



RAF FAR EAST FLIGHT

PART 1: UK—SINGAPORE

In October 1927 four Supermarine Southamptons of the RAF's elite Far East Flight set off from Plymouth on an epic adventure to open up Britain's Empire air routes while also proving the reach and reliability of the Service's flying-boats. **TREVOR LIPSCOMBE** opens his two-part account of the FEF with its leisurely five-month cruise to Singapore

THE ROYAL AIR Force's Far East Flight of 1927–28 was a landmark "cruise" undertaken by four twin-engined Supermarine Southampton flying-boats from England to Australia via Singapore — truly an adventure into the unknown in an age when the world was a much bigger place. Acclaimed at the time for its achievements, the Far East Flight (FEF) has largely been forgotten, eclipsed by a cloud of more glamorous contemporary aviation adventures. Now, some 90 years later, the FEF provides a timely reminder of the many changes that have occurred in long-distance flying within the span of just one human lifetime.

On both sides of the Atlantic, the 1920s and early 1930s were regarded as a "golden age" of flying, when "horizons beckoned with a glamour never found again . . . all the world was waiting to be explored by air", as Harald Penrose put it in *British Aviation: The Adventuring Years* (Putnam, 1973). The idolised celebrities of the day

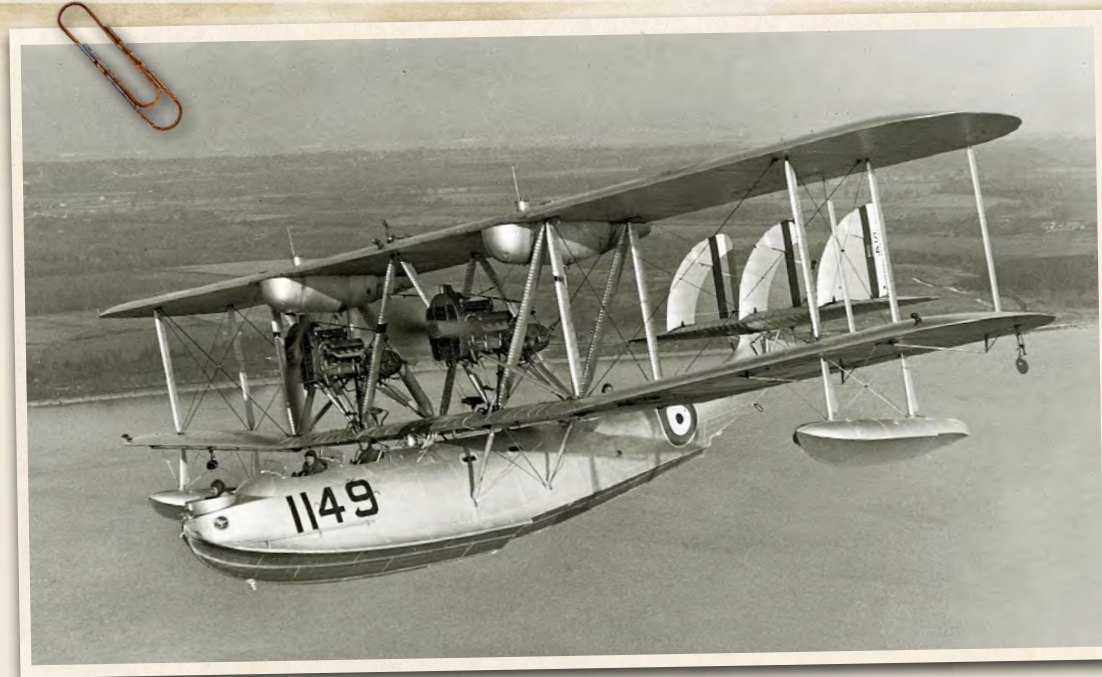
were aviation heroes — Alan Cobham, Charles Lindbergh, Bert Hinkler, Hubert Wilkins, Charles Kingsford Smith and others of many nations — whose world-shrinking feats made headlines in the popular press across the globe. The romance of aviation grasped the imagination of a public traumatised by war and economic upheaval as never before or since.

CASTING A SHADOW

A darker side of this golden age, however, was global political uncertainty, which would culminate in worldwide conflict only 20 years after the "war to end all wars". This renewed fear drove technological development at a frenetic pace in Britain, Europe and the USA, which threatened to change the global balance of military supremacy. In 1925 C.G. Grey, Editor of *The Aeroplane*, having recently visited America, reported with characteristic pungency:

"The US Services regard war with Japan as inevitable . . . Japan is manoeuvring to make the Pacific Ocean a Yellow Lake. And America is not going to stand for it . . . the position of Europe is full of uncertainty and incalculable danger. Aerodynamics have transformed the Channel into a ditch devoid of military value . . . if Germany invades France or Belgium, a situation will be created in which Britain would be open to attack by air."

The growing capabilities of aircraft increased fear of the potential large-scale bombing of cities, but also raised horizons and opened up the



TAH ARCHIVE

ABOVE The Air Ministry initially ordered the wooden-hulled Southampton Mk I "off the drawing board" in August 1924, the first production example making its first flight on March 10, 1925. An anodised light-alloy metal hull was developed for the Mk II, the first of which was S1149, seen here, and which, in company with S1150, S1151 and S1152, served with the FEF.

possibility of long-distance mail and passenger services. Britain was concerned with protecting the outposts of its far-flung Empire, and the sea routes connecting it, from hostile air power. At the same time, speedier air travel would shrink the world, facilitate communication and trade and draw distant possessions closer.

In 1921, after his return from a British Empire tour, the Prince of Wales addressed a dinner for Dominion Premiers: "There is no doubt that the future of rapid Imperial inter-communication lies in the air, and I trust that the day is not far distant when civil aviation will have built a great air organisation on the same lines as our mercantile marine, and that delegates of the next Imperial Conference will travel by the air routes now being worked out. The British Empire has more to gain from efficient air communication than any other state in the world, and I feel sure that no time will be lost in solving the problems connected therewith."

As aviation pioneers began to reach across the world in the 1920s, the lack of landing grounds and the general unreliability of aircraft favoured the development and use of flying-boats for this task. Many major towns and cities were on a river or coast, and any smooth stretch of water became a landing place for an emergency alighting. Like the earlier great sailing voyages, many of these early long-distance flights were exploratory in nature, intended to open up new air routes and test the viability

of aircraft as a faster means of transporting mail, passengers and cargo to distant parts of the world, and of relocating aircraft for defence purposes. Could aircraft survive the rigours of major climatic changes? Were they reliable enough, and could they be repaired and refuelled in remote locations?

Reflecting these concerns and opportunities, the RAF began planning a cruise by a flight of four Southampton Mk II flying-boats to Singapore to foster defence co-operation between Britain and its Empire, and "to gain experience of the problems involved in the reinforcing of points on the Imperial routes with aircraft drawn from England

