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NANCY BIRD WALTON

A YOUNG PIONEER

*Once a girl has obtained her flying licence ...
she has won her wings, and no piece of paper,
current or expired, can take that away from her.*

(Nancy Bird Walton)

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A newspaper article promised ‘crazy flying and aeronautics’ at the Wingham Air Pageant and Nancy Bird wanted a slice of it. The refreshment tent ladies were so flat out serving tea and scones to the hungry masses they wouldn’t have had time to notice young Nancy’s unruly auburn curls bob through the crowd and approach the well-known air show and endurance pilot Reg Annabel. Excitedly, Nancy handed over a week’s wages – £1 – to pay for her first ever joy ride, and it was in Reg’s sleek new open cockpit Gipsy Moth biplane. The beautiful timber and canvas craft was the sport plane of its day. Reg had just circumnavigated Australia and was now flying the Moth around on the airshow circuit.

This was September 1930 and teenage Nancy already knew she wanted to fly. Having left school when she was just 13, she went to work for her father and uncle at their store in Mount George, on the mid-north coast of New South Wales, where they also had the local cream contract. Meanwhile, her mother stayed down in Manly so the other five children could finish school.

Travelling 30 kilometres east from Mount George to Wingham, Nancy had been full of excitement as she jostled with the rattling cream cans on her dad’s truck. She was three weeks shy of her fifteenth birthday and that night she lay awake dreaming of a bright future – one that most definitely involved flying.

Australian aviation was 20 years old at that time and there were only 60 aeroplanes flying in Australia. Air travel was just coming within reach for the general public. Returned Great War pilots (the few that had survived) continued to fly around the country, doing their best to eke out a living while doing what they loved. Flying.

But none of that concerned Nancy as she smoothed a supple leather flying helmet over her small head and a pair of bug-eyed goggles across her eyes to defend against insects and grass seeds blowing up from the floor after start-up. At only 157 centimetres tall, the

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helmet and goggles were possibly the only visible part of her from outside the aircraft.

From the pilot's seat behind her, Reg let the Gipsy Moth accelerate across the grass until it gained enough speed to roar, bouncing over the ground faster than the cream truck ever could. Deafened by engine noise, the wind whipped around their heads as they sped away, leaving a turbulent blast of spring debris in their wake.

The colourful gathering below quickly shrank to an indistinguishable mass on the edge of the large circular racecourse. The land flattened out to look like a map and Nancy's world, once so certain, was now surreal as altitude brought an entirely new perspective.

Back on the ground again, she upended her purse and immediately booked a second joy flight. This time she paid an extra 30 shillings for the pilot to do aerobatics – a couple of loops, a spin and some stall turns.

Not knowing what to expect, most passengers on a joy flight like this subconsciously reach for their chest to clutch the seatbelt for reassurance. About six minutes into the air, Reg would have levelled out at 3000 feet to perform the first loop. Purring along at 80 knots, he would have poled forward. The engine would roar and a view of the ground would fill the front windshield. It can feel like a death dive, but to Nancy it was wildly exciting. But then, applying full power, Reg would have gently levered the stick back and climbed in an arc.

As Nancy's stomach was pushed low towards her pelvis, her brain would have pushed back against her skull while the horizon disappeared below the nose of the plane. Staring at the spinning propeller and wide-open sky, only the centrifugal force would have held her in place. As Reg pushed the joystick forward slightly, in a heart-stopping moment, the world would be upside down and her stomach would now be up against her ribs. Body light on the seat, the ground would have slid into view like a roller blind from above Nancy's head as

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they came out the bottom of the loop and back level and ready for the second one.

Nancy was absolutely thrilled with the aerobatics. Her flying career as one of Australia's most recognisable woman pilots had just begun. Or it would. As soon as she was old enough.

AS A FIRST STEP, NANCY EQUIPPED HERSELF WITH A COPY OF Swoffer's *Learning to Fly* (first published in 1929), a dark blue book that fits neatly into the hand. Its 150 pages of text and diagrams detail the basics of flying.

The first page explains the impossibility of learning something as hands-on as flying a plane by reading about it from a book. Nothing's changed there in 80 years. But just reading the book was motivating enough for Nancy to return to Wingham in June 1933 when Charles Kingsford Smith took a rest from his record-breaking flights to come barnstorming with his flying circus.

Back then, pilots, usually in groups, often took their fragile canvas, timber and wire flying machines around the countryside, performing stunts and giving joy rides for money. The groups were called a flying circus and the popup events were known as barnstorming (an American term) because pilots would land beside the barn, which then became the venue. The spectators usually stood safely near a barn as the aeroplanes whirled overhead.

Sir Charles Edward Kingsford Smith MC AFC (1897–1935), often called Smithy, was the most famous man in Australia at the time, revered for his wartime prowess and his record-breaking flights, most notably crossing the Pacific Ocean with co-pilot and business partner Charles Ulm. They flew an incredible 11 000 kilometres in three hops of 27, 34 and 20 hours each, navigating to vital pinpoint locations in the vast Pacific Ocean. Having landed in Brisbane, 300 000 people turned out at Sydney to greet them when

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they arrived there. But now, five years and several records later, Smithy had parted ways with Ulm and was setting up his own aviation business at Mascot in Sydney. Kingsford Smith Aviation included flight training and maintenance.

Determined by nature and convinced she would learn to fly, in the intervening three years Nancy had purchased a leather flying jacket, a helmet and some goggles. Barnstorming at Wingham, Smithy's team watched her approach across the field in this get-up and wondered where on earth she'd come from. The stars aligned though when, with all the assurance of youth, Nancy informed Smithy of her intention to learn to fly.

Of course, he invited her to his new flying school because he was polite and she was sweet, and students bring money and Smithy needed it. He probably assumed she wouldn't show. But when the famous Charles Kingsford Smith invites you to learn to fly with him, it would be a great lost opportunity not to appear. Nancy had already decided she would become a pilot and so the timing was right.

Nine weeks later, as her seventeenth birthday approached, Nancy was ready to go and informed her father accordingly. Whether from fear or frustration, her father exploded in a fit of emotion. It did nothing to slow down his daughter.

In her three and a half years at the store, Nancy had almost saved the £200 needed for a pilot licence. Much of it was from her £1 weekly wage and it was topped up from an insurance policy her father had taken out, which matured when she turned 16. Nancy went home to her mother at Manly and for each flying lesson undertook the lengthy trip from Manly to the airfield over at Mascot. This involved a tram and a ferry and ultimately a long walk.

Smithy took Nancy for her first one or two flying lessons (there's conflicting reports and I was unable to locate her logbook) and while he was a brilliant pilot, his time was better spent building the business and pursuing more record-breaking ventures.

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In *Born to Fly*, Nancy says Smithy told her, 'You know Nancy, I don't approve of women in aviation, it's not the right place for them.' However, they became good friends and he often collected her from the city, along with his office manager, and gave them a lift out to the airfield.

There was a lot to be gained just by being in his realm, and the connections she made at his hangar served her well. After her initial lessons, Smithy came and went on other, more serious ventures. Being such a natural pilot, he didn't understand the time it takes for most newcomers to learn and so he handed her over to a more patient instructor – Pat Hall, for whom she also had the utmost respect.

The following two years passed with Nancy installed either in the aeroplane learning to fly, beside the engineers in the hangar or sitting out on the grass under the buzzing aeroplanes watching, breathing in the whole spectacle and making friends. She revelled in the atmosphere, the place, the excitement of being part of the elite group of people involved with aviation. But when it came time to go it alone, she balked.

When Pat Hall offered her the chance to do her first solo, something every student relishes and dreads in equal parts, Nancy refused to go. Had she waited and wanted it for too long? It is an instructor's job to assess the student and Hall certainly wouldn't have sent her if he didn't think she could do it.

Nancy got home and realised what she'd done, then spent a sleepless night berating herself. Shortly afterwards, however, she got back in the plane and successfully flew it around the circuit alone. Within six weeks of beginning her flying lessons, she had her A licence, which meant she could fly the aeroplane but only within sight of the airfield.

As she tried to figure out how to fit in with the men, the diminutive novice pilot later defied the norm and dispensed with frocks in favour of custom-made knickerbockers that enabled her to more easily scramble in and out of cockpits. This was an awkward and

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delicate exercise, which involved straddling the side wall, then lifting the right leg high and squeezing awkwardly down into the seat. There were precious few women around the small airfield, and when she gained her B (commercial) licence, Nancy was the youngest woman in the British Commonwealth to do so. By 1935 she was the eleventh Australian woman to gain a B licence. No-one could dispute her dedication to the task as she rolled up her sleeves in the hangar and undertook the engineering component, which would enable her to manage some of her own repairs and to fly for payment.

There was another woman who already had a couple of years flying experience and she and Nancy quickly became friends. Twenty-one-year-old Peg McKillop, like most other female pilots then, had a substantial private income and simply flew for fun. This put her and Nancy on completely different footings as Nancy knew that she would have to fly for income if she was to pursue her dream, so the relationship might have foundered there.

But, while Nancy's father had been none too thrilled about her departure from Mount George and subsequent career choice, he could see that she was doing well with her flying and he had a change of heart. He and a relative offered Nancy £400 and a business plan was hatched.

Nancy bought a salvaged Gipsy Moth aeroplane on the cheap and had it rebuilt. It was from the estate of Reg Annabel, the man who introduced her to flying. The daredevil pioneering aviator had performed many feats in his career, not the least of which was flying under the Sydney Harbour Bridge – a manoeuvre that was then swiftly prohibited by the authorities.

Applied boldly near the nose of the freshly silver painted Moth was its new name, *Vincere*, which means 'To Conquer' and she had that as her goal. To conquer both the air and the constant warnings she received about the lack of flying opportunities available to women. The purchase and rebuild took all of her £400.

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Route of Nancy Bird Walton's barnstorming and clinic rounds

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And so, operating on a wing and a prayer, 'Big Bird' (Peg's nickname, because she was tall) and 'Little Bird' (Nancy's, because she wasn't) set course in early 1935 for Tamworth – their first port of call on an eight-week barnstorming tour in NSW, during which the only thing greater than society's resistance to female pilots was the determination of the women in the plane.

They departed Sydney in the cool of autumn, with Nancy straining against the seat cushion, squinting through her goggles against the ocean's glint as she scanned the coast for Newcastle, 115 kilometres to the north.

Using only a compass for direction, a watch, and a ruler to measure distance on a rudimentary road map, Nancy had to constantly calculate her time and distance to assess her airspeed, in order to figure out her landing options. The Gipsy Moth could only manage two hours plus 45 minutes of mandatory reserve. At a speed of 80 knots, she could fly about 260 kilometres in nil wind.

The next day, from Newcastle at sea level, Nancy and Peg pushed the flimsy little canvas and timber aeroplane to its limit of 80 knots, climbing for about ten minutes until they reached 5000 feet, the lowest safe altitude for that flight as they tackled the mountains of the Great Dividing Range, which peaks at 4600 feet (1400 metres) to the west of Newcastle, before flattening out towards Tamworth on the other side. In the Moth's open cockpit, they consulted their flapping maps, with Nancy shouting through a Gosport (speaking) tube over to Peg in the front, discussing their course and anticipating their arrival in an aircraft for which brakes were not yet invented.

They arrived safely in Tamworth and were overjoyed when they got their first paying passenger. In doing so, Nancy became the first woman to operate an aircraft commercially in Australia. But rather than thinking about the record books, Nancy had a more immediate concern: paying the bills. She needed to sell those joy flights to keep

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herself and Peg operational. A Gipsy Moth has two seats and so a pilot could take just one passenger at a time.

The money they earned was enough to pay for the fuel and repairs, but the whole venture was really made viable because of Peg's extensive contact list of property owners and friends who hosted them as they made their way around the district.

The barnstorming course was plotted against a calendar of agricultural shows and race meetings. This assured a ready crowd when they landed in paddocks next door. It was a clever strategy devised by Nancy but not always supported by the various committees who watched their annual event lose its lustre as the crowd's eyes (and spending) turned skyward.

As her career gained traction, the public life of Nancy Bird also took flight. It didn't take long for the media to cotton on to her endeavours and *Woman* magazine paid a small retainer in return for its name to be painted from one side of the underwing right across to the other in large black capital letters so it was clearly visible from the ground. It was possibly the earliest example of advertising on an aircraft. Nancy also wrote a regular column for the magazine. Her daring adventures made great reading in the Depression era, when housewives could only dream of such freedom and excitement.

There was certainly plenty of freedom in the wide blue yonder but sometimes the excitement got fairly confronting. It's hard to appreciate today that these women flew into a town or property and then looked for a paddock, road, racetrack or claypan to land on; flying an aeroplane with minimal power and no brakes. Aerodromes didn't appear in great numbers until the 1960s and so pilots would have to assess their landing options from the air when they arrived. If they landed without hitting a stump, fence or ditch, or sinking into a bog, then it was a good day. And if they returned to the airport the next morning to find their lightweight aircraft had managed to stay upright and tied down rather than being upturned by a strong wind, then that was a good day too.

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As Nancy and Peg took in the dozen or so stops on their first tour, some 1100 kilometres from Mascot to Tamworth, Moree, Burren Junction, Walgett, Narromine and back to Mascot, they shared bedrooms, meals and the flying. It was close living, with a luggage compartment measuring just 70 cm long, 60 cm wide and 30 cm high at the highest point – hardly bigger than a picnic basket, or a few shoeboxes – which also had to accommodate tie-down ropes and other essentials. So, it was a carefully selected few items that each packed into a tiny bag. Any smaller essentials were carried within Peg's puffy flight suit.

It was during this trip that Peg met her future husband, also a pilot, when the women landed on his property, Malaraway Station, just south of Moree, NSW. While Peg would remember that flight fondly (as the destination became her future home), Nancy's experience was less glowing. The rough landing blew out the old tyres on the Gipsy Moth and in that moment, the meagre profits were blown as well.

Further along the track, it was a fortuitous meeting in Narromine that changed the course of the barnstorming business. Local entrepreneur Tom Perry, well known for his vision and generosity, took a fatherly interest in Nancy's exploits and offered to underwrite a loan for her to buy a better aeroplane. It only took one more splutter from the Gipsy Moth's about-to-expire engine and Nancy's decision was made. She needed something more reliable, but it created a conundrum.

Should she go more heavily into debt in the hope of successfully creating a business to service its loan? Scratching for cash from joy flights and managing on a marginal income to buy fuel the next day is a precarious plan at best. When Peg returned home to Orange for a spell at the end of the three-month tour, Nancy flew *Vincere* up to Dubbo for a month. Southern Air Lines was just then being established there and Tom Perry had invested £10 000 in the business. He installed Nancy as his public relations person. Her job was to promote aviation to a sceptical public and try to garner interest in it as a viable means of transport. It was a tough sell against the well-

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established and efficient railway, but the flip side was that Nancy, still considering Perry's offer of a loan, was in the right place at the right time for what came next.

Reverend Stanley Drummond, the Methodist minister at Wilcannia, happened to be in town and invited her to Bourke three months later to fly the outback nursing sister on her rounds. It was the break Nancy needed and the 'trial' led to the work she would ultimately be remembered for.

In the meantime, in August 1935, Nancy and Peg began their second barnstorming tour, over the same route as before. They broke their itinerary in September to join a host of other aviators up in Narromine for the regular air pageant held there. It was a chance to reconnect with flying friends over a fun and exciting weekend. Nancy and Peg won a large silver trophy, which, it was suggested, would do well to be filled with champagne at the pub. But the ever-sensible Tom Perry pulled the party back a notch, noting the unsuitability of such a deed on a Sunday.

The other prize-winner from the event was an Englishman who invited Nancy to co-pilot with him on a UK–Australia air race. She was also tossing up whether to join the record-setters by flying herself from Japan to Australia. The reality though, was that she would wake in fright at the thought of flying over water. And money, the great leveller of dreams, prohibited both ventures. Ultimately, the winner was the Far West Children's Health Scheme, which benefitted enormously when Nancy chose to take up the Reverend's offer.

At the end of the second barnstorming tour, in October 1935, the women pinned up their hair, strapped down their leather helmets and flew north from Hillston to Bourke. They made their way from the Bogan to the Darling Rivers over great stretches of timbered country that provided very few navigational references, or options for a forced landing. This gave way to the black soil country around Bourke where they landed in a glorious sunset. It was an exciting welcome and

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Nancy eagerly anticipated the trial run for Reverend Drummond's clinic rounds. Nancy turned 20 the following week, which she spent in company with the perpetually strained clinic nurse, Sister Webb.

If life during the Great War and then a long stint in the outback weren't challenging enough, the poor nursing sister now had to climb into the forward seat of *Vincere*, cocooned by emergency rations and a cumbersome set of baby scales.

For Nancy's part, she was now not only a pilot but a nursing assistant. While Sister Webb attended to mothers and infants at the pub in Louth, the first stop of their clinic tour, Nancy distributed books and comics to the older children. It was so exciting to have an aeroplane land at Louth that the school gave the kids half a day off to go out and have a look at it.

Then came the test, a 75-minute flight north-west to Urisino Station over some lost and lonely country; the 'Never-Never'. In the fading afternoon light, they searched for the Bourke–Wanaaring Road, which on the grossly inadequate road map was just a thin line that followed the telegraph wire. Beyond these two landmarks – the road and the telegraph wire – lay the endless outback, the edge of civilisation, from which it would be almost impossible to establish a position report. With Sister Webb, rather than Peg, now occupying the other seat, Nancy was on her own in unfamiliar and challenging country.

Despite the challenges, they did arrive at Urisino Station, from where the women undertook a one-day, 290-kilometre round car trip so that Sister Webb could minister to 40 children; it was a journey she made every six weeks. Nancy took in the rough corrugated iron shacks set on barren ground and was awed by the strength and conviction of the women who stuck it out there.

In this remote country, 200 kilometres out the back of Bourke, Nancy left the throttle open and was almost run over when she swung the prop and *Vincere* kicked into life and rolled away. In a Laurel and Hardy-like scene, she chased the aeroplane, jumped up,

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reached inside the cockpit and pulled back the throttle to stop the aircraft embedding itself in trees. This wouldn't have happened had there been a second pilot to manage the usual start-up procedure.

The next challenge was getting from Hungerford to Yantabulla. The road kept disappearing under sand drifts that continually swamped it. But arriving in Yantabulla, Nancy's navigational woes paled against the plight of the policeman's wife.

Sick to death of bread, salted meat and black tea, the policeman's wife reckoned it was immoral to station a mother and her children out here at the back of nowhere. There wasn't enough fresh food to make a decent meal for the kids. With much fellow feeling for this poor woman, Nancy and Sister Webb handed over their fresh fruit. As a cinematic backdrop, a canvas water bag hung from the verandah post, impotent against an unrelenting drought wind on a 43°C day.

The travellers dug even deeper then and gifted one of their most precious possessions, their iced emergency water brought from Urisino. It would have been their only saviour if they'd broken down out there, but it was a calculated risk, for the women were almost home and the young family was desperate. Feeling so grateful for the fruit and water, the policeman's wife probably felt like jumping in the aeroplane with them as Nancy and Sister Webb disappeared in a cloud of dust and made for Bourke.

That was Nancy's introduction to the life she was beginning. It was enough to convince her to write to Mr Perry and accept his offer. She would replace *Vincere* with something bigger, more comfortable and more reliable.

Nancy and Peg were ready to head back to Sydney and did so just as the drought broke. Their flying was always heavily dictated by weather; however, they flew home to Sydney in moderate to heavy rain, which pelted them incessantly in the open cockpit.

As if *Vincere* knew its days were numbered, it saved the best for last. On a charter flight over a Sydney polo field, the engine drew its

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final breath, which resulted in a silent descent into Mascot. Regardless of what her jackaroo passenger thought about the forced landing, Nancy was sad to part with the Gipsy Moth. *Vincere* had given Peg and Nancy a lot of fun and enabled Nancy's start in aviation.

Nancy sold the Gipsy Moth and invested in a shiny modern Leopard Moth, VH-UUG. Its enclosed cabin, three leather seats and cooling and heating abilities were absolute luxury. The new monoplane would be like trading a farm ute with no suspension for the latest model air-conditioned sedan with leather seats and power steering. It had been a huge year for Nancy, from buying *Vincere*, followed by two barnstorming tours and finally heading off with a commercial contract in a new aeroplane.

In mid-November 1935, after only a couple of hours cross-training on the Leopard Moth, it was time for Nancy to walk the line – one she'd painted for herself. She intended to fly from Sydney, traverse the Blue Mountains and across to the far west of the state. The de Havilland sales reps waved her off; however, the engineers were convinced that the beautiful new craft would not survive the expedition in the hands of its inexperienced owner. At the time, Nancy had little choice if she wanted to be a working pilot. She was never going to be employed ahead of a man, and there were still plenty of them looking for work. In buying her own aeroplane, she bought herself a job and the opportunity to fly for a living. She now had to make it work.

The sturdier Leopard Moth cruised at 120 knots across the Blue Mountains, smoother and faster than the fragile old *Vincere* ever travelled. It was a lonely ride without Peg, made worse by the news that her friend and hero Charles Kingsford Smith was missing off the Burmese coast.

Arriving in Bourke alone and with limited funds, the generosity of another working woman, Mrs Fitzgerald, the hotel proprietor, helped her out. Mrs Fitzgerald took Nancy under her wing and

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offered her full board for £2 per week. The hotel was home for the next nine months.

Reverend Drummond's parish extended far beyond the railway's end, over lonely isolated country. Out there, an appallingly large number of children lacked government or medical assistance to combat the prevalence of trachoma, a bacterial infection that is still a leading cause of childhood blindness. Bourke was the location of Australian ophthalmologist Fred Hollows work 30 years later and he is now buried in the local cemetery.

Drummond hoped to get grossly disadvantaged children to Sydney where they could be treated properly and where they could stay until fully recovered. This was a different role to the Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS), which had been operating out of Cloncurry in Queensland, 1600 kilometres north, for the past eight years. RFDS had established a broader network the previous year, with a NSW base at Broken Hill, 800 kilometres south of Bourke. Nancy was not connected with either of these, geographically or professionally.

Reverend Drummond wanted Nancy to fly Sister Webb on her regular rounds out of Bourke. At times Nancy carried critically ill patients to a hospital but that was the exception rather than the norm – distinct from the RFDS, which flies a doctor out for more detailed work. Sister Webb was more like a mothercraft nurse doing a regular round to check on the mothers and children. For Nancy, this work would be infinitely more satisfying than touting for joy flights on a barnstorming trip.

The clinic rounds contract was run with the help of a government subsidy of £100 for a six-month trial as a retainer and a guarantee of the same again to be on standby and to ensure this work took priority over everything else. The aeroplane had cost £1700 and its hangar £70. The contract was Nancy's only certainty, but it fell far short of what she needed. To survive the six months, between the

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aero-medical work Nancy was available for charters, usually taking stock buyers and station owners between properties.

The nervous Sister Webb was coaxed back into the aeroplane on the assurance that the Leopard would be vastly more comfortable than the Gipsy, but the summer heat and resulting turbulence did little to reduce her distaste for flight. By Christmas, a permanent clinic was established in Bourke, staffed by Sister Margot Silver, which left Sister Webb to live out her days on more agreeable earthly adventures that didn't involve flying.

Nancy embarked on a regular clinic round from Bourke to Louth – Urisino – Hungerford – Yantabulla – Ford's Bridge – and back to Bourke. It was a loop of about 200 kilometres that arced out west of Bourke. The motoring maps from the men at the local garage weren't very accurate and so a positive position fix often meant landing at a station to ask directions. Without obvious landmarks like rivers and mountains, Nancy was reduced to navigating along the Overland Telegraph line, a single wire on a single line of posts with a clearing either side, and just about the right width to safely land alongside if required. Without radio, the only way to call for help was to scale a post and cut the telegraph wire, then spend a day or two on emergency rations while waiting for a telegraph linesman to show up looking for the fault that the pilot had just created. It was a rudimentary fall-back, but at least it brought hope of rescue within a few days. Thankfully, Nancy never had an accident or emergency.

As she settled into this starkly unknown territory, the maps slowly mattered less and the featureless uninhabited dry country that had at first been confronting became familiar. But it was the fear of a fatality in those wide expanses that made her shudder years later, thinking about what might have been if things hadn't gone to plan. It would have been a lonely demise, as often nobody knew where she was or what her movements were. Drawing on the story of a lost and delirious Aboriginal tracker found 'swimming' in the sand by

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Urisino Station workers, Nancy always carried a survival pack of water, barley sugar, raisins and chocolate. If this could happen to an experienced tracker who knew the country intimately, how much more easily might a newcomer become lost and disoriented?

Charter work was coveted and to fulfil her mandate, she flew one day in thick sleety rain to Narromine. On the 320 kilometre trip, she flew just above the railway line, as she knew there were no hills en route and it was her only visual clue and navigation aid. The only problem was finding another aircraft coming the other way, doing the same thing, but such was the risk in the early days of aviation. Nancy later regretted her naivety in doing that flight. It was one of the tales in her rich collection: farmers giving dodgy instructions that included looking for sheep dung as a marker, flying ill patients, landing on inadequate ground and breaking down.

There was more hair-raising flying at the end of 1936 when Nancy took a reprieve from the outback and entered an air pageant from Brisbane to Adelaide via Sydney and Melbourne. Relishing the reunion with other pilots – Lores Bonney, Freda Thompson, Ivy Pearce and May Bradford – Nancy went on to win and claim the Ladies Trophy by one minute. Much of the trip was scooting along, sandwiched between the railway and the low-hanging cloud. The overall race winner was Reg Ansett, who later established Ansett Airlines.

Just as Kingsford Smith had found, Nancy struggled to convince the government to sponsor her pioneering work. Her contract with the Far West Children's Health Scheme ceased at the end of 1936. It had lasted just one year. Railway carriages returned as mobile clinics and the nurses went back to motor vehicles for their outback rounds. The Scheme still operates with its original intent; however, after Nancy's time aeroplanes never again featured in regular patient care.

Nancy was now without a job, but still greatly in debt and so she shifted 450 kilometres north to the larger centre of Charleville, Queensland, in the vain hope that the government would utilise her

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in aerial ambulance work. It seems astonishing now that she could be turned away when she was prepared to fulfil a need, using her own aircraft and having already gained outback experience.

She was glad to be back in a larger town though, after the remoteness of Bourke. She loved the contact with civilisation in Charleville: a hangar, skilled engineers and the pilots based there with the fledgling Qantas were all important in maintaining her momentum, which was starting to flag.

Other Australian women pilots, Nancy's contemporaries, mostly flew on the coin of their wealthy families and achieved great notoriety. In 1934 Freda Thompson flew herself from England to Australia, financially supported by her family, and by 1936 Lores Bonney had already circumnavigated Australia, flown to England and was preparing to fly to South Africa – all paid for by her husband. Even Peg had departed the scene and gone to England. Colin Kelman followed soon after and as a married couple they flew themselves back to Australia.

In stark contrast to the cashed-up high profile 'aviatrix' of the time, it was expense that forced Nancy, a lone single 21-year-old to again relocate – this time to Cunnamulla on the Warrego River in south-west Queensland.

Cunnamulla was smaller than Charleville but the welcome was huge and Mrs Davis, the publican, provided a rent-free room at the pub. Nancy's existing client base, established during the barnstorming tours, was pleased to see her back in town. So was the mayor who, seeing what both the NSW and Queensland governments refused, went to great lengths to support her by offering his shire engineer for aircraft maintenance.

The district valued her services. The Department of Civil Aviation informally gave leeway for Nancy to operate in a less-than-ideal regulatory situation as her aircraft rarely had the necessary weekly safety certificate for flight. In Smithy's hangar, Nancy had received

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basic aircraft maintenance training but for the more complex tasks she required the services of a professional, the nearest thing being the shire engineer.

Now in her third year of operation, by early 1937 Nancy was quite well known and well regarded. She had no trouble rejecting the romantic overtures of the wealthy graziers of Narromine, and even less rejecting the self-professed bashful bachelor who reached out from Victoria. His was one of many fan letters she received around that time, and it finished 'PS: I am at present learning to fly'. While this was surely flattering, she'd have been infinitely more interested if he were learning to be an engineer. A photo in *My God! It's a Woman*, of Nancy in a frock and pith helmet sitting sullenly on the Leopard Moth's wheel is captioned: 'Desperation – I had engine trouble and the nearest ground engineer was more than two hundred miles away. I would have married the first one to come my way.'

Struggling to see the romance in the debt, engine troubles and fatigue; managing her business without a mentor; flying without insurance; and living as an unsupported single woman finally took its toll. Nancy's seemingly limitless enthusiasm succumbed to the realities of one so young going it alone. The hurdles were too high and she became unwell.

Her initial six-month stint in the outback had stretched to two years and it was Reverend John Flynn, having established the RFDS a decade prior, who took Nancy aside for a fatherly word. Life in the outback was just too tough for a woman in her situation, he said. Famed aviator PG Taylor, who she knew from Kingsford Smith's sphere, echoed the sentiment, and a few years later there were the harsh words of Defence Minister Harold Thorby. He had expressed the belief that women were biologically unsuitable to be pilots – Kiwi Jean Batten and Englishwoman Amy Johnson being notable exceptions. There was no consideration given here that, despite her youth and tiny stature, Nancy had been successfully operating as a

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commercial pilot running her own business. She was well known in Australia and to be excluded from the ranks of the 'notable exceptions' was a direct blow.

Nancy's creeping anxiety finally peaked when she was flying from Sydney to Goodooga on the Queensland border and she encountered menacing low cloud over the Blue Mountains. In *Born to Fly* she says:

... as we got nearer to the mountains I could see there wasn't much room between them and the clouds. Suddenly what I had been feeling for months came to a head – everything inside me revolted against those clouds and those mountains and it was almost as though the machine stood on its tail rather than go into it. So I turned back and landed again at Mascot ... In my heart I knew I could have got through if I wanted to ... I didn't ever want to fly again ... I suppose I had really had a sort of controlled nervous breakdown. I didn't recognise it as that – I really didn't feel anything except a very strong desire not to fly again in that dreadful western turbulence.

Anybody who has spent a few summer days in the west will know exactly what she was talking about. The 42-degree days out there might cool down to 36 degrees at dawn, but then it heats right up again. It is relentless.

There is never shame in baulking at bad weather; in fact that decision is and was applauded. There is an aviation saying: 'It's better to be on the ground wishing you were flying than to be flying and wishing you were on the ground. Even eagles stay in their tree when the weather is no good.' Nancy put the aeroplane in the hangar and went home, dejectedly, to her mother's house in Manly. She meant it when she said she didn't want to fly again. She sold the lot and walked away from flying with exactly the same amount of cash she'd gone in with. Four hundred pounds. It was March 1938 and she was

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23 years old. Nancy didn't return to the outback for many years, but she maintained a fondness for the place and the people who inhabited it.

Nancy needn't have felt so bad though; she had disproven the naysayers and supported herself in commercial aviation for three years. By leaving the dangers of it behind, she became one of the few who lived to tell the tales. She was so well known by then that it was deemed necessary for her to issue a press release stating that she was done with flying. In reality though, she wasn't done with aviation.

Nancy used her £400 to undertake an overseas research tour at the invitation of Dutch airline KLM. She now saw a future not as a pilot but perhaps in some sort of ground service around catering or administration, and collected ideas and information for a Sydney exhibition. From Europe she travelled to America and on the ship crossing the Pacific met her husband to be, Charles Walton. In December 1939, amid news of looming war, major newspapers ran a small item stating that Miss Bird was married in a small private ceremony in Sydney. Reverend Flynn officiated.

The new bride soon undertook work with the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force and says she was invited to England to fly with the Air Transport Auxiliary but was unable to accept due to a war-time ban on women travelling. A second obstacle was the fact that she was married, and in *Born to Fly* comments that her husband and his family had firm views that a wife's place was by her husband's side.

Despite having her wings clipped, Nancy clung to her aviation connections for the rest of her life. Her contemporaries either died or retired from public life but Nancy continued to stand up for the causes she believed in, such as supporting Arthur Butler in establishing the NSW Air Ambulance during the 1960s and putting a toe into the political arena. However, it is her role as the founder of the Australian Women Pilots' Association (AWPA) for which she is most revered.

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During her flying career, as a young woman with few connections, Nancy struggled to meet the high cost of flying. Most women pilots had funding from family or other external sources. She believed that an association would promote camaraderie and support for women pilots.

In a small white envelope postmarked 29 August 1949, Senja Havard (now Robey) received an invitation on Nancy's personal stationery. The stiff white pre-printed card invited Senja to a meeting at Mascot. About eight Sydney women gathered in the timber aero club building that stood where the international terminal car park is now. Against the chink of cup upon saucer, Nancy proposed the formation of the AWPA. In 2016, Senja, aged 90, recalled that anything Nancy proposed was seen as a good idea. And this was definitely a good idea. A year later, on 16 September 1950, at the inaugural meeting at Sydney's Bankstown airport, 35 women became founding members. Nancy was president from 1950–55 and from 1959–60.

The Association still aims to encourage and support women interested in aviation and while flying, to create networking opportunities. In a 1965 article for the AWPA magazine *Airnews*, Nancy wrote:

Once a girl has obtained her flying licence, we are of the opinion that like the boys in the Air Force she has won her wings, and no piece of paper, current or expired can take that away from her.

AWPA brought many women back into the fold and, being around aeroplanes again, many decided to return to flying. For Nancy, it eventually didn't sit well that she was a 'Penguin President'. Penguins don't fly. With a student licence, Nancy decided that she'd be happy to fly with her good friend Maie Casey, wife of the Australian Governor-General, Richard Casey. Maie, or whoever else

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Nancy could hop in with, would do the flying and Nancy was a well-qualified co-pilot.

In 1958 after a 20 year absence, Nancy renewed her licence and was delighted to be given her original licence number. She became the first non-American woman to win a trophy in the All Women's Transcontinental Air Race across America in 1958. This event is more commonly referred to as the Powder Puff Derby.

Her close friend and champion balloon pilot, Jenny Houghton, recalls Nancy's quiet determination. On a 1986 trip to India to speak at an international women's flying convention held at the Taj Palace, Nancy arrived at Delhi airport to find her luggage had been misplaced. When airport authorities deemed it gone for good, she stood her ground and gently informed them that she was meeting the Indian prime minister in precisely two hours and didn't intend to do it in her travelling clothes.

Other members of AWPA who knew Nancy well recall her turning up at their homes with moral support and practical help during some of their trying personal challenges. Her own home was always open to women pilots.

Of all the great pioneering aviators that she had known and worked with, Nancy was one of the few who survived into old age. In Sydney, she was accessible and thrived as an aviation ambassador. She loved getting out, enjoying both the attention and the socialising.

Over time, Nancy distributed her memorabilia to the Australian War Memorial and the National Library in Canberra, and to the Mitchell Library and the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney. She has a road, an airport terminal, a control tower, a Royal Aeronautical Society lecture, an Australian Women Pilots' Association Award, a NSW Air Ambulance King Air aircraft and a NSW Rural Fire Service DC-10 fire tanker named after her. The National Trust declared her a National Living Treasure and she was awarded an Order of the British Empire, an Order of Australia, an Order of St John and an

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Honorary Bachelor of Engineering. Her book, *My God! It's a Woman* went into space with Australian astronaut Andy Thomas. He and his astronaut wife returned the (space-travelled) book to her when Andy was speaking to aviation students by special invitation in the Great Hall of Sydney University. Nancy was an invited guest. Importantly, the new \$5.3 billion Western Sydney Airport at Badgery's Creek will officially become the Western Sydney International (Nancy-Bird Walton) Airport.

While Nancy's legacy seems disproportionate to her actual flying achievements, it isn't just the power of publicity that makes her a household name. As long-time family friend and fellow aviator Dick Smith confirmed, what Nancy did in the 1930s, alone in those conditions and in the face of male prejudice, was remarkable. And standing firmly atop her pioneer pedestal, Nancy used her greatest skill, public relations, to set up the rest of her life. She was available in Sydney for speaking engagements or other opportunities and she used her connections to make things happen. She had also seen the evolution of aviation from rudimentary biplanes through to the most sophisticated Airbus and when delivering a speech, could recall those transitions with good humour and clarity.

In September 2008 Captain Elyse Fordham gently splintered a bottle of champagne across the hull of Qantas's first Airbus A380, VH-OQA, christening it the *Nancy-Bird Walton*. Sporting her trademark triple strand of pearls, the 93-year-old guest of honour sat through Qantas CEO Geoff Dixon's two-minute speech where he applauded her courage, resilience and optimism. She then stood at the podium to make her own speech.

'Fortunately, I couldn't hear all that. I'm sure it was exaggerated,' she said matter-of-factly to a chorus of laughter. 'Qantas announced that they'd name this magnificent aircraft after me on my ninetieth birthday three years ago. I made it my business to stay alive for today's ceremony and I've made it ... I've made it!' she said animatedly.

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Three months later, the same Airbus did a low and slow pass over Nancy's funeral at St Andrew's Cathedral in George Street, Sydney. Inside, her granddaughter Anna Holman spoke of 'Our Mum, our Nan, our friend, our Nancy, a dearly loved member of our family ... who led us with the grace of a glider and the determination of a jet fighter.'

Interspersed among the crowd were pink outfits, accessorised with strings of pearls, Nancy's favourite combination, worn by AWPA members. They continue to benefit from the organisation that was then 58 years old. Its senior commercial airline and RAAF members now enjoy comfort in the cockpit beyond the wildest imaginings of the young Nancy Bird, who had to ask the station workers to remove a fence so she could take off from an isolated barren paddock in the outback. Nancy would have loved their life, but she was too far ahead of her time.