

## BOOK REVIEW:

# *Written in the sky*

by Mark Carr

Melbourne Books: Melbourne; 2020; 480 pp; ISBN 9781925556612 (soft cover); RRP \$39.95



*Written in the Sky* is an autobiography of one man's desire to fly, recording his efforts to achieve a boyhood dream and the challenges and rewards of realising his ambitions.

The author, Mark Carr, joined the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) as a midshipman to train as a naval aviator in the Fleet Air Arm. He has flown with the RAN, the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), Ansett Airlines and Cathay Pacific Airways. While many before, and after, him have followed a similar path, Mark has expertly woven an historical backdrop across his experiences. The demise of the Fleet Air Arm, the infamous and bitter airline pilot strike of 1989 that drove him from Australia to Hong Kong, and the transition of an entrepreneurial international airline into a business venture fighting for market share of air travel, are keystones in his career.

A chance meeting with his father's friend, a former Fleet Air Arm pilot, sharpened a desire to fly into an ambition to "Fly Navy". While there were close encounters with failure while undergoing basic and advanced flying training phases in the RAAF, graduation saw him transfer to the Fleet Air Arm training regime. The demands of Navy flying, particularly landing on the aircraft carrier HMAS *Melbourne*, then flagship of the RAN, a very small aircraft carrier by world standards, quite rightly draws admiration for Australian Navy pilots who routinely faced the challenges of carrier operations. His light-hearted description of Navy terminology provides another example that sets the Navy apart from the other Services.

Like many Fleet Air Arm pilots of the time, his bitterness at the government's decision to scrap the Fleet Air Arm is clearly demonstrated. Subsequent transfer to the RAAF to fly Orion long-range maritime patrol aircraft provided an extension to his military career. His description of flying a complicated and lethal aircraft and the requirement to enforce Australia's military interests across the Indian and Pacific oceans is instructive.

Family commitments, however, and a desire to avoid the staff duties that come with promotion to senior rank, caused him to look beyond the Services. As a boy in Mornington, Victoria, he had wistfully looked up at airliners overhead plying their way to and from Tasmania. Leaving the RAAF and joining Ansett Airlines helped him realise another boyhood dream until it was shattered by the vicious, bitter and

protracted airline pilots' dispute in the late 1980s. His description of the policies and operational procedures of the domestic airline sets the scene for his ongoing commentary on his flying experiences in the civil environment.

While the pilots' dispute forced people to take sides with either the airlines or the pilots' union, Mark and his family chose to leave Australia and fly for Cathay Pacific Airways, an organisation that had an entrepreneurial flair and reflected the drive of its founders. The latter part of the book recounts his experiences flying in the busy skies over South-East Asia, the Middle East and long-haul flights across the Pacific Ocean. While long distance flights for an international airline might seem somewhat less than stimulating after a career in the Services, the author's writing skills ensure that the reader remains engaged and absorbed with his accounts of challenges and rewards. The insight he provides is fascinating.

While there are quite a few autobiographies with similar themes, this autobiography stands out as a simply told, down-to-earth account of his adventures without 'gilding the lily'. His honest appraisal of his flying abilities, his personal attributes and his outlook on life are refreshing. He takes the reader into the cockpit with him, describing cockpit activities, the mechanics of flight, navigation and the challenges of menacing weather conditions, among other subjects, where his commitment to flying and managing these demands is clearly evident. *Written in the Sky* is suitable for those with an intimate knowledge of flying and will not disappoint them, while it will also engage the aviation enthusiast who will enjoy the experience.

*Written in the Sky* was quite literally written in the sky when the author was routinely returning home to Melbourne from Hong Kong in the back of an airliner. To use his own words: *I wanted to do justice to all the wonderful aircraft that I have flown, a credit to their designers, manufacturers, and the people who maintained them ... I sincerely hope that the reader, of whatever age or background, finds the work informative, entertaining, and possibly even inspiring.*

I believe that Mark has ably met his objectives and in doing so has provided an opportunity for aviation enthusiasts to share his experiences with a rare insight into the activities in the cockpit and on the flight deck.

**Bob Treloar**