

THE LASCONDOR LANDS AT THE OLD BOURKE AERODROME

In the golden age of Australian aviation, when the vast distances of the continent presented both challenge and opportunity, a remarkable aircraft made a brief but memorable appearance at the Old Bourke Aerodrome. On 22 July 1930, the throaty roar of three radial engines announced the arrival of something truly special—the Lascondor, Australia's ambitious answer to commercial air travel, piloted by Captain Frank Neale on a gruelling test flight from Melbourne to Darwin.

The story of the Lascondor begins with Herbert Joseph Larkin, a decorated World War I pilot whose DFC and Croix de Guerre avec palme spoke to his courage in combat. Larkin's vision extended beyond the battlefield; he saw Australia's future written in the skies. His Larkin Aircraft Supply Company Ltd (LASCo), evolved from the earlier Larkin-Sopwith Aviation Company, represented one of the nation's pioneering aviation enterprises at a time when the industry was still in its infancy.

By the late 1920s, Larkin had recruited William Stancliffe Shackleton, a distinguished British aeronautical engineer, as chief designer. Shackleton's first creation for LASCo was the six-seat Lascoter, which took to the air on 18 May 1929, powered by a Siddeley Puma engine. But Shackleton and Larkin had grander ambitions.

In late 1929, at LASCo's new facilities on Coode Island, Victoria, Shackleton began designing something unprecedented in Australian aviation—a large three-engine commercial aircraft. The Lascondor, as it would be known, was designed to carry seven passengers with a payload of 602 kilograms. In a clever display of engineering economy, Shackleton incorporated components already designed for the Lascoter, including the mainplanes from what would have been the second Lascoter.

The prototype emerged as a high-wing braced monoplane of composite construction—wooden mainplane and tail surfaces married to a steel-tube fuselage featuring innovative weldless patented joints, all covered in fabric. Three Armstrong Siddeley Mongoose radial engines provided the power, their distinctive sound becoming the Lascondor's calling card.

By 23 March 1930, the Lascondor was ready for testing. Captain E.W. Leggatt took the controls for its maiden flight on 2 April 1930, and the aircraft performed admirably. The ceremonial christening came on 28 April 1930, conducted by Lady Somers, wife of Victoria's Governor and herself an accomplished aviator. Her words rang with optimism: "I christen this machine the Lascondor. May she fly long and well... a credit to Australian design and workmanship." She then joined other distinguished women for an inaugural flight over Melbourne, even taking the controls herself.

Lady Somers is remembered for her stopover at Bourke on her outback expedition in her Gipsy Moth on 1st July 1930.

But triumph quickly gave way to setback. The Lascondor ground-looped at Coode Island when an undercarriage radius rod failed, causing extensive damage. Plans to use the aircraft for the MacKay Expedition to central Australia had to be abandoned. However, LASCo's engineers

proved their mettle—by 1 July 1930, just three months after the christening, the Lascondor was airworthy again, its Certificate of Airworthiness having been issued on 3 July.

It was during this period of renewed confidence that Captain Frank Neale embarked on his ambitious test flight from Melbourne to Darwin, a journey that would demonstrate the Lascondor's capability across Australia's demanding interior. On 22 July 1930, the aircraft descended toward the Old Bourke Aerodrome, a vital refuelling point in the vast outback.

An enthusiastic local photographer captured the moment, preserving for history this rare glimpse of Australia's only tri-engine monoplane. For the people of Bourke, accustomed to the isolation of their remote location, the arrival of such a sophisticated aircraft must have seemed almost miraculous—a tangible symbol of how aviation was shrinking their vast continent.

The Lascondor's subsequent flights through Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, and the Northern Territory proved the soundness of Shackleton's design. Jimmy Larkin would later boast that the aircraft never required a single modification during its operational life. In one remarkable demonstration of reliability, it flew over Canberra on just two engines while carrying Prime Minister Scullin and the Minister for Trade and Customs—a testament to both the aircraft's engineering and the crew's confidence.

Tragedy struck again on 4 November 1930, when the Lascondor was damaged at Coffs Harbour during a flight from Roma, Queensland to Melbourne. The aircraft had to be shipped back to Victoria for repairs. But by now, the Great Depression had tightened its grip on Australia's economy. LASCo, like so many enterprises of the era, found itself struggling financially. Though repairs were eventually completed and test flights resumed from Camooweal in April 1933, the company's fortunes continued to decline.

In 1935, LASCo ceased trading. New England Airways acquired the assets, but the Lascondor's flying days were over. The aircraft was abandoned at Camooweal aerodrome, a lonely monument to ambition undone by economic forces beyond anyone's control.

The Lascondor remains unique in Australian aviation history—the only tri-engine monoplane of its type ever built in the country. Substantial remains, including two of its three engines, have survived in private hands, physical remnants of a bold dream that came tantalizingly close to success.

That photograph taken at Bourke captures more than just an aircraft on a stopover. It freezes a moment when Australia's aviation pioneers dared to compete with the world's established manufacturers, when the nation's engineering prowess produced something genuinely innovative. Though only one Lascondor ever flew, it proved that Australian design and workmanship could indeed produce aircraft worthy of Lady Somers' blessing—machines that could fly long and well across one of the world's most challenging



The Lasco Lascondor at the Old Bourke Aerodrome



The Lasco Lascondor



The Lasco Lascoter