

## Phillip Hesselson

### The daring aviator who flew to London in 1937.

By Noel Otten, February 2009

I met Phillip Hesselson in 1970. To me, (at the time 24 years old), he was already an “old” man of 60. He was not an imposing figure by any stretch of the imagination. At 5 ft 5 inches he was shorter than most men. He wore “coke bottle” glasses all his life. A quietly spoken man, reserved, dignified, the epitome of the “perfect” gentleman and a “gentle” man in every sense of the word! Nothing about his appearance or his manner gave one any indication that this man, in his youth, was a man of action! A daring adventurer. Over the years, as I got to know him, I discovered that he was truly an unsung hero of South African aviation history.

To one and all he was “Mr. Hesselson” the Chairman of JLPC!

This is but one story in a life filled with adventure! I hope I can do justice to the memory of a very special man.

The following article was written by Chris Barron of The Star newspaper in 2003 when Phillip Hesselson passed away.

“Phillip Hesselson, who has died at the age of 93, was a Johannesburg attorney who flew to London in a two-seater, open cockpit, single-engine Junkers Junior aeroplane in 1937. He had no radio and his only (navigational) instrument was a compass.

Hesselson took off from Baragwanath Airfield near Johannesburg in August of that year and arrived in Croydon, London, 29 days later after being in the air for 100 hours. On his trip up Africa, around the eastern side of the Mediterranean, and across Eastern Europe, he had to land every 300 miles to refuel.

His exploit was in response to a competition for the longest flight ending in London. Hesselson won easily; his closest rival having flown all the way from Liverpool. He received a trophy from the legendary British aviatrix, Amy Johnson.

From Baragwanath, Hesselson, with his friend, Len Fisher, set off for Uganda where he flew into what he described as “the mother and father” of all storms. For 30 minutes he battled through the storm at full throttle at 70 mph, barely managing to keep his plane, Silver Bird, from hitting the tree-tops.

He flew over dense jungle, bush, swamp and desert, with no sign of human habitation for hundreds of miles.

They flew over the Taurus Mountains in southern Turkey which rise 8000 feet above sea level in freezing temperatures. A man, not given to exaggeration, Hesselson described those 50 minutes it took to cross the mountain range as a “nightmare”.

Uncomfortably close below them were the wickedly jagged peaks separated by yawning ravines.

They crossed the Black Sea and flew for hundreds of miles following the railway line used by the “Orient Express”. By the time they reached Budapest three weeks into their trip, the pair looked so bedraggled in their khaki shorts that the reception clerk at the posh hotel they wanted to book into, sniffily suggested that they try a cheap “pension” at the other end of town.

From Budapest they flew 130 miles up the Danube to Vienna where Hitler had just finished the annual political rally colossal “Nazi” banners still flapping in the breeze. Being Jewish, Hesselson and Fisher flew on.

After a 40 minute refuelling stop in Frankfurt, they took off hastily for Croydon. Hesselson had no proper charts for this leg and once in the air, realised that the antiquated map he’d found in a back-street shop in Budapest was hopelessly inadequate.

He had permission for only one landing in Germany and given the frightening political climate, decided to press on to Britain, more than 300 miles away, and hope for the best.

One hour off the French coast, there was still no sign of England and Hesselson knew they didn’t have enough fuel to turn back. He realised, with a sense of mounting panic, that they were completely lost, and that if they ran out of fuel, they would drown.

He decided that the only solution was to climb as high as possible. If they still couldn’t see any land, and ran out of fuel, then he would dive the aircraft straight down into the sea. “If we had to die, I decided it was going to be a quick death” he wrote later.

They'd reached 7000 ft, when what looked like a bank of fog, 2 miles away, turned out to be land. Hesselson did a forced landing on the first field he saw. He had one and a half gallons of fuel left, enough for another 15 minutes of flying.

On his way back to South Africa he was hit in the chest by the propeller while starting the engine in Palestine. He crawled into the cockpit and continued down the east coast of Africa in excruciating pain. When he reached home, he discovered he'd been flying with fractured ribs.

When World War 2 started 2 years later, Hesselson wanted to be a fighter pilot, but failed his eye test and became a navigator instructor instead.

Hesselson was born in Standerton on June 13 1910, the son of a wagon-maker from Lithuania. He studied law at Wits University and was still practicing as an attorney until 3 weeks before his death. His wife, Pauline, whom he married in 1951, died in 1975.

Chris Barron.

Phillip Hesselson remained an active pilot until he was into his 80s. He had 2 passions in life, his Mooney and his Alfa Romeo.

In spite of the fact that he had to discipline me on one or two occasions, he never showed any animosity towards me. I served on the committee for many years under his chairmanship and today, I occupy that same seat. He was at the helm of the Johannesburg Light Plane Club when it made the move to the Syferfontein site. He gave the club direction during those difficult times. I hope I do justice to the chair that he once occupied.



*Len Fisher (left), Phillip Hesselson (right)  
In front of the Junkers A50 Junior, ZS-ACK*



*Phillip Hesselson in his later years.*