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1950s: An FAA Auster Autocar J-5G trainer at Nowra, the runaway over Sydney revisited - Kim Dunstan.

Once again Kim Dunstan has provided excellent aircraft notes to go with this photo, and revisited the amazing story of an Auster that accidentally took off without its pilot over Sydney , and which was finally shot down by Navy planes off the coast.

We did have an earlier version of that story, but Kim adds some details and gives it his own touch. We think it very much bears a re-telling.

Here's Kim's notes, which also cover the Navy Austers, one of which - by coincidence - was also involved in the runaway, pilotless plane chase.

Kim writes:

'On her Coronation cruise in 1953 HMAS Sydney shipped two Auster Autocar J-5G aircraft home from the UK for use as communications and training aircraft at the Royal Australian Navy Air Station at Nowra, south of Sydney. For 10-years they served variously with 723, 724 and 725 Squadrons.

The Auster Autocar J-5G is a single-engine, four-seat, high-wing monoplane, built by Auster Aircraft at Rearsby, Leicestershire. Based on a 1940s Taylorcraft design, it used a four cylinders, air-cooled, 155 hp Blackburn Cirrus Major engine, giving it a range of 500 miles and a top speed of 116 mph. The Auster was a popular civilian light-aircraft, which was adopted by the military as an AOP/artillery spotter among other things.

At RANAS Nowra the Austers looked out of place among the high-powered fleet-air-arm aircraft, but they were useful aircraft. Seemingly, the main role for the Auster was to do the jobs 'real' aeroplanes didn't do. Also pilots no longer posted to squadrons could keep-up their flying time and 'refresh'. As such it was not unusual to see an Auster, piloted by someone 'a little rusty,' doing 'kangaroo hops' down runway 21, then flying around Nowra Hill and repeating the performance. But the Auster was a sturdy, reliable little aircraft and they performed well.

Anyway, life wasn't always dull for the RAN Austers - because one was involved in a bit of excitement - along with two Hawker Sea Fury aircraft. The date in question was 30 August 1955 and the excitement was caused by a runaway civilian Auster Archer J-4, which had taken off from Bankstown airport, without anyone at the controls. Apparently the pilot had dismounted to restart the engine by hand. One flick of the propeller - and away went the Auster down the runway and into the sky.

Needless to say the situation was causing the authorities some dismay. But one of the RAN Austers from Nowra was making its way to nearby Schofields aerodrome and the pilot, Commander J. Groves, offered to trail the runaway Auster, which was heading across town towards Sydney CBD. After watching the errant Auster for over an hour, the RAN Auster had to break-off from the chase as it had been airborne for more than three hours.

Meanwhile, with Sydney radio stations broadcasting minute-by-minute reports on the Auster's progress, the excitement on the ground was nearing fever-pitch. In a bold stroke the authorities called the RAAF who scrambled a Wirraway from Richmond airbase to shoot down the delinquent Auster.

By now the pilotless Auster had managed to fly across the city to Manly where it turned north towards Palm Beach. Flying into a steady breeze the Auster gained altitude - to around 9,000 ft. Here the air tends to be cold and as the gunner in the rear of the Wirraway was to find out, it was very cold. In fact so cold he was unable to change magazines on his Bren gun after his initial shots failed to stop the Auster.

With the Wirraway retiring from the scene, the RAAF sent two Meteor jet-fighters from Williamtown to intercept the Auster. Very soon the Meteors caught up with the troublesome Auster. However, because the Auster was only doing about 60 knots, the pilots found it difficult to position for a shot. Adding to the frustration the first Meteor's guns jammed - having fired only a few rounds. And the second didn't shoot at all.

Meanwhile, at the RAN air-station at Nowra, south of Sydney, two Sea Fury aircraft had returned to base after firing rockets at Beecroft Range. The Sea Furies, from 805 squadron, were piloted by Lieutenants Peter McNay and John Bluett. Both of their aircraft were quickly loaded with 20mm ammunition and the pilots were told to fly to Sydney.

Flying north the two RAN Sea Furies arrived on the scene shortly after the RAAF Meteors broke-off their engagement. As a precaution, to ensure the Auster Archer was empty, McNay lowered his flaps and undercarriage, slowing his prop-driven Sea Fury - to check the cabin - as a report had been received that a schoolboy might be onboard.

Ensuring it was empty; McNay repositioned his Sea Fury behind the Auster, now flying at about 10,000 ft and some distance out to sea. McNay fired a short burst from his 20mm cannons - hitting the Auster and knocking it out of a turn. Bluett, in the other Sea Fury, then fired from a beam-on position, causing the Auster's cockpit to burst into flames. Badly damaged, the Auster nosed-down in a slow spiral. McNay followed with another burst from his cannons, sending the Auster crashing into the sea.

This was handy work on the part of the RAN pilots, not least because the navy Auster was nearby when the Auster Archer took-off from Bankstown. Pilotless from around 8.30 am the Auster was airborne for over three hours. When the Sea Furies arrived it was 11.35, by 11.42 the Auster was destroyed - hitting the ocean about five miles off the coast. The

remarkable thing is the runaway Auster was airborne for so long - and fortunately not involved in a major accident.

The RAN Austers were small as fleet-air-arm aircraft go - but big surprises come in small packages. By 1963, the RAN had withdrawn their Austers from service, disposing of them soon after. However, one of the Austers was rediscovered and is now housed at the Fleet Air Arm Museum, near Nowra, about 2-hours drive south of Sydney...'

Photo: Kimberley Dunstan RAN 1958-67, kindly sent for the Unofficial RAN Centenary 1911-2011 Photostream.