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**Australian Aviating Part VIII**  
by Clark Closkey



Ray and Clark at Bankstown

Ray Clamback is not just another Aussie pilot. Ray and Aminta Hennessey own and operated Clamback and Hennessey Aviation at Bankstown Airport, Sydney where I'm doing my flying. I've already told the story of the remarkable Aminta and her flying exploits, now it's Ray's turn. Ray is 68 years young and has been flying since 1960 and has accumulated over 20,000 hours—over 1000 of them night flying in a Twin Commanche! He has crossed the Pacific over 250 times and the Atlantic 4 times in single engine and light twin aircraft! In addition, he has many movements of aircraft around Asia and Europe. He has flown for the Forest Service doing survey work, instructed and ferried aircraft all over the world. Ray is a Class 1 Flying Instructor with IFR and multi-engine training approval for most aircraft as well as specializing in aircraft ferrying. He was an innovator of the long-range collapsible temporary fuel systems. Ray has flown around the world three times in a Piper Archer! Ok, I'm tired of using the exclamation mark. Suffice it to say that Ray is a pretty special pilot. Not surprising then, that Ray Clamback would have a story or two to tell about his flying adventures.

How about one where he ditched in the Pacific Ocean... his third career ditching; one in a river and two in the Pacific Ocean? Ray's story begins on October 4, 2004 when he and fellow pilot Lynn Gray in her own plane, took off from Hawaii enroute to Christmas Island, on the next leg of their journey, approximately 1068 nautical miles and 8 hours away. The weather was fine when they lifted off in their new Cessna 182's at 0620. Following in a Cessna Caravan, was Aminta Hennessey who took off 45 minutes after the C182s.

Approximately 600 nautical miles south of Hawaii, Ray's plane developed an engine problem. The oil pressure began to drop. He contacted Aminta who alerted the Coast Guard on her HF radio, and immediately donned his lifejacket. Within minutes, the engine seized and Ray was flying a glider. It was just a matter of time before the plane ditched, and like most high-wing, fixed gear planes, flipped over onto its back.

Ray became disoriented and didn't know how the plane was lying until he saw the light above him. The cockpit immediately started to fill with water, a result of the windscreen being broken or the door opening on impact. He felt for the life raft as the water poured in but couldn't find it, (Lynn, who was circling above saw the raft exit the plane on its own and promptly sink from lack of inflation), so he struggled free of the cockpit and rose to the surface. When he surfaced, he could see the whole belly of the aircraft was completely covered in oil. As he watched, the plane slowly filled with water, sunk below the surface and was gone. There he was in the middle of the Pacific Ocean floating in a lifejacket without a raft.

Ray is a big man, and although the lifejacket was tight around his neck, he had to constantly use his legs to keep his head above water in the two meter swell.

Meanwhile, Lyn saw him exit the plane, then due to conditions, lost sight of him. She kept searching for over 4 hours until the two U.S. Coast Guard planes arrived but she was forced due to fuel shortage, to depart and carried onto Christmas Island.

The US Coastguard began its search and as you can appreciate, had a daunting task to spot a bobbing head in the open ocean. But determi-

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nation and experience prevailed and after 6 1/2 hours in the water and just at dusk, Ray was spotted.

The CG flew over and dropped flares and two life rafts complete with survival kits and Ray managed to swim to the nearest one and, with great effort, pull himself aboard.


Ray knew from his survival training, that rescue would not happen immediately. He drank some of the kit's water and ate a 'long-lasting' sandwich and wrapped himself in a few thermal blankets. Ten long hours passed and as the Coast-guard Hercules continued to circle overhead, Ray endured bitter cold from a rainstorm. He had to constantly bail the raft out to keep out the sea and have a shelter from the driving winds.


When the C 130 began dropping flares, Ray knew help was close at hand. Soon he spotted a bright light on the horizon and realized a ship was headed his way.

As the ship, a container vessel, pulled along side, a harness was lowered down to him but he could not put it on. One of the crew came down into the raft, put the harness around him and then he was lifted up onto the 'dry boat'. What a relief. He stood there while they took the harness off and then they asked him if he could climb up the gangway. This he could only do with lots of help from the crew and Chief Engineer in case he fell. There was a lift that then took him approximately three floors up to the officer's lounge. There he sat down and they got him dry clothes and gave him tea.

Ray was on the ship for 11 days from pick up point to Melbourne. The Captain apparently asked him if he wanted to be dropped off at Christmas Island, but he said that he would prefer not to.

Ray has settled back into normal life. He continues to fly and has even taken on other ferrying jobs since the October, 2004 event. As I said earlier, these Aussie pilots are a tough lot.

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