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PERCIVAL P.40 PRENTICE IN AUSTRALIA

Only one example of the Percival Prentice was registered in Australia.



Magazine picture of VH-BAO at Bankstown, soon after its was registered.

Courtesy Dave Eyre

The Percival Prentice first flew in 1946 and was selected by the Royal Air Force as a 3 seat all-weather fully aerobatic trainer for the early post-war years. It was all metal construction with fixed undercarriage with a large cockpit area to allow side-by-side seating for instruction, plus another trainee observing, powered by a 250hp de Havilland Gipsy Queen 32 engine.

Over 300 Prentices were built at Percival Aircraft Ltd's plant at Luton, and a further 66 Prentices for the Indian Air Force were built by Hindustan Aircraft in India. The last RAF Prentices were radio trainers retired in 1953 when, in a remarkably ambitious purchase, Aviation Traders Ltd of Stansted acquired all 252 aircraft in a bulk lot at an attractive price. Aviation Traders was a heavy aircraft maintenance company owned by the entrepreneurial Freddie Laker, who was confident they could be marketed as civilian touring aircraft.

The civil conversion's main selling point was the spacious cockpit, which provided two rows of two seats behind the front two pilots seats. Carrying 6 persons on a single engine should have made an attractive economical aircraft for private or charter use, however in military service the Prentice was notorious for its poor performance in warm weather, and it was found that with 4 or more passengers, the civil Prentice's performance was barely marginal.

Nevertheless, Aviation Traders Ltd commenced work on their civil conversions. A number of modifications had to be incorporated to satisfy British civil CofA requirements, including an artificial stall warning "stick-shaker" device. The first was test flown in June 1956 and only 28 aircraft were completed before the project was abandoned three years later. All 252 Aviation Traders Prentices had been ferried from RAF stations to Southend, Stansted and Minworth where those not selected for civil conversion were stripped for parts then abandoned in graveyards on airfields until the scrappers moved in.

Australia's one and only Percival Prentice began life as RAF Prentice T Mk.1 VS687, and was selected by Aviation Traders Ltd from their large stockpile of RAF disposal airframes for civil conversion, being registered G-AONS to Aviation Traders in May 1956. However it was nearly two years before the conversion was completed and it made its first test flight on 2 March 1958 at Southend. British CofA was formally issued to G-AONS three days later, to new owner David J. Hill, Southend. The Prentice now had a smart civil colour scheme and the name *Koomela* painted on the nose.

David Hill was an Australian who had flown with RAF for the previous five years and was looking for an aircraft to fly home. He was also seeking employment as a commercial pilot in Australia, having placed an advertisement in the October 1957 edition of *Aircraft* magazine (then the only Australian aviation magazine):

"Australian leaving RAF, wants position with progressive firm as executive or charter pilot, flying modern aircraft. 1850 hours singles, twins, pistons and jets. Flt/Lt D. J. Hill c/o 94 Blackburn Road, Blackburn, Victoria."

On 5 March 1958, the day that the CofA paperwork was handed over, David Hill departed Southend on his flight home. We know nothing of the delivery flight except that G-AONS refuelled at Bahrein on 19 March and reached Australia on 29 April 1958. David Hill had a Sydney

address and flew the Prentice in Australia under its British registration for a few months, and accompanied experienced aviation writer Keith Robey for a local flight from Bankstown. Robey published a detailed assessment of the Prentice for his regular pilot report series in the June 1958 *Aircraft* magazine. His assessment was complimentary, suggesting that the roomy all metal Prentice could be a low cost replacement for the wooden construction aircraft types recently identified by DCA for restrictions and future grounding (Percival Proctor V, Miles Gemini & Messenger etc).

G-AONS visited Moorabbin in June 1958 but by September the aircraft was parked in the Fawcett Aviation hangar at Bankstown awaiting inspection for Australian registration. In November that year it was at de Havilland Aircraft Pty Ltd at Bankstown about to commence its overhaul.



Percival Prentice G-AONS at Moorabbin in June 1958, outside the Schutt Aviation hangars. All over silver with red trim, and the name *Koomela* on the engine cowling. Photo by Eddie Coates

On 25 February 1959, the Prentice, now painted as VH-BAO, was test flown at Bankstown following its Australian certification inspection, and two days later DCA issued the Australian CofA and it was formally added to the Register to owner David J. Hill, Sydney.

The Australian CofA imposed a lower AUW (All Up Weight) to the British CofA and Mr. Hill wrote to DCA in September 1959 complaining about this restriction which limited the use of his aircraft. The Department's airworthiness section replied suggesting that he could submit the aircraft for flight testing under DCA supervision, and if the performance figures gained for these tests allowed, the aircraft's Flight Manual could be changed. However all costs of the flight tests would be borne by the owner and if negative performance figures resulted, the aircraft's allowable weight would be restricted even further. No flight tests were conducted. In October 1959 the Prentice visited an airshow at Albion Park aerodrome, Wollongong NSW.



VH-BAO at Bankstown during 1959. It retains the same paint scheme but the name *Koomela* has been removed from the nose. Photo by Eric Allen

In March 1960 VH-BAO changed hands to Mr. R. G. Douglas of Sydney. Unfortunately his experience with the Prentice was short and unhappy. The following month on 26 April 1960 it crashed on takeoff near Cobar NSW. The DCA accident summary states that the pilot attempted to takeoff on a strip which was considerably shorter than required. The aircraft struck trees after becoming airborne when the pilot reduced airspeed below the optimum in an attempt to clear them. The pilot held a Private Pilot Licence with 200 hours total time and 23 hours experience on this aircraft type. He and his passenger were unhurt in the accident.

The fate of the aircraft after the Cobar crash is not known, although it was professionally dismantled by aircraft engineers flown to Cobar from Bankstown. Although it remained on the Civil Register for another nine years, its wreck was not returned to Bankstown and it was not repaired.

R. G. Douglas, the Prentice's last owner, also operated a Fairchild Argus VH-BVF and went on to establish a sales company World Wide Aeronautical Services, Sydney in 1962 and imported Piper Comanche 250 VH-DOL, Beech G35 Bonanza VH-WWK and two new production model Navion Rangemaster Gs VH-WWE & WWL. The first Navion VH-WWE was air delivered to Australia, from San Francisco, arriving Sydney on 14 November 1962.

Percival Prentice Mk.1 c/n PAC/312

Registration	Date	Owner/Event
VS687		RAF
G-AONS	3.58	Aviation Traders (Engineering) Ltd, Southend
	5.3.58	British CofA: David J. Hill, Southend
VH-BAO	27.2.59	David J. Hill, Sydney
	8.3.60	R. G. Douglas, Sydney
	26.4.60	crashed near Cobar NSW
	26.2.69	Struck-off Register

A VISITING PRENTICE

Another Percival Prentice was seen in Australia for a short time in 1969. It was G-AOMF which was being ferried from England to New Zealand by its owner Bill Wilkinson, a New

Zealand dentist practising in London. He recalls: *My love affair with the Percival Prentice began in July 1962 when I bought G-AOKF for 1,350 pounds. Before buying I looked at the specifications very carefully: it was an all-metal six seat machine, it was fully aerobatic (with two people on board) and had an IFR instrument panel. The glasshouse gave excellent visibility, the fixed undercarriage was widely placed and look as though it could handle the fiercest of crosswinds. The most important requirement was that it was cheap.*

In his personal account "A Prentice Log Book", Wilkinson describes adventurous flights to European countries and the purchase of two other Prentices G-AOLU & G-AOMF, which he based at Biggin Hill for flight training before moving them to Jersey in the Channel islands. He sold all three, 'OKF to a mining engineer in Liberia conditional on Wilkinson delivering it to Monrovia - more adventures but a successful sale resulted. For some time he had been considering a flight to New Zealand and in late 1968 repurchased G-AOMF for that purpose.

G-AOMF was a late conversion by Aviation Traders, previously RAF VS316, gaining its British CofA on 12 April 1960. Bill Wilkinson was its third civil owner, purchasing it in August 1963 and selling it in September 1966 to CAVU International Ltd.

Wilkinson set off from Jersey on 25 February 1969 bound for NZ, with a non aviator friend as passenger, and a 44 gallon drum of Avgas in the rear cabin piping fuel into the right wing tank. In "A Prentice Log Book", he describes the many dramas en route, reaching Singapore on 12 March. G-AOMF cleared Australian customs on arrival at Darwin, before continuing to Brisbane via refuelling stops at Tennant Creek, Mount Isa, Longreach, Charleville. Wilkinson then flew by airline to NZ to make arrangements for a NZ import licence and fitting an extra fuel tank and HF radio. A month later he returned to Brisbane to collect the Prentice, bringing with him a HF radio and a metal auxiliary fuel tank he had constructed in NZ, which was secured on the co-pilot seat with the passenger seatbelt.



G-AOMF at Brisbane-Eagle Farm on 15 March 1969. Inscription on the tail reads "*Happy Landings Bill and Pete! from Peter and the C.I. Aero Club*". Photo by Dave Thollar



G-AOMF'S flat green paint scheme can be seen in this telephoto shot at the old Brisbane Airport on 4 May 1969. The Prentice is parked close to the fence of the Eagle Farm horse race course. Photo by Roger McDonald

On 19 May 1969 G-AOMF departed Brisbane Eagle Farm airport for the 7 hour leg to Norfolk Island and continued to Auckland the next day. Wilkinson was joined by his wife, who had arrived by airline, and they made a tour of NZ in the Prentice a few weeks later, being seen at Wellington on 26 June, Christchurch 4 July and Momona 4-5 July 1969. Wilkinson was quoted in NZ newspaper reports saying he wished to sell the aircraft in NZ before he leaves for USA on business.

After local sale and NZ certification delay it was registered ZK-DJC on 29 November 1972 to Mr. N. B. Cooper of Kaiapoi. 23 years later in April 1995 it changed ownership to Mr. G. F. Rhodes of Christchurch. However certification problems resulted in the NZ Civil Aviation Authority revoking its registration on 19 May 1998. G-AOMF now resides in the Transport Museum at Wanaka, painted in bogus Royal NZ Air Force scheme as "NZ2003".

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