



Revisiting Frigate Bird II

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The closure of Sydney's Powerhouse Museum in February 2024 reignited public and political debates about the controversial 'revitalization' of its Ultimo and Castle Hill facilities, and the removal of its largest exhibit – the Catalina seaplane, *Frigate Bird II*. For the past thirty years it has remained suspended ten metres above the museum's main gallery, physically isolated from the public that has come to hold it in such high regard. In October 2023, however, in preparation for its pending disassembly and removal, the museum lowered the aircraft, almost to ground level. For just four months, visitors to the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (MAAS) were allowed, for the first time, to viscerally experience one of the museum's most iconic artefacts (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Catalina flying boat 'Frigate Bird II'. OBJECT NO. B1495. 1944. Powerhouse Museum, Sydney. Photographer Judith Hickson, 2023, reproduced with permission.



Display full size

Frigate Bird's enduring popularity is puzzling, given its limited technological and historical significance, and the unwavering disinterest that Australian public museums have always displayed for the collection, interpretation and display of aviation's non-military history, and heritage. Despite possessing its own world-class aviation collection, it was fully two decades ago when MAAS last installed an aviation-themed exhibition (marking the centenary of flight in 2003), an occasion it simply could not avoid. One must look back another half-century still, to the fiftieth flight anniversary in 1953, to discover when MAAS had previously installed an aviation exhibition (also its first).[Footnote¹](#) For the most part, state and federal (non-military) museums in this country have actively eschewed the collection, interpretation and display of aviation's history and technology. In Australian public museums, aircraft are tolerated rather than appreciated. Despite being one of MAAS's most popular exhibits, and its largest, *Frigate Bird II* did not even rate a mention for example when, in 2005, the museum published its first institutional history.[Footnote²](#)

Collectively, Australia's state and federal museums are thought to have acquired just one original aircraft (a tiny ultralight) during the past quarter-century, while deaccessioning at least another two during the same period. Hence the preference in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne for suspending those collection aircraft which cannot be dismantled and

accommodated in off-site storage. A compromise between institutional disinterest and public expectation, this suspend-and-forget approach to aviation history has for decades released valuable floor space for exhibitions more in keeping with curatorial interests. Aviation clearly is not one of those interests, as the recently installed temporary display accompanying MAAS's lowered seaplane patently revealed.

So why then, given this uncharitable assessment, has MAAS put an eleventh-hour effort into the interpretation and display of its Catalina, and why should *Frigate Bird II* be favoured ahead of the other half-dozen aircraft that were also dangling from the former Boiler Room roof? Was this uncommon effort warranted and proportional to the aircraft's significance, or, was this simply a hedge against the likelihood of further political scrutiny, and criticism?

The showcases accompanying *Frigate Bird II* were mostly furnished with personal memorabilia and ephemera, carefully selected to help reinforce the mythology surrounding the plane's pilot, Captain Gordon Taylor, and the impact of his 1951 Australia–Chile return flight. This mythologising masks several unwelcome truths, not least that the flight was unnecessary and unproductive, an indulgence orchestrated by two former Australian Flying Corps pilots (one of whom, fortuitously, was then the Minister for Air). MAAS made no attempt to contextualise the 1951 flight, either as part of the federal government's pressing need to increase dollar reserves through export earnings, or as a pre-emptive move designed to counter British plans in 1949 to open a direct Chile–Australia airline service.[Footnote³](#) To these ends, the Commonwealth had in fact already begun exploring possible export shipping solutions, some years prior to Taylor's proving flight.[Footnote⁴](#)

Challenging the museum's singular interpretation is difficult however, especially since this is the only narrative that Australians have ever been permitted. Allowing for other interpretations could cause the importance of Taylor's flight to be reconsidered, and possibly downgraded. The Catalina's cultural significance would then also have to be reassessed, leaving MAAS to explain how the aircraft's acquisition was ever justified to begin with.

Partly for these reasons, significance matters are seldom ever publicly addressed by collecting institutions. *Frigate Bird's* removal from public

display affords an opportunity to objectively reconsider if the myth surrounding the plane and its pilot is sustainable, in light of the available evidence. It transpired that Australia derived no economic, security or political benefits from the Catalina's 1951 flight, despite these having been used by Taylor as principal justifications. Indeed, as the Chilean Chargé d'Affaires reminded our External Affairs Minister, some years later, it was New Zealand that capitalised on Taylor's flight and derived the most benefit (its national airline TEAL having instituted a regular service to Tahiti, partially following *Frigate Bird's* earlier route).[Footnote⁵](#)

Taylor gifted the aircraft to the nation because, as he explained in 1959, 'Not only has this particular aircraft led the way across the Pacific but we [i.e. Australians] have used the same type for so much exploratory work over routes which do and will join Australia with other continents'.[Footnote⁶](#) What he neglected to mention then, but would have known full well, was that none of the inter-continental routes used by Australian-based Catalinas were ever continued with after World War II. In an age of non-stop trans-oceanic flight, Taylor's 1951 return flight across the South Pacific (to Chile) was only ever of passing local interest, quickly overshadowed by the introduction (also in the early 1950s) of conventional trans-oceanic airliners – like the Lockheed Constellation.

Throughout the 1950s Taylor repeatedly offered to donate his Catalina to the Commonwealth government for preservation purposes. Successive Aviation ministers continued declining, arguing (correctly) that its significance was insufficient 'to justify the Commonwealth accepting responsibility for its preservation'.[Footnote⁷](#) Minister for Air, William McMahon, not only questioned the aircraft's limited historical significance, but also warned Prime Minister Menzies that its acceptance could 'create a precedent which may well lead to ... other claims for preservation of aircraft, some of which may be more deserving of recognition than *Frigate Bird II*. This [in turn] could lead to further costly expenditure by the Government for permanent housing and maintenance'.[Footnote⁸](#) Faced with mounting storage bills, and pressure to remove his unwanted aircraft, Taylor threatened to sink *Frigate Bird* off Sydney Heads – a move the Commonwealth probably would have welcomed. In 1960 Warringah Shire Council was also asked to set aside land for its display, this last-ditch effort also being rejected.[Footnote⁹](#)

It was only through the eleventh-hour intervention of Sydney banker (and MAAS benefactor) Ernest Crome that the Catalina was saved, the museum's Trustees agreeing to accept the aircraft on 4 December 1961 – based on its 'historical significance'. Difficult to distinguish then, that significance appears even more opaque, six decades later. Then, as now, Catalinas are neither scarce nor rare, the museum's PB2B-2 variant being numerically and historically the least significant of the many examples that have operated throughout Australia.

Captain Gordon Taylor remains a giant of Australian aviation who has rightfully earned a place in our national pantheon, alongside the likes of Harry Hawker, Hubert Wilkins and Deborah Lawrie. This honour however owes mostly to his pre-war aerial achievements and little, if anything, to his 1951 flight. To suggest otherwise, as MAAS would have us believe, is to misrepresent the facts.

While public museums are continually reassessing the significance of their collections, iconic collection items are sometimes spared such scrutiny. Previous reassessments have even led MAAS in recent decades to deaccession a number of its collection aircraft (viz. a Hawker Sea Fury and a Douglas C-47). Applying standard significance assessment criteria is unlikely to ever deliver a similar outcome however, even though the case for significance appears, in this instance, to have been overstated. Nothing, it seems, can dislodge the public's rusted-on attachment to *Frigate Bird II*. What we could reasonably hope for, nonetheless, and have every right to expect when eventually the Catalina returns, is a display that rejects the past's uncritical mythologising in favour of some fearless, evidence-based research.

Mark Clayton

Notes

1 'Exhibition Marks First Flight Jubilee', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 December 1953, 2, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/18401810>.

2 Graeme Davison and Kimberly Webber, eds, *Yesterday's Tomorrows: The Powerhouse Museum and Its Precursors 1880–2005* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2005).

3 'B.B.C. Listening Post Report, 6 September 1949', Chile – Economic Relations with Australia, National Archives of Australia (NAA): A1838, 833/1 Part 1, ID 584512.

4 The Australian Legation, Chile, cablegram, 4 September 1948, Chile – Economic Relations with Australia.

5 Juan Domeyko to R.G. Casey, copy letter, 15 September 1954, Chile – Economic Relations with Australia.

6 P.G. Taylor to R.G. Menzies, 7 September 1959, Catalina aircraft Frigate Bird II. Offer by Sir Gordon Taylor to present aircraft to the nation, National Archives of Australia (NAA): B595, 16/11/223, ID 778595.

7 D.G. Anderson to E.J. Bunting, letter, 16 October 1959, Catalina aircraft Frigate Bird II.

8 William McMahon to R.G. Menzies, letter, n.d., Catalina aircraft Frigate Bird II.

9 Edmund T. Lennon to A.W. Doubleday, letter, 18 May 1960, Catalina aircraft Frigate Bird II.