

‘CAPTAIN PENFOLD’: A MINOR PROPHET OF AUSTRALIAN MARITIME AVIATION

In October 1913, at the time of the first RAN fleet entry into Sydney,¹ naval aviation was at a very early and theoretical stage and no aircraft took a formal part in the ceremony. However, the following report did appear in the *Sydney Morning Herald*'s coverage of the fleet's arrival:

A balloon ascent at Watson's Bay - a beautiful ascent and descent - for a minute or two held the attention of the people, who in their thousands were crowding the foreshores and the boats that lay within the harbour, and perhaps it also interested the crews of the warships, for the balloonist was throwing bombs down from high up in the air to demonstrate its possibilities in war time...²

The balloonist was Vincent Patrick Taylor (1874-1930), better known as ‘Captain Penfold’, a Sydney boy and a member of an industrious and apparently successful family of merchants. His brother, George (1872-1928), another aviation pioneer, worked with Lawrence Hargreaves on his gliding experiments and on 5 December 1905, was probably the first to fly a heavier-than-air, non-powered aircraft in Australia.³ Four years later, George's wife, Florence Taylor, OBE (1879-1969), an architect and engineer, became the first woman in Australia to emulate this feat, using a glider of her husband's design and build, at Narrabeen.

Rather than fly gliders, Vincent Taylor decided to become a balloonist and parachutist. By 1905, he was already offering an aerial pamphlet delivery service at £5 per 1000 and his clients included many Sydney businesses. He also made well attended display balloon ascents at Randwick, Clontarf, Balmoral and Wonderland City.⁴

At the end of 1906, Taylor signed on as a deck-hand on a ship sailing for San Francisco; his objective was to learn more about ballooning and parachuting from the professionals then working at Oakland. He introduced himself to the resident balloonist as ‘Captain Penfold, the Australian parachutist’, and worked in San Francisco with Thomas Scott ‘Captain Tom’ Baldwin, the inventor of the flexible parachute and builder of the first practical dirigible in America.⁵ Perhaps significantly, a later student of Captain Tom was General ‘Billy’ Mitchell, an early air power advocate best known for his bombing demonstrations against obsolete battleships.

Taylor made rapid progress, and it appears likely that during this period he also learned much about the design of both parachutes and balloons and the materials and processes involved in their manufacture. His involvement in ballooning brought him to public notice and, sponsored by the *San Francisco Examiner*, on 6 May 1908 he made the first of several ‘attacks’ on the US Navy's Atlantic Fleet (President Theodore Roosevelt's Great White Fleet) as it entered San Francisco. After launching in his coal-gas filled balloon he climbed through cloud passing over the fleet and then from about 2000 metres parachuted into the Bay. He had to be cut free of his parachute by a boat's

crew from USS *South Dakota*, but on 11 May repeated the feat at night. Ever the showman, the darkness enabled him to use various pyrotechnics and flares to simulate ordnance dropped upon the fleet as he descended.⁶

Taylor returned to Australia in late 1908 and began making parachute descents every Sunday at Clontarf. Hanging precariously from a trapeze, he used an aneroid barometer to determine his altitude and usually jumped from about 1000 metres. He called his new balloon the ‘Baldwin War Balloon’ and used a red, white and blue parachute of his own manufacture named ‘Empire’. Taylor accepted sponsorship from businesses and local government and usually included the Australian flag in his displays. His ‘military’ stage costume included white pants, a gold braided blue coat and gold braided peaked cap and he wore a curled and waxed moustache.

His success allowed Taylor to establish a factory in Castlereagh Street, Sydney, to manufacture balloons and parachutes. A balloon made of Japara silk cloth weighed some 100 kilograms and cost £45. A parachute cost £14. He took his display to many regional towns in New South Wales and Victoria and appears to have often donated a portion of the takings to charity.

In late 1909, Taylor went into partnership with his brother and established what has been claimed to be the first aeroplane factory in the southern hemisphere.⁷ The enterprise opened in Surrey Hills and volunteers began assembling eight ‘war kites’ and one large aeroplane. The aircraft, named ‘Building Australia’, was powered by a 30 HP engine made by Gibson & Son, Balmain.

Calling himself ‘The Australian Aeronaut’, Taylor presumably had the ‘Building Australia’ in mind when he enquired about an Australian Government competition to develop an aeroplane suitable for military purposes and capable of carrying two persons and ‘poising’ in the air. No one, however, ever claimed the £5000 prize on offer.⁸ Instead, in December 1910, the ‘Building Australia’ was advertised as an attraction for the first aviation carnival, held at the Royal Agricultural Society Grounds in Sydney. Unfortunately the aeroplane did not fly and Taylor entangled his balloon in overhead wires. The Taylor aeronautical factory does not appear in the records thereafter.

Taylor went to England in 1912 to get his pilot's licence in conventional aircraft, and he graduated from the Bristol School, Salisbury Plains, on 3 December 1912. While in England he fitted in some balloon ascents and parachute descents including a well publicised ‘Santa Claus’ jump for a chocolate firm. The company received publicity beyond expectations for this flight, since due to a number of emergencies the flight lasted for two days. The two remaining passengers were eventually rescued, but not before they had ditched their costly movie cameras to prevent the balloon falling into the sea.

On his return, Taylor made what may have been Australia's first BASE jump.⁹ To test out an emergency parachute he had designed for airmen and for escaping from high buildings, on 5 June 1914 he jumped from the North Sydney Suspension Bridge linking Cammeray and Northbridge, at a point 50 metres above the mudflats of Middle Harbour. The canopy opened in 30 metres, and Taylor was reported as landing exactly seven seconds after releasing the patent catch by which the canopy was attached to the bridge ironwork.¹⁰ On 30 June 1914 he made a similar jump from a 12 storey building off George Street in Sydney's central business district.¹¹

Although over age, in World War I Taylor joined the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), serving as a driver for two years with the 10th Battery, 4th Field Artillery Brigade, Second Division. He apparently applied for flying duties but was rejected due to a lack of available positions. He was hospitalised for a short period after the Battle of the Somme and then returned to Sydney where he was medically discharged in 1917. The examining doctors found that his disabilities had been caused by his parachuting and ballooning activities before joining the AIF, and so denied him a war service pension.

Taylor returned to civilian parachuting and supported Australia's war effort through recruiting displays in Sydney and around regional Australia.¹² Until 1918 he jumped as 'Captain Penfold', but reverted to his own name after the war. Returning to the United States in the 1920s, he continued his stunt career, making parachute jumps off bridges over the Niagara Falls River and the Snake River Gorge in Idaho. Taylor also invented and manufactured a floating dry suit very similar to the now superseded Fleet Air Arm 'Goon' suit. He used this to travel down white water rivers, and on at least one occasion simulated a swimmer attack on US Fleet units.¹³



*Vincent Taylor in his floating dry suit.
(AusPostalHistory.com)*

Taylor's views on parachuting are interesting and were best expressed in an interview published in 1928:

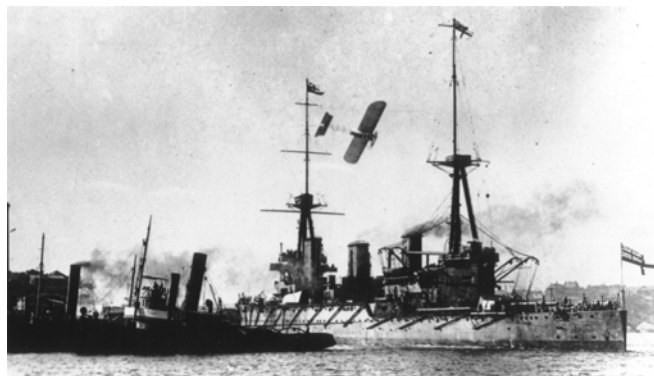
Parachuting is poetry of motion. In an airplane, one is being dragged along. In a free balloon, he is pushed by the wind, but in a parachute he is supported and carried down like a babe in its mother's arms.¹⁴

Time, however, was running out for balloon parachutists and other 'daredevils', as the Great Depression reduced money spent on such spectacles, and powered aircraft

attracted greater attention. In 1930, apparently destitute he was hospitalised in the charity ward of a Jacksonville hospital. He died alone aged 56, but was buried with military honours, his casket being draped with the Union Jack and the Florida National Guard providing an escort.

Although a musical concerning some of Taylor's exploits was performed in Sydney in 1997, there are no known commemorative plaques or memorials.¹⁵ Relegated to the ranks of eccentric showmen, his contribution to Australian aviation has been overshadowed by the achievements of others. This is arguably a grave misjudgement. He was undoubtedly a pioneer, who at great personal risk successfully and routinely demonstrated the edge of what was possible. Taylor was also a fiercely proud Australian and, perhaps above all else, an enthusiast for the development of local aviation.

As a minor prophet of maritime aviation ('minor' because it appears not many took serious notice) Taylor, well in advance of others, highlighted the need for warships to adapt to meet the ever changing threat environment, particularly from the air. Moreover, he pioneered the use of parachutes well before these became an accepted safety system. Noting his role during the Fleet Unit's first entry into Sydney in October 1913, it is perhaps not asking too much to spare him a thought during the centenary celebrations.



A Bleriot monoplane piloted by Maurice Guillaux, banks over the fleet flagship, HMAS Australia, in July 1914. The RAN provided a standby search and rescue service for Guillaux during his early flights. Maritime aviation progressed rapidly. Less than four years later, Australia would carry two aircraft for fighting and reconnaissance duties and a 4-inch gun for anti-aircraft defence. (RAN)

- ¹ This Semaphore is based on research and writing by Captain Cris George, RAN (Rtd), with assistance from Dr David Stevens.
- ² *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 October 1913.
- ³ www.ctie.monash.edu.au/hargrave/taylor_bio.html
- ⁴ *The Sun*, 24 September 1969.
- ⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Scott_Baldwin.
- ⁶ Neville Parnell & Trevor Boughton, *Flypast, A Record of Aviation in Australia*, AGPS Press, Canberra, 1988, p. 6.
- ⁷ Parnell & Boughton, *Flypast*, p. 10.
- ⁸ www.auspostalhistory.com/articles/104.shtml
- ⁹ Buildings, Antennas, Spans [Bridges] & Earth [Cliffs].
- ¹⁰ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 June 1914.
- ¹¹ *The Evening News*, 30 June 1914.
- ¹² 'Recruiting in Benalla Gardens', *North Eastern Ensign*, 14 June 1918.
- ¹³ www.auspostalhistory.com/articles/104.shtml
- ¹⁴ *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 7 August 1928.
- ¹⁵ www.nushow.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=16:a-micro-review-of-some-oz-musicals@catid=3:reviews&Itemid=12.



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