

The Grunau Eagle

Recognised with an Oswald Watt Gold Medal and induction into the Australian Aviation Hall of Fame, Harry Schneider's impact on aviation in Australia has been profound. Lucianne van Gelder met this gliding legend.

If you're familiar with the Schneider name you would know it's synonymous with unique sailplane design, with the pinnacle of production taking place from 1954 through to 1968. The Schneiders didn't just build incredible designs, they built Australian pilots with many early Australian records being achieved in Schneider aircraft.

In a time before marketing spin and the value of a name, Schneider designs paid homage to Australia with names reflecting natives such as the Kangaroo, Kookaburra, Kingfisher, and the Platypus.

Unsettling times

When Harry was young, his Father Edmund began forging a reputation for his Sailplanes, establishing the E. Schneider Ltd Glider Factory situated in Grunau, a small town near Hirshberg in east Germany. One of Edmund's earliest designs became popular in 1930, the Grunau Baby, with thousands being sold to clubs and private owners.

Harry was the true Grunau

baby, being born in the household annexe which adjoined the workshop. Harry jokingly refers to the fact that he was "born in a hangar".

Grunau was a town that centred on gliding; many locals were employed at the factory. The first wave flight in the world took place in Grunau. A popular gliding school was also located in the village where, at the age of 15, Harry learned to fly.

Harry recalls his very first experience of flight in a fore runner to the SG38 primary glider taking off from the bottom of a ridge in a low glide. Strapped against the seat just prior to touching down, he distinctly heard his father's voice say: "Pull your legs up!" He would have only been about three years old.

Harry was 10 when he formed a model airplane club with his friends using construction materials he sneakily extracted from the factory floor, which were actually



pre-cut timbers for the following day's production. Around the same age Edmund decided Harry would benefit from attending a cadet school which specialised in grooming boys to become future members of the air force.

It was a very disciplined and structured environment and it laid the foundation for Harry joining the Luftwaffe (air force) during WWII. However, unfortunate circumstances were to dramatically impact Harry's life. At age 20 he was captured by the British and became a prisoner of war; he was taken to a French POW camp based near the village of Bren, South East France.

Thankfully, through the assistance of the Red Cross, he was able to pen his first letters. One he sent to Grunau to check on his family and the other to his father's sister in Stuttgart. It was just by chance that Edmund was staying with his sister; they hadn't heard word from Harry in over a year. Edmund replied straight away and Harry received the letter which reinforced his second attempt to flee from the camp.

Finally escaping with a friend, they were able to navigate due to a map they procured from a Polish woman who had smuggled it into camp. "I don't know how we did it," Harry recalls. "That map was



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Harry today, with author Lucianne van Gelder. Working on the ES 60 Boomerang prototype. Harry with his father, Edmund Schneider. Early days at the Waikerie Gliding club. Harry straps into ES 53.

the only way we knew where we were, as we had been transported in cramped enclosed goods trains and even on a pontoon bridge over water."

Avoiding detection, they stayed in a farmer's loft. The farmer had recently killed a pig and Harry can still remember the smell of the charred pig flesh, which they cooked over a fire.

They followed a railway line and jumped on a train eventually making it to Saarland, a South-western German state that borders France and Luxembourg.

Harry's eyes well with tears as the harrowing memories flood back of such painful times and

so much adversity. "Just terrible, terrible at times. I really didn't think I would survive."

Harry was finally able to reunite with his family in Stuttgart. In 1946 they moved to Lake Constance on the Swiss border, and began building and hiring boats waiting for legislation to change so they could again produce gliders.

To Australian shores

Edmund was considering his family's future and the possibility of immigration; he had been in contact with Indian authorities

in relation to a move to Indian shores. Fate stepped in as Edmund had read a copy of the English magazine *Sailplane and Gliding*, which contained an article on Keith Chamberlain's flight in the Grunau Baby 2. Edmund contacted Bill Iggulden, President of newly formed Gliding Federation of Australia to gauge opportunities on Australian soil. Harry says that Bill was instrumental in assisting the family make the move to Australia even arranging an overdraft to pay for the family's passage. They arrived in Melbourne in 1950.

"We initially worked for the Royal Aero club at Moorabbin,"

Harry says. "They only had Tiger Moths to fly with wooden spars and ribs, which we did the repairs on."

The Schneiders were seeking a suitable and cost-effective workshop, when they met SA pilot John Wotherspoon, who wanted Harry and Edmund to build him a two-seater so he could fly with his family. John owned a roof tile factory in Rosewater, Adelaide, and extended the factory space to the Schneiders. One of the reasons why the Kookaburra has a wing span just under 40 feet is due to the size restrictions of the Rosewater factory where it was built.

Throughout the years the



The ES60 Boomerang prototype when the factory was still at Parafield.

Schneiders worked closely with the GFA. Liaising with the design and development committee, they took on feedback and built gliders to cater to the Australian market. GFA also made partial financial contributions for some projects.

When it comes to design it's as though Harry developed his skill set almost through a type of osmosis, having always been around the industry and working closely with his father. Harry feels that it's just something that's always been in him.

In 1954 the ES-52 Kookaburra first flew and ignited attention and interest from Aussie pilots. It was an exceptional side by side two-seat trainer, which allowed ease of instruction. The Kookaburra was the prominent trainer during the 1950s and 60s.

Predominantly, gliders were sold to the domestic market, some were exported overseas, such as the Super Arrow and Boomerang to America, and the Kookaburra to New Zealand.

In 1957 greater space and larger facilities were required, so operations were transferred and re-established at Parafield.

Parafield experienced rapid growth, with crowding and restrictions on glider operations, resulting in another operational move in 1968. Fortunately, at a swift pace assisted by Don

Anderson of the DCA, premises were established at the Western end of Gawler Airfield.

Design magic

Noel Roediger a former commercial pilot and close family friend has a great deal of personal knowledge and recollection of the Schneider family. He was only nine years old when he first met Harry and from time to time worked in both Parafield and Gawler glider factories fabricating and painting.

Noel remembers Harry reading a great deal and being up to date with current European industry best practice and trends so when the Boomerang flew it had a superior performance to anything else in standard class at the time.

"Harry's high level of attention to detail, his processes and method of manufacture were pushing new frontiers," Roediger says.

The Boomerang wing section leading-edge was fibreglass and early in the design prototype stages on the laminar section of the wing. "It was critical that the radius of the leading edge was exact."

If this section was produced by hand, each section would have slight variations, so Noel assisted Harry with creating a cedar template to the exact profile: a very time consuming process to ensure exacting precision.

Once completed, they located a fibreglass expert who stood the wings on the leading edge and made large concrete moulds, then filled with polyurethane with a glass end they would trim in the moulds. Noel believes this process was unique and that it produced the best wing in the world for a number of years.

The company also blew its own canopies something which was relatively unknown in the industry at the time.

Noel felt privileged to personally conduct a great deal of work on the Platypus design, undertaking all the test flights under the ever watchful eye of Harry.

Assisting with the certification and the stability testing process of the Platypus, many a crisp early morning would see Noel and Harry launch the Platypus and take it to 10-12,000 feet and then spin all the way down to 1500 feet.

In terms of today's build standards and design, Noel believes that the Platypus would be in a league of its own saying, "There's still nothing else I've flown that's better than the Platypus."

The Kingfisher was Harry's first sole design, independent of his Father's input, then the Boomerang followed then with prototypes of the Platypus ES 63 and 64 Platypus. GFA financially assisted in the

development of the Platypus.

Harry's favourite design is the platypus: "It's the one project I would have liked to have seen evolve more."

However mass production of the Platypus wasn't meant to be.

The climate began to change, or as Noel puts it, "crunch time," when an entrepreneurial Aussie, Bill Riley, sealed an exclusive agency deal with the Czechoslovakians and began importing Blaniks into Australia. This tipped the scales in terms of pricing and affordability and saturated the market to the point where Schneider Pty Ltd just couldn't compete. The Blaniks were prone to fatigue issues and many were grounded; a fatigue life of 3000 hours and, in Australia, lifespan limitations were implemented.

In 1974 the Whitlam Government went into cost recovery mode and demanded that the factory start contributing a significant amount in rent. Consequently, Harry bought 12 acres of local land to set up his own facilities and switched business model. Rather than producing, he sought to import gliders and offer repair services.

Alan Patching AM is the Honorary VP of the Australian gliding museum and owner in a Platypus syndicate. Alan got a group of enthusiasts together and they purchased the Platypus. Alan said that the Platypus being Australian made, was the last of its type ever to be built in Australia.

"It was just such a delightful glider to fly," Patching remarks. "I just had to purchase it to keep flying. I have been fortunate enough to fly every type of Schneider aircraft in Australia, yet the Platypus has to be the jewel in the crown of Schneider designs."

"Harry Schneider was a brilliant intuitive designer, who used to go to bed at night with pencil and paper on his nightstand, so that

if he awoke in the night with an idea he would jot it down. I will never forget when Harry designed the Kookaburra; it really set Australian gliding on its feet."

Patching headed to Adelaide to purchase a single seater on behalf of the Victorian gliding club, but after experiencing the Kookaburra, convinced the

AV8 flight training and who owns numerous Schneider aircraft.

Her first restoration project was a Schneider Boomerang in 1989 which features the only factory-fitted canopy bearing a unique violet hue.

The glider comprises a full wooden frame and a large one piece 11-metre wing span. Glancing

"There's still nothing else I've flown that's better than the Platypus."

committee to invest in not just one, but two Kookaburra two-seaters. "Such a great trainer. The club ended up purchasing five overall."

Boomerang come-back

Another avid Schneider enthusiast is Catherine Conway, a glider specialist and operator of

inside, you can literally smell the history. A muted Schneider badge stamped to authenticate its South Australian production and 1960 build date, the side by side seating and simplistic layout of controls, Catherine adds: "I don't know how he did it, almost every one of his designs possesses awesome handling. They are known for their handling.

"The Boomerang, for example, is particularly interesting, most aircraft get heavier as you get faster, but the Boomerang doesn't! Due to unique anti-balance tabs on the elevator, which result in complete ease or a lack of load on the stick. Such lightness when flying."

Conway is a great advocate for gliding and believes that it's an ideal foundation for students of aviation and instructs in her Diamond Dimona motor glider.

"The powered community, in particular GA and commercial aviation, don't seem to fully comprehend what gliding can offer," she says. "What I think needs to happen, is that gliding should be integrated into commercial courses in primacy in the ab initio stage."

Europe is integrating, and in America FAA runs the gliding in a completely integrated

system. Conway believes that Australia should consider greater integration between the gliding and power fraternities.

Harry's legacy

Schneider designs profoundly influenced the Australian aviation landscape. Even today there is still so much interest and passion for Schneider aircraft. Harry won the 1966 Oswald Watt Gold Medal award – given by the Royal Federation of Aero Clubs Australia for his design of the Boomerang as the most notable contribution to aviation in Australia. In 2015 Harry Schneider was inducted into the Aviation Hall of Fame.

He is a man who overcame profound personal challenges in order to actualise his vision for the benefit of others. Ultimately Harry was able to soar above and beyond, as only a great eagle could. 🦅



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