

NEW ACQUISITIONS

The intimate case of Charles Kingsford Smith

The Museum's Dr James Warden tells the tale of an Australian hero and one of his admirers.

Emeritus professor of pre-history John Mulvaney told me a story in 1998 over a beer in the pub on the South Alligator River. We were on our way to Darwin after Professor Mulvaney had briefed the World Heritage Committee on the threat to Kakadu by the proposed — now abandoned — uranium mine at Jabiluka.

At the age of eight, the young John had hurried from school to a nearby field with a few pence in his pocket to take a joy flight — unknown to his parents. Beside himself with excitement, he climbed on board and for a few brief minutes took off into the sky, banking and turning and soaring and, all too soon, landing. But when he got home his mother was utterly furious: he was late. She had been worried sick. Any punishment remained undisclosed in John's tale. Yet it was worth it: he, a dreaming schoolboy, had flown with Charles Kingsford Smith — the world's greatest aviator.

Kingsford Smith was the archetypal Australian hero: handsome, daring, dashing, and decorated. His early exploits were the foundation of his celebrity. Smithy had been an air ace in the Great War, he was awarded the Military Cross by King George V for 'conspicuous gallantry', and he was once forced down by the legendary Red Baron, Manfred von Richthofen. After the war he became a Hollywood stunt pilot and a barnstormer in Australia. One of his nicknames was 'King Dick'.


In the mid-1920s he changed course and began to fly for records and firsts with his flying companion Charles Ulm. In 1928 they went to America attempt for one of the big 'firsts' — a flight across the Pacific. Smithy, Ulm and two Americans made the inaugural flight from the United States to Australia in the now-legendary Southern Cross. That flight made Smithy the hero of Australia. More than Bradman and Phar Lap and Nelly Melba, he was the unequalled Australian superstar. Every moment of the flight seemed to be turned over in the press, and Ulm's flight logs were published. Even the scribbled notes they wrote mid-flight were newsworthy. One, from Ulm to Smith, read: 'I've got a



Metal cigarette case, owned by Charles Kingsford Smith.
photo: Dragi Markovic

feeling we're going to make it with flying colours.' Indeed they did — and to mark the moment Ulm gave Smithy a gold cigarette case inscribed 'Smithy Old Son / We made it. / Charles'. The National Museum now owns the case and the National Library has the note.

Ulm was the more dour and business-like of the two and was best man at Smithy's wedding in 1930. But in 1931, after Smithy published an account of the famous flight, the friends fell out. Ulm felt his role diminished and he was hurt, if not embittered. The friendship never recovered and they never again shared the cockpit. Yet Kingsford Smith was distraught when Ulm was lost in the Pacific in December 1934. He was bereft and perhaps guilt-ridden. Then the whole nation was distraught when Kingsford Smith himself went down off the Burmese coast in November 1935.

The cigarette case is an intimate artefact of a broken friendship and a national legend. It has been much handled. Smithy must have carried it constantly. Indeed in most photos of him he is holding a cigarette. The gold case was perhaps in his hand or in the pocket of his flying suit that day when the errant schoolboy went aloft. 

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