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Keith Virtue, pioneer airman

The history of air travel and transport to the Northern Rivers Area is long and involved. It includes some famous names like Kingsford-Smith, Ulm, Stinson and Ansett. There was great interest in flying after the First World War and many of the famous aviators of the time came here offering joy flights to the bravest. Most of these pilots had served in the infant air force and they were keen to continue flying.

One local lad who was fascinated by these new flying machines was Keith Allison Virtue, a farmer's son from Bexhill. He was 11 years of age when he witnessed his parents take a joy flight in a small aeroplane which had landed in a Lismore paddock. At 15 he began a course in motor car engineering with the International Correspondence School but soon switched to aircraft engineering. He had decided to build his own aircraft!

His father watched with interest as Keith started fiddling with a motorcycle engine as a first step in achieving this plan. He realised that the lad was 18 and not interested in farming so he suggested that Keith go to Brisbane and learn to fly at the Qantas Flying School. If he got his licence he would buy him a Gipsy Moth. This was quite a prize as the plane would cost the farmer over £800. Roughly 12 months later, in November 1928, Keith, with his brother Ralph as co-pilot, flew his prize home to Bexhill and landed in a paddock on his father's farm. Local residents came out in strength even though rain was pelting down, and the young aviator was presented with a silver cup.



Joy flights were the next step and these were very popular, usually taking off from the farm. He also offered flying instruction and undertook a flying taxi service as required. Advertisements were placed in local papers and then he decided to look for a booking agent. He went to see the New England Motor Company in Lismore which was the leading travel agent of the time. By chance he met the owner, George Robinson, and their conversation led to their forming a partnership as New England Airways.

On 1st January 1931 their first service began between Lismore and Brisbane. Later they started a service between Brisbane and Sydney. By 1935 a public company was formed as Airlines of Australia. It later became Australian National Airlines (ANA) and then merged with Ansett Airlines. In 1934 Keith had married George Robinson's daughter, Nita. They had two sons.

With the outbreak of World War II in 1939 Keith Virtue joined the RAAF with the rank of Flight Lieutenant. As a skilful pilot he was involved mainly in low-level flying dropping supplies and equipment in New Guinea. On his discharge in 1947 he returned to flying with ANA. He retired to Brisbane and died on the golf course in 1980. He has a memorial at Bexhill. His two sons became airline pilots.

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