



FOREVER YOUNG

OJA's new beginning

WRITER: OWEN ZUPP

For those who witnessed the final moments of flight for Qantas's Boeing 747-400 VH-OJA, few will forget the sight. The massive yet graceful *City of Canberra* concluded its long career by approaching the shortest runway it had ever landed on after the shortest flight it had ever flown. People had packed the airfield perimeter and traffic was literally stopped on the roads. And then, when the wheels had touched down and the crowds had finally dispersed, OJA was at rest at its new home.

At rest, but not retired.

Preserve or perish?

When an airliner nears the end of its operational life, there are various options

in retirement. It can be cannibalised for parts, parked in one of the remote, dry desert storage facilities or in some cases broken up altogether. None of these fates seemed particularly appropriate for an aircraft with such a significant heritage and a world record under its belt. For OJA, the numbers certainly stack up. During its 26 years in service it transported more than 4 million passengers over 85 million kilometres – or 110 return trips to the moon.

Fortunately, it was decided that OJA would escape these less than desirable outcomes. It was decided that it would find a new home on the New South Wales south coast at Albion Park. Here, under the watchful eye of the Historical Aircraft Restoration Society, or HARS, it would begin a new life of service, albeit permanently at sea level.

The first challenge lay in delivering the aircraft to the regional airport, where the runway is only 1800m long and 30m wide and not designed to accommodate the weight of the Boeing 747-400. Before the wheels of the aircraft could even leave the ground, an adequate risk assessment needed to be conducted and all stakeholders from CASA to local government had to be satisfied that the flight could be executed safely.

Additionally, the flightcrew had to be specifically trained to fly the 747 on the short 90km sector to an airport

outside of its normal operational envelope. Only when all aspects of the flight had been addressed was it cleared to make its final journey to the home of HARS.

History now records that on March 8 2015, the *City of Canberra* was met with near perfect flight conditions and cleared to depart Sydney for the Illawarra Regional Airport at Albion Park. Fittingly, the main landing gear of OJA touched down for the last time at 7:47am. Its days of flight had drawn to a close, but its new life had just begun.

Continuing to serve

The 747 wasn't nicknamed the 'Jumbo' without reason – it is big. The strength and dimensions of the runway were not the only considerations, but how best can a 747 be parked for an extended length of time?

It was planned that OJA would be positioned on two concrete slabs – one for the nose gear and another for the main landing gear. While the slab for the nose gear was relatively straightforward, the main gear provided a greater challenge in terms of engineering and repositioning services such as water, drainage, electricity and fencing. However, once in situ, the giant red tail overhanging the airport road is not only a great advertisement, it is a consistent reminder of the huge scale of the 747.

● OJA departs Sydney on the short hop to Albion Park on March 8 2015. DAMEN AIELLO



● Captain Sandy Howard (right) talks a visitor through the features of OJA's flightdeck.

OWEN ZUPP

In the following weeks, Qantas engineers removed three of the four RB211 engines as they were still in serviceable condition. An engine that was on display at HARS was fitted to balance the remaining engine and stabilise the aircraft. OJA now boasts its full complement of four engines.

For safety reasons the engineers also removed or disabled a good deal of equipment including the emergency escape slides, medical kits and some of the aircraft's navigational equipment. Notwithstanding these necessary and relatively cosmetic changes, VH-OJA is fundamentally complete and intact. The task now became the ongoing care of the historic aircraft.

Under the watchful eye of Phil Mason, OJA is kept up to standard by a team of dedicated volunteers, many of whom previously served with Qantas in roles ranging from pilots to engineers and cabin crew to corporate positions. Consequently, it is a group that not only brings a unique skill-set to the table, but enthusiasm, pride and passion.

Externally, the aircraft is washed regularly. The universally recognisable red tail is prone to the fading fate of all red paint on all aeroplanes, so plans are afoot to recoat the tail with a more durable paint. Tyres are regularly rotated and repainted and the old-model ground power unit (GPU) that provides electrical power also requires ongoing



maintenance. With OJA pointing to the west, strong winds from that direction can have the engines' fans spinning at quite a speed. To this end, a solution is being found to allow visitors to still safely view the engines.

Inside, OJA looks as if it is ready to depart on yet another long haul. Seat belts are dressed and various passenger tray tables display what would have been on offer to customers. Through the local support of Panasonic, the upper deck and flightdeck are air conditioned, while galleys and bathrooms are also open and on display (Although clear panels have now been installed due to some visitors treating the toilets as being fully operational!)

The long-term plan is to house OJA in a dedicated hangar, but in the interim, she is an eye-catching addition to the HARS facility at Illawarra Regional Airport. And while she attracts many visitors, she is more than just a pretty face.

Up close and personal

OJA's life after flight is growing by the day. Universities and technical colleges alike are utilising the aircraft as a learning platform for its students. Members of the Australian Air Force Cadets, Air League and Scouts are also frequent visitors. And NSW state primary schools currently have a module on transport and the retired

Boeing 747-400 slots in very nicely as a living, breathing platform for the aviation component of their syllabus. Geographically, Albion Park also allows students to attend nearby road and rail facilities.

While the aircraft is obviously a drawcard for local tourism, it is bringing visitors down under from right across the globe. Enthusiasts from both sides of the Atlantic have specifically organised in advance to see OJA as a priority on their holiday to Australia. Meanwhile, cruise ships have also begun to dock in the region with their passengers alighting nearby and travelling to see the *City of Canberra*.

Once there, a visit and inspection of OJA forms just one part of the tour of the HARS' collection. Spread across a number of hangars and surrounding tarmacs, there is a wealth of aviation history living and breathing in a wide range of airframes – from Tiger Moths to Super Constellations. With many still in flying condition and others being restored to such a state, there is a hive of activity on the hangar floor as highly experienced engineers ply their trade.

HARS tours are particularly interesting due to the fact that visitors can get up close and personal with the aircraft. They can climb from the nose to tail of a maritime Neptune or sit in the cabin of a classic DC-3

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airliner as they may have done in the 1950s. Stairs lead up to the cockpit of a former RAAF F-111 and even a Bell Huey Cobra to allow a step down into the pilot's seat. However, the most comprehensive experience lies in the exclusive tour of VH-OJA.

The tour is conducted by the very people who flew and supported the aircraft – former Qantas pilots, cabin crew and engineers. As with the entire human force that drives HARS, these people are volunteers. They not only possess a wealth of knowledge but they have the ability to share entertaining anecdotes gleaned over years of operational flying. Restricted to small groups, the tour begins with an audio-visual presentation and briefing, where the guides for the tour are introduced.

Guides include Captain 'Sandy' Howard, a pilot who flew OJA numerous times in his 32 year career with Qantas. A senior check and training captain, Sandy flew the 747 exclusively with around 10,000 hours on the '747 Classic' and over 6,500 hours on the 747-400. There was also more than 2,000 hours training 747 pilots in the simulator. Another is engineer Roger Blakey, who was on the team in Seattle leading up to the acceptance and delivery of OJA. And then there is Darlene Wright, a long-haul flight attendant who served on OJA and is now flying short-haul routes with Qantas.

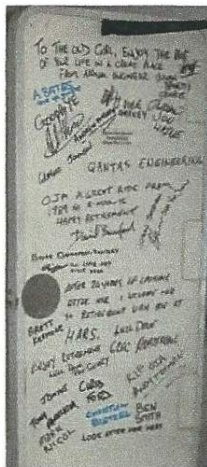
As HARS is an operational environment, the briefing covers safety considerations before outlining the history, statistics and significance of OJA's service and achievements. Once completed, the tour commences under the guidance of your engineer whose in-depth knowledge of the 747-400 is immediately apparent. Walking beneath the massive wing and beside the impressive Rolls-Royce engines is not something one can normally achieve and only when standing at the wing-tip can the degree of sweep on the wing and the towering fin truly be appreciated. But it is in the details of the smallest items that can sometimes stir the greatest fascination.

Access on the exclusive tour is seemingly unlimited. In fact, ascending a ladder beside the nose gear up into the main equipment centre (MEC) is something that this author didn't even experience when being endorsed on the aeroplane. Inside the MEC is another world of cables, looms and electronics that are a second home to the engineers that keep the 747-400 flying. This



● Engineer Roger Blakey inside the main equipment centre. OWEN ZUPP

● Qantas staff left farewell messages for HARS on the inside of a galley storage cabinet door. OWEN ZUPP



fascinating space then leads to the forward cargo hold where visitors can see first-hand the cavern beneath their feet where their luggage resides. It is these formerly 'hidden' places that truly underline the mastery, complexity and sheer size of the 747.

From the inner workings to the passenger cabin, visitors are then shown through the various classes of passenger travel within the 747. However, beyond the reclining seats and inflight entertainment lie the task of feeding hundreds of people around the clock from a number of specifically designed galleys. And when the crew are not serving? The cabin crew rest in the tail section of the 747 is another behind-the-scenes port of call on the tour. The enclosed space where flight attendants grabbed valuable hours of shut-eye between shifts is also home to a discreet compartment which houses the aeroplane's 'black boxes' and other select circuitry.

In this post 9/11 era of intense airport security and bulletproof flightdeck doors, perhaps the most fascinating

aspect of the tour for many is the ability to sit in the captain's seat of a Boeing 747-400. This privilege is reserved for the exclusive tour, but is also a major attraction. The first impression for many is just how high up the crew is seated, looking down on top of the 'old world' DC-3 parked adjacent. Furthermore, due to the engineering prowess of the team at HARS, the flightdeck can be powered up, bringing the various lights and electronic flight instrument system (EFIS) screens to life. This not only allows a real sense of a flightdeck in operation, but allows the flightcrew guide to highlight various details with ease.

When one has scoured the 747, inside and out, the full tour of HARS takes place before the experience concludes with a light lunch and a chance to ask those last few questions before receiving a copy of the book *The Life and Times of OJA – The Long and the Short of it*.

From the outset, Phil Mason emphasised that HARS wanted to bring visitors close to the action, not keep them at a distance and in the world of 'Do Not Touch'. While health and safety will always require limits on tours involving aircraft, there is little doubt that a visit to HARS and particularly the tour of OJA allows one to get as 'up close and personal' as reasonably possible in this day and age. And the future has even more in store for OJA with a 'wing walk' experience tour being developed.

A new beginning

The destruction of old airliners is possibly the ultimate act of a throw-away society. Once proud examples of man's ultimate achievement are relinquished to the stockpile as little more than the physical sum of its many parts. The majesty of the sky is replaced by the blowtorch or desert isolation.

However, at the Illawarra Regional Airport, HARS has managed to breathe life into a veteran of global travel. A record-breaking Qantas Boeing 747-400 that was a part of Australia's rich aviation history was given a second chance. A chance to not only be on display, but a chance to tell its tale through those who gave the metal and motors its very heart. Far from fading into the past, the *City of Canberra* is set to be a part of the future for many years to come. After all the effort that it took to retain and preserve OJA, it is really more than just a second chance – it is a new beginning. ■