

BONFIELD, Beryl

She flew round the world with the greatest of ease

By JULIE NORMAN



Beryl Bonfield, back in Australia.



The single-engine Proctor which flew her from London.

IF you've never met a Proctor III, think of an eagle beside the Sky-masters or Constellations or Lancastrians you have seen buzzing across the sky; an eagle with wooden wings, one engine, storage space for just 40 gallons of petrol, and a tendency to be greeted with "Oh, I say, haven't you pranged yet?" by breezy RAF types in desert outposts.

Because that will give you a fair picture of the plane that brought soft-voiced Beryl Bonfield and two Australian ex-airmen from London back home; in a roundabout trip that lasted exactly five weeks, took in a war, an accident, a stop-over in a Maharajah's palace, and a few other, to quote Beryl, "assorted incidents."

The background that led up to all this for her hadn't been an uneventful one, either. Born in Sydney 35 years ago (35 years that don't show in light brown eyes, red-brown hair) she had four years at Sydney Hospital, then did an Obstetrics and Tressillian nursing course. Equipped with the three nursing certificates and a wish "to help people where help was scarce," she left for Marble Bar in Western Australia—where the thermometer often registers over 100 degrees for weeks on end—and, with another sister, ran the Australian Inland Mission's hospital there for some years.

When the war came in 1939 Beryl joined the AANS (the Australian Army Nurses' Service) and went as a sister to the Middle East, where she was stationed for 16 months with the

9th Division. After a short leave in Sydney she was off again, this time to New Guinea, and after about 12 months in Port Moresby went on to the base hospital at Lae. Back to Sydney again, then six months in Borneo and, after the war, to Japan—"where the scenery, especially in autumn, is wonderful"—and where she spent 16 months.

Finally home, and, she thought, with travels far behind her, Beryl settled into Concord Repatriation Hospital—but not for long. Her younger sister Nea, unhappy at the thought of the long journey to England to join her naval-officer fiance, asked Beryl to go with her. Packing her trunks with long-practised skill, she went.

She Feels Homesick

That was in the middle of last year, and after helping Nea get calmly and beautifully through her wedding and the flat-settling-in process, she got her bags together again for a wonderful, whirlwind tour of Scotland, Wales, and the Continent—a tour that took her through Holland, Switzerland and France, but left her feeling "slightly homesick" and with her mind made up to come home just as soon as she could.

"But, of course, it wasn't as easy as that," she smiled (sitting in my routine office and holding a snake-skin bag she bought in India, wearing a magnificent cameo from Rome). "There was no hope of booking my passage in the normal way for

months to come, and I was feeling very dreary when I walked into Australia House one day to look at the notice-board there. Every Australian who's been to London knows that board. On it are pinned messages and notices and letters, and you always go there wondering if you'll see something from somebody you know; wandering past I saw a notice that went something like this:

Anybody willing to help fly Proctor III home contact Mr. Brown. £150st. needed. Apply early January."

And Beryl, though it was long past January, who had no knowledge of flying, contacted Mr. Brown; who eventually called on her, a lean, dark young man with a typical ex-RAAF moustache. Stranded in London himself (he'd come over from Dubbo, NSW, to try to join the Berlin air lift, but had been unable to do so) Ian Brown had bought the Proctor from Air Force disposals, and now wanted, he told Beryl, two men with some flying experience and the necessary money, to help take her back to Australia. He was sorry, but he didn't think a woman could stand up to the trip.

Beryl said certainly she could; she was a nurse, she'd been in the Army, and she was sure she could be of some help. And after a lot of pleading and downright arguing on the matter, Ian said yes; so, with another ex-airman, Harry Smith, of Sydney (Harry, studying engineering at Sydney University, had worked his

When Australian nurse Beryl Bonfield was in London, and wanted to come home, she took the first transport available—"a wooden plane with one engine." This is the story of her journey.

way to London in the engine-room of a ship in his vacation, and wanted to get home in a hurry), they planned their route—with Ian as pilot, Harry as navigator, and Beryl as guardian of the health and general helper.

Which brings me back to that opening paragraph about a wooden eagle . . . and their journey. . . .

With vaccinations over, visas arranged, goodbyes said, and after many delays (one when an exuberant airman leaping from a large plane put his foot through the wing of Proctor) they taxied off from Croydon Airport on February this year, and arrived in France the same day. From then on their trip began the pattern it was to follow—short hops from town to town, from country to country, made necessary by the need for constant refuelling (remember a Proctor only carries 40 gallons); with overnight stops at some places, several days at others that had special sight-seeing appeal; with breakfast on the ground, a makeshift lunch in the sky, and dinner on the ground again; with wonderful hospitality everywhere, and, in Europe, Harry getting them through airport officials with a flow of French; with Beryl in heavy woollen slacks, two sweaters, and an overcoat, trying to keep warm in a plane with no heating—and her face clean with cold cream, because the water was too cold to use.

"I didn't worry about the trousers though," said Beryl, "even in Rome, where there were so many beautiful women, beautifully dressed, so many new cars, so many wonderful shops, and so much food; until we arrived in Greece—the capital, Athens, to be exact—and I was dragged off to a very formal party still dressed in my pants, pullover and army boots. (I'd only been able to bring a tiny amount of luggage on the plane, and in any case, didn't have time to go back to the airport and change). Everybody was most polite to me and I had every dance—but still, you know how you'd feel in those circumstances." (Yes, I know.)

From Athens, where they saw the Acropolis and the amphitheatre used by ancient Greek actors, they flew to the Island of Rhodes, "where brandy is sold in all the cafes for the price of tea," then had to stay two days in Cyprus because of a gale that almost blew the Proctor off the ground. "It was lashed down at night," smiled Beryl, "but all the same, we had our doubts about seeing it next morning."

Then came a hop over the sea to Damascus in Syria, another one across a desert covered in snow — an amazing event caused by an extremely severe winter — and a stop-

over at a RAF refuelling station; where, to Ian's query about spare parts for the plane, an obliging airman said, "Oh, yes, loads of them around here, you know. Lots of Proctors have pranged in these parts. It's a wonder to me how you keep going."

From there to Basra, on to Bahrain, to avoid the long journey across the Arabian Gulf, and finally, warm India and the relief for Beryl of changing from trousers into the light cotton dirndls and sandals she'd packed. After India (and a wonderful four days spent in a Maharajah's palace) they went on to Burma—and stayed the night within half a mile of a war between opposing tribesmen. "We could hear the gun fire," said Beryl, "and thought any moment we'd be in the middle of it. But luckily, we got out safely."

Next stop was Kuala Lumpur, where the three slept overnight on the floor of the Aero Club; and the following day arrived in Singapore.

It was an easy hop from there to Sourabaya, and then on to Batavia and Bali; in Bali they stayed at a luxury hotel, bought more souvenirs and set off next morning for the island of Sumba.

Stormy Weather

"On the way there," remembered Beryl, "we ran into a terrific electrical storm, and the boys were afraid we'd miss the airfield through it. Luckily we managed to come down with the Proctor still in one piece, and spent that night in the village. But there was no plane fuel available, so we had to fill up with car petrol, plus the gallon or so of fuel we had left, and try to take-off on that. As you see, we managed it."

All this time, incidentally, though the three had had a few alarming experiences, there were no serious mishaps in the air. Or on the ground. But in Timor, driving round beauty spots in a jeep handled by a neigh-

borly local, Beryl was badly bruised when the jeep overturned.

However, with her home such a little way off she endured the bruises, and almost five weeks after they'd left London, she, Ian, and Harry arrived at Drysdale Mission in Northern Australia. From there the Proctor flew busily on to Wyndham, to Darwin, finally to Dubbo, Ian's home.

Journey's End

"Ian wanted to spend some time there, so I didn't wait for the Proctor to bring me to Sydney," Beryl remarked. "I finished the journey in a most unromantic fashion in a train, and rushed in to say hello to the family just five weeks after I'd set out from Croydon Airport. We'd been met at most airports on the way by a batch of photographers—ever since leaving London, so it was rather wonderful to come home quietly."

And that just about finishes the story of the sort of trip most people dream about, single-engine plane or not. Harry has now gone back to his course at the University, Ian is home in Dubbo, and Beryl is working again as a sister at Lithgow Hospital.

On the other hand, it may not be the end. Because when I asked, "Would you really do the whole thing again if you had the chance?" she answered so heartily, "I certainly would . . ." I feel somehow Beryl Bonfield will make the chance for herself—and continue on the travels that have been packed so tightly with color and excitement.



Not a shiek, but Ian Brown in a turban.



Harry Smith, a statue, and Beryl—in Bali.