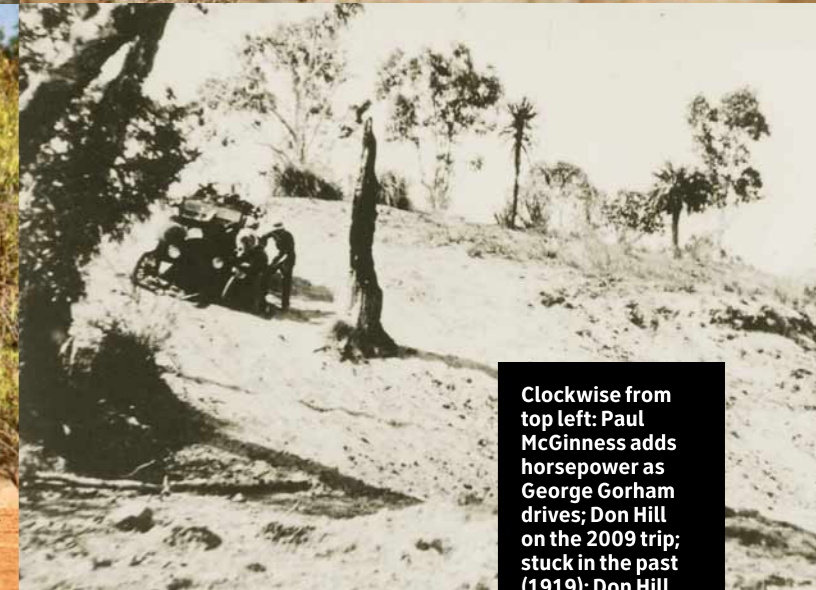


The England-Australia Air Race survey team at Longreach, 1919. From left: George Gorham, Paul McGinness, Hudson Fysh



Clockwise from top left: Paul McGinness adds horsepower as George Gorham drives; Don Hill on the 2009 trip; stuck in the past (1919); Don Hill (centre) and team

# CAR TREK

*Qantas celebrates 90 years by retracing an overland expedition forged by its early pioneers.* WORDS DAVID LEVELL

**T**AKE TWO GAME WWI VETERANS, one Model T Ford and hundreds of miles of car-bogging, axle-cracking, bone-shaking, unforgiving wilderness. How does that add up to one of the world's most successful and longest-running airlines?

Next year Qantas celebrates its 90th birthday, but 2009 marks another 90th of almost equal significance – a pioneering car trip across Australia's rugged Top End, without which Qantas probably would not exist today. To mark the occasion, the drive was re-enacted this year by a Qantas A380 pilot.

In 1919 Hudson Fysh, 24, and Paul McGinness, 23, were footloose ex-servicemen, survivors of the horrors of Gallipoli and the war in the air. Both had transferred mid-war from

the Light Horse to the Australian Flying Corps, which favoured horsemen as recruits, and both had received the Distinguished Flying Cross for valour in aerial combat. They came home determined to reach for the sky and fashion peacetime careers with their hard-won aviation expertise.

Their big chance arrived when the Australian government announced the 1919 England-Australia Air Race – £10,000 for the first Australians to fly from London to Darwin in less than 30 days. Fysh and McGinness tried to enter, but their backer died before they could buy an aircraft. Instead they agreed to undertake an overland survey of the air route between Longreach (Queensland) and Katherine (Northern Territory), setting up landing fields for the competing pilots.

1919 PHOTOGRAPHY: QANTAS HERITAGE COLLECTION; 2009: MEGAN SLADE/THE COURIER-MAIL

They left Longreach in a Model T Ford on August 18, 1919, accompanied by mechanic George Gorham. A .303 rifle was packed to shoot bush tucker and extra petrol was sent ahead to Borroloola by boat. The Model T was boldly going where no motorised vehicle had gone before; this was the first car trip across the Gulf of Carpentaria, partly using a route taken by explorer Ludwig Leichhardt in 1845.

The air race organisers had little idea of just how wild and isolated the Gulf country was. Fysh and McGinness were asked to build the airstrips on hard level ground, clear of trees and ideally "near a telegraph or telephone". Instead, the three men found themselves forever dislodging their car from sand and bogs, coaxing it through thick, trackless bush and nursing it across tidal rivers and more than 40 creeks. Once they borrowed horses to drag the Model T over 32km of sand. Some riverbanks were so steep they had to use a bicycle pump to make the petrol flow upwards into the engine.

However, there were positive encounters. Despite dire warnings from graziers to beware hostile locals, Aborigines

proved invariably happy to lend a hand, rescuing the travellers from boggings and helping them across rivers.

**T**HE HARDSHIPS OF such a journey can never be entirely smoothed out, not even with the benefit of 4WD backup. Qantas A380 First Officer Don Hill knows this first-hand. This year he re-created the landmark drive, taking a restored Model T from Longreach to Darwin. Departing from Qantas Founders Museum on August 18, Hill and his small team reached Darwin on September 8. "It was an eye-opener realising just how hard it was," Hill says. "Those guys really were pioneers".

Despite the modern equipment, Hill's expedition still had to tough out much the same terrain, often off-track and sometimes driving through 2m grass. One creek crossing was so deep the water was above the carburettor intake so, says Hill, "we wrapped it in plastic and pushed the car through underwater." Overall, however, the restored Model T held up magnificently despite its 90-year-old transmission and >

Don Hill and team in their Model T, re-enacting the epic 1919 Top End car trip that gave birth to Qantas



## Conceived to overcome the transport challenges posed by Australia's vast outback, Qantas can truly be said to have been built from the ground up

crankshaft, suffering little more than a single flat tyre and an insect in the fuel line. “The car was brilliant,” he says. “I could have comfortably driven it back to Longreach. It kept on going over harsh rocks and gullies. The main problem was that the narrow tyres bog in the sand.”

Hill reports it was actually the new gear that caused the most grief. “Problems were more to do with the support gear – broken axles on the trailer, tyre blowouts on the 4WD.”

The re-enactment involved visiting remote communities to raise awareness of the historic 1919 trip. Reflecting on the undertaking, Hill says, “I feel a bit more personally connected to what they went through. Out there, relying on yourself, the sense of isolation – it gave me a feeling of how heroic what they were doing was, and what they had achieved.”

**O**N OCTOBER 8, 1919, after 51 days and 2179km, three weary men drove into Katherine. By then Fysh and McGinness had arrived at two conclusions – firstly, the race’s airstrips were better sited further south, and secondly, the brave new world of aviation could overcome the hardships of remote outback travel.

“As a result of the survey,” Fysh later wrote, “we were convinced of the important part aircraft would eventually play in transporting mails, passengers and freight over the sparsely populated and practically roadless areas of western and northern Queensland and North Australia.”

They had seen the future, and wanted to play their part. Fysh and McGinness spent the next few months promoting the idea of an air service for the region; their lucky break proved to be the all-too familiar sight of a broken axle. McGinness chanced upon Fergus McMaster, a Queensland grazier, stuck in a riverbed outside Cloncurry. After helping to free his car, McGinness soon had McMaster convinced that the answer to his transport woes lay in the sky.

McMaster became Qantas’ first major investor, enabling an order of two Avro biplanes on August 19, 1920. The fledgling airline was then called Western Queensland Auto Aerial Service Ltd, registered on November 16 as Queensland & Northern Territory Aerial Services Ltd (QANTAS).

Qantas launched early the following year as a joyride, stock-inspection and air-taxi service based in Winton and then Longreach. On November 2, 1922 the airline’s first scheduled flight took off, a mail service to Cloncurry. Fysh landed the plane at the same Cloncurry airstrip he had marked out with McGinness on the car trip three years before.

By 1935, Qantas was flying overseas. Ironically, Australia’s international carrier was born of a resolve to create what McGinness saw as an “airline for the inland”. Conceived to overcome the transport challenges posed by our vast outback, Qantas can truly be said to have been built from the ground up – starting with the red earth on the boots of two adventurous young men in 1919, on the road trip of their lives. 🌐