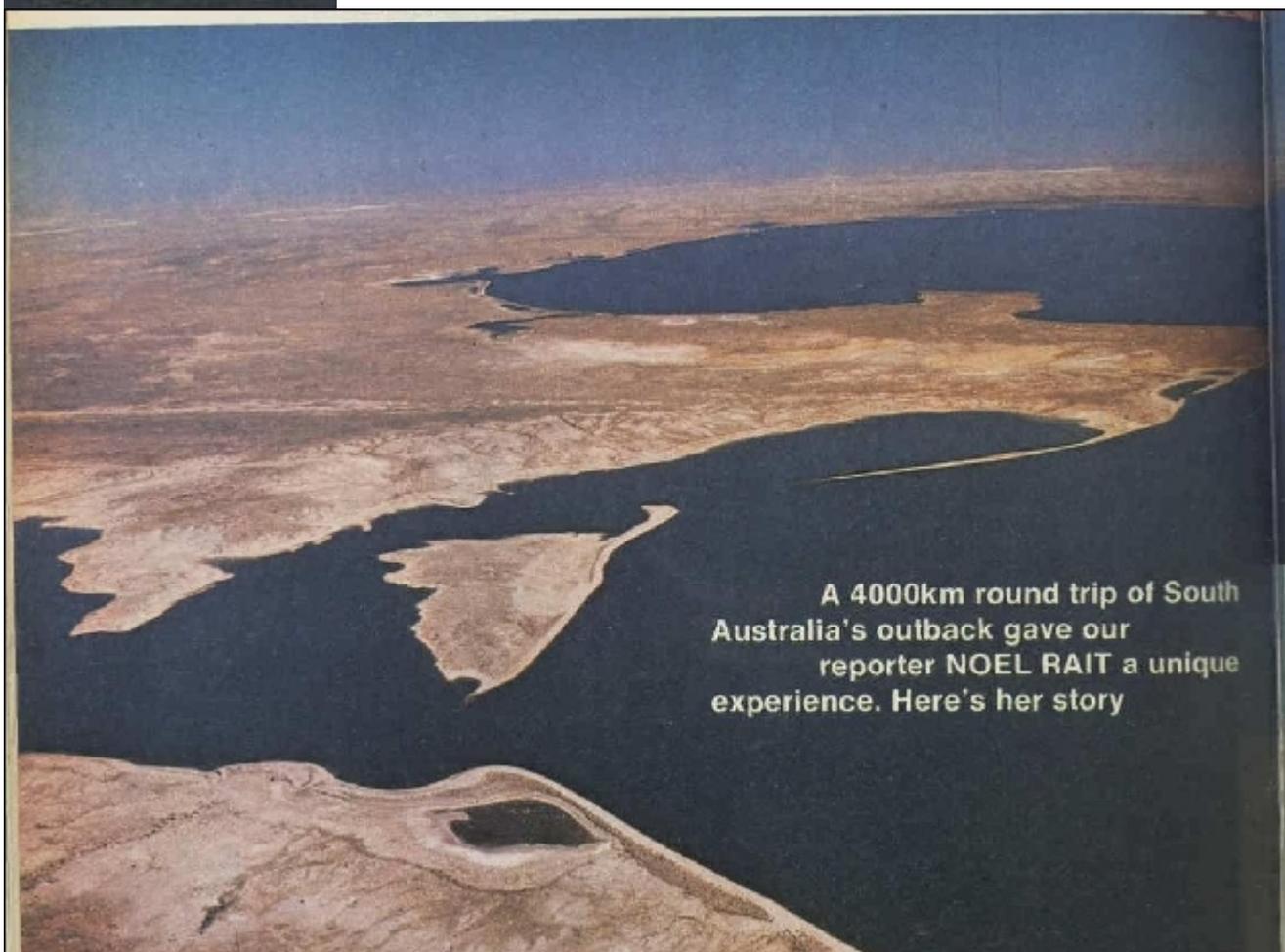


“OUR ONLY LINK WITH THE WORLD”

A 4000km round trip of South
Australia's outback gave our
reporter NOEL RAIT a unique
experience. Here's her story

NOEL RAIT & [REDACTED]



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A dramatic view from above Lake Eyre. Now a shimmering expanse, where flocks of pelicans settle, the lake will revert to "a dried-up claypan."

Pictures: Andrew Lenman.

"IT'S HARD for people to imagine the sort of things that happen out here. Here we talk in square miles, not acres."

Bob Burgess, experienced bushman, ex-police officer, spoke above the twin-engined drone of our aeroplane as we flew over great tracts of South Australia's outback.

"The area we're flying into is the

biggest fenced sheep station in the world — Commonwealth Hill, about 4500 square miles. The biggest fenced cattle station in the area is Anna Creek, about 11,500 square miles." (The equivalent of almost half the area of Tasmania).

The scale is staggering and made me realize how very different life here must be from the world most of us know.

It's here that the Royal Flying Doctor Service does such vital work and I was

invited to see it all at first hand by the South Australia-Northern Territory section of the RFDS. With its headquarters in Adelaide and the radio bases at Port Augusta and Alice Springs, the section covers an enormous slice of territory.

For me, the adventure of a lifetime began when I climbed into our small aircraft at Adelaide airport with pilot Peter Struik and photographer Andrew Lenman. We flew to Port Augusta and were joined

No wonder women in the outback say thank you

**ourback say thank you
to the Flying Doctor**



ABOVE LEFT: Pilot Michael Hallett, with flying sister Mrs Ann Donaldson

ABOVE LEFT: Pilot Michael Hallett, with flying sister Mrs Ann Donaldson and Dr Ernest Kamitakahara. ABOVE RIGHT: Opal mining country around Coober Pedy, from the air.

there by Bob Burgess, our host and guide.

Bob is chairman of the RFDS regional committee at Port Augusta and a member of the State Council. He explained that two medical teams (a doctor and sister each) are based at Port Augusta. While one team goes on clinic flights, the other remains to radio medical advice and take emergency calls.

In a serious case the patient is air-lifted to hospital. Through radio, people living

on isolated stations can contact a doctor at Port Augusta within minutes.

"In SA and the Northern Territory, in an emergency, a doctor can reach any place throughout the vast flying doctor network within three hours," Bob told me.

About 320km (200 miles) out from Port Augusta, we reached our first stop.

You could hardly see the airstrip at Kingoonya, in the middle of all the dusty saltbush. Mrs Lyn Napier, whose husband runs a station, drove us into the little township. Here a medical centre built through local effort is visited once a month by the RFDS doctor and a dentist. I met Mrs Barbara Jacob who works as part-time sister and Mrs Dot Schank, secretary of the medical fund the local people pay into against the time when they might need an emergency flight.

Barbara Jacob told me: "People come

CONTINUED OVERLEAF



Flying Doctor

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100 km (60 miles) away for

in from stations 100km (60 miles) away for 'the doctor's day.' Our worst cases have been car accidents."

For Lyn Napier education is a big problem in the outback. She has a daughter at boarding school and her son will be going away soon.

"It's very hard to send your children away. Entertainment? You've got to be prepared to travel about 160km (100 miles) to gymkhanas and dances. Otherwise you just don't go out."

Outback families have to be resourceful. But they make no secret of their reliance on the Flying Doctor.

Households are supplied with medical kits to use in case of illness or accident. Each item in the kit is numbered. Over the radio, the doctor explains what to use for the illness if he feels it can be treated at home.

There are regular dental clinics and services by opticians, chiropodists, and health inspectors.

The telegram service provided by the radio network is sometimes the only means of communication. The flying doctor radio



Clinic day at Tarcoola for Dr Kamitakahara and Sister Donaldson.

transmits the "School of the Air" for outback children and "over the air" community group meetings such as the CWA and mothers' clubs.

Bob Burgess explains: "Women can talk to neighbours who might live at least 80km (50 miles) away on the 'galah sessions.' Weather reports are received from outposts daily and relayed to the SA Meteorological Bureau."

A station owner's wife summed it all up. "The flying doctor radio means a lot more to us than a medical service and the difference between life and death in an emergency.

"Out here where there are no telephones the flying doctor radio is our only means of communication, our only link with the world outside our boundaries."

Moving on to Tarcoola, a railway town at the junction of the new line to Alice Springs, we taxied merrily over the golf course among the saltbush and sand, stopping outside the little hospital. The flying doctor's plane with its insignia was

RIGHT: At mealtimes on isolated Todmorden Station Mrs Lillecrapp summons station hands with a bell.





already there from Port Augusta, having brought Dr Ernest Kamitakahara and flying sister Mrs Ann Donaldson up for clinic day.

"I love flying," Ann Donaldson told me. "You really get to know your patients in the outback. It's a lot different from working in the city."

Smiling Dr Kamitakahara, who comes from Canada, says the outback life is far from dull. "We get a lot of emergencies relating to mining accidents and tourists. There is quite a shifting population here because of the railway being built so we also get just about anything you'd get in a city hospital."

At Tarcoola we also met the two newly arrived resident hospital sisters, Dianne Kennaugh and Kay Trappel. Both Sydney

Kennaugh and Kay Trappel. Both Sydney girls, they had fallen in love with the outback.

A flight north took us to Coober Pedy where we spent the night. Surely the dustiest place in the world, the opal mines look like giant anthills and a man can take out half a million dollars in opals in a single day.

An RFDS doctor holds regular clinics twice a week at the hospital there. Bill McDougall, chairman of the Coober Pedy Hospital board, and Matron Carol Allen, from Sydney, welcomed us to the hospital where a shower and comfortable beds awaited us.

Bill McDougall told us a lot of tourists are treated at Coober Pedy, as well as road and mining accident cases.

Pioneering relics

"A lot of people aren't fit enough to tackle vast distances. We have had people who have died here on their way through and others have had to be evacuated by the RFDS."

After our night at Coober Pedy, a further 240km (150 miles) in the direction of Alice Springs took us to lovely Todmorden Station. Everything was blooming on the 3000 square miles surrounding the 90-year-old homestead.

Station owner Gordon Lillecrapp and his wife Mary treated us to a sumptuous morning tea in the gracious homestead with its mellow family treasures. We browsed through a fascinating museum of old bottles and pioneering relics and admired Mrs Lillecrapp's garden.

In the big kitchen where she does all the cooking for the station, Mary Lillecrapp showed me the radio that is Todmorden Station's vital link with the RFDS.

"Because we've no telephone out here

...that talk with the RFDS.
"Because we've no telephone out here, we use the service to order things, making all our plans and arrangements. If we need medical help we talk on a different wavelength.

"Then there is our chat session. I talk to my next-door neighbour who is about 70km (45 miles) away and now two or three other ladies have joined in and it's developed into quite a little session."

The Australian Inland Mission hospital at Oodnadatta was next.

We were greeted by two of the sisters, Rosalie Bolton and Suzanne Nilon, in the "one millionth Holden," a bit the worse for wear but proudly bearing its testimonial plate. Suzanne, from Sydney, said: "We are here for a year. I think every nurse should do this work at some time in her career. It gets you right into the community, its people and problems."

The flying doctor visits the hospital once a fortnight. Rosalie, from Birdsville and Hobart, said: "Whatever happens, we get it here. It is up to us to make a decision whether to call the RFDS if patients need further treatment, or to treat them here."

On the way back to Adelaide we all fell under the spell of the great Lake Eyre, 160km (100 miles) long, where Donald Campbell made his land speed record in

BELOW: Nursing Sisters Rosalie Bolton and Suzanne Nilon in the kitchen in the Oodnadatta hospital.





the Bluebird. As we flew low over the shimmering expanse to photograph flocks of pelicans it was hard to believe that the lake would revert back to what Bob Burgess described as "just a dried-up claypan."

There was just time to put down at Muloorina Station and meet Lorna and Maurice (Blue) Hughes over a cup of tea and some of Lorna's home-made cookies before taking off for Port Augusta.

Sitting in the kitchen I heard a flying doctor broadcasting medical advice to a mother, telling her how to give her sick baby an injection from the medical kit.

I came back after a journey of more than 4000km (2500 miles) with that memory just one of a host of indelible impressions. At Port Augusta the medical team stood by.

I had a real sense of the comforting, invisible network of communication.

"Our only link with the world . . ." W

IN SOUTH Australia and the Northern Territory alone it costs \$1000 a day, seven days a week, to keep flying doctor planes in the air. Funds are urgently needed: the section is now appealing to the public for

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\$250,000.