

# Aviation mystery was unsolved for 27 years

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It was a wet and windy Saturday morning at Mascot airport, the kind that gave pilots second thoughts about climbing into a cockpit. But Travis “Shorty” Shortridge and his co-pilot Charlie Dunnell were experienced aviators.

While this was Dunnell’s first commercial flight he had plenty of hours in the air and knew the plane’s capabilities. Shortridge was a former air force pilot who had also notched up a lot of time in the aircraft he would be flying — the Avro X.

It was March 21, 1931, and both men had checked weather reports, which predicted strong headwinds. Takeoff was at 8.10am but the weather bureau didn’t open until 9am, which meant that Shortridge and Dunnell were relying on a weather report from the previous day.

Shortridge hated clouds and had remarked to his wife before he left that it was a “dirty day” but as someone who had flown under the unfinished Sydney Harbour Bridge, he was not deterred by bad weather. But by the time the aircraft was in the air — with six passengers — the conditions had deteriorated considerably. The plane was the Southern Cloud, one of five Avro X aircraft operated by Australian National Airways (ANA), the airline founded by pioneer aviators Charles Kingsford Smith and Charles Ulm.

The flight to Melbourne should have been routine, helping to establish the airline’s reputation for reliability. But instead the Southern Cloud would make history by being Australia’s first commercial airline disaster. The wreckage would only be discovered decades later.

The incident would also have a devastating effect not only on the families of those who died but also for Kingsford Smith’s fledgling airline.

Ulm and Smith had started their first airline, Interstate Flying Services, in 1927 with two Bristol Tourer aircraft, but



Wreckage of the Southern Cloud which was found in 1958; and (left) pilot Travis Shortridge.

when they failed to secure a contract to deliver the mail they turned instead to giving exhibition flights.

In June 1927 they flew around Australia in 10 days.

They topped that feat when they completed the first trans-Pacific flight from Oakland, California, to Brisbane in 83 hours in the Southern Cross between May 31 and June 9, 1928. Trading on their fame they established ANA in December 1928.

The airline was nearly doomed from the start when Kingsford Smith was reported missing in the outback in 1929 while flying to London to order planes for his new airline. Smithy and his crew were found, but not before two pilots crashed and died while searching for them.

ANA officially started operations in January 1930 with Smithy at the controls of the Southern Cloud on the Sydney to Melbourne route. But Kingsford Smith was not ready to spend the rest of his life as a domestic airline pilot and went off to

1931  
accomplish more aviation feats, leaving other pilots to take over his route. So it was that on March 21, 1931, Shortridge and Dunnell were at the controls of Kingsford Smith’s Southern Cloud.

Passengers included accountant Bill O’Reilly, businessman Hubert Farrall, engineer Julian Margules, artist Clare Stokes, local woman Ellie May Glasgow, and American theatrical producer Clyde Hood.

The pilots’ fatal error had been to rely on an outdated newspaper weather report. By the time they were in the air the weather had turned foul.

Powerful winds were bringing down trees and powerlines, and snow was forecast in the mountains.

Southern Cloud had no radio so there was no way to warn the pilots. When the aircraft failed to arrive in Melbourne at its scheduled time, people feared the worst. On Sunday morning a search got under way, but no wreckage was found. The plane seemed to have vanished from the face of the earth.

In the wake of the disaster there were recommendations that all aircraft be equipped with radio, so pilots could be updated on weather conditions.

The loss of the Southern Cloud was a blow to Kingsford Smith’s airline. By January 1932, the company was in serious financial trouble and Smithy appealed to the government to subsidise his airline, threatening to go overseas saying, “If my country does not want me I will take the hint and fly away”.

ANA went into voluntary liquidation in July 1933. Shortly after its founders had their own aviation mysteries — Ulm disappeared on a flight over the Pacific in 1934 and Kingsford Smith over the Andaman Sea in 1935.

The mystery of the Southern Cloud was solved in October 1958 when 26-year-old Tom Sonter, a construction worker on the Snowy Mountains Hydro Scheme, stumbled across the twisted wreckage in remote dense forest west of the Kosciuszko National Park.

In the days before black box flight recorders investigators had little information to go on, but the conclusion was that Shortridge’s plane had hit bad weather, been blown off course and crashed into a mountain.