of bottles, homes which look like castles, astronomy monuments, unique gardens, camp sites along

unnamed gravel roads, the magnificent bowls club and an Olympic specification diving and swimming pool. Our favourite attraction became the local Bore Baths, where 42°C water is piped up a kilometre from the underground Artesian Basin, just for us to bath in at sunset. Oh, and don't forget how to find things on the Ridge, look out for a coloured car door tour. Buildings consume anything that can be found, even car doors with windows, making perfect house windows as we found at our 'Castle on the Ridge'.

Day 5: Lightning Ridge to Yarrawonga, Distance: 421nm (780km)

The forecast is for a spiralling low pressure and rain later in the week, which we had been watching approach from Western Australia earlier in the week. Ken and I decided to depart a couple of days early to fly home to Latrobe Valley before the poor weather arrives. Ken planned to fly from Lightning Ridge to Latrobe Valley in the Bristell, while I planned to fly from the Ridge to Yarrawonga today and, hopefully, to Latrobe Valley the next day. My estimate put the flying time around seven to eight hours, depending on the winds.

At this time of year, daylight hours might become critical and being well prepared was essential. My plan was to fly from Lightning Ridge to Coonamble for a brief stop and have a stretch then fly onto Narromine for some fuel (AV-GAS). The final and longest leg would be overflying West Wyalong to Yarrawonga. The area forecast was for winds to be 360 degrees at 20kt at 2,000ft, which would make the flight easily achievable. Departing Lightning



Car doors and everything gets consumed at Lightning Ridge
All photos: Ian Rees

Ridge, the winds were four to eight knots tail at 5,000ft. There was no 20-knot tailwind as forecast which was disappointing. The air was smooth, the sky was clear, it was time to sit back and enjoy the ride south to the Victorian border. The first leg was 94nm over-flying Walgett then to Coonamble in a time of one hour 45 minutes. Some local pilots at the airport came out for a chat as they saw a trike for the first time.

The conditions further south remained the same, light north-easterly winds, about five knots tailwind. The trip to Narromine was in smooth air and took one hour 20 minutes to complete. My plans were to empty the 20 litres of fuel I had with me into the tank and top-up with AV-GAS. I had heard Ken on the radio landing at Narromine earlier and departing for Yarrawonga after he got fuel. As it turned-out, our radios worked so well, we stayed





Ian Rees in his Airborne XT912 Arrow at 3,000ft near Benalla (VIC)
Photo: Peter McLean



Lightning Ridge township and airport. NSW

HGFA Wing Tips:

by Peter Allen, HGFA Project Officer

A few months ago a member reported a near miss with a light twin-engine aircraft. He was thermalling at the time in class G airspace, at about 5000ft. The twin-engine missed him by a hundred metres or so.

in contact until Ken was all the way down to the Mansfield area later that day.

Unfortunately, when I arrived at the fuel bowser, it was out of action due to a service agent reprogramming it for BP fuel cards. While I was waiting for the software upgrade, a motor glider arrived and also wanted fuel, so the agent downgraded the software so we could buy our fuel and depart on our way.

The last flight sector was the longest for the day. The distance from Narromine to Yarrawonga was 253nm. I planned to fly via West Wyalong and Narrandera, just in case I needed to stop or for a planned alternate. As it turned out, neither of these were required and the XT912 Arrow flew on-rails all the way to Yarrawonga.

On such a long flight, I found the best strategy was to use Oz-Runways for sector flying, waypoint to waypoint and use my Garmin GPS on a direct-route to Yarrawonga. This method allowed me to track the flight as planned between waypoints, as well as see my ETA and distance into Yarrawonga to ensure I was going to land well before last light. I had flown around this area – Parkes, Forbes, Peak Hill, Dubbo, Carrathol, Narrandera, Cootamundra and Boorowa, etc. – for many years during summer hang gliding competitions and I knew it well. I flew over the gold mine at Lake Cowal and got some amazing photos of the mine. It has produced 1.7 million ounces of gold.

As I got further south, past Narrandera and Urana, the inversion was very thick and trapping smoke from stubble burn-offs in the air-mass such

that visibility was worsening the further south I flew. Approaching Lake Mulwala, the conditions were just meeting VMC requirements. The wind had also strengthened during the afternoon to 10 to 20kt up high, which was the forecast winds as predicted at the start of the day. It was amazing to fly above the inversion in warmer air than down lower. Thermals of 500 to 800ft/min were found below the inversion, while the air above was much smoother and so combined with the tailwind and increased temperature of a couple of degrees warmer, it was best to stay high.

I was in radio contact with Peter McLean about 50nm north of Yarrawonga. Ken was also on channel while passing Mansfield, so we all caught-up with aircraft positions and intentions. I landed on runway 01 at Yarrawonga, but probably should have used the cross-strip into wind. It was almost exactly 3:40pm, as predicted hours earlier on the Garmin. Lawrie Thompson was kind enough to assist me with a fuel run into town and put my trike in his hangar for the night.

Day 6: Yarrawonga to Latrobe Valley, Distance 155nm (287km)

I arrived at Yarrawonga airport in the hope of an early start, however, a quick call to Ken at Latrobe informed me that it was not possible to get into Latrobe Valley at that time due to 100% low cloud cover. Time for a chat with Peter and Anne for an hour or two before departing to the south via Benalla. Peter joined me on this first leg of the flight and took several excellent aerial photos of my trike

as we approached Benalla. Thanks Peter, the photos were much appreciated.

Peter returned to Yarrawonga into a 20kt headwind while I over-flew Benalla at 3,000ft on my way south to Lake Eildon, Cathedral Ranges. Further south, I climbed to 8,000ft (8,500ft ceiling) to cut the corner over the mountains into Latrobe Valley with a nice tailwind and clear sky. It couldn't get any better, but it quickly got worse. The last 30nm turned into a 25 to 30kt easterly headwind which got quite rough and took an unexpected hour to travel the last 30 miles into Latrobe airport.

Thanks so much to Peter and Roy Counsell for all their preparation for the trip and hosting us at the Lightning Ridge Castle. It was a real pleasure to join you on this adventure. To Ted and Shirley, we can never repay your kindness and hospitality. Thanks to Ken for being my wing-man the whole way and allowing me to experience 'The Dark-Side' of flying the Bristell. To Ray and Philip, you guys add great IFR to a VFR experience, thanks for always looking out for us en-route as you zoom past on autopilot. What's App kept us all informed and laughing the whole way and for days afterwards.

Flight Statistics

Distance flown: 1195nm (2,210km)

Total flight time: 22 hours



Forms and Documents

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HGFA Office Manager