SOUTHERN CROSS AWARD

TRANS-AUSTRALIA AIRLINES

1946

Trans-Australia Airlines, or TAA, was one of Australia's major domestic airlines from its inception in 1946 until its merger with Qantas in 1992.

Up until World War II, Australia was one of the world's leading centres of aviation. With its relatively small population of seven million, Australia ranked sixth in the world for scheduled air mileage, had sixteen airlines and the industry was growing at twice the pace of the world average.

Successive Australian governments regarded air transport as a matter of national importance. In the words of the then Director General of Civil Aviation AB Corbett "... a nation which refuses to use flying in its national life must necessarily today be a backward and defenceless nation".

As the Second World War came to an end, the Commonwealth Labor Government was keen to ensure vital industries were retained, including airlines. In 1945 the Federal Parliament passed legislation establishing the Australian National Airlines Commission (ANAC), a government owned authority, which would own and operate aircraft in domestic airline services.

A High Court ruling allowed the government to establish a domestic airline, but also ensured that it could not legislate a monopoly. The ANAC was chaired by the famous and formidable businessman Arthur Cole (later Sir Arthur), who was a great believer in business competition and would not have accepted the chairmanship if an airline monopoly had been in place.

The Commission decided on the name Trans-Australia Airlines. Lester Brain was hired from Qantas as the new General Manager. This was a coup for TAA given Brain's experience, skill and administrative ability.

TAA acquired its first two aircraft in early 1946, both Douglas DC-3s. A dozen more of the same type were added in the ensuing months. Soon after four larger, more modern DC-4s were purchased from the USA, and Aubrey Koch (ex- Qantas) was appointed Senior Pilot DC-4 Skymaster with John Watkins appointed Senior Technical Officer. The latter became a key figure in TAA's future growth and success.

Due to a looming federal election, TAA was tasked to be operational before 28 September 1946. On 9 September 1946, Captains Hepburn and Nickels took off from Laverton bound for Sydney carrying a load of VIPs and one paying passenger.

TAA experienced significant growth in the next few years. By August 1949, TAA had carried one million passengers and by June the following year, it made its first profit and was increasingly popular as an airline of choice. In 1951 the new Menzies Government enshrined Australia's Two Airline Policy which provided for competition only between the Government owned TAA and a private airline (then Australian National Airways which later merged with Ansett to become Ansett Airlines of Australia).

TAA's first pressurised aircraft was the popular and robust Convair 240. East to west coast services were offered using DC-4s and the very popular Vickers Viscount was introduced in the 1950s.

TAA soon introduced the four-engined turbo-prop Electra, followed by the revolutionary Boeing 727-100 and DC-9-30. The at-the-time advanced F27 Fokker Friendships were introduced to regional routes and were a boon for many towns and communities.

By the late 1960s TAA had an extensive network criss-crossing the continent, as well as an internal network in Papua New Guinea, and flights from Darwin to Portuguese Timor.

Further expansion occurred in the 1970s and larger 727-267s were acquired.

Following moves to deregulate airlines around the world to bring the advantages of more competition, lower fares and more flights, the Federal Government through the 1981 Airlines Agreement heralded the end of the Two Airline Policy and open skies from 1990.

With deregulation imminent, TAA introduced the first wide body aircraft to the Australian domestic market with the Airbus A300B4 in 1981 and in 1986 the Commonwealth Parliament passed legislation to abolish the ANAC and set up TAA as a wholly owned Commonwealth public company. Long serving General Manager, Frank Ball, AM AFC, retired.

TAA was rebranded Australian Airlines as part of a plan to be more competitive. Its first CEO was James Strong who was instrumental in leading the airline towards the more competitive, deregulated market.

With deregulation in 1990, new entrant airlines came on the scene – the first, Compass, was relatively short lived. Others came and went in the market but the main activity was between arch rivals Australian Airlines and Ansett.

The Government then moved to merge Australian Airlines and its owned international carrier Qantas and this was achieved on 14 September 1992. The merged international and domestic carrier came under the Qantas banner and entity. James Strong was invited back to head up the new Qantas and was at the helm when the government offered Qantas for sale in a public float in 1995. Strong retired as CEO in 2001.

From start up at the closing moments of World War II, TAA quickly became a major force in Australia's domestic airline network with its heritage alive and well in the domestic operations of Qantas today.

The Australian Aviation Hall of Fame proudly presents the 2017 Southern Cross Award, honouring an organisation which has made an outstanding contribution to aviation in this country, to Trans-Australia Airlines.