

Paddock Plan Dick Smith wants monument near Culcairn for 1920 aviation milestone

On mission to honour plane pioneers

Anthony Bunn

ENTREPRENEUR Dick Smith wants a paddock south of Culcairn to have a monument to salute its link to a historic feat in Australian aviation.

The former face of computers and food products visited the field next to the Olympic Highway and Lowes Road yesterday to outline his vision.

It relates to the journey of World War I lieutenants Ray Parer and John McIntosh who flew a de Havilland DH9 in a pioneering air race from England to Australia in 1920.

Mechanical woes forced them down numerous times and the trip ran over 200 days by the time they arrived in Darwin en route to the finish at Melbourne's Flemington racecourse.

But outside Culcairn the troublesome engine sparked a dramatic landing which Parer described in his book published the following year.

"She ran along, but as soon as she touched, I knew that the ground was too soft," Parer wrote.

"It was too late then to open up the engine again.

"The wheels sank about six inches (15 centimetres), and she turned completely over."

With the plane, made by a furniture factory, upside down and damaged, the pilots were unable to continue but they had become the first to complete a single-engine plane journey from England to Australia.

That deed and the adventures originally captivated Mr Smith in 1982 when he was preparing to successfully fly a single-engine helicopter around the world on a journey that covered much of the pioneers' route.

"I read everything I could, because I was pretty scared,"

Mr Smith said.

"My helicopter is a similar speed and range to the fixed wing of those days, so I read this book.

"I just hoped what happened to them didn't happen to me, but the staggering difference is the modern reliability of technology, they were in the early days where

it just constantly broke down and failed.

"I've done five flights around the world and never had an engine failure or a breakdown because modern technology is so much improved."

Mr Smith only learnt earlier in 2023 where exactly the de Havilland landed after

speaking to former Culcairn tourism officer Neville Lowe, 83, whose father Keith as a 17-year-old supplied draught horses Stormy and Kit to pull the plane out of the bog with ropes.

Now Mr Smith is keen to have a marker to recognise the milestone moment.

"We've got to get a mon-

Dick Smith and Neville Lowe standing in front of the paddock where a forced landing occurred in August 1920. Far left: Townsfolk from Culcairn and surrounds gather to look at the upside down de Havilland plane and left, the de Havilland plane ready for its mission to fly in an air race which had prize of 10,000 pounds. Pictures by Tara Trehwella and the Australian War Memorial

ument or something, so it's known forever," Mr Smith said.

"I just think that it's so important for Culcairn and the area that the first ever single-engine plane to go from England to Australia ended its flight here, at this location.

"You need to know that because when people die and pass away that history will be gone. I'd like to see (something), even if it ends up just being a small stone cairn with a plaque on it, saying 'Parer and McIntosh landed here at the end of the first single-engine flight from England to Australia'."

Mr Smith plans to write to Greater Hume Shire Council with his suggestion and he added he was prepared to contribute a "significant" amount of money.

He said it may necessitate buying a small section of the paddock to ensure it was safe for passers-by to stop and read the monument. Property owner John Buckley, who has leased the paddock for 31 years, said he would be prepared to consider a sale.

Remarkably, the plane flown by Parer and McIntosh, which never flew again, still exists and is in the Australian War Memorial's collection.



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