

# 'Finding Smithy'

## Other assessments



A **national myth** puts a person on a pedestal. They can only have good qualities. Any normal human weakness or failing can usually not be tolerated in the myth. Did Kingsford Smith have human weaknesses? Look at the following evidence and decide.

### Source

14

#### Some other information about Smithy's character and behaviour

- The myth of Smithy tells of him being banned from entering the Britain-Australia race in 1919 because of political interference. The reality was that he had been involved in a series of landings in fields not authorised for that purpose (thereby endangering his passengers' safety) and insuring planes for more than their value – and crashing them. The company who owned the plane that Smithy was to fly therefore wanted him replaced.
- Smithy happily accepted a nephew deliberately destroying his speed boat so that Smithy could get the insurance money at a time when he needed cash.
- During his days of flying an aerial service in WA and his barnstorming days of giving paid joy rides, he crashed many times, endangered passengers and spectators on the ground, and often flew while drunk. During his barnstorming days he often took women for rides for free in return for sexual favours – known at the time as 'a ride for a ride'.
- 'He was an impatient, frustrated, very gifted man who wanted to show the world what aviation could do. His mind was permanently in the sky. On the ground he was a restless roamer, never creating a stable home and spending as fast as he earned.' 'He ... gave [his first wife] a very rough time – was a bad drinker, never paid his debts, and was a womaniser. "Not a very honourable man."' (A family member of Smith's first wife)
- In 1929 he flew with a crew of three on a trip to England. He became lost near the north-western coast of Western Australia. They had to land the plane, and were forced to stay there until rescued. They did not have equipment to repair the radio, or food to keep them going. Search parties were sent out, and one of them also got lost and the two rescuers died in the desert. Some people accused Smithy of deliberately getting stranded for the publicity (though an inquiry later cleared him of this charge). He and his crew were described by one newspaper as 'private adventurers taking foolhardy risks.' (*Sydney Bulletin*), and the *London Times* commented: 'The question remains whether to venture on such a voyage at a bad season, without tools and without provisions, was altogether unjustifiable. It seems imprudent to set out without equipment to repair the wireless.'

- 'He just came and went as the spirit moved him, never seeming to worry about anything. But because he was so universally worshipped and the most famous man in the country, everyone just accepted it.' (A young apprentice engineer working for Smithy in 1931)
- Smithy was a member of the New Guard, a secret military organisation that was ready to take over the New South Wales government by force in an act of civil war during the Depression.
- His most recent biographer quotes psychiatrist Ken Craig's opinion that Smithy was an alcoholic: 'There are other things, too, about him that are very common to alcoholics: his promiscuity, the constant need for fresh conquests, seeking reassurance about his potency; his chronic restlessness; his earlier flighty



irresponsibility as a pilot [in WA]; his inability to handle money; the great generosity – ready to give away his last penny, always broke. And the evidence from the photographs that show how rapidly he aged – another consequence of alcoholism.'

Smithy in 1933 after a solo flight from England (*Brisbane Courier Mail*)

- 'To the aircraft manufacturers the record-breakers were absolute anathema, people who flew aircraft dangerously overloaded for their personal glory. Their frequent disappearances and crashes served only to give air transport a bad name.' (Nephew, Rollo Kingsford Smith)

(Ian Mackersey, *Smithy. The life of Sir Charles Kingsford Smith*, Warner Books, London, 1999 pages 42ff, 269, 288, 85, 215, 264, 269, 276, 306)

- 14 What are the characteristics or qualities that are revealed here?
- 15 Why are such characteristics not stressed in the popular image or legend of Smithy?
- 16 Does this information change your views about Smithy as a person, or his achievements, or his role as an Australian myth?
- 17 Do you think such information ought to be included in your museum display? Or should you only stress the man's achievements, and his good qualities?

