

DR CLYDE CORNWALL FENTON, THE PILOT

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ABSTRACT

In 1934, Dr Clyde Fenton, a Melbourne medical graduate, became the first flying doctor in the Northern Territory of Australia, an area similar in size to France, Germany and Spain combined. A time when the combined population of those three European nations was some one hundred and thirty million, and yet the non-indigenous population scattered over the same area in the Northern Territory was just over four thousand. In 1930, records of the indigenous people were not kept. Sealed roads were rare, dirt roads of inferior quality were prone to flooding and first world infrastructure of contemporary Paris or even Sydney was virtually absent. Fenton demonstrated unbelievable skill and courage as a pilot in retrieving patients back to his hospital in the town of Katherine for life saving medical care. This paper describes his flying prowess and the various climatic, environmental and bureaucratic challenges he faced bringing the sick patients to optimal therapy, his medical cases are previously documented. 1 Stride P. Katherine Hospital in the early years, opening to WW II, 1931-1939. *WJPMR*, 2026, 12(4), 47-62



Map of Australia

INTRODUCTION

Clyde Cornwall Fenton was born in Warrnambool, Victoria, Australia on 16th May 1901. He attended primary school in Natimuk and his secondary education was at Xavier College, Melbourne where he was dux in 1917. Clyde was renowned for his skill with machinery, his expertise with mathematics and his wit. He then graduated the University of Melbourne with Bachelors' degree in Science in 1922 and Medicine and Surgery in 1925.

Dr Clyde Fenton became the first flying doctor in the Northern Territory of Australia in 1934. This article describes his adventures, misadventures with fortunately only minor injuries and his battles with administration and bureaucracy in the essential service of retrieving patients, some with critical illnesses, from remote locations in the outback. During the six years until 1940, Fenton estimates that he covered a quarter of a million miles with combined flight times of three thousand hours.

His clinical role extracting and treating patients is previously published.

1 Stride P. Katherine Hospital in the early years, opening to WW II, 1931-1939, *WJPMR*, 2026, 12(4), 47-62

Major sources of information were Fenton's autobiography, Trove newspapers and the Australian Dictionary of biography.

2 Fenton C. *Flying Doctor*. Hawthorn Press, Melbourne 1947,

The early years

The newly qualified Dr Fenton, now tall, lean and bespectacled, worked initially as a resident medical officer at St Vincent's Hospital, Fitzroy, and then in private practice at Geelong before his adventurous spirit surfaced. He attempted to drive with his younger brother Frederick across Australia in record time, however an accident in South Australia terminated that endeavour. In 1927, only two years after graduation, he settled in Wyndham, Western Australia, as the District Medical Officer. He assembled a small single-engine, single-

seater aircraft and taught himself to fly, even without the aid of any navigation equipment, air charts, and often proper landing strips.

Again debacle followed adventure and he crashed his aeroplane! However, he developed a particular renown as a unique and dashing character!

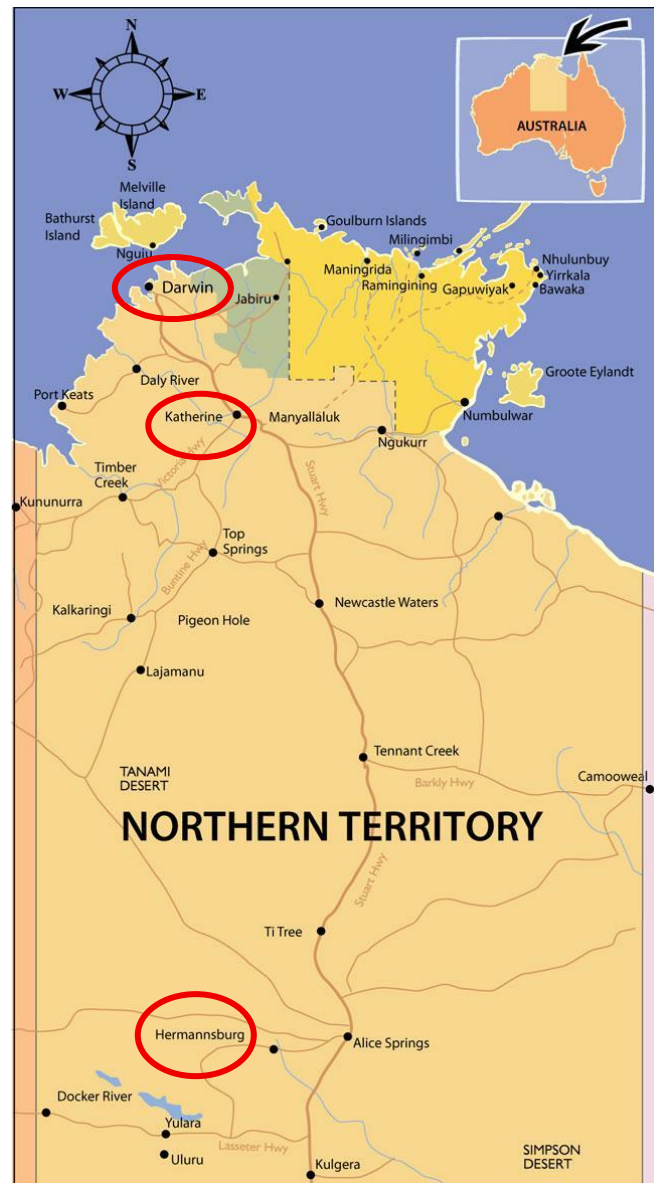
He boarded ship for the voyage to the United Kingdom in Melbourne in 1928, stopping en route in Darwin where he was persuaded by Dr C. E. A. Cook, the chief medical officer, to remain. Five months working in North Australia's health service alerted him to the communication and transport problems over the vast distances and sparse population of the Northern Territory, an area similar to France, Germany and Spain combined! He was also disgusted with bureaucracy, red tape and officialdom in the Northern Territory and left after a few months.

In 1929 Fenton sailed to England where in October he joined the Royal Air Force as a medical flying officer. He qualified as a navigator, but they did not teach him to fly any further and Fenton did not find the RAF suited him. In his second brush with bureaucracy, he resigned in February 1930 after disputes over regulations! On 11 November 1932 he married Eve Ryan-Gallacher at the Registry Office, St Martin, London, but they were later divorced.

The Pilot

The press published a great deal more about Fenton's prowess as a pilot than as a doctor, the former being easier to comprehend and perhaps more interesting to their readers. In WW2, the Airforce enlisted Fenton predominantly for his skill as a pilot than a doctor.

Fenton returned from UK to Australia and in March 1934 Cook appointed him medical officer at Katherine in the Northern Territory with the agreement of mileage payment for the small Gipsy Moth aircraft he had acquired. The Shell Company arranged for him to pick up supplies on the way at Adelaide, Alice Springs, and Newcastle Waters.



The Northern Territory

Fenton formed the Northern Territory Aerial Medical Service, though the founder, Flynn, had a policy of not using doctors as pilots working as pilot as well as doctor.

Fenton became a legend in the Northern Territory during the next six years.

3 Courier Mail 13/3/1934



The first Government aerial ambulance used by Dr Fenton, who previously flew his own planes as part of his Top End aerial medical service. (*Supplied: CDU Nursing Museum*) In Wyndham, Western Australia, in 1927

Sister Olive O'Keefe, the matron of Katherine Hospital, described how amongst her many duties, she was expected to drive the hospital truck and assisted by an Aboriginal man, George Pallura, set out the flares marking the runway ready for lighting when Fenton buzzed the hospital. On the first occasion the nervous sister missed lighting one of the flares, which marked the end boundary of the runway. She was horrified when the angry Fenton zoomed in and cutting the engines so he could be heard, screamed, "Where's that bloody boundary light?".

Obviously, there were no recriminations as the sister recalls them playing cards happily later that evening after a safe landing!

Requests for medical assistance came via pedal radios through the two Royal Flying Doctor Service stations at Cloncurry and Wyndham, then telegram. With famous daring and an apparent disregard for personal safety, Fenton landed on the primitive bush strips and runways to pick up the sick and return them for medical treatment. Fenton had no navigational equipment or radios, he landed on strips lit by kerosene flares or car lights and had only the railway lines and the Katherine River to locate his position and the runway at Katherine.

He became well known and admired for his kindness and determination to help by the small towns, pastoral properties and missions. Cook remarked on his 'resolute devotion to duty,' his 'compulsive acceptance of challenge' and his 'wilful disregard of personal hazard'

In 1936, Dr. Fenton took delivery of his No 1 plane which has been undergoing a rebuilding at the Qantas Empire hangar at the Darwin aerodrome and made a trial flight over the town. It did not last!
4 Northern Standard 4/2/1936

The Standard was fearful the Northern Territory would lose its flying doctor service as the Department of the Interior has refused to buy another plane for Fenton and arranged for his aerial medical work to be continued by the Australian Aerial Medical Services.

However a largely attended public meeting held in the Darwin Town Hall decided to inaugurate a fund to purchase an aeroplane to replace the one recently lost by Dr. Fenton and to adopt measures which will ensure the retention of his services in the Territory.

The meeting expresses its admiration of the gallant and devoted way in which Dr Fenton brought the consolation of his medical skill to the pioneering settlers of the

Territory, deplores the misfortune which cost him the loss of his plane, and condemns the ungenerous and unappreciative attitude displayed towards him by the Government; further that, in order that proper recognition of Dr. Fenton's work may be shown and his services retained, this meeting enthusiastically endorses the proposal of His Worship the Mayor to open a fund, firstly to purchase an aeroplane to replace the one destroyed and secondly to supplement the meagre subsidy of £100 at present allowed by the Government for the maintenance of Dr. Fenton's plane.

It appeared to the meeting that Mr. Paterson, Minister for the Interior, showed little interest in the health and welfare of the outback Territorians.

5 Northern Standard 13/11/1936 6 Northern Standard 17/11/1936

Subsequently, Mr. Paterson, the Minister for the Interior, announced that the flying medical service would be continued in North Australia, despite the fact that Dr Fenton's own aeroplane had been destroyed.

Mr. Paterson said that the service would be provided either by the purchase by the Government of an aeroplane, which would be available to Dr. Fenton, or through the Australian Aerial Medical Services. It was most unlikely, however, that the Government would subsidise Dr. Fenton to buy a new aeroplane himself. It was recognised that Dr. Fenton had rendered services of the highest value in the Territory since he had used an aeroplane, and it was recognised also that he had the confidence and support of practically every person in the Territory.

7 Northern Standard 24/11/1936

Dr. C. C. Fenton congratulated the Sydney aviator, Mr. Goya Henry, in his successful appeal to the High Court of Australia which forced the Federal Government to prepare for a referendum on an amendment to the Constitution. The High Court agreed that the federal Government did not have the authority to legislate interstate aviation.

Fenton wrote *"Warm congratulations on the successful issue of your tenacious fight against bureaucracy. I presume the majority of aviators in the Commonwealth applaud your exposure of the monstrous imposture of fifteen years' duration and the dramatic stoppage of the obstructive antics of the department, now ignominiously demonstrated to be illegal, invalid, and 'ultra vires' (beyond the powers). In other words, you have now cancelled their licence."*

Mr. Henry said that Dr. Fenton's telegram was in reply to a letter which he sent the doctor, expressing sympathy with him because of the refusal of the renewal of a certificate of airworthiness for the plane used by Dr. Fenton in his work in the Northern Territory.
8 Sydney Morning Herald 28/11/36.

The Committee of the Dr Fenton N.T. flying doctor fund presented the Gypsy Moth Aeroplane they purchased to Dr. Fenton at the Darwin Aerodrome on December 27th 1936.

9 Northern Standard 22/12/1936

The observer writing in the Northern Standard noted again that Dr Fenton was providing a wonderful medical service to the outback without the promised government support of a plane which had been promised moths previously

10 Northern Standard 29/1/1937

At the government request, Fenton in his own plane joined the search for the Larrakia, a Japanese fishing vessel, and transported Dr Cook, the chief medical officer to Darwin to confer with the minister. The politicians failed to see any irony in their requests!

11 Northern Standard 15/6/1937 12 Northern Standard 9/7/1937

Dr C. E. Cook, the Chief Medical Officer, wrote to the Standard in response to critical letters about the failure of the State Government to provide Dr Fenton with a plane. He stated that Fenton's specific requirements were not easily met in Australia, and that negotiations for a specific ambulance plane with Fenton were well advanced such that a suitable plane would soon be made available.

13 Northern Standard 13/7/1937

Dr Fenton denied reports appearing in a Melbourne paper that he had applied for a position in Tasmania.

14 Northern Standard 24/8/1937

Dr. C. C. Fenton flew to Melbourne with Qantas on leave with plans to take delivery of his new plane, a Fox Moth, fitted with an ambulance cabin in Sydney, in which he will return to Darwin.

15 Northern Standard 5/10/1937

Fenton arrived back in Darwin flying his new Ambulance type Fox Moth plane after an absence on holiday leave of about seven weeks. He announced his arrival in customary fashion flying low over the Darwin Oval during a football league match, and then over Myilly Point and on to the aerodrome.

16 Northern Standard 30/11/1937

Two tradesmen arrived in Katherine to build a hanger for Fenton's plane, a task expected to take three weeks as long as all materials arrived punctually.

17 Northern Standard 3/1/1938

Dr. Clyde Fenton was awarded the Oswald Watt gold medal for brilliant flying in 1937. This medal is presented each year to the aviator, who in the opinion of the Associated Australian Aero Clubs does the most brilliant performance in the air within the

Commonwealth or to an Australian born aviator who does the most brilliant feat outside of Australia.

Although this is usually awarded for one single outstanding flight, the Committee considered Fenton's work throughout the year was more meritorious than any individual performances.

18 Northern Standard 17/6/1938

Dr Fenton flew Mr. Hugh Stuart over Katherine Gorge in his Dragon Rapide biplane to survey the water catchment particularly for farming and to consider the option of hydroelectric power, another non-medical job!

19 Northern Standard 7/10/1938

Dr. Fenton wheeled his plane out of the hangar in Darwin at 6 p.m. and found a stowaway, Geoffrey Adamson, crouched inside. Adamson was taken into police custody and charged with being unlawfully in an enclosed area, the Ross Smith aerodrome, without lawful excuse.

Adamson was unemployed, wished to leave Darwin, had some war injuries and anxiety. A one month sentence was suspended conditional on good behaviour, and he was given a fare to travel to Sydney.

20 Northern Standard 9/12/1938

A Mr. C. Wrighton, a managing director, and Mrs. Wrighton returned home from what was possibly the most-travelled three weeks' holiday ever undertaken by an Australian. They travelled four thousand miles by air in a Lockheed Super Electra crossing Australia in two directions, thirteen hundred miles by train, and the remainder by motor car.

At Katherine they were proud to meet Dr. Fenton who announced his presence in characteristic manner. In his own little plane he came swooping down on their big Lockheed, at the aerodrome, climbed to perform a couple of stunt manoeuvres, and then landed alongside the passenger plane. Mr. Wrighton could see Dr. Fenton obviously flew without fear!

21 Northern Standard 3/1/1939

Fenton's flight to convey Mr. R. Quilty, a stockman, stricken with acute appendicitis five hundred miles to Darwin he described as one of the most hazardous of his flying career.

In response to an urgent call from Bradshaw's station, Dr. Fenton left Darwin on Sunday afternoon with Miss Ormond, a Darwin Hospital sister. He returned to Ross Smith aerodrome with Mr. Quilty at 12.30 a.m. on Monday. Landing, with the assistance of flares, Dr. Fenton immediately supervised the transfer of Mr. Quilty to the waiting ambulance. Within half an hour of his arrival Quilty was operated on and he was expected to make a good recovery.

Dr. Fenton said from the time he flew out of Darwin, he battled blinding rainstorms for hours. He had the awesome experience of seeing the propeller of his machine encircled by a halo of St. Elmo's fire. This is a harmless, glowing blue or violet plasma discharge that appears on windshields, wingtips, or the nose during electrical storms, caused by ionized air from strong electric fields. While it can indicate turbulent conditions, it is not a danger in itself to flight safety.

The landing ground at Bradshaw's Run was only three hundred yards long and about thirty five yards wide leaving no safety margin. Dr. Fenton was compelled to land at Timber Creek, about fifty miles away and reduce all the plane's non-essential weight including leaving his accompanying nurse behind. He landed and took off from Bradshaw's with Quilty onboard with only a few yards to spare and sufficient petrol to take him back to Timber Creek. After refuelling and taking the nurse

aboard, the doctor continued his return flight to Darwin shortly after 6 p.m.

Shortly after leaving Timber Creek he flew into a very severe tropical storm. Fenton was virtually flying blind guided by his compass, experience and guesswork. He realised headwinds would prevent him reaching Darwin so he aimed for Katherine to refuel as his fuel supply was low. St. Elmo's fire again enveloped the propeller blade. By now he was totally lost, so he followed an unidentified river and was delighted to pick up a railway line which guided him into Katherine where he landed in the dark as he was not expected and the flares were not lit! Had Katherine been equipped with wireless this risk would have been obviated. It is his base, but it is not provided with wireless communication. Fenton would have been able to notify his expected time of arrival with a patient and advise what preparations would be necessary at the hospital. Also messages for attention could be received direct from Katherine.



A picture captured of Dr Fenton's flying doctor biplane flying through a wet season storm. (Supplied: Library & Archives NT)

This would often save several hours and might mean the difference between life and death.

By its apparent apathy towards the flying doctor service the Government is greatly hampering the doctor in his world, the press considered. Messages have to reach him via Darwin from where they are telegraphed during the day. At night and at the week-end they have to be phoned to Pine Creek Hospital and from there to Katherine Hospital. Delays in raising both hospitals are frequent, and communication is not clear. Often hours elapse between the time the message is received in Darwin and before it reaches Dr. Fenton at Katherine.

Fenton refuelled and took off again at 10.00pm to fly through more storms before finally reaching Darwin. Ambulance men at the aerodrome had to climb the mast and flash a torch along the wind balloon to enable him to land.

The author is a little surprised that Fenton did not perform an appendicectomy in Katherine, an operation within the author's capacity as a first year house surgeon in the Middlesex Hospital in 1970
22 Northern Standard 7/3/1939

Dr Fenton visited Canberra in 1939 to organise a transceiver for his aircraft. The Canberra-based Department of the Commonwealth Health Department had recently assumed control of health services in the Northern Territory, hence, while in Canberra, Fenton met Dr Cumpston to discuss many of the inadequacies which existed at Katherine such as the need for electric lights at the airstrip and a telephone line between the hospital and the aircraft hangar to enable nursing staff to contact him promptly.

He also stated that the industrious sisters were still required to live and sleep on the hospital verandah, an issue that should have been fixed five years previously. The temperature in Katherine varied between five and forty degrees, and the verandah would have been shared with mosquitos bearing diseases such as malaria and

Ross River fever, and perhaps with venomous spiders and snakes!

Dr Cumpston, more sympathetic than Dr Cook ordered that separate nursing accommodation be completed by September.

He had managed four years since the previous before his next crash in February, 1940, when his Government provided machine was crashed and damaged, but Fenton for the third time was uninjured!.

Fenton flew his new Fox Moth plane to Mascot in Sydney where it was fitted with direction finding equipment and other flying aids and had a complete overhaul. On the return journey to Darwin accompanied by Dr. Catalano, he landed at Brunette Downs briefly with engine trouble and flew on to Darwin.

23 Northern Standard 19/1/1940 24 Northern Standard 23/2/1940

Dr. Fenton discovered a five foot brown snake moving around the rudder controls of his plane while flying at 2000 feet in his Fox ambulance. The snake reared its head to strike at Dr Fenton, who scrambled on to the pilot's seat. While crouching on the pilot's seat, Dr. Fenton manipulated the joy stick to make a forced landing near Maranboy, two hundred and ten miles south of Darwin.

It is thought that the snake entered the cockpit while the plane was standing on the field at the Roper Valley station where Sister Smith and Dr. Fenton stopped for lunch. Dr. Fenton said that when he first discovered the snake he made a frantic kick at it and sent it underneath the rudder control. The plane landed in the long grass at the Maranboy railway siding where Dr Fenton and Sister Smith killed the snake with the spare joy stick and a spare hammer!

The grass then had to be cut down for nearly two hundred yards to enable the plane to take off.

Dr Fenton requested that the owners of cattle and other outback stations should build larger landing grounds. He

said the provided fields were too small to allow an adequate margin of safety for landing or taking off, referring to his crash last week when he was taking off from Hodgson Downs cattle station.

Dr. Fenton declared, "The smallness of many landing grounds makes ambulance flights hazardous for patients and hospital sisters accompanying me, to say nothing of myself. I frequently get away with a risky landing and take-off by the skin of my teeth. This time I did not. It was pure luck that none of the occupants was injured." Fenton continued, "I was actually in the air when I saw that because of the smallness of the aerodrome, which is only four hundred and fifty yards long and consists of sandy soil. I could not clear the trees at the end of it. I had to land, but when braking the machine crashed into some logs.

"A large number of settlers are too casual about their landing grounds. Their attitude shows lack of appreciation of the service the Commonwealth Government is giving them. It also shows lack of co-operation with officers of the medical service who do not stint themselves in rendering medical aid when needed."

Dr. Fenton said that circulars had been sent to all settlers who had aerodromes pointing out the minimum requirements for safe landing fields.

"I have made complaints to the authorities about the unsatisfactory state of many grounds," added Dr. Fenton. "Even some of the aerodromes at police stations leave much to be desired."

The. Commonwealth Health Department may send an engineer and material by plane to Hodgson Downs so that repairs to Dr. Fenton's damaged Fox ambulance can be effected on the spot. Otherwise it will have to wait until the dry season before the machine can be brought in by road.

25 Northern Standard 5/3/1940 26 Northern Standard 14/5/1940



Katherine Hospital
1930
<https://hdl.handle.net/10070/931210>

The long-awaited radio transceivers and the installation of radio 8QL at Katherine during April 1940 greatly improved emergency communication in the outback. In addition to their professional skills, the two nurses in the Katherine Hospital were trained to operate the radio.
27 Barrier Miner 30/05/1940

With the advent of WWII and Fenton's call up to join the RAAF, he received some tokens of appreciation of the services rendered to the Northern Territory from his friends and patients. A few of his intimate friends presented him with a wallet of notes containing one hundred pounds in notes. It was presented at Dr. Catalano's Home by Judge Wells after Dr. Fenton was delayed by two urgent calls from the bush for medical assistance.

When making the presentation Judge Wells said that only a very few of Dr. Fenton's friends in Darwin, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs had had the opportunity of subscribing to the presentation. Judge Wells said, "I feel sure that if those settlers outback had known of the presentation being organised the wallet would be much larger than it is. As much as Dr Fenton's work is appreciated in Darwin it is nothing in comparison with the esteem in which the outback pioneers hold the flying doctor and his work."

Judge Wells later added that Doctor Fenton's work had been conducted under the most difficult and hazardous conditions, and conducted in a manner which left nothing to be desired so far as Dr. Fenton was concerned.

"His ability as a pilot of light aeroplanes is equalled only by his surgical and medical knowledge." In offering Doctor Fenton the best wishes of residents in the Territory Judge Wells said that the Commonwealth Government was not doing all it could and should in building the defences and fighting forces of Australia. "The present critical times demand the best possible national and personal efforts if we are to survive as a nation," he declared.

Others who paid tribute to Dr. Fenton and his work included Colonel Steele, the Commandant, Wing Commander Eaton, Major Moore, Captain Gregory and Mr. Balfe.

Approximately fifty residents attended this presentation at Dr. Catano's residence. -
28 Northern Standard 14/6/1940

Dr. Fenton was called to make one more ambulance flight before he left the Northern Territory. He was called by Goulburn Island Methodist Mission to pick up a sick Indigenous patient who he flew to Darwin and the patient was admitted to hospital. From there he planned to fly to Sydney in his private Gipsy Moth plane 29 Northern Standard 7/6/1940

The naughty boy – Fenton and bureaucracy

Fenton was not always on the side of law and order however! He was the quintessential Australian larrikin! Landing his plane on the main street of Katherine for a trip to the pub after flour bombing the townsfolk, was a favoured activity! To the Civil Aviation Department, Fenton was a disaster, but to the people of the Top End, he was a hero. The territory and national press noted not only his courageous rescues, but also his escapades, his disregard of rules and regulations and occasional pranks often causing problems with government authorities which he treated with disdain!

Like most doctors of today, he appeared to believe that administration should function as facilitators such that the expert health professionals can provide the best possible health care free of obstruction. However administration appear to seek control, not just of finance, but of health professionals. Secrecy of inevitable suboptimal care in spite of the best intentions appears more important than an expert evaluation of the issue with improvement of systems!

Fenton was noted for speeding and once was prosecuted for riding a "motor bicycle to the danger" and that he also attempted to ride overland south from Darwin on a Douglas motor bike. Prior to first coming to Darwin Dr. Fenton crashed in a plane at Wyndham.

30 Northern Standard 16/4/1934

Occasionally his theatrical flair got the better of him and after buzzing a crowd swooping low over the open-air cinema Star Theatre in Darwin several times, including once between the front of the audience circle and the screen and then landing a government aircraft on Mindil Beach, he received an official reprimand!

His flying licence was suspended by the Darwin representative of the Civil Aviation Department, Mr. E. Bunting. The certificate of air-worthiness of Dr. Fenton's plane was also suspended. Dr. Fenton would be unable to fly his plane until the suspension is lifted, without being liable to prosecution. And he also received a summons!

He then appeared at the Police Court charged with on 20th April, being pilot of plane VH-ULI which he flew at a low altitude in close proximity to buildings in a manner dangerous to the public. He pleaded not guilty.

Sergeant Koop in outlining the case for the prosecution said defendant was a first class pilot and his work generally was valued in full, but no person can do wrong without penalty where the welfare of others and their lives are endangered. When the defendant flew over the Star Theatre a performance was in progress and a large number of people were in the building and some of these will say that defendant flew over the building at a low altitude. This performance was repeated.

On 14 May 1935 Fenton was fined £20 for "endangering public safety. After many witnesses, expert opinions and the defendant's responses, the Magistrate found the defendant guilty and fined him £20, with £6/16/6 costs, in default one month's imprisonment. A stay of proceedings for 30 days was granted.

31 Northern Standard 26/4/1935 32 Northern Standard 14/5/1935

Once when Fenton's pilot's license was revoked after some misdemeanour, he stated "In spite of the suspension of my flying licence I am morally bound to continue flying in pursuance of my medical duties," he said, and continued without the licence until it was restored. Sometimes during that period he had special permission from the civil aviation authorities, but often he flew without it. His only reply to charges of reckless flying was that all his flying in the north was necessarily reckless owing to the nature of the country over which he had to fly, and the hazardous nature of the landing grounds available.

However, the Civil Aviation Department rescinded the suspension of Dr. C. C. Fenton's flying licence a few days later.

33 Northern Standard 17/5/1935

The miners at Pine Creek expressed concern at the possibility of losing his services due to the 'pin-pricking' of the Darwin administrators and planned to make a suitable presentation to Dr. C. C. Fenton to express their gratitude for his services.

34 Northern Standard 2/7/1935

Fenton's worst misdemeanour in the eyes of bureaucracy was a flight to China. In 1936 Fenton's sister died in child-birth in China leaving his mother distraught and stranded. There was no mention of the father or the baby. Fenton made an unsanctioned flight to China from Darwin to Swatow, in China in a small open aircraft in the cyclone season to bring his mother home. He added extra fuel tanks altering the plane's legal specifications.

Captain Johnston, the Director of General Civil Aviation alleged that he violated certain Commonwealth flying regulations including omission to notify foreign countries of his intention to fly over their territories and a departmental investigation was planned into his flight to China. Darwin's officialdom were increasingly anxious about Dr. Fenton's persistence in undesirable activities from their perspective.

Not only had he left without completing any desired forms, but he also left without completing an income tax form and awaiting clearance within a few weeks! The Bulletin considered that every non administrator would admire his pluck!

35 Northern Standard 27/3/1936 36 Northern Standard 26/4/1935 37 Northern Standard 28/4/1935

This aircraft lacked an airworthiness certificate, nor did he have a pilot's licence at the time. Fenton had not obtained any clearance from the Customs authorities or permits for a flight over foreign countries. During the journey he made the first solo flight across the Gulf of Siam, with several narrow escapes.

He had no official landing permits or required papers to visit other countries but managed to talk his way through Koepang and Bangkok, the latter by handing over an aircraft manual in English when asked for an airworthiness certificate. Eventually, an official in Hong Kong grounded him.

Dr Fenton somehow took off anyway, only to be arrested in Swatow, China, then released because of his "filial piety". On the way back he was grounded again by the same Hong Kong official, who not having learned his lesson, gave the doctor permission to evaluate his plane with a test flight. So Dr Fenton was off again, departing Hong Kong to the official's consternation and arriving back in Darwin to a hero's welcome, his Moth plane a trusty and resilient partner in many adventures, in June in Darwin. He had been profitably engaged while away, studying malaria and tropical medicines in Singapore and Java as well as comforting his mother in China.

He left Koepang, now spelt Kupang, East Timor, at 6.45 a.m. Northern Territory time, and arrived in Darwin at 3.15 p.m., a flight of eight and a half hours. Because of strong head winds while crossing the Timor Sea Dr. Fenton found he could make more headway flying the whole distance just above the sea, an estimated height of ten feet, an immense attainment of concentration! He achieved this heroic adventure of crossing the Timor Sea in the cyclone season in a single-engined machine.

Captain Johnston, the Director of General Civil Aviation alleged that Doctor Fenton violated certain Commonwealth flying regulations including omission to notify foreign countries of his intention to fly over their territories. Johnston stated that a thorough investigation would be made into Fenton's action.

38 Northern Standard 27/3/1936 39 Northern Standard 19/6/1936

Fenton was supported by a colleague, Dr. J. Newman Shelton, writing to the "Courier-Mail" of Brisbane.

"I sincerely trust that the 'Flying Doctor' (Dr. Clyde Fenton) will not be unduly harassed by the red-tape of aviation officials, and Customs authorities, in his perilous flight to China. It is typical of this heroic doctor that he should desire at great personal risk to hasten to comfort his mother following (as per private advice I have received) the death in China, in tragic circumstances, of his only sister. All good

Australians will sincerely wish him Godspeed and a safe return."

The Standard considered that Dr. Clyde Fenton, Darwin's flying doctor, was becoming a real source of worry to Darwin's officialdom and that the man persisted in doing things, which were in themselves undesirable from the official viewpoint.

However, the Standard considered that apart from officials, every Australian would admire his pluck. The 'Pubtest' backed Fenton ahead of administration and his income tax return!

40 Northern Standard 28/4/1936

The Northern Standard "Observer" inquired about the position regarding Dr. Fenton and the aviation authorities? They said that he would not be allowed to fly his plane until it is made airworthy, and the cost of this has to be borne by the Doctor himself. Meanwhile the position was serious as far as the people out-back are concerned, as in the event of a hurried call, there would be no "Flying Doctor" to come to the rescue.

The Observer continued, *"Whatever the trouble may be, it is up to the authorities to have the matter remedied, and at once; the lives of the people must not be jeopardised by petty disputes, or professional jealousy. Dr. Fenton has conducted wonderful work and has been the means of saving many lives in the Territory, and it will be a shame if such a good record is now to be spoiled."*

41 Northern Standard 23/10/1936

It appears that the Aviation authorities in Darwin cancelled Fenton's pilot's licence and his Moth plane's certificate of airworthiness in response to his naughty behaviour of leaving for overseas with submitting a tax return and without a flight plan. In October Fenton flew Dr. Cook, the Chief Medical Officer of the Territory, from Katherine to Darwin without the correct documentation! His plane was housed in the Qantas hangar at Darwin airport

Civil aviation authorities refuse to comment on the position, and it is understood that Dr. Fenton would not be prevented from flying back to Katherine, where he was stationed.

Part of the issue was that Fenton made some alteration to his plane for his flight to China, therefore a certificate of airworthiness was refused until the plane had been further examined.

Secondly the Civil Aviation Department demanded a certificate of physical fitness written by another doctor in Katherine, yet Fenton was the only medical officer in the district in which he resides, and the authorities refused to accept Fenton's certificate!

Until his next visit to Darwin it would not be possible for him to obtain a health certificate from another doctor to satisfy the Civil Aviation Department! In the meantime, the Civil Aviation Department instructed Qantas ground engineers not to conduct any repairs to the machine, and Dr. Fenton has been compelled to make essential repairs and renewals himself.

42 Northern Standard 3/11/1936

The Singapore Straits Times claimed erroneously that Fenton flew to China in a plane which was the property of the Commonwealth Government, and which he was forbidden to use by the Commonwealth Government. Dr. Fenton had claimed four thousand five hundred dollars damages in a claim against the paper but was awarded five hundred dollars, then approximately £70 in Australian money for libel.

43 Northern Standard 19/1/1937

Dr. Clyde Cornwall Fenton was fined £5, costs 15/- in default of two weeks' imprisonment with hard labour for driving a motor vehicle across railway lines on to a jetty. Fenton pleaded guilty in absentia being unaware of the existence of the by-law.

44 Northern Standard 8/4/1938

In 1948 the Civil Aviation in Darwin finally prosecuted Fenton for breeches of the Air Navigation Regulations. He conducted his own defence but unfortunately the magistrate failed to appreciate Fenton's iconoclastic sense of humour and fined him £50 for breach of regulations, equal today to some \$700, though this was reduced to £5 on appeal with the aid of a legal representative!

2 Fenton C. *Flying Doctor*. Hawthorn Press, Melbourne 1947,

Accidents

Over the next few years he had three serious crashes writing off three planes and numerous minor accidents. To the Civil Aviation Department he was a disaster, but to the people of the Top End, he was a dashing hero.

In May 1934, a crash destroyed his Gypsy Moth. Dr. Fenton, accompanied by Dr. Woolnough, the Commonwealth Government Geologist, had left Mistake Creek the night before and made a good landing about ten miles from Victoria River Downs station homestead shortly after midnight.

On the following morning Dr. Fenton took off alone and made an observation flight to ascertain his whereabouts and made a bad landing at the Victoria River Downs. His plane turned over and was completely wrecked. He was uninjured but severely shaken.

Pilot Cropley, in the 'Magic Carpet,' took off from Pine Creek this morning for Wave Hill to search for the missing plane, before it was learned the overdue flyers were safe at Victoria River Downs. Mr. George Anson,

government dispenser, left Katherine by car this morning to go there to bring the stranded doctor back to Katherine.

45 Northern Standard 1/6/1934

In January 1936, Fenton crash landed his second plane in the dark causing severe damage, but he was again uninjured. Later the same year in November he crashed his third plane which was then destroyed by fire. On this occasion, Fenton suffered a broken nose, abrasions, and burns, sustained when dragging a passenger from the wreck.

In December, 1936, Fenton's plane crashed into the dense growth near Darwin Aerodrome, just after take-off. He had planned to fly to Bathurst Island to deal with an influenza epidemic, however, Dr. Fenton, in his Moth plane, crashed in some high scrub about fifty yards from the sixth hole at the Darwin golf links.

Mr. Johnson, a member of the local B.A.T. staff, was with him as passenger. The machine had been undergoing repairs during the day, and that after leaving the ground the engine began to give trouble but the pilot continued on in the hope that it would pick up and also because turning back would involve too great a risk.

However the engine failed altogether and the machine crashed amongst some twenty foot high saplings. The pilot sustained a broken nose and head injuries while the passenger got off with a bruised leg. The plane caught fire and was completely destroyed, only the engine and some twisted iron remaining.

It was understood the Air Accidents Committee of the Civil Aviation Department would hold an enquiry into the crash.

46 Northern Standard 10/11/1936

In September, 1937, after making an aerial call on a sick patient near Borrooloola, in the Northern Territory, Fenton failed to return. He was last seen flying over Beetaloo Station, on Tuesday after leaving Newcastle Waters early that morning on an inspection of cattle stations north of the Barkly Tablelands.

At first it was thought that he may have become involved in a minor mishap at either Beetaloo, O.T. Downs, Tanumbrini, or Nutwood Downs Stations with which there is no means of communication. Only Nutwood Downs station has motor transport facilities, and at first no great alarm was occasioned. When Dr. Fenton left Newcastle Waters on Tuesday it was believed he had a gallon of water, a tin of biscuits, and a supply of concentrated food tablets stored in his machine in case of emergency. At first it was thought that the plane carried only seventeen gallons of petrol, but then it was definitely established that the doctor had all tanks filled to capacity before he took off from Newcastle Waters.

Extensive searching by land and air parties during the week-end failed to reveal any trace of the flying doctor who has been missing for several days and grave fears were now held for his safety. For seven days he remained lost in the outback with fears he may have been killed in a crash

Many planes including Flight-Lieut. Hely and the Guinea Airways Lockheed joined the search for Fenton. Hely found him walking twenty miles north-east Tanumbrini and landed alongside him, then took off with Dr. Fenton and flew to Newcastle Waters. When found he was weak from exposure. He had been living on a cow which he had killed with his pocket knife; but all his food was exhausted by the time he was discovered.

His plane was intact and was being brought in. It had run out of petrol

47 Northern Standard 28/9/1937

Despite his recent gruelling experience, he was in the air again as expected of this most courageous man, within a few days. Dr. Fenton flew his own plane from Newcastle Waters to Katherine. He was accompanied from Birdum to Katherine by his rescuer Flight.-Lt. Hely in the Rapide.

48 Northern Standard 1/10/1937

Dr Fenton crashed in his new Fox Moth aerial ambulance as he was leaving Hodgson Downs station, Roper Valley, with a patient to fly to Katherine Hospital, a distance of one hundred and forty miles. The plane was seriously damaged, but Dr Fenton and his passengers, Sister Smith, of Katherine Hospital, and the patient, Mrs. O'Liffe, wife of the manager of Hodgson Downs were not injured.

The plane crashed on a small landing ground near the station homestead. After he had seen to the comfort of his passengers, Dr. Fenton rode one hundred and twenty miles on horseback to Roper Valley Station, where he reported the mishap over the pedal wireless to Darwin.

Mr. Roy Edwards, who crashed a fortnight ago in his own plane some fifty miles further up the valley, left Darwin in Dr. Fenton's private Moth and picked up the doctor at Roper Valley.

Dr. Fenton then flew to Hodgson Downs, where Mrs O'Uffe was placed on the plane's stretcher, and flown back to Katherine.

Electrical interference drowned most of Dr. Fenton's report of the crash, but he is thought to have said that halfway through the run for the take-off he realised that the heavily loaded machine could not clear the small runway. An accident was inevitable, and rather than crash into trees outside the field, he slowed the engine allowing the machine to run into a log at the end of the runway. The two crashes in the Roper Valley have now

reduced the number of aircraft available here for medical flights from three to one.

49 Northern Standard 27/2/1940

Fenton, as recorded above, had to land on a short runway and crashed into some logs before stopping his plane. He complained that outback settlers requiring medical services had not provided adequate landing sites.

50 Northern Standard 5/3/1940 51 Northern Standard 14/5/1940

Accolades

Dr. Fenton was elected as one of the Vice Presidents at the inaugural general meeting of the Aero Club. There were over fifty members and it marked a new phase in the history of the Northern Territory.

52 Northern Standard 28/9/1934

The Administrator of the Northern Territory, Mr. C. L. A. Abbott and Mrs. Abbott stood on the lawn in Government House grounds and received guests to the reception in honour of Rear-Admiral R. H. O. Lane-Poole, C.B., O.B.E., R.N., plus the Captain and officers of H.M.A.S. Canberra. Dr Fenton was amongst those receiving a Coronation award for distinguished services.

53 Northern Standard 24/8/1937

Dr. Clyde Fenton was awarded the Oswald Watt gold medal for brilliant flying in 1937. This medal is presented each year to the aviator, who in the opinion of the Associated Australian Aero Clubs does the most brilliant performance in the air within the Commonwealth or to an Australian born aviator who does the most brilliant feat outside of Australia.

Clyde Fenton was awarded the OBE in 1941. He was awarded the Lady Cilento medal in 1971, an acknowledgement of an individual's professionalism and a contribution of exceptional merit.

He was well remembered after his death. The Clyde Fenton Primary School in Katherine, Clyde Fenton Hangar of the Katherine Historical Society and the Fenton Airfield, a World War II airfield near Hayes Creek in the Northern Territory were all named after him. One of the planes he flew, a Gipsy Moth, is on display at the Fenton Hangar at the Katherine Historical Society Precinct

Fenton – war service

Dr. Fenton said "It will be with great regret that I will leave the Northern Territory and my work here, but I felt it my duty to enlist. That regret, however, will be tempered by hopes that I will be able to return to my job when the war is over."

Dr. Fenton offered his services to the R.A.A.F., shortly after the outbreak of WW II. He received his call up by telegram on 14 May 1940 for the Royal Australian Air

Force Fenton was initially told he was over the age limit for pilots having just turned thirty nine and was placed on the medical section of the Air Force reserve.

It was also thought possible that Dr. Fenton would be trained as a Flying instructor. Then from 17 June 1940 to 11 January 1946, Fenton served more for his expertise as a pilot than as a doctor! He joined as a pilot officer He left for the Air Force training school at Camden, New South Wales and completed a flying instructor's course. Despite his vast and varied experience as a flyer he said he was fully prepared to find he had a lot to learn when he entered the flying training school.

54 Northern Standard 7/6/1940

Fenton was then appointed commanding officer of No.6 Communication Unit and posted to Manbulloo airstrip near Katherine in the Northern Territory in February 1942. During this time he made many emergency medical flights and continued to work closely with his nursing colleague, Olive O'Keeffe, the head nurse working at the Katherine Hospital.

His squadron of aircraft provided transport and rescue services to military bases as well as unofficial medical support to missions. They were known as 'Fenton's Flying Freighters'! This unit, sometimes based at the Ross Smith Aerodrome in Darwin, and at the Batchelor airstrip, delivered mail and food supplies to army and RAAF outposts, as far afield as the observation units on the now deserted Wessel Islands. In August 1943 he was promoted to temporary squadron leader.

His RAAF appointment terminated on 11th January 1946

That year Fenton joined the Commonwealth Department of Health in Brisbane. While he was there he wrote a lively and popular account of his pre-war years in the Territory, *Flying Doctor* (1947)². At the registrar-general's office, Sydney, on 10th October 1949 he married Sheila Ethyl Young, née Pigott, a trained nurse and a widow; they were to be divorced in October 1959. Transferring to Melbourne in 1949, he remained with the department until his retirement in March 1966. On 29th March 1963 he married Lavinia Florence Catalano, née Robinson, a divorcee, at the Presbyterian Church, Winchelsea.

Survived by his wife and a son from his first marriage, he died on 27th February 1982 at Malvern, Melbourne.

CONCLUSION

Tall and slightly built, alert, luminous eyes, and a small fair moustache, Dr. Fenton was quiet, retiring, and modest, but was an incurable practical joker and a rebel against discipline. Untiring in his devotion to his exacting task and courageous to the point of recklessness, he is idolised by the pioneers of the north of Australia.



Katherine Hospital 2024

In every corner of the vast north in 1941 every man, woman, and child felt the departure of a personal friend, a striking man in whom every individual had the utmost confidence both as a pilot and as a doctor, and an Australian whose exploits have spread to many parts of the world.

CareFlight Fundraising Manager, Jo Rutherford, researched the life of Fenton for the fund raising event and said Dr Fenton that paved the way for remote medical care in the north and that "He showed that aeromedical service was essential in the Top End and he was courageous in showing it could be delivered everywhere. He was a pioneer who worked to provide access to medical care wherever people lived."

Clyde Fenton received many well deserved awards in his later years and after his death.

In 1937 he received an Australian aviation award the Oswald Watt Gold Medal and the King George VI's coronation medal. In 1941 he was awarded the OBE. The Clyde Fenton Primary School in Katherine, Clyde Fenton Hangar of the Katherine Historical Society and the Fenton Airfield, a World War II airfield near Hayes Creek in the Northern Territory were all named after him.

One of the planes he flew, a Gipsy Moth, is on display at the Fenton Hangar at the Katherine Historical Society Precinct



The flying doctor today.

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