

SEAPLANE SOLO

BY

FRANCIS C. CHICHESTER

AUTHOR OF
'SOLO TO SYDNEY'

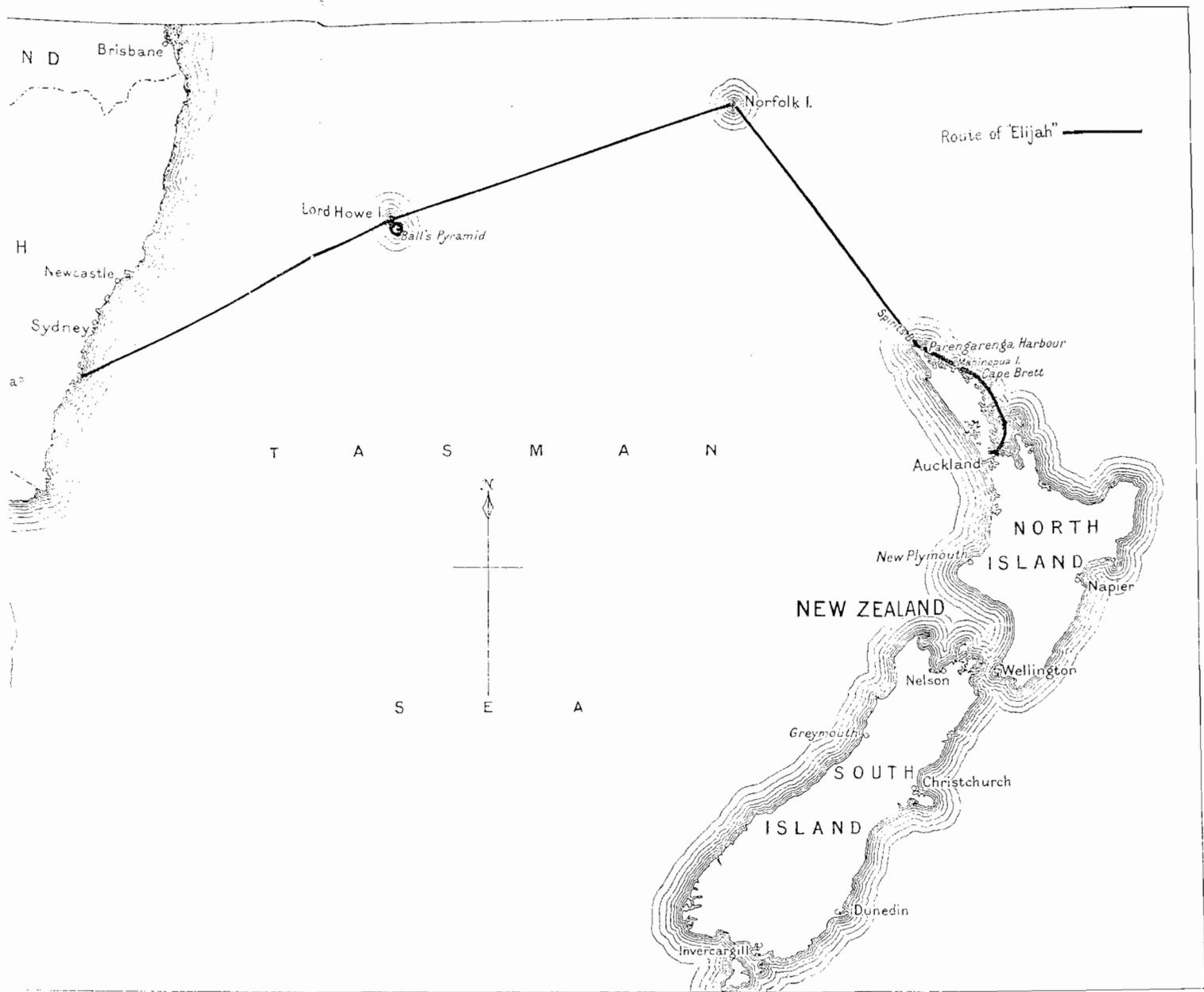


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SKETCH MAP TO SHOW THE ROUTE TAKEN ON THE FLIGHT

FROM SCYLLA

much. I suddenly felt emptied of all courage; I touched the utter depth of cowardliness. I was so terribly helpless, totally unable to lift a finger to keep off the death I could see inexorably closing in on me. Wireless gone, compass, instruments breaking one by one, navigation 26 miles out somewhere—perhaps double as much, plane gradually breaking up, propeller so strained by its out-of-true wobbling that it was bound to collapse sooner or later—it was only a case of time, and now, my God! bad weather.

I turned to the wireless transmitting; useless it might be, but as a routine act to which I was accustomed, it seemed the only thing I could lean on; it gave me support like an old friend.

Before the end of the message, the plane struck rain; its stinging cold chilled the outside of me—but not as much as it froze me inside.

Emerging from it, I found the sky with an aspect of oppressive weight, and though the sun still shone through the cloud gaps, the water had lost its sparkle, only glistening in patches on an otherwise dulled surface. Streaking the space between clouds and ocean were now many slanting columns of rainfall from leaden cloud bellies to grey blotches of sea. I hurried through my drift observations and plotted in the hour's flight. Halfway through the work, I noticed the slanting pillars of rainfall were now squat and many, whilst those of sunlight were only slender and few. I made sure there were still one or two sunshafts ahead—otherwise I must use the sextant at

FROM SCYLLA

once—and continued the drift plotting. I found the wind had backed right round to west of north. So now the plane must begin to beat into a head wind. I glanced up at the petrol-tank—3½ hours' left. At the end of the hour the position should be:

6 hours 10 minutes out.

Miles flown 491 or 464, I could not tell which till the next shot.

Looking up, I found that the sunlight, which I had made sure of being ahead only a few minutes ago, and which I depended on for the sight, had all disappeared. I peered round—there was none to be seen. Only a low cloud ceiling with rain squalls bulging from it, and threatening to form a solid mass to fill the whole sky. I looked behind. There was none there, even. The cloud openings had everywhere shut against me. I could not get the sight. I could not tell where I was. "Steady!" I said aloud, "take it quietly! Don't get excited!" At this moment, the plane flew against a rain squall. The heavy drops struck my forehead, stinging like hail. I was chilled to the bone, desperately helpless: to be flown into heavy rain, and cut off as by a grey curtain, hanging intangible yet impenetrable, from sight of sun, of the island, even of empty space. But the squall only covered perhaps a mile, and breaking through the far side, I found a patch of wintry sunlight lying away to the right. It scarcely seemed real; indeed, in that rain squall I seemed to have flown out of touch with ordinary existence. Both sky and

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sea had now a scurrying air as if fleeing in a dream. I swung the plane away from its course and set off in chase through spits of rain, the plane now labouring dead into wind. The sunlight, which had appeared close enough at the start, seemed to keep its distance. Fearful that it, too, would disappear before I could reach it, I increased speed and sat tense all over—even ear-drums stretched tight by some jaw movement—waiting for the explosion of propeller flying to bits and the runaway roar of the motor. Gradually, I relaxed as nothing happened.

The plane seemed scarcely to draw any nearer to the sunlit edge. Suddenly, I perceived the reason—the patch of sunlight was moving away as fast as the plane approached. Impossible! How could it move against the wind? I must be suffering from a delusion. I could soon test that. I looked down, fixed my eye on a wave touched by the edge of the sunlight, and watched it. Jupiter! there was no mistake: the sunlight was gliding away into wind and at racing speed. The plane was now on the edge—but there it stayed. Cloud must be forming above at a furious rate. Amazed and agitated, I found the plane was not now gaining at all, could only just hold its position, flying beside a ghostly cliff where the beginning of sunlight lighted the end of rainfall.

I must have that sunlight! Thought of the rickety old plane and of everything else was blotted out; I thrust open the throttle wide, leaping for it madly as a stranded fish leaps for its life-giving water. Several

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times I had a glimpse at the cloud edge. At last I thought the plane in position and turned sharply to secure the sight broadside on. But as I lifted the sextant, the shadow raced over the plane and on again. Angrily, I turned about and renewed the chase at full speed. Nothing else in the world counted. I adjusted the sextant to a rough guess of the angle between the sun and horizon, then held it ready. I inclined the plane seawards, the speed rising steadily till the wind made a shrill note in the rigging. How it was standing the strain, heaven only knew. I turned with a vertical bank, and had a single shot while still in the turn, pulling the plane out of a crashing dive just above the surface. The next instant it was in dullness and rain; I flew on westwards. The observation was $4\frac{1}{2}$ minutes late but I corrected it for time from the altitude-latitude-azimuth table. I quickly made allowance for estimated height above the sea, sextant index error, for sun's semi-diameter, and compared the result with the calculations done in readiness. It said the plane was 21 miles short of the line down which it must turn.

Now the sea was dark, and the grey of rain-sodden clouds was subtly changing to the blue-black of impending storm. The wind was rising fast and the S.E. swell below overrun by a stronger from the opposite quarter of the compass. The waves leaped up angrily and lashed sheets of spray southwards.

I flew on: helpless, hopeless—in the first sextant work at least one error, perhaps several. And what

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trust could I put in that last miserable observation, only one sketchy shot with the plane mid-way between vertical bank and crashing dive, worked with brain dulled from hours of shaking rattle, clogged with fatigue? And I could do no more to find my position—there was no more sun. The very sky seemed to be lowering on me to force me down. Fifteen minutes had passed since the last sight. I turned S.S.W. There was nothing else I could do.

The clouds were becoming darker, heavier, lowering. The plane was scudding over the rising, roughening seas at great pace, with the wind nearly behind. The drift of 15° showed the alarming, rapid increase in force. The very fact that clouds spilling rain were now fewer seemed an added threat. They were massing above and presently the storm would burst to complete my desolation, so that if I passed within a stone's throw of the island, I should catch no sight of it through the downpour. What a hopeless task, flying over mid-ocean between two specks of land; as hopeless as if I were flying through space from planet to tiny planet, lost control of direction and were shot away into nothingness.

Dully, I stared at every sullen low-lying cloud on the horizon, each a possible concealment of the island: and slowly traversed the stormy ceiling in vain search for a glimpse of the sun.

At last I gave up all hope.

Almost at once a break appeared in the clouds dead ahead and sunrays shone down. I opened the

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throttle and raced for it, leaning slightly forward, too intent to feel grateful. I secured three sights while crossing the lake of sunlight. Deafened by the incessant roar, nerves burning with slow fire under my skin through the endless shaking vibration or because of the strain of it, brain doped with fatigue, I laboured heavily with figure after figure, not using any of the data employed in the previous sight, but working the whole entirely afresh. The result gave the island dead ahead. And when I comprehended it, I was exalted with confidence. Of course the island was dead ahead, of course my navigation would take me to it—hadn't I schemed and planned and plotted for months to make sure there was no flaw in my system—hadn't I tabulated every error in every observation and altered the system time after time to make it infallible? I had done my work; it was good; the island was there ahead. I closed up the sextant and stowed away all the instruments.

Looking over the side at the tumult of waters, crests torn off in showers of spray, I found the drift had increased to 20° . A 40-mile wind! But it was the rapid change in the force which caused the greatest anxiety. And the whole sky menacing. What did it mean? What had I struck?

As though hunting a ship with a searchlight, I unceasingly swept the sea to and fro, to and fro. Where low cloud cut off the horizon from sight, it was difficult to tell the visibility. 6 hours 35 minutes out. Where was the island? Minute after minute dragged

FROM SCYLLA

itself by. 6 hours 40 minutes. Had I miscalculated? An error in my chart or in the reading of it? A mistake recurring in the sextant work? A defective compass? My God! I had always made mistakes; 100 miles—140 miles of error. I had none of the feelings of a hunter, only of the hunted, twisting my head from side to side as though in search of escape. Escape from this helplessness. I glanced at the petrol-tank— $2\frac{3}{4}$ hours' petrol left. What a terrible weight the atmosphere seemed, or was it the silence of a bad dream in all this desolation of space between grey sea and dark ceiling? Here and there, heavier blue-black clouds were dropping on to the water surface; squalls with their hearts thinly concealed in purple haze, were massing all round the horizon to hem me in. I looked over and found the drift had increased again, was now nearly 25° . A gale! What had I struck? 6 hours 50 minutes. I had missed it! My blood turned to water and ceased to flow. I was bitterly excluded from life, without help, without hope. I had not even a boat. I never realized before what safety it seemed to offer. The plane would not last five minutes in that sea. $2\frac{3}{4}$ hours' petrol left. It was the utter inability to help myself that bred terror. My brain was numb, and refused to work. What could I do? I must decide on a course of action. I must force my brain to work. If I once let myself get into a panic, I was done. $2\frac{3}{4}$ hours . . . $2\frac{3}{4}$ hours . . . very well, on for half an hour, then west for half an hour, then north till the end. . . . That last splutter of

FROM SCYLLA

the motor, the final glide with empty beat of propeller.

I felt a rush of heat through me. Away to port—a long island in purple haze? Hope fired up while I stared. No, curse it! It changed shape! A black, lowering cloud. The flame of hope died out and I sank back again into the depths of depression. Still 6 hours 50 minutes. The clock had broken now! Supposing my watch had been two minutes out all the time, making an error of 30 miles—the discrepancy between sextant and dead-reckoning! 30 miles' distance from the island in this storm . . . as well be 300. The hand had passed 6 hours 50 minutes; the clock could not be broken after all.

With another hot surge of hope through me, I looked to port and found a long line of black cliff, land behind, rising—the top hidden in cloud. . . . It lost its outline. Oh hell! a distant squall. It was as though first hot and then freezing water were dashed over me. 6 hours 53 minutes. How incredibly weary I felt. Why could I not just fly on and on for hours and hours with nothing to do but fly? Well, I was tired of worrying. What was the good of it? If I'd failed, I'd failed. And as for that, did it really matter one way or the other? How intolerably stupid to worry about the future—about something one could not control! I would eat something, I thought; at least that could give some sort of tangible pleasure in the present.

I was stretching out my hand to feel what there