

THE SPIRIT OF SERPENTINE (Episode 6)

Once upon a time a small group of flightless birds, mostly Ratites, sought refuge from predators in the low scrub of the Serpentine Valley. Hidden from preying eyes of other birds, these aspiring aviators built an airfield. In order to regain the dignity of flight, which their ancestors had lost, they construct and restore beautiful flying machines. Now many soar high in the sky and some frolic close to the ground. Whilst most birds share this joy, a few are jealous and conspire.

The Serpentine River, which drains the flatlands between the Darling Escarpment and the Coastal Dunes, tracks 32° South of the Equator. It is within the Horse Latitude, but in the valley it often feels like the Roaring Forties. In other parts of the world this latitude is characterized by the Trade Winds, a steady air movement toward the low-pressure equatorial belt known as the Doldrums. The absence of mountains and trees in the flatlands makes matters worse. Those Ratites, who fly tail wheel machines with low wing loading, are continuously practicing the art of survival between the safety of flight and that of their hangars. It is a transition zone, only a few meters above the ground, where these flying contraptions are unstable in yaw, pitch and roll. At the mercy of any gust, they can not cope with dust devils which are locally known as Willy-Willys or Cockeyed Bobs. When conditions are inclement, it is only the practice of acrobatics which offers these Ratites the skill to fly another day.

One solution to the peril of flying tail wheel machines in gusty conditions is open grass land. Serpentine Air Park is unique in this respect. Grass however, is a labour intensive commodity. The lack of fresh water during the long dry summers forces other air fields in the area to resort to gravel, limestone or asphalt. This great asset of the Park is the product of hard work and the vision of a few Ratites to whom all tail wheel aviators are grateful. This Episode is the story of how Serpentine acquired its grass runway. Like previous episodes it is a story of conflict and how the Park, through its magic, managed to survive and prosper.

Some of the birds nesting at Serpentine look onto flying as a disturbing activity which should be conducted as far away from the airfield as possible. They do not see the need for grass or cross runways because they fly only when conditions are clement. These birds show discontent of Ratites who frolic in the sky and mistrust of those responsible for the grass. Clearly they don't believe in the Magic of the Park. It is up to True Ratites to convert the cynics. Late on



Sunday afternoon, sitting on the grass with a glass of wine and a piece of cheese, the sight of beautiful machines dancing in the sky is indisputable proof of the Magic of the Park. Perhaps they need to entice Dodos, Moas, Penguins, and Kakapos to witness such an event. These birds only need to be touched by this magic and the Serpentine Flock of Flightless birds will live happily ever after.

The following are fictional characters. Any resemblance to reality is purely unintentional and totally coincidental.

THE SERPENTINE FLOCK The Grass Episode

In evolutionary terms Ratites have great affinity to grass. They forsook the power of flight in exchange of ground speed to evade predators. Open grass land offers these flightless birds the ideal domain. Some years ago however, a small flock of Ratites gathered at Serpentine with the sole intent of regaining the art flying. They were totally dedicated to building and learning how to operate flying contraptions. The matter of the Air Park was almost inconsequential. In fact the first runway was a poorly compacted sand track with a thin gravel surface.

The need for better facilities became apparent to most birds as the flying machines became more sophisticated. Regretfully this was the beginning of the conflict. "Why spend money on runways? If the wind is too severe I don't need to fly." Some of the birds argued. In spite of this criticism a determined Ratite, who became renowned for collecting and restoring wonderful memorabilia, brought in the necessary equipment and runway 05-23 was born. There were no arguments. The funds materialized and Serpentine Air Field began to acquire the characteristics of the Park that it is today. The same Ratite was also instrumental in establishing the cross runway 09-27 which at that stage was nothing more than a dirt track. Indisputably he was a great bird who has left a wonderful legacy not only in the Park but throughout the Serpentine Valley.

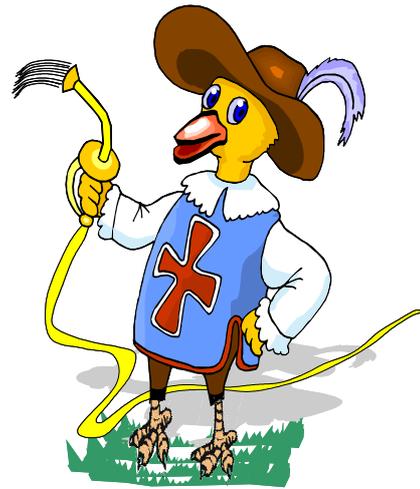


The Park began to attract more birds. Some were equipped with rare flying machines built before the advent of runways. These Ratites were looking for open space free of restrictions. Enthusiasts welcomed them with open arms, but a few resident birds were suspicious. In time the cross runway became more than an emergency strip. It was used frequently and needed upgrading. Efforts to grow grass had failed. In summer the cross strip was a dust bowl; in winter a quagmire. A new council lead by the Kiwi bird was elected with a clear mandate for change. The first item on the agenda was the matter of an all weather grass runway. Some of the birds became very suspicious. "It will cost money. We don't need another runway, we were happy as we were." So the confabulation began.

The matter was brought to a head when a great Ratite who was truly a bird in name and fact, demanded a vote: Gravel or Grass. The answer was clear; for years all efforts to grow grass had failed. It was a hopeless cause until a very reserved Ratite spoke out, in his timid like manner: "I will do whatever is required to make the grass grow". The cynics voted in favour, in expectation of failure.

The Gang of Four was thus established. They would rise before the kangaroos sought refuge in the bush from the heat of the summer sun. In turn they would water the grass with a few sprinklers attached to a plastic hose connected to a soak. Their tenacity has been an inspiration to all who now recognize these as

True Ratites. Several other birds aspire to belong to the band. Regretfully it is not a simple matter because it is a Gang of Four. Like the three Musketeers however, they accept apprentices, but only if they display D'Artagnan like loyalty. After the morning's toil, at about 10 o'clock, the gang gathers in the local cantina known as the Cafe'. There the real decisions regarding the Park are made. These Ratites have gained power not by vote, but by hard work.



The grass is an attraction not only to birds flying tail wheel aeroplanes, but to kangaroos and deer too. It is part of the Magic of the Park. The harsh sound of rubber grabbing the asphalt; on grass, is nothing more than a gentle swish. Cross wind on a paved runway is a struggle of reverse control with rudder and aileron. On grass it can be a gentle three point with a rudder slide to track the center of the runway. The relief of seeing the cross strip when the windssock points straight to the hills is exemplified by the Ratite¹ who belly landed an unruly machine on the grass with hardly any damage.

Eventually sufficient funds were found to install permanent sprinklers to lessen the labour of the Gang of Four. In spite of the project's success the grumbling by the malcontents did not cease. It boiled over when it was decided to automate the system by drilling a deep well. This proved to be a feat of excellence in engineering, economics and public relations. For months however, the turmoil threatened to topple the Council and challenged the patience of at least one Ratite. The watering automation began when a female Ratite² secured sufficient funds from the bureaucracy. The commitment associated with this grant instigated a plan to provide water for the community at large. The outcome was a resounding success. The Park now boasts a great fountain capable of quenching fires and flooding runways. The critics have been silenced, but for how long?

A parallel runway is taking shape. As summer gives way to winter a big bird with a rather rapacious reputation will do a low pass to fertilize the soil. The process will begin once again as birds rake and level the ground, whilst others plant anything which looks like grass. Eventually money will be found for the plumbing to ensure survival of the grass during the long dry summers. Such a strip will provide relief to the crumbling asphalt runway which will become unserviceable unless it is repaired soon.

From the air, the sight of two grass strips will be a homing beacon to any potential Ratite who wishes to nest at Serpentine. Such a bird, with hard work and a bit of luck can become an apprentice. Several institutions including Council and the Gang of Four offer such positions. In politics, after only 12 months of training, our aspiring Ratite can seek the position of Cock. Not so in the Gang of Four where he is likely to remain a cadet for a very long time. Fresh air, hard work and the Magic of the Park makes True Ratites live on for ever.

¹ Some claim he is the Darwinian Rhea

² The female species is rare at Serpentine because the male incubates the eggs