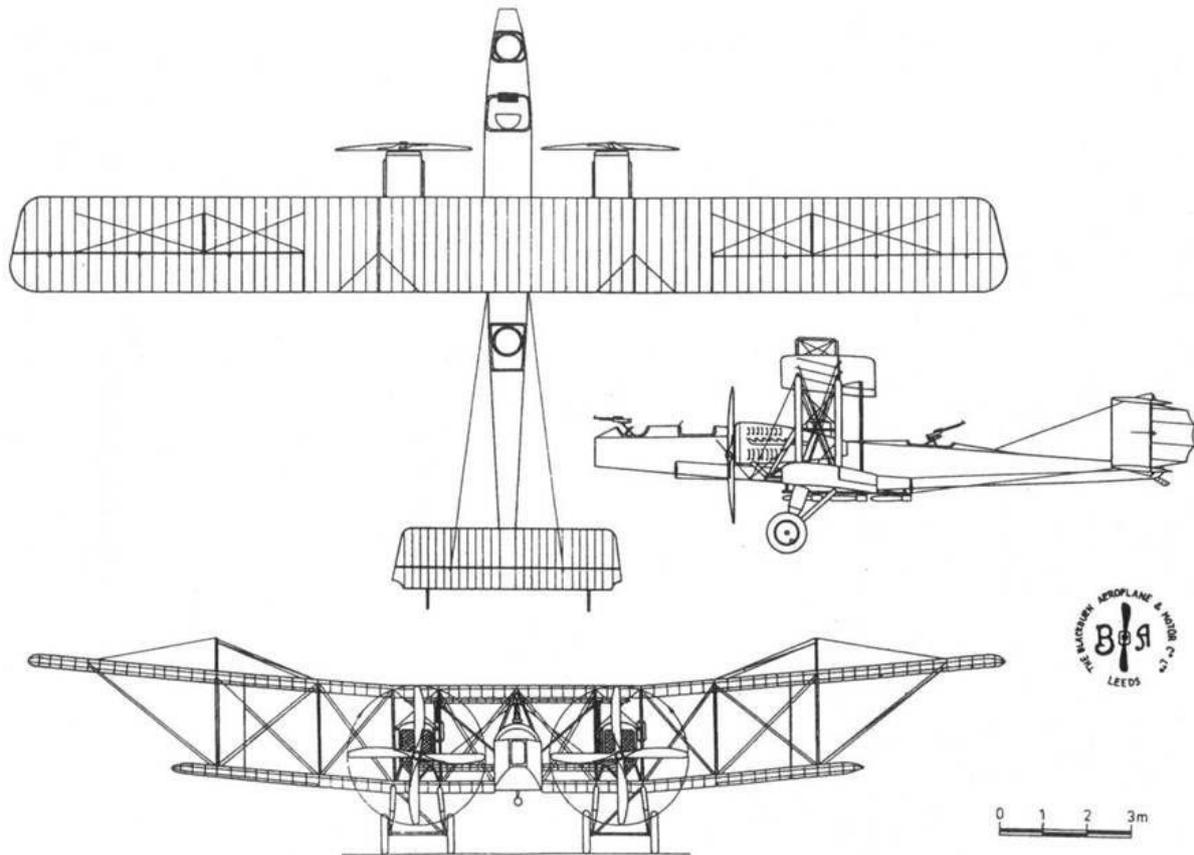


## Where in Crete is the Blackburn Kangaroo?



### Drawing of the Blackburn Kangaroo.

The inmates of the Canae Mental Asylum were used to the sights and sounds of aircraft. From their tiny barred windows they could look out across the aerodrome at Suda Bay on the Mediterranean island of Crete.

But on the morning of 5 December 1919, many of them thought their last moment had arrived. Careering across the grass and heading straight for their bleak stone prison was a huge biplane bomber. With one engine seized and tyres punctured, the pilot was desperately trying to avoid the low brick wall surrounding the asylum.

Patients walking in the gardens ran for their lives as the aircraft loomed over the walls. Suddenly the plane's wheels struck a small embankment and the aircraft stopped. Tipping forward on its nose, the tail rose high in the air. And there it stayed.

Four men climbed cautiously down from their cockpits, reaching the ground at the nose where large letters spelt out the name 'Kangaroo'. The attempt by Brisbane pilot Valdemar Rendle and his crew to win the great 1919 England-Australia Air Race had ended. This is the story behind his little-known flight. Doomed to failure at its start by government-imposed delays, and at its end by unknown saboteurs.

Valdemar Rendle, the son of a Brisbane doctor, was born in 1897. Throughout his schooldays at the Taringa State School and Brisbane Grammar he closely followed man's early feeble efforts at flight. Determined to fly he took up gliding, and in 1915 was a founder member of the Queensland Volunteer Gliding Civilians. The First World War had enveloped Europe and Rendle tried to enlist in the Royal Flying Corps. He was turned down due to defective eyesight. Discourage, but as determined as ever, he joined forces with Major Thomas McLeod who, with the help of the Brisbane *Courier*, had formed a flying school. Their aircraft, a Caudron biplane subscribed through a special newspaper fund, was the first aircraft built in Queensland. It was presented to the club by the editor, J. J. Night in November 1915. The *Courier's* Aeroplane Club trained eight pilots. These men made their way to England and were welcomed by the Royal Flying Corps. Among the last group to embark from Brisbane was the 18-year-old Rendle. Enlisting as an Air Mechanic he was awarded his Wings and promoted to Lieutenant in March 1917, He was later awarded the Air Force Cross (AFC) during operations as a ferry pilot delivering aircraft to the battle front.

Following the Armistice he worked as a test pilot before joining Olly's Air Service flying airmail on the London-Paris run. In March 1919 he heard of the Australian Government's offer of £10,000.00 for the first successful flight from England to Australia by an Australian pilot. A few months earlier Lieutenant Rendle had joined forces with two other ex-R.F.C. pilots, Lieutenants Cyril Maddocks and Charles Kingsford Smith. Purchasing two war surplus De Havilland's the trio had formed an aerial business doing whatever work they could find. There was precious little. Their plans were to eventually buy more converted wartime aircraft and set up a training school near Sydney. In May 1919, the Blackburn Aircraft and Motor company announced that they were willing to enter one of their converted Kangaroo bombers in the air race from England to Australia. Desperate to attract peace-time business, aircraft manufacturers all over England took up the challenge. Kingsford Smith and Maddocks considered the aircraft available and selected the Kangaroo as the most suitable machine. They approached the manufacturers only to find that their friend Rendle had already been promised the aircraft. They were offered the positions of co-pilot and engineer. They immediately accepted.

**The original Kangaroo team on the day of their announced departure before 'red tape' stopped their flight; from left to right are: Charles Kingsford Smith, Lt. Cyril Maddocks and Valdemar Rendle, all AFC pilots. Of this trio, only Rendle ended up in the Blackburn Kangaroo.**



The Blackburn R.T.1 Kangaroo was built as a reconnaissance torpedo bomber and saw service on anti-submarine patrol towards the end of the war. During convoy protection flights in the North Sea, they attacked eleven German U-Boats, sinking two and damaging several others. Powered by two Rolls Royce engines, it carried a load of 1500 kilograms. Cruising at 136 kph. it had a range of 2400 kilometres. Early models were equipped with a special machine gun housing resembling a pouch, hence its unique (and in this case apt) name.

The first week in June the Kangaroo was ready to set off. Their departure was announced in the papers, when the trio received an incredible and controversial setback. The Australian Government had asked the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale in Paris to vet all race entries and decide on their suitability. The Fédération advised the organisers not to allow the Blackburn team to compete. It had decided that no member of the crew had sufficient navigational experience to safely guide the aircraft to Australia. Viewed today, in the light of Smithy's subsequent pioneering flights, it was an ironic decision and one that members of the Fédération may well later wished to forget.

The bitterly disappointed team appealed personally to Prime Minister Billy Hughes, who was in London for the Peace Conference. The 'Little Digger' refused to alter the unpopular decision. He told the amazed press, 'I talked to the boys and found them full of eagerness. But none of them knew Anything about navigation ... We feel responsible for the safety of these young fellows and could not let them start on a voyage half-way round the world ...'

It seems that in fact the Kangaroo crew had equal if not more experience than other crews accepted for the race. Theories have been advanced that the Australian Government wished to delay the Kangaroo's start, as no other competitor was within months of being ready to set out. It appears a quite feasible deduction.

The Prime Minister then promised the trio to 'delay' the start until they could receive sufficient training and gain navigational experience.

But the delay also gave the other teams time to prepare and to find suitable aircraft. Lieutenant Rendle enrolled at the Andover Navigational school while the other crew members took technical courses. Over the following weeks there were problems between Smithy and the Blackburn Company. In August he and Maddocks were negotiating with another company to fly its aircraft.

With Rendle still the choice as the Kangaroo's pilot a new crew was formed. Lieutenant D. R. Williams, another ex-Australian Flying Corps airman was the new co-pilot. Reg Williams, like Rendle, had been 'mucking around England' awaiting expatriation since the war's end. Born in Albury in 1896 he was the son of a schoolteacher. His interest in aviation had grown along a similar path to that of his fellow crew member, Rendle. In 1910 he built his first full scale glider, in which he soared to the dizzying height of eleven feet towed by a willing team of young friends pulling on the ropes!

Later models reached twenty feet and covered quite long distances. In 1916 he was a member of the first course to graduate from the new flying school at Richmond in New South Wales. When the second course commenced, Williams—with the grand total of three hours' solo flying under his belt—was an instructor on the school's Curtis J.N.4 trainers. In 1917 he was commissioned in the Australian Flying Corps and sailed for England where he became a close friend of Ray Parer, destined to become a rival in the post-war air race. Williams, like Rendle, was posted to a ferry unit and despite numerous requests did not get to France until a

few days before the Armistice. He was still in the A.F.C. —attached to the Graham White Aircraft Company—when he was invited to join the Blackburn Crew,



*For the vital job of flight engineer of the gallant and bewilderingly vulnerable machine Lieutenant Garnsey St Clair Potts (1897-1959 (left), another ex-Flying Corps man, was chosen. The search for an experienced navigator, satisfactory to the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale and the Australian authorities ended when Williams introduced Captain (later Sir) Hubert Wilkins (right) to the team. Their new compatriot brought a wealth of navigation and meteorological expertise gained as a lead member of Stefansson's Polar Expedition.*



*meteorological expertise gained as a lead member of Stefansson's Polar Expedition.*

With the crew finally approved and ready, Blackburn unwittingly added to the delay. Re-equipping the aircraft with more powerful engines took considerably longer than anticipated. On 21 November 1919 the Kangaroo was wheeled out onto the airfield at Hounslow. All was ready. But the frustrating delays of the previous five months had changed them from odds on favourites to rank outsiders. Already three other aircraft were ahead of them.

Etienne Poulet, France's leading pilot, had unofficially joined the race. Though not a contender for the prize money, he hoped to bring to French aviation the honour of being first to complete the mammoth flight. He left Paris on 10 October and had already reached India. However, his frail Caudron biplane was grounded in need of major repairs.

Captain C. Matthews, an Australian Flying Corps pilot, had left Hounslow on 21 October and had reached Cologne in his single-engined Sopwith Wallaby, only to be grounded by heavy snow. He was still there.

Ross and Keith Smith in a Vickers Vimy bomber (the eventual winner) had taken off a week earlier and having crossed Europe before the weather broke, were approaching Baghdad as the Kangaroo was taking off. Though a week behind, the crew were still confident that with luck they could overtake the readers.

They were in high spirits and joked and laughed with onlookers as the engines were started. A large crowd was on hand to farewell the Blackburn entry. Rendle opened the throttles and the heavily-laden aircraft lumbered away across the grass. The Brisbane *Courier* reported the next day, 'As the machine bounded forward the airman's cheer could be heard above the roar of the engines.'

**Right, the Blackburn crew.**



Once airborne the aircraft circled the crowd, the crew waving repeatedly. Its huge registration letters G-EAOW—the Blackburn’s private markings, translated by the crew to mean ‘England - Australia On Wings—were visible for several minutes. Lieutenant Rendle turned away and headed for France.



**The Blackburn Kangaroo at Hounslow on the day prior to leaving for Australia. Rendle (shown here) had just delivered the aircraft from the Blackburn factory.**

Many of the crowd had witnessed the departure, two weeks earlier, of another Queensland pilot, Captain R. M. Douglas of Charters Towers. He and navigator Ross had been killed within minutes of leaving the ground when their Alliance ‘Endeavour’ aircraft had mysteriously dived into the ground next to the Surbiton Cemetery.

Once out over the channel the Kangaroo ran into teeming rain. While Rendle and Williams concentrated on keeping a steady course Captain Wilkins carefully, plotted their progress. Engineer Potts anxiously watched and listened to the steady roar of the engines. It was also his job to keep transferring fuel from the specially-fitted auxiliary tank.

Reg Williams recalled years later the problems that beset the crew, located as they were in separate open cockpits staggered back from the nose of the converted bomber: ‘It was bitterly cold all the time. On the first day out from England we flew for about four hours in a blinding snowstorm with no way of navigating except by compass. The manufacturers in England had given us all the appropriate clothing and we were rigged up in flying suits made of oilskin, several pairs of long socks, coats and helmets in an attempt to keep out the cold’.

Despite the many layers of protective clothing the men of the Kangaroo suffered terribly as did those in the other competing aircraft from the effects of the bitter cold of the European winter. At 160 km.p.h. the sleet and snow drove into every corner of the open cockpits chilling the crouching men to the bone. The roar of engines and wind made voice communication between the cockpits impossible.

“We had no way of conversing except by sending notes to each other on a small pulley and wire system we had erected along the side of the plane,” Williams remembers, “Some quite flippant notes were sent along that wire!”

*Hubert Wilkins, as senior officer on board, had been given overall command of the aircraft. Besides his duties as navigator, he kept a careful log of weather and atmospheric conditions during the flight. In his tiny open cockpit were crammed an array of special instruments for measuring and recording temperature, air density, and humidity. Every thirty minutes he recorded details of cloud formation. Scientist at heart, he had told pressmen that his interest in the flight was more in meteorological research than in winning the £10,000.*

On the first day, slowed by rain, snow, and dense fog, they reached Romilly near Paris. They awoke next morning to find the airfield fogged in and covered by deep snow. For the next three days they gloomily waited for a break in the weather.

Winter was settling over Europe. On 25 November they managed to get airborne again. The aircraft then encountered terrible weather battling the infamous Mistral wind and flooding rains all the way to Lyons. Their progress across France and Italy was punctuated by continuous storms and a series of seemingly unaccountable mechanical troubles. Shortly after taking off for Pisa, engine trouble caused a forced landing. Inspecting the engine, the airmen discovered to their alarm that the magneto wiring had been carefully engineered to cause a short circuit.

Following emergency repairs, the Kangaroo reached Pisa on 29 November. Next morning, they were of again into the teeth of a gale. Again, they were bothered by the troublesome magneto. This time they found its sealed housing filled with dirt. The 180 kilometres to Rome took them five hours! Their next leg was across the snow-covered Apennines to Taranto. Heavy fog hung over the peaks and Rendle had great difficulty in keeping the aircraft on an even keel. In 1919 blind flying instruments were non-existent. Over the town of Capua engine trouble forced another emergency landing. Inspection revealed that the magneto had again been sabotaged. Working frantically, they replaced the damaged magneto and carried on.

Lieutenant Rendle's son, R. V. Rendle, a second World war Spitfire pilot, recalled that his father had no doubts that the succession of engine failures were due to premeditated sabotage. There was great rivalry between the manufacturers of the various race aircraft. With the rundown of wartime production, the demand for commercial aircraft was small. To produce the winning aircraft would be of great value to the successful company. It would prove to a doubting public that aircraft were a reliable method of transport over long distances and possibly guarantee government orders. It was strongly rumoured that one manufacturer had been overheard to say that if his aircraft did not get through he'd make sure no others did! (which one?).

On Friday 5 December the Kangaroo left Taranto and for the first time experienced good flying weather. They covered the 1000 kilometres to Crete in seven hours. Next morning, however, they were further delayed. The aerodrome was flooded and their heavy aircraft was bogged. Bulgarian prisoners finally dug the aircraft out of the morass. Three days later the ground had dried out. They prepared to leave.

Eighty kilometres out over the Mediterranean Sea—en route for Egypt—disaster struck. Co-pilot Williams had just glanced back to take a farewell look at the thin blue line that was Crete disappearing on the horizon, when a chilling, ominous sign caught his eye. This was how he described the events that followed: ‘I noticed that the tail was all black on one side. I guessed immediately this was from oil leaking back in the slipstream from the port engine. I passed a message to Rendle.

Potts and I were together in the rear cockpit and we tried to work out some idea that could help, but nothing was possible. Rendle turned back for Suda Bay. But with our contrary luck we were faced with a headwind and it took over an hour to reach land.’ Unknown to the men known to the men at that time, an oil line had fractured and was spraying hot oil out into the slipstream under twenty kilograms pressure. Aware that the heavily laden Blackburn would not hold height on one engine Rendle was forced to nurse the failing engine along and to throttle back to the minimum power setting needed to keep the staggering machine in the air.

With great skill—and a little luck—they limped back to Suda Bay, their precious oil steadily pumping overboard. As the airport boundary came in sight the last of the oil sprayed from the broken pipe, and with it went their brief encounter with Lady Luck. The motor raised a terrible clatter followed by a scream of tortured metal as valves and bearings ran dry.

‘The engine seized with such suddenness that bits flew everywhere’ Williams said later as he described the final moments, ‘I thought the sudden locking of the crankshaft was going to cause the propeller to wrench the engine right out of the wing’. They were down to rooftop height when the Kangaroo crossed the airport boundary. Heading for a group of houses it seemed that a crash was inevitable but, at the last minute Rendle lifted the aircraft. It grazed the rooftops and dropped out of control to ground on the other side. Hitting a metre-wide ditch, the tyres burst, and the aircraft veered off course and headed for the walls of the local mental hospital. When it finally stopped, tail up, the nose was only a couple of feet from the stone wall.



A detailed examination of the failed engine revealed that the oil line had fractured, apparently as a result of fatigue caused by bending it a number of times backwards and forwards. The unknown saboteur had struck again.

Other damage to the aircraft was easily repaired and the crew cabled England for a replacement motor. Several cables reached Blackburn's, but their messages were so distorted in transmission that no engine was ever sent. Months after the crash an analysis of oil taken from the damaged engine was sent to Lieutenant Rendle by the British Ministry of Supply. It stated that iron filings had been found mixed with the oil. Yet another indication of sabotage.

A few days later news of the Smith brothers' arrival in Darwin put paid to further plans to carry on.

On his return Australia Rendle took up a position as Chief Pilot with the Sydney Aerial Company. In 1922 he again made the headlines when it was announced that he [Rendle] was ready to make the first crossing of the Pacific in a Sydney based, twin-engine seaplane. The public contributed money, the press supported the idea, and all was ready. Once again the Australia Government stepped in. For the second time they refused Rendle permission to be the first away on a pioneering flight. This time, it seems, his will was finally broken. He gave up flying and went into business in England. During the Second World War, he served with the R.A.F. as a senior engineering officer. Squadron Leader Rendle died on 11 August 1962.



**The end of the attempt. Members of the crew are removing their personal belongings after the Kangaroo had crash landed**

*Within a month of the crash landing, Hubert Wilkins was headed for the Arctic wastelands eventually to receive world fame for his trans-Polar flights.*

Reg Williams is today [as at 1970 publish date] the sole survivor of the gallant crew. Leaving the stricken aircraft in Crete he travelled to Alexandria where he eventually signed on for the crew of the merchant ship *Parisian* and worked his passage through the Suez to Fremantle.

Flat broke, he managed a free ride on a special parliamentary train carrying Prime Minister Hughes back to Sydney.

In 1920 he started up his own flying training and charter company. During the Second World War he enlisted in the R.A.A.F. and was Commanding Officer of the base at Tamworth. In 1969, though severely weakened following a serious illness, he courageously took part in a re-enactment of the last leg of the 1919 flight, travelling in a D.C? from Singapore to Darwin.

He was the only survivor of the gallant men who had set out on the mammoth event fifty years earlier. The aircraft landed at Fanny Bay Airport, half a century to the day since the winning Vickers Vimy touched down at the same spot. Reg Williams told reporters on that day, "Don't make me out to be anything special. I am just an ordinary run-of-the-mill man. Write about the other chaps. They were the magnificent men. My only claim to fame was that I outlived them."

The original Blackburn Kangaroo sat for years several on the airfield at Suda Bay until it was housed in a temporary museum in the town. When the Germans invaded Crete, a small group of locals dismantled the ageing bomber and hid it in one of the countless caves in the nearby hills. The story goes that at the war's end none of the group survived to relocate the aircraft. It has never been found [as at 1970] It seems fitting that mystery should surround the final resting place of the Kangaroo, as it is surely surrounded the series of incidents that ended its challenge in the greatest air race ... a series of events that possibly denied Valdemar Rendle and Reg Williams a leading place in aviation history.

### ***Questions and mysteries:***

*The whereabouts of the Blackburn Kangaroo today?*

*In caves in Crete? Could parts be found and repatriated?*

*Was there a falling out between Charles Kingsford Smith and Wilkins at the time?*

*The author of this article seems to give Wilkins an almost minor 'Jonnie-come-lately' role in this story.*

**Source:** The following is taken from a transcript of a chapter in Terry Gwynn-Jones's 1989 book, 'On a Wing and a Prayer', University of Queensland Press (pp.23-34). It was first published in 1977 with more illustrations, photographs and different pagination. Dr. Stephen Carthew was sent a copy of the 1977 publication and has reproduced that here with those page numbers. I have since further modified the document for on-forwarding to members of the ISGPW Crete 2019 tour in the hope that we may be able to shed some light on this lost chapter of Australian aviation. W. Archer

*The few sections related to Captain (later Sir) Hubert Wilkins MC and bar specifically are in italics.*



**The Blackburn Kangaroo G-EAOW Suda Bay Crete 1919**

