

NORMAN BREARLEY LAUGHS LOUDEST

Leigh Edmonds

Your exhortation to 'do some aviation history now' (that's not exactly what you said, but that's what you meant) led me to take the attached cutting out of a recent Saturday issue of the *West Australian*. (I'm afraid I can't be more accurate than that - I failed to note which issue it actually came from but any decent historian 100 years from now will doubtless be able to find its original source without too much trouble.)

Air fare war keeps trains off the rails

PASSENGER train services between Perth and the eastern states — including the Indian Pacific — are facing an uncertain future after a massive drop in patronage.

Rail authorities decided yesterday to indefinitely extend cutbacks which have reduced east-west passenger services from five to two a week in recent months.

This follows a continued slump in passenger numbers this month as transcontinental train services battle for survival in the face of the recession and massive discounting by domestic airlines.

This week's latest round of the domestic air fares war means travellers can buy a Perth-Sydney return ticket for \$370 — compared with the cheapest discount fare on the Indian Pacific of \$400 return.

The cheapest Perth-Sydney return train ticket for passengers wanting sleeper facilities is \$894.

Patronage on the Indian Pacific has fallen to 20 per cent of seating capacity — one-quarter of the occupancy level needed to make the service viable.

That is despite an emergency 50 per cent cut in overall east-west services at the start of the month.

The cutbacks began in February when

By PETER HOOKER

rail authorities — led by the Adelaide-based federal railway Australian National — axed one of the then twice-weekly Trans Australian train services between Perth and Adelaide.

Australian National then announced a "temporary" reduction in June services which led to the suspension of the remaining Trans Australian service and cut Indian Pacific services from three to two a week.

Yesterday, it announced those cuts would be extended to at least the end of next month. From then, service levels would be reviewed monthly.

Australian National's public affairs manager, Christina Holmdahl, said that, despite school holidays, July bookings on the Indian Pacific were still only at an occupancy level of 40 per cent — half the viable level.

She said the size of trains had been reduced but this was not enough without cuts in the frequency of service.

To be viable, Indian Pacific services need an 80 per cent occupancy level on a full-sized train with capacity for 142 sleeper-car passengers and 104 sit-up passengers.

Ms Holmdahl said the restoration of previous service levels depended entirely on passenger demand.

You might put it under a heading something like 'Norman Brearley Laughs Loudest' because, if there is a great landing ground in the sky to which Sir Norman only recently retired, it is likely he is having a good laugh over the complaints of the railways when he thinks back to what he had to put up with from them in the early 1930s. As everyone will know, Brearley started the first scheduled air transport service between Perth and Adelaide, once weekly, with the 14 passenger DH-66 Hercules in June 1929. This was just in time to catch the looming depression. In June 1930 West Australian Airways lowered its fare for the flight between Perth and Adelaide from £18 to £12 with an additional charge of £1 for overnight accommodation at the Forrest

hostel and other incidentals.¹ (If I've got to look this stuff up, I may as well put in some footnotes,) This fare was virtually the same as the first class rail fare over the same route and Airways actions drew the attention of the railway commissioners who blamed the company, at least in part, for the decline in first class rail passengers. Shipping and rail, the two oldest methods of traveling between Perth and the eastern states, were vastly more patronized than the air route (in the ten months to 30 April 1930, rail carried 22 300 passengers, shipping 22 102 and the air service 598) but the railways believed that the air service might constitute a threat, particularly during the Depression.² Railways noted that the reduced air fare attracted more passengers to air travel, 37 passengers in May 1930 when the fare was at its old rate, and 99 in June when it was reduced.³ By the end of 1930, Airways claimed it was carrying full passenger loads on most Perth-Adelaide flights and in April 1931 the need to reduce rail operating costs in the face of relatively poor patronage led to the reduction of the train service from three to two a week.⁴ Since Airways was subsidized by the Commonwealth, the railways claimed that it gave unfair competition when declining traffic was causing increasing losses in rail operations.

Aircraft argued that the railways were also subsidized and that they were 'patronized only by those to whom no other means of transport is available'.⁵ It also asked why the Saturday express between Melbourne and Adelaide, which had been so important to Perth-Adelaide service by providing the link needed to speed the mails to Britain, had been cancelled.⁶ More seriously, Airways and *Aircraft* argued that the railways carried an aggregate of 1,000 people a week, and that the most Airways could carry was 28 and that, although Airways received about £6,000 a year in passenger fares, it paid the Commonwealth Railways £5,000 in freight to the depots which the company maintained along the route.⁷ Brearley also argued that many who traveled on the Perth-Adelaide service only did so because they needed to save time and that they returned by train, creating a rail trip which might otherwise not have been undertaken at all.⁸

By about 1934 Brearley claimed that the rail authorities had come to share his point of view that the air service was not in serious competition with the railways and that it contributed significantly to the railways' revenue. However, he sold the service to Adelaide Airways in mid 1936 and it linked up with Australian National Airways in November 1936. A month later the DC-2 'Bunguna' commenced flying on the route.⁹ When this new aeroplane started on the service, the schedule was increased to two return flights weekly and, in October 1937, the 'Bunguna' commenced a third weekly service.¹⁰ The Commonwealth Railways complained bitterly of unfair competition.¹¹

The reaction of the Civil Aviation Board showed that in the few years since 1930 it had developed a new confidence in the way it approached the Commonwealth Railways' complaints. The Railway Commissioner claimed ANA would make large inroads into railway earnings and recommended that the government should withdraw all subsidies from the service.¹² The Civil Aviation Board responded with arguments about the value of air transport, the possible use of modern civil aircraft in times of national emergency and the value of the air service to the business community and to Western Australians in general. The Board contested the Commissioner's argument that air passengers had been taken from the railways and suggested that the increased air traffic was probably due to improved aeroplanes and improved schedules and frequency 'which in itself is due to the increased demand for air travel' and 'an increased appreciation by the public of the advantage, safety and comfort of modern air travel'.¹³ Unlike responses to previous challenges to civil aviation the Board no longer felt compelled to justify aviation's movement onto Australia's main transport corridors when it commented that 'any loss of traffic to the Railways that may result from the Airways must be faced as an inescapable result of progress demanded both by commercial and defense considerations'.¹⁴ A couple of years later this attitude was amplified when the Director General of Civil Aviation, commenting on the same kinds of complaints, answered 'this was the price of progress' and that the remedy was to improve

the older form of transport.¹⁵

Here we are, fifty years on, and the railways are again complaining about competition from aviation. Obviously they have not improved themselves enough to compete as the Director General suggested they should. The real change, however, between now and then is that the railways no longer feel they have a superior right to that of aviation and realize that if they can't compete they will go out of business. Even when the aviation fare war subsides, I suppose there will be a lot of people who had not flown before and who will see no reason why they should sit on a train for three days when they can do the same distance in four hours.

NOTES

1. *Aircraft*, July 1930, p.310; and *West Australian*, 14 July 1930.
2. Note by the Railway Commissioner, 11 June 1930, Australian Archives (AA).
3. Commissioner of Railways to the Department of Transport, 23 July 1930, AA.
4. *West Australian*, 12 January 1931, p.8 and 23 April 1931, p.12.
5. *Aircraft*, July 1930, p. 402.
6. *Aircraft*, January 1931, p.5.
7. *West Australian*, 17 November 1931. p.6; and *Aircraft*, 1 January 1931, p.35.
8. Cutting from the *Herald*, December 1930, AA.
9. *West Australian*, 5 December 1936, p.22.
10. *West Australian*, 20 October 1937, p.18.
11. Briefing note prepared by Controller-General of Civil Aviation, 15 March 1938, AA.
12. *ibid.*
13. Secretary, Civil Aviation Branch to the Secretary, Department of Defense, 21 January 1938 347/1, file 192/124/52, AA.
14. *ibid.*
15. Director General of Civil Aviation to the Secretary of the Department of the Interior, 15 March 1940, MP 131/1, file 192/101/782, AA.