

# HILLSON PRAGA

By Neil Follett



VH-UVP at Camden Aerodrome.  
[VIA Camden Historical Society]

The Praga E.114 first flew in 1934, and was designed by Jaroslav Šlechta and built at Karlín, a suburb of Prague, Czechoslovakia. Known as the Air Baby because of its light weight, the E.114 was powered by a 36 hp (27 kW) two-cylinder Praga B engine. The second prototype flew to Heston, England, in August 1935 on a demonstration tour and attracted the attention of wood-working business F. Hills and Sons Ltd. The firm liked what it saw, despite having built just one Mignet HM.14 *Pou-de-Ceil* (Flying Flea) previously, and acquired a licence to build the type in England. Production began in Manchester and the aircraft was known as the Hillson Praga. The Praga engine was also built in Britain under licence by Jowett Cars Ltd.

F. Hills and Sons, formed in 1921, primarily made doors and furniture. They were to be contracted by Percival Aircraft to build Proctors during W.W.II so the decision to build the Praga had a significant bearing on the firm's future.

Three Pragas were brought to Australia by (and initially registered to) D. Macarthur-Onslow trading as Light Aircraft Pty Ltd (known as Light Aircraft). In an advertisement in the December 1938 issue of 'Aircraft' magazine, Light Aircraft stated they were the "sole and exclusive representatives and licensees in Australia" for Hills and Sons Ltd, Praga aircraft. All three aircraft were destined to have short lives in Australia.

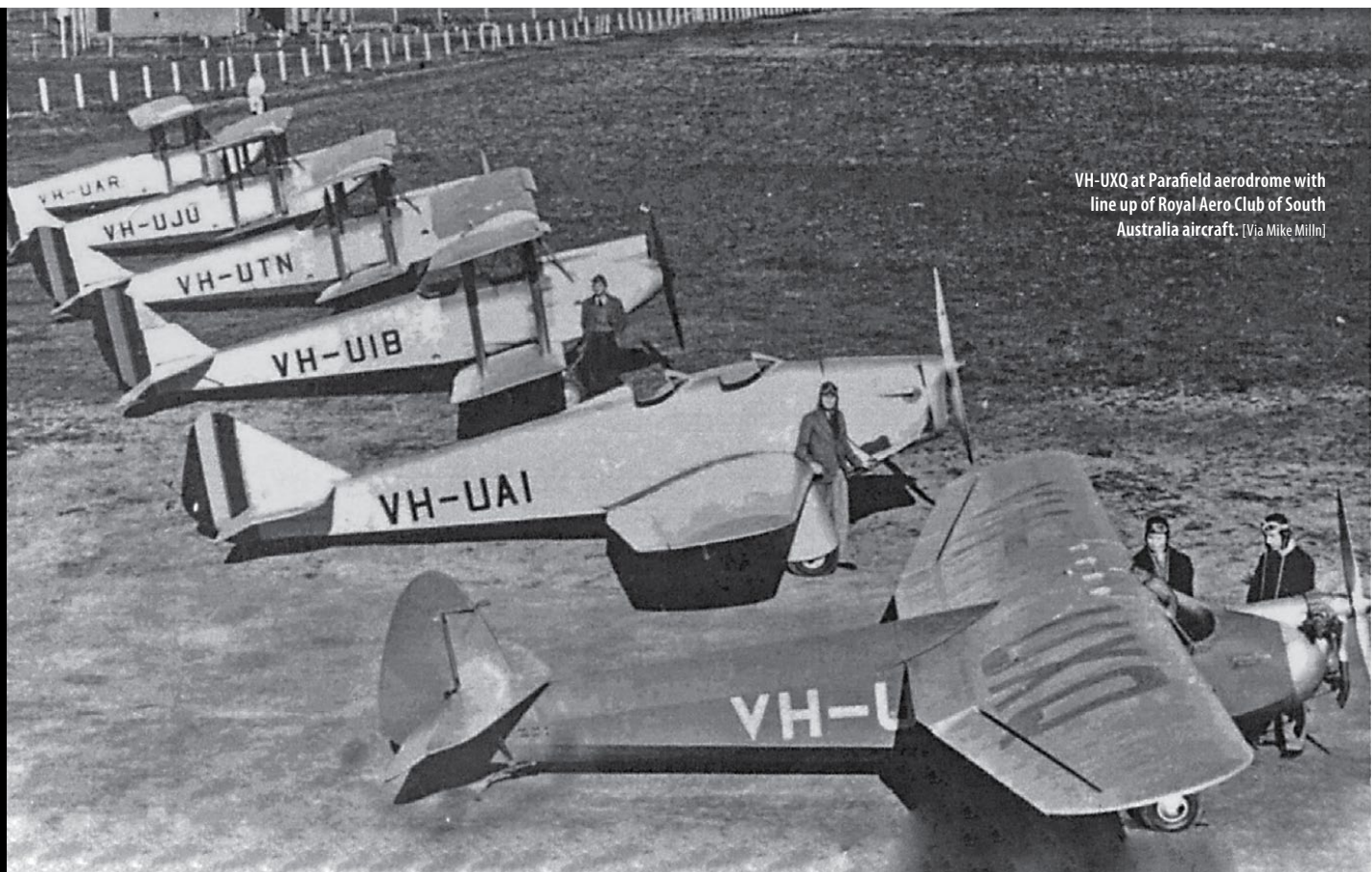
#### VH-UVP

The first Praga on the Australian register was the former G-AEON (c/n H.A.20). Some sources quote its construction number as H.A.1 but it is highly unlikely that the first aircraft built was exported directly before extensive flight tests. It was registered to Hills and Sons on 3 November 1936 as G-AEON. It was registered in Australia during the following April.

It would appear that a replacement engine was needed for VH-UVP as, in Novem-

ber 1940, Light Aircraft purchased a used, but newly overhauled, engine from Hills and Sons. An interesting note in correspondence between Light Aircraft and Hills states "...this engine of Czech origin was received in this country and paid for by them to Czechoslovakia before 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1939. This is essential to comply with our own regulations, Czechoslovakia being a country under enemy domination and we presume the Australian Government will also require this certification..."

Joseph Bowden, a sergeant and flying instructor in the RAAF, became the registered owner on 1 December 1941. It may be he had an unusual purpose in mind even then, because in February 1942 he applied to the Department of Civil Aviation (DCA) for permission to sell the Praga to a Tom Barrett, of Orange, NSW, who wished to use the aircraft in connection with his frozen food business. Bowden also asked for permission to give flying instruction to Barrett.



VH-UXQ at Parafield aerodrome with line up of Royal Aero Club of South Australia aircraft. [Via Mike Milln]

DCA advised their District Superintendent at Mascot that "...Mr J.H. Bowden is a Sgt. Pilot Instructor in the RAAF and therefore would not be permitted to give instruction to civilians for reward and therefore an instructor's endorsement to his licence is not approved. However he could be given approval to instruct Mr. Barrett only".

VH-UVP was registered to Barrett on 28 February 1942 but, on 6 May 1942, ownership returned to Bowden. At the time Bowden owned Travelair 2000 VH-UGY which was sold to Barrett on the same date. Bowden was discharged from the RAAF in September 1942 and set up Bowden Air Transport based in Broken Hill, NSW.

In August, shortly before his discharge, Bowden requested approval to sell UVP to William Porter of Temora, NSW, who, like Barrett, intended to use it for his business. Porter was a stock and station agent. It would appear that the sale never took place as Bowden loaned the aircraft to Porter without payment. (It would not be Porter's only dalliance with the type however.) The Praga must have eventually returned to Bowden in Broken Hill as it was destroyed in a fire at Bowden Air Transport's workshop on 16 April 1945. Also destroyed in the fire was Percival Gull VH-UQW.

#### VH-UXQ

This aircraft was first registered to Light Aircraft on 13 July 1937. On 4 August Light Aircraft informed the Civil Aviation Department (CAD) that the aircraft (c/n H.A.21) had been sold to the Royal Aero Club of South Australia. VH-UXQ was involved in a minor accident on 20 May 1939 when, after a flight, a passenger was struck on the shoul-



VH-UXR at Camden Aerodrome with VH-UVP in background. [Via Camden Historical Society]

der when he walked into the propeller. Remarkably, he was not injured and the damage was to the aircraft with a broken propeller tip!

In May 1941 a Howard D'Alton of Albert Park in Melbourne informed the CAD that he was purchasing the aircraft to assist in obtaining sufficient hours for enlistment in the RAAF as an instructor. It was duly registered in his name on 23 May 1941. In reply to a query by D'Alton the DCA informed him of the following:

"With reference to your inquiry of 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1941, regarding the painting of your aircraft VH-UXQ I am to advise that Regulation 18 of the Air Restrictions Order states - "An aircraft shall not be used

for flying instruction or training purposes unless - (a) it is painted yellow; or (b) it has a yellow band two feet in width painted around the fuselage, and a yellow stripe two feet in width and extending from the leading edge to the trailing edge on the under surface of each main-plane." It will not be necessary to paint your aircraft yellow or have yellow bands painted on it if it is being used for private purposes only."

There is no National Archives record of D'Alton having served in the RAAF so, unless he served as a civilian, it would appear his plans for VH-UXQ did not reach a favourable conclusion. On 13 August 1942 D'Alton wrote to DCA as follows, "I propose selling



*my Hillson Praga aircraft to Mr Jack Pater of Middle Park ... The aircraft is situated at Myrtleford, uncamouflaged; would you be good enough to grant permission for the machine to be flown to Essendon or Coode Island aerodrome in its present condition (without camouflage paint). Immediately the plane arrives at its destination it will be placed in a hangar in preparation for re-painting..."*

DCA was advised, two months later, that the sale did not eventuate. Subsequent correspondence informed the Department that the aircraft was at Broken Hill and stored in the Flying Doctor hangar.

Joseph Bowden seemed to have a liking for Hillson Pragas as he became the owner of VH-UXQ on 11 December 1943. Bowden was the Flying Doctor pilot for Broken Hill at the time. He indicated that he regarded the Praga as a supplementary aircraft for the Flying Doctor service.

Ownership changed again when William Porter of Temora, NSW, clearly another Praga enthusiast, became the registered owner on 11 October 1944. Like VH-UVP, 'UXQ came to a fiery end when it was destroyed on 19 November 1944.

The local police reported the incident that was caused by a rather forgetful owner.

*"I beg to report that on the morning of the 19<sup>th</sup> instant William James Porter of Hoskins Street, Temora had been flying*

**“ when turning the propeller to start the machine the engine back-fired and burst into flames, completely destroying the aircraft ”**

*his Hillson Praga high wing monoplane no. VH-U.X.Q. and when landing on the Junee Road Satellite about six miles south of Temora, one of the wheels punctured. He left the machine and came to Temora to have the puncture repaired. About 11-30 a.m. he returned to the machine and after refitting the wheel he switched on the motor, and when turning the propeller to start the machine the engine back-fired and burst into flames, completely destroying the aircraft. Porter stated that when he left the machine in the first instance he forgot to turn the petrol off, and on his return the carburettor had flooded. It being exceptionally hot, it is presumed that when the engine back-fired it caused the fumes to ignite. The machine was valued at £500 and was insured for £350 ground insurance only."*

Incidentally, in early January 1945, Porter made arrangements to purchase a de Havilland DH.87 Hornet Moth (VH-UUW). Porter had intended to make the Hornet Moth available for Bowden's use but the aircraft was based permanently at Temora by May and obviously avoided Bowden's flammable workshop.

#### **VH-UXR**

The third Hillson Praga (c/n H.A.22) was first registered to Light Aircraft on 15 June 1938. While being operated at Camden by the Macquarie Grove Flying and Gliding School it suffered two engine failures. Both failures were caused by the crankshaft breaking in flight. The School sought approval to install a Salmson A.D.9 engine instead of the Praga. This did not go ahead presumably as the extra weight of the Salmson reduced the pay-



**LEFT:** VH-UXQ at Parafield Aerodrome. [Via South Australian Aviation Museum]

**BELOW:** Miss E. Bronner, a student with the Royal Aero Club of South Australia, with VH-UXQ. [Via South Australian Aviation Museum]

**BOTTOM:** VH-UXR.



load to only 127 pounds (58 kilograms) which was insufficient for a passenger.

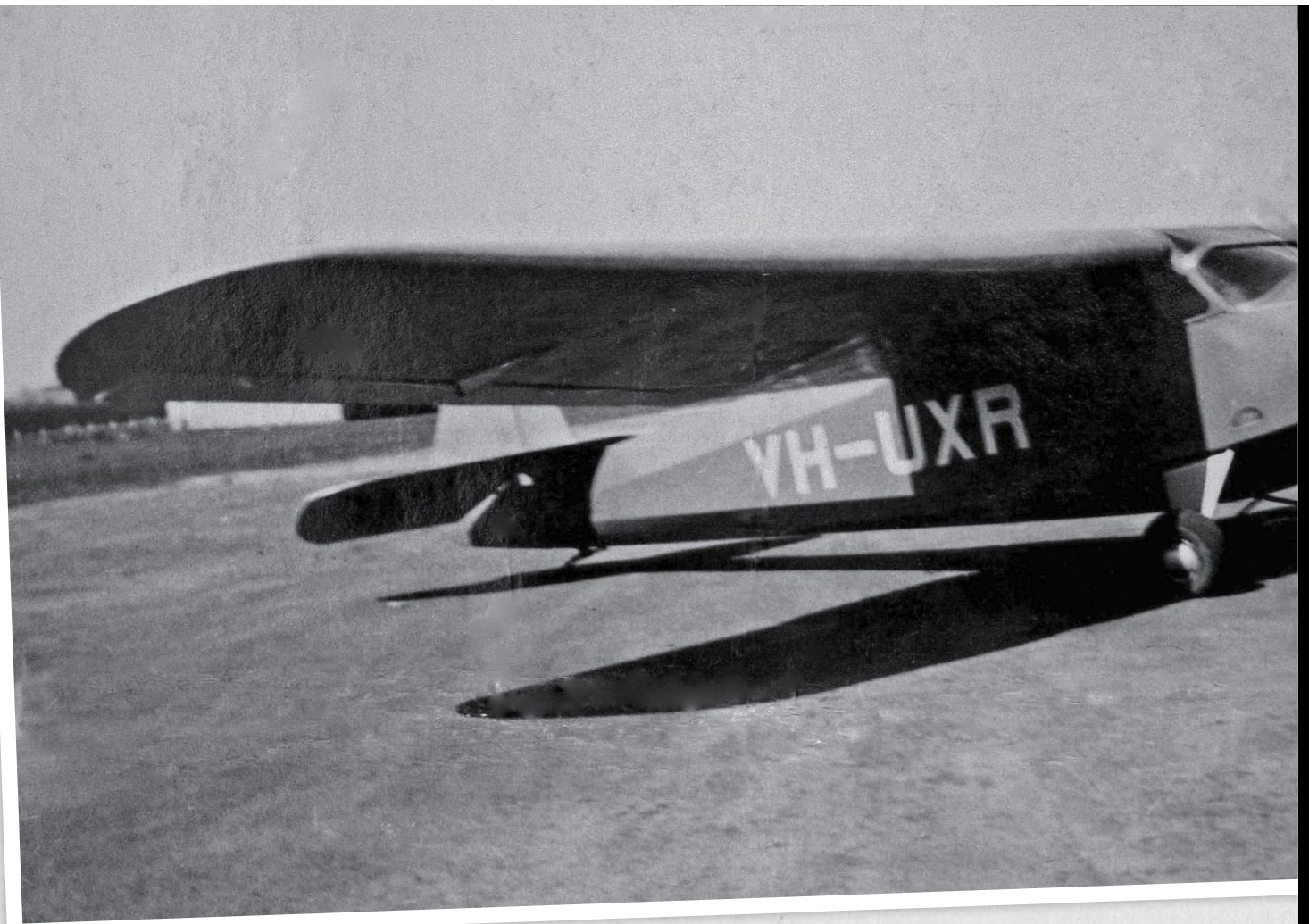
In June 1940 Eric Condon of Wagga Wagga, NSW, purchased the aircraft on the condition that it had a Certificate of Airworthiness. After being test flown at Camden, VH-UXR was flown to Wagga Wagga by Condon as he was not permitted to store or fly the aircraft at Camden as the aerodrome had been taken over by the RAAF.

On hearing about this, DCA wrote to Light Aircraft informing them that VH-UXR did not have a current C of A and that under the National Security (ships & aircraft transfer) regulations an aircraft may not be sold, let, loaned or hired without prior approval of the Minister for Civil Aviation. They also wrote to Condon informing him that the aircraft did not have a C of A and that his licence was not current. Both Condon and Light Aircraft were asked to explain their actions.

The outcome of this was that Light Aircraft was warned that any future breach of regulations would not be dealt with in a lenient manner. Condon was informed that because of his breach of flying without a valid licence, renewal of that licence would be deferred for one month. The aircraft was registered to Condon on 20 September 1940.

VH-UXR again came to DCA's notice when a newspaper article was brought to their attention. The article in a Wagga paper of 11 March 1941 read, "A cross-wind landing on one wheel ended a stunting flight by





*E.E. Condon, a well-known flyer, this evening. After rolling and diving Condon was about to land on the municipal aerodrome when he saw spectators signalling frantically. They indicated that a wheel was missing from the plane. The plane travelled 50 yards on one wheel and then stopped without being damaged. The missing wheel was found on the aerodrome."*

Naturally DCA wanted an explanation from Condon why he was flying an aircraft that didn't have a current C of A, why he was performing aerobatics in a non-aerobatic aircraft and why he was performing aerobatics with a passenger on board.

Condon explained that the purpose of the flight was to allow someone on the ground to take photographs of it before the aircraft was dismantled and that he did not perform any aerobatics. He sent DCA a statement to that effect signed by a Justice of the Peace. He also backed up his explanation with statutory declarations from his passenger and a witness on the ground. DCA's reaction was to suspend his licence for three months.

Eric Condon was born in 1906 and had purchased VH-UXR to build up his hours prior to entering the RAAF as flying instructor, despite this role being one allocated by the RAAF as it saw fit. He enlisted in the RAAF in May 1941 and was discharged in October 1945 with the rank of Flight Lieutenant. At the time of his discharge he was serving with 6 Communications Unit RAAF. He put his experience to good use af-

**“ I opened the motor in an endeavour to increase the lift and the next thing I remember was sitting on the ground in the middle of wreckage ”**

ter the war as he ran his own businesses trading as Wagga Flying School and Wagga Air Taxis. Condon was a bit of a local celebrity and was known in the region as the 'Flying Godfather', a pretty impressive moniker for someone who died in his late forties.

In July 1942 VH-UXR was sold to Mr. J.R. Pater of Middle Park in Melbourne. It was based at Coode Island aerodrome. He wrote to DCA in October 1942 to seek permission to write safety tickets for the Praga. Pater stated that he was employed by the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation as an inspector and part of his duties were to sign out the company's aircraft. He also stated that the Praga was his third machine as he had previously built a glider and owned De-soutter VH-UEE.

VH-UXR came to an end on 11 September 1943. In a response to provide a statement about the accident, Jack Pater wrote; "I de-

*parted from Essendon drome at approx. 1545 hrs on 11<sup>th</sup> September and proceeded to Coode Island and made a normal approach into the south and when about directly over the bank after crossing the river surrounding the field the aircraft failed to respond to the controls and continued in a dive. I opened the motor in an endeavour to increase the lift and the next thing I remember was sitting on the ground in the middle of wreckage.*

*The speed in the approach was 50 m.p.h. (80 km/h) indicated air speed which was a good 10 m.p.h. (16 km/h) above the stalling speed of the aircraft. The aircraft is completely wrecked although the engine condition is fair."*

What caused the accident remains a mystery, and thus ended the life of the third Hillson Praga to enter the Australian civil register.



**LEFT:** The Hillston Praga VH-UXR, possibly at Wagga Wagga NSW .

**BELOW:** Jack Pater with his Praga, VH-UXR.

**BOTTOM:** VH-UXR stored in a hangar, it was later written off in a landing accident on 11 September 1943.

