

On-the-Step

Issue 33
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PRESIDENT'S REPORT

This certainly has been a year of great highs and extreme lows.

For an incoming President worrying how he could ever fill the shoes of the outgoing Rob Loneragan, it's been a challenge with aspects that I hope to never have to repeat. The highs focus on some fabulous seaplane adventures conducted by groups of our members, the Tasmanian adventure being one that has already been reported in On-the-Step, and more recently the once in a lifetime Daintree adventure to witness the total eclipse of the sun. The Eclipse Adventure is mentioned in this issue, however it is with overwhelming sadness that

this issue is being dedicated to our Editor/Producer of On-the Step, a SPAA executive committee member with unbridled /uncappable / un-suppressible energy and enthusiasm for seaplane flying.

Having flown a great adventure and witnessed one of the greatest spectacles he had seen, in the form of a total eclipse of the sun from 7000ft, Ross Vining tragically lost his life in an accident as he was flying down the West coast of Cape York on his way home to Adelaide. Ross had fulfilled what he had been planning to do for the past 10



years and died doing what he loved best, "kissing the water" in spectacular parts of Australia that had never been kissed before, which gives some small comfort to the many flying colleagues, work colleagues, friends and family to whom he gave so much inspiration. Around 15 SPAA members attended his funeral, where a packed congregation celebrated the life of this great scientist, aviator and community member.

For the sake of the seaplane pilot

community and in order to try and prevent such a tragedy reoccurring, we will report on the details of the accident at an appropriate time and once the coronial investigation is completed and released. There is, however, one message that came out of Ross's accident that I feel needs to be brought to the attention of every pilot that flies alone anywhere, but particularly in remote areas. Ross carried a GPS tracking device (Spot) and made sure a number of people were able to track his flying progress. If not for that fact Ross's accident site

would quite possibly still remain undiscovered. Ross wrote an article on the Spot GPS Tracking device in the August 2009 (Issue 20) of On-the-Step and we have reproduced it again in this issue. Please read this article and give strong consideration to regularly using such a device. The SPAA Executive have recommended the use of Spot devices as part of standard SPAA flight procedures. More on this in our next issue.

Many of you have grown to know Ross through On-the Step with his well researched and interesting articles and his

absence leaves a great hole which we are now wondering how to fill, so please forgive us while we struggle to maintain On-the-Step even if only a shadow of its previous issues.

The SPAA executive is looking into the setting up of a Ross Vining Memorial Scholarship to provide young pilots with seaplane training and endorsement. As Ross was always so keen to interest new pilots into the joys of seaplane flying, this seems like a most appropriate memorial. More on this as it is developed.



A Tribute to Ross Vining

by his wife Linda

at his funeral on 27 November 2012, Adelaide SA

Ross loved to fly.

He was an experienced pilot with more than 2,800 hours in many different aircraft, but his favourite plane was his little Searey VH-RRZ that took him to far away places that others could rarely reach. His was not a quest for speed, height and destination, rather he loved the science of flight, the physics, the mathematics, the mechanics,

the navigation. He found exhilaration getting down low and going slow so he could study the topography and search for interesting places to 'kiss the water'.

Flying liberated Ross's soul, it refreshed his spirit and cleared his mind for the big decisions he needed to make at work where he was Director of Forensic Science South Australia.

Underpinning everything Ross did was an appetite for adventure and

exploring. He organised and ran three private expeditions to Antarctica, climbed some of the world's highest mountains, descended into deep canyons, loved white water rafting, sea sailing and cycling. Ross was always up for a challenge and this resulted in many expeditions to exciting locations. Before his trip to Cairns, he was mountain climbing in Italy, and on his return from the solar eclipse he was planning to sail in the 2012 Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race.

It was at the the University of NSW Bushwalking and Mountaineering Club that Ross and I met, and our life together, and that of our son Ben (29), was always playful and active and punctuated with big ideas and extraordinary output.

We will all miss Ross's effervescence. He was such a happy man, full of infectious enthusiasm and excitement. He was fit and healthy and in the prime of life at 62 when the tragic crash of his Searey extinguished his life.

The Seaplane Pilots Association Newsletter was one of his

greatest at-home pleasures. He enjoyed writing stories about aviation and his fellow pilots, researching the latest developments, finding pictures to illustrate each page and reporting on his flying episodes and those of his mates, all the while reminding people to fly safely. In one of his final conversations with me shortly after the solar eclipse he said, "I've got so much good stuff to put in the next SPAA newsletter. Can't wait to get home."

The funeral service handout expresses our feelings:

"We did not see you fly away,
We did not see you die,
All we knew was that you were gone,
Without our last goodbye.
It was a sudden parting,
Too bitter to forget,
Your death has left a vacant place,
Of which we all regret.
Sincere and true in heart and mind.
Wonderful memories left behind."



At the time of Ross Vining's tragic accident he was flying over a very remote part of North Australia. While the vegetation is generally sparse, Ross's plane came down on the edge of a small clump of trees which made it extremely difficult to see from the air or ground. Even when given the crash site coordinates to within 20 metre, an aerial search had great difficulty finding it. If not for the fact that Ross was carrying an operating GPS tracking device, location of his plane along the 800km flight planned for that day might have taken weeks, months or years.

Ross was an early adopter of the GPS tracking technology and made a point of passing his tracker web access address on the three or four people before a long trip and copying their contact details to the group. He also emailed his intended flight path for the day. As a result, when it was noticed that his tracker had been transmitting from the same remote spot for more than four hours with no accompanying message that he needed help (which can be transmitted through the GPS tracker) our worst fears were realised and a call for search and

rescue operations was raised. The search party, a Department of Customs coast watch aircraft, were promptly given Ross's GPS tracker's exact (within 20m) coordinates so that they could focus their search. Without the data from the GPS tracker it could have been 24 to 48 hours before an alarm was raised. There are several GPS tracking devices that are suitable for these type of applications. Ross's one was a quite low cost (less than A\$200), but effective device known as a **Spot GPS Messenger**. Below is the article Ross wrote in 2009.

SPOT uses a GPS chip to locate your position which it broadcasts to a global star communications satellite, which relays it the SPOT headquarters in USA.

Your position, anywhere in the world, can then be displayed on Google Maps, or if you have activated the "message" features then appropriate messages will be phoned, emailed or sent by SMS.

Features:

SPOT can send out 4 different **predefined** messages:

Alert 911 - Alert emergency services, with location.

Help - Request help from family, with location.

Check In - Send "OK" to family, with location.

Track Progress - Log and track your location on Google Maps™ - This is called SPOTcasting.

Specifications

The bright orange handheld device is water and shock-proof and it floats. It works around the world, independent of cellular systems and it weighs just 206 grams.

Coverage: virtually all of North America, Europe and Australia, portions of South America, Northern Africa and Northeastern Asia, and hundreds or thousands of miles offshore from these areas.

Battery Life: Uses 2 AA lithium batteries;
 SPOTcasting tracking mode: Approx. 14 days
 SPOTcheck OK/√: 1900 messages
 Operating Temperatures: -40°F to +185°F
 Operating Altitude: -300 feet to +21,000 feet

Limitation: the SPOT link to global star satellites is a one-way (simplex) system. SPOT sends data to the satellite network, but it cannot receive a reply. So it does not know if the message was received.

GPS magazine (www.gpsmagazine.com) has a good review of this device. In the comment's section there are 70 comments by users. Some comments are positive but a majority appear to be negative and relate to apparent failure of SPOT to send out OK messages or to log positions in SPOTcasting mode.

I used my recent trip from Adelaide to Sydney to test the accuracy and reliability of SPOT.

My SPOT was left on the dash of the aircraft with a good view of the sky. It was switched on and placed in tracking mode at the start of each flight. An "OK" message was sent at the completion of each flight.

My route from Adelaide to Sydney followed the Murray River to the Snowy Mts and then up the NSW south coast to Sydney and then return, more or less direct to Adelaide. The flight was mostly low level (usually 500ft above ground) with more than 100 landings on the Murray River and associated waterways.

I carefully analysed the performance of SPOT as follows.

Reliability

Over the course of the approx 30 hours of flying there were 230 occasions when SPOT should have put a SPOTcast position on the web site. Of these 230 possibilities exactly 180 positions were logged and 50 positions were missed - 78% reliability.

On one occasion, 3 consecutive SPOTcasts were missed. On 6 occasions 2 consecutive SPOTcasts were missed. All other SPOTcast failures were "one offs" and were flanked by good positions.

Eight "OK" messages were sent – all were received by both email and SMS usually within 5 minutes.

I did not attempt to use the "911" or "help" functions.

Accuracy

The position accuracy of the "OK" messages was checked by observing the location on Goggle maps. In each case they were accurate to within 5 metres.

The 180 SPOTcast positions also appeared to be accurate.

Conclusion

I would like 100% reliability of the tracking function, but I can live with 78%, especially given that consecutive failure to track was relatively rare.

I do a lot of solo flying in remote areas of Australia. Overall I believe the SPOT adds considerably to my safety. It is on my checklist of "essential items".



Hello "eclipse mob"

My plan is to depart Adelaide on Thursday afternoon (8nov) o/n at Wentworth, long day Friday to o/n in vicinity of Lismore, then track up the coast, I hope to catch you up by Fraser Island.

Who is carrying a SPOT?

Can we exchange SPOT codes that way we will know where we all are.

Ross

Ross Vining's Quest for the Eclipse

By David Geers

I'll try not to repeat stuff you may already have read, and concentrate on the highlights of the North Queensland trip.

First of all Ross was running late leaving Adelaide, and then struggling with poor weather on the way up. We, the eclipse mob decided to wait an extra day at Great Keppel so Ross could catch up. He landed at Keppel late afternoon Saturday 10th of November. It was an exciting moment as the mob was now altogether. To my surprise Ross told me that his undercarriage was not retracting and he had flown all the way from Adelaide to Keppel without doing any water landings. So this had to change, Ross found an earth wire loose. I remember how excited Ross sounded over the radio when we took off from Great Keppel and it wouldn't have been more than five minutes before Ross had the plane skimming across the water again. Ross loved landing on water.

The next day was only a short hop to Airlie beach

once again over some outstanding countryside. Now if you're looking for somewhere to retire to, Airlie Beach Air Park should be high on your list, a nice long bitumen runway with lots of beautiful houses adorning the strip, and extremely friendly service both from the airport operators to the restaurant/bar. After a relaxing night in our 4 star accommodation we departed Shute Harbour. Ross and myself tracked for Whitehaven however the 25kt southerly's weren't conducive to water landings. Typical of Ross he managed to find some smooth water to do one of his famous touch and go's at the northern end of Whitehaven.

We continued tracking North to my new best friend's place Paul and Linda Williams where we landed at their airstrip in a cane field. Paul and Linda really rolled out the red carpet and looked after twelve of us for the night. It certainly was a night that I'm sure we will all remember forever.

The next day we continued northward bound. Paul

Hewitt joined Ross for the trip from Paul and Linda's to Innisfail. We had to dodge a few showers on the way up which we jokingly blamed Ross for bringing up with him. Safely at Innisfail we let the rain showers pass. Back in the air again tracking around Cairns air space over Green Island the weather cleared up nicely for a beautiful trip north, we were hoping to land at Cow Bay. After flying over we all agreed that our alternate at Wonga Beach would be the safest bet.

We landed at Wonga Beach in order: Rohan, myself, Ross, and Paul Williams in his Carbon Cub. The rest of the group decided to drive up from Innisfail hiring a 12 seater van, arriving at the strip we discovered a 12 seater van doesn't fit 13. Ross who was keen to be up early to enjoy the eclipse from the air, as was always his plan, decided to stay at a nearby Wonga Beach B&B. Ross also advised that he would be planning to continue North ahead of our planned schedule as he was hoping to be back in Adelaide for some important meetings. So we all said our goodbyes to Ross not thinking that would be the last time we would speak to him again.

The eclipse mob drove to Cow Bay after several wrong turns and eventually found our accommodation. Vaun ensured we were all up in time not to miss the eclipse the next morning. We

all assembled on the beach at Cow Bay watching the sunrise as well as some very interesting people also on the beach who kept us amused. We soon heard a familiar sound of a Rotex 912 engine. Ross was back for one more goodbye with a low-level pass over the beach having about 1000 people

waving him off. The moon was about halfway across the sun at this stage, Ross then decided to get up close and personal with this eclipse he climbed to 7000 feet, this is where I feel I can share the e-mail he sent us before leaving Bamaga early the next morning - the day of the accident.

We stayed another two nights at Cow Bay, this is where the eclipse mob split up with the Buccaneer guys heading back South, Vaun enjoyed annoying the locals at Port Douglas, Rohan and myself along with my first officer Mark, planned to follow in Ross's footsteps travelling to the tip of Australia. We left Wonga Beach on Friday planning a short trip to Lockhart

River and by this stage we were informed that Ross was missing, and we decided to land at Cooktown and then decide on our next plan of attack, to find our lost mate.

Unfortunately it was at Cooktown when we found out the tragic news from Keith Clark. It's hard to describe the empty feeling we all felt. We decided to continue heading north as Ross would have insisted on it. Instead of travelling to Lockhart River which is a dry community, and in need of a few drinks, we decided to spend the night at Musgrave

Dear Eclipse Mob

What a day. We were so lucky with the weather, I hope you all enjoyed the experience as much as I did. It was fascinating to see all the people lined up along the beaches, I did a low pass along Wonga beach, there must have been more than a thousand people on that beach alone. Everyone was excited and waving madly.

I climbed to 7,000 ft and was beside one cloud but had a clear view to the west with just a couple of minutes to go there is that weird sensation in that the sun seems to be bright but it does not seem right, and there is no warmth in it. And then I could see this dark column appear in the west and loom up towards me. Then the sky in the west went very dark and I could see Jupiter sparkling, then suddenly the sun went out, it was strange, it was quite dark but the clouds around me had an odd glow to them, I think they were lit by reflected light from the distant horizon. It was an surreal beautiful experience, I was literally shouting for the sheer joy of it. I have not seen any of the pictures yet, but if they capture even a fraction of what I saw and felt it should be good. Ross

Roadhouse. The next day we flew on to Weipa for fuel. With Ross's last Spot coordinates 78 nautical miles north of Weipa we decided to fly over the accident site to pay our respects. We had hoped to set up some sort of memorial for our mate. Unfortunately at that time the crash site was still a crime scene so our memorial will have to wait - it sure is a beautiful area of coastline where he crashed. We continued on to Bamaga landing at Loyalty beach

where we spent the next few days exploring the Tip, Thursday Island and before heading home. The tip of Cape York is only a short five-minute scenic flight away from this beautiful spot. We then spent the next few days heading back home coastal.

I wish I could find the right words to say to make this right, but I can't. I just know we will miss him a lot.



Ross, a pilot with many hours of experience in a variety of light aircraft, became a passionate seaplane pilot around six years ago. Since that time, his love and enthusiasm for seaplane flying, actually amphibian flying as his aircraft could land on water and land, has become legendary amongst the seaplane community. His infectious enthusiasm and great knowledge of Australian geography inevitably led him to many flights to most parts of Australia's coastline as well as inland areas. In the lead-up to his accident, he had flown to the North Queensland coast with a number of other seaplanes to witness the total eclipse of the sun. A trip that he had been planning for 10 years and a highlight of his flying experiences.

In addition to heading up forensic science for South Australia, Ross (Professor Vining) was a very active member of the Seaplane Pilots Association of Australia being the Editor of their new letter "On-the-Step" and South Australian Coordinator.

In his time producing and editing On-the-Step Ross wrote many entertaining and informative articles. Normally On-the-Step is around 7 or 8 pages, but since it is Christmas and many of us have a few days to relax and, if the weather is no good for flying, read about our passion. We have decided to add a few of Ross's stories on one of his adventures which took him from Adelaide around the Great Australian Bight and up the West Coast to Perth where he was part of Perth's Australia Day celebrations. Later he continued around the West Coast circumnavigating the entire Western half of Australia, but we might get to that later. We hope you enjoy his story.



The Big Bight GASA

Seaplaners - the Big Bight GASA is taking shape for January 2010.

So far we have 7 likely starters. The slower mob (a bunch of 4 Seareys) Brian Dehlisen, Jim Moline, Ted Munkton and me. And a flock of faster Lake Amphibians - to be confirmed.

If you are still undecided just take a look at these pics from my flight over and back last year.

The Great Australian Bight is an unbroken cliff line stretching just over 200kms. The cliff is almost exactly the same height the entire way and there is not a single creek or rivulet that breaks its smooth almost billiard table top surface. It is the longest continuous sea cliff in the world.

The only sealed road that crosses Australia is just a stone's throw from the cliff line for

most of that 200km, and since there are no towns, villages or even single houses they have marked sections of the highway every 100kms or so as emergency landing strips for the Flying Doctor to access road accident victims.

In January you can expect a stiff SE wind which generates smooth lift off the Nullarbor cliff. I positioned myself just seaward of the cliff line and a few hundred feet above it. I could trim nose down by about 7 degrees and get an extra 15kts of ground speed. Then I tried slowly reducing power. I found that with a fuel flow of only 7 litres a hour (28% power) I could maintain altitude with an airspeed of 50kts.

Getting fuel as you cross the Nullarbor is not difficult. There is a road house every 200km - you just land at the dirt strip at the back of the roadhouse (they all have one), taxi around to the pumps and fill-er-up.

Expect to meet some of the locals at the road houses or at the hundreds of kilometres of remote beach you fly along.

And the section of coast between Esperance and Augusta in the SW corner of WA is breathtaking! In one day I made 125 water landings at more than 40 different locations -

rivers, estuaries, estuarine lakes, reef protected headlands and beaches. I was drunk on the sheer pleasure of it all. The only thing that would have made it better was another SeaRey to share it with.

The Big Bight GASA departs Adelaide on 20 Jan to arrive in Perth on 25 Jan

Life is short.

Be there!



The local locals know how to stay cool



The local dingos will greet you



*The longest unbroken cliff line in the world .
It seems to go forever, and is complete with
landing strips on the highway.*



*Refuelling isn't a problem, but sometimes you have to queue
for a while.*



The Big Bight GASA

**Harvey Prior, Kevin Bowe
and Ross Vining**

Our plan was for a group of seaplanes to gather in Adelaide and fly in company to Perth to take part in the spectacular airshow over Perth on Australia Day.

Many were interested but in the end there were just 3 aircraft in the group. Harvey Prior

piloting Lake Buccaneer VH-LAK, Kevin Bowe in Lake Buccaneer VH-ASS and Ross Vining in SeaRey VH-RRZ

The trip around the coast from Adelaide to Perth is not to be missed, a pot pourri of moods with numerous huge shallow estuaries in South Australia, the endless cliffs of the Great Australian Bight, deserted beaches stretching into the distance and the rugged beauty of the Albany area.

The airshow over/on the Swan River next to the Perth CBD made a fitting finale. A truly spectacular location for an airshow, quite unique in the world.

There were aerobatics, simulated dogfights, formation flying by the RAAF, banner towing, helicopters towing giant flags, war birds, a vintage aircraft flyby AND our seaplanes. It is professionally organised, a real pleasure to be part of, thanks to Werner Buhlmann.

The Display Box is quite tight, just 1,600m long by 800m wide. And down the centre, waiting for the Australia Day celebrations, was a row of six barges loaded with fireworks!

The crowd was gathering for the Australia Day celebrations and the fireworks, so people started arriving in the morning, and by late afternoon the foreshores were packed with spectators and there were hundreds of small boats moored around the perimeter. About 250,000 people line the Perth Water Display Box.

Our display needed careful planning to cope with the wind, the turbulence off the tall buildings on the water front, wind-generated chop, boat wakes, fireworks barges and numerous marine navigation pylons. The fact that we had 2 Lakes and 1 SeaRey – with quite different performance characteristics added to the complexity. But, with careful planning and good use of the radio it all went brilliantly.

We had 2 display slots, one at 5pm and another at 7.20pm. The 5pm slot was disappointing. A strong, blustery SW wind generated chop on the water and turbulence off the tall buildings on the south shoreline. This made for difficult flying and even greater difficulty in settling our craft onto the water.

But the 7.20pm slot was sheer magic.

We arrived in the holding pattern to the west of the city 10min early and circled, watching the setting sun illuminate the tall buildings of Perth CBD in a golden glow. The wind had dropped to a light breeze and the white caps that had frustrated us at 5pm were gone.

We watched the preceding acts from our dress circle seats. First the “Turbo Blast”, a handling display of big, fast aircraft, then a pair of helicopters towing giant flags through The Box.

And, then just as the sun set, it was our turn . . .

The Lakes headed around the city to enter from the east. The SeaRey dived down, crossing the Narrows Bridge and passing down the north shore of Perth Water. There was still a light chop on the north shore line and with a slight tail-wind we were fast as we skipped along the shoreline. And then we headed around the protected, shallower southern shore. Here the water was calm with just a light head wind – perfect!

The sun was below the horizon, the buildings were glowing in the sunset, giving the setting that beautiful early evening serenity. We skimmed around the perimeter of Perth Water and the crowd loved it. The subdued light of early evening caused cameras to select “flash” mode and there were dozens of sparkling flashes on the foreshore as we cruised past barely skimming the water.

We did a few circuits and manoeuvres and then climbed out over the Narrows Bridge as the next act, “High Performance Aircraft Aerobatics” entered the box. We flew back to Jandakot airport with the lights of Perth glowing brightly, making a fitting end to an exciting and satisfying Big Bight GASA.



Photos courtesy of Neville Murphy - nmur8396@bigpond.net.au

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