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Article – Airport Musings

“EVEN CAIRNS WANTS AN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT”

A personal recollection of the events leading to the upgrading of Cairns Airport to take wide-bodied jets from overseas that occurred on 31st March 1984.

For me, the saga of the upgrading of Cairns Airport to take wide-bodied jets on flights to and from overseas countries really started about 16 years before - back in 1968. At the Annual Conference of the Associated Chambers of Commerce of Australia in Adelaide, Atkinson, the CEO of the Australian Tourism Commission, presented a paper on how the new Boeing 767 Jumbo Jets being built in the United States were about to revolutionise Australia's prospects of attracting visitors from overseas.

I was at the Conference as a young research officer working in the Chamber's Canberra Secretariat.

Having been born and raised in Cairns, Atkinson's revelations were of particular interest. Growing up in Cairns, you could not fail to be aware of tourism – the Sunshine Express (subsequently the Sunlander) would bring visitors to the city, including the annual influx of Young Australia League (YAL) visitors. To raise money for the High School, we would be at the wharves to sell coconuts to the tourists departing on the Manunda and Manoora coastal trading vessels each afternoon. Visitors would come into Hayles Jetty after their day trip to Green Island to experience the magic of the Great Barrier Reef. The Kuranda train would depart each morning with visitors on board to see the spectacular views of the Barron Falls and walk in the 'giant scrub' of Paradise.

But also growing up in Cairns, one was very aware of its remoteness. The rail trip of 1,043 miles to Brisbane took two days and the city was proud of its pioneer aviator, Tom McDonald, who had established flights from Cairns right down to Brisbane before the national carrier entered the route. The city was proud of its Aerial Ambulance to service the medical needs of the remote cattle stations and communities of the Peninsula and Gulf.

Cairns Airport and that at Mareeba had played a vital role during the Second World War. If any city in Australia was aware of the potential of aviation to break down cost barriers and remoteness, it was Cairns, and I had grown up in that atmosphere.

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In 1974, Bill Cummings was manager of the Far North Qld Development Bureau and its Sub Board for Tourism & Travel. In recent years, he has carried out a great deal of cost benefit and economic impact analysis on roads across the region and across the north and centre of Australia.