

NOTES FROM THE REAR

“Who were you with?” asked the bloke about my age at the bar after the parade.

“Wallaby Airlines.” I replied

“Wallaby Airlines.” he repeated “The Caribous.”

I was quite pleased that he was that knowledgeable. Many Vietnam vets I’d spoken to since the war had to be filled in on the details.

“They flew so slowly.” he said showing even more knowledge of the squadron. “In fact they flew so slowly they are the only known aircraft to cop a bird strike up the arse.”

I wasn’t quite sure whether to be proud of this singularly outstanding achievement, or to snort him for insulting a great aircraft.

“Well...we got you into those tight little airstrips to fight the war”.

“Yeah, it was terrific.” he continued walking through his own private minefield, “By the time we got there the fight was usually over.”

Having got the shits thoroughly by this time I asked, “So who were you with?”

“110 Sigs, Vung Tau. Spent the war up Telecom Hill drinking at the Navy Diver’s Bar.”

Well that was it. I eased off to find a more suitable drinking companion. Bloody smart arse.

But he could have been right. We were flying against a head wind one day when one of the passengers motioned for me to join him. He pointed out the window and said “Look at those hills, they’re beating us.” I admit we did seem to be losing ground. Someone up the front must have noticed too. A change of course and we started to improve our position. At least now we looked like we were going somewhere even if it was in the wrong direction.

There were various types of pilot who flew the Caribous in Vietnam. A different set of rules from those back in Oz allowed for some individual creativity.

We had:

The **Gardener** - a pilot who liked to prune the tops off the trees with the UHF aerial much to the chagrin of the radio techs.

The **Botanist** - brought the greenery back to base for further examination.

The **Wannabe Bomber Pilot** - arrived over the destination airstrip which was under fire, and dropped the delivery, a live cow, through the cookhouse roof. The cook radioed back that he was delighted with the service. Saved him getting shot at whilst chasing an angry cow down a ‘hot’ strip .

The **Water Skier** - flew so low over the sea he put up more spray from prop wash than the regulars on the Murray.

The **Banzai Pipeliner** - flew along the waves at six feet. The waves were twelve feet high. If he wanted to surf the Banzai Pipeline he should have taken a trip to Hawaii.

The **Cullenary** - carved it up and made a meal of the flight. (alternatively - trying to get a Caribou to fly like a Mirage)

The **Fun Fair Operator** - pulled positive 'G's on the passengers and then took her over the top. The negative 'G's soon sorted out who was not wearing a seat belt. Course the passengers all had to pass the assistant loady on their way off the plane. Words like 'mad' 'insane' 'it's frightening enough down there mate without nearly killing us up here.' were all too frequent.

The **Philosopher** - same as the fun fair op only he did the manoeuvre with a plane load of pigs. Trying to prove the old theory about 'bacon on the wing' (even NASA hasn't tried that one yet)

Talking about pigs, on one flight the box, housing a large white, was a little flimsy. On take off the weight of the animal popped the back of the box and the porker came out, rolling down till he hit the ramp. He picked himself up and took a position sitting on the floor facing the assistant loady. They struck up a conversation and apparently the assistant loady was quite pleased to finally find someone who would listen to him. Unfortunately the plane's destination was up into the highlands - Montaniard territory. The assistant loady's latest friend was to become the focal point of a Montaniard ritual that was quite stressful to watch from a Westerner's viewpoint.

Embarrassing Moments:

There were numerous applause for the dedication and efficiency of the squadron as a whole. However, at various times, not unlike any other venture in life, things turned left leaving the crews to call on the old French adage "C'est le guerre!".

One delivery arrived over the firebase destination airstrip with a load of palletised, empty sand bags. There was shooting and all sorts of nasty things going on down below so a request to drop the pallets was approved. Just drop them on our end of the airstrip was the request. As they were originally meant to be delivered, they had no parachutes. Don't need 'em anyway. Can't hurt a sand bag advised someone with a wealth of knowledge on sand bags.

Out went the red streamer. We had one run. Cargo door open, ramp level, straps undone, assistant loady holding the pallets from rolling prematurely, loady, safety strap on lest he follow the pallets out into space, set to run the lot down the rollers in one move. The pilot was quite adept at his craft. Flew the plane to all but the edge of the strip, green light on, pallets rolling. Out they went, falling...falling...dead-eye-dick. Straight onto the end of the runway in a line, one, two three, four....

As the pallets hit the ground they compressed, the straps sprung off and the empty bags shot up in a perfect arc landing, and covering, to halfway down the airstrip. "Oh shit!" says someone. "Christ! Look at that!" exclaims the loady.

"Wallaby 05 thanks for that." comes a call from the firebase. "Not only will we not be able to retrieve the bags till the firing stops and we no longer need them, but it looks like there'll be no aircraft landing here till we clean up the mess. You sure you're on our side?"

Some of the flights were long and boring. There was not a lot of scope for games like 'I Spy' up at 10000 feet. Clouds, hills and blue sky just about covered it.

Our two young intrepid pilots decided to put themselves through their paces.

"Lurch†, think up things to test us will you. It doesn't matter when it is, we need to get experience. You need to surprise us so that our reaction time improves."

So Lurch pulls a few circuit breakers. Some tests were easy, others a bit harder.

“Can’t you find anything that will really get us thinking?” asks one.

“Not really. You seem to be on top of anything I can do.”

We all sat back in our seats revisiting the doldrums. We were headed for Da Nang. Daylight was fading and the crew was hungry. We’ll get off at the first exit agree the pilots having been told our quarters for the night were at this end of the strip. A radio call confirmed that control wanted us off as quickly as possible, as they had four F4s taxiing out to blast off on a twilight mission.

We touched down on the stripes at the end of the strip. Reverse pitch, gun the engines for maximum reverse thrust. Suddenly the nose rears up like a stallion and we go charging off down the airstrip. “Jesus Christ...what the ..!”

It took both pilots till half way down the strip to get the beast under control.

Lurch came on the internal radio.

“You gentlemen ever heard of the reverse pitch circuit breaker?”

“Wallaby 04, Wallaby 04, Say I thought you guys were getting off at the first exit. I’ve got four F4s chewing up juice waiting for you to get off the runway.”

“You silly bastard Lurch! Yeah control. A little mishap. Sorry. Will exit the last. I’ll kill ya Lurch!”

“You told me to test you anytime and I did.” “Shit just as well it was a long strip and not one of those cricket pitches.” “Give me some credit.” signs off Lurch with the biggest smirk you’ve ever seen. Lurch† always had a big smirk when he’d done something smart.

Wallaby Airlines had requests to drop an assortment of nasties such as incendiary flares and barrels of tear gas. The night time flares runs was real hair raiser. We were given a parachute harness and instructed that if a round of fire entered the aircraft don’t hesitate to grab a parachute, hook it on and leap out the back. As the loady instructed, don’t look around for him to give the nod. He wouldn’t be there. (I always wondered where he’d be. Climbing out the front over the pilots’ heads??)

I had passed matriculation chemistry. Every time we had occasion to use white phosphorus, the ignition time was measured in nanoseconds. Someone hadn’t done their homework with regards to time allowed to find the chute, hook it on and leap out the back. I reckoned by that time we’d be part of the floating star.

Not only that. They forgot to mention that we would possibly be parachuting into enemy hands. Who would possibly be shooting at us on the way down. And that’s if we ever worked out how to use the damn parachute having never been taught.

Actually, after a bit of thought, it sounded better to be part of the largest star in the heaven rather than the other options. Our only glimmer of hope was that it was night and we were possibly hard to spot to shoot at.

But we lived to fly another night. This time dropping 44 gallon drums of tear gas. These drums burst on hitting the ground and the wind carried the gas to the enemy. It was never explained

whether the gas was meant to cause the enemy to retreat, or to cause them to cough so loudly that our blokes could easily locate them and pick them off.

There seems something weird about coming across a whole group of men in black pyjamas, sitting in a circle, having a good cry. Never the less, there we were flying around above Xuan Loc one dark and shady night when the order came to drop the first batch. Three drums.

We were given a heading and a location to offload the drums. Cargo door up, ramp level, loadies with safety harnesses, green light, roll...roll...out they go. We continued to fly a circle pattern waiting for orders to drop the next batch.

“Wallaby Airlines....Wallaby Airlines. *Cough*” came the distinct Aussie accent over the radio. “Youse silly bastards. *Cough Cough*. Youse have dropped the gas in front of us. *Cough Cough*. You’re killin’ us. *Cough Cough*. Whose side are youse on?”

“We dropped them right on the coordinates given us.” replied our skipper trying to hide the hurt in his voice. “Didn’t headquarters tell youse, *Cough*, there’s been a change in the wind direction. *Cough Cough*. Youse are as useless as an ashtray on a motorbike! *Cough Cough Cough*”

HQ hadn’t divulged this seemingly unimportant piece of vital information. We slunk out of the area not a word spoken. (I’ve since found out from numerous conversations with army friends, that any HQs were usually surplus to requirement, a waste of money, a place where people sat sipping coffee waiting to put in their claims for an assortment of awards since they were the ones who submitted the final account of any event.)

Which brings up the time the Yanks shot down their own Caribou. A famous photo made the cover of The Pacific Stars and Stripes newspaper. Someone of importance in Wallaby Airlines decided to visit the Yankee HQ at Nui Dat to ascertain the level of possibility of the same thing happening to us.

“These guns on tracks can hit Saigon from here.” our adviser told us proudly. (Saigon was 38 miles away he added.) “How high do they fire?”

“Well it depends on the azimuth and trajectory but we can reach 60000 feet.”

“That’s 12 miles high.” “Yep.”

“So if we fly at a ceiling of 10000 feet, your shell can hit us on the way up, or on the way down.”

“I guess so.”

“So how do we find out where and when you’re firing.”

“You don’t! We don’t want Charlie to know so we keep it quiet.”

We walked out of there with a chill running down our spines.

“That’s not good enough.” says the boss.

I wasn’t privy as to whether they ever solved the problem or even came to an agreement, but terms like ‘friendly fire’ were being used often enough for one to start writing home to his mum. But I do know I went back and examined the picture of that falling Caribou very closely to see if there was any way an assistant loady could get out of it without hurting himself too much.

But it wasn't long after that that we were on the 005 mission flying from Pleiku down to Nha Trang. Things were hotting up in the Pleiku area so we were glad to be getting out of there. Approximately half way to Nha Trang there was a little mountain shaped like a woman's hips. It had a valley up the middle and copse of trees right at the top of the valley, the junction of two other streams. For reasons which temporarily escape my memory, this mountain was referred to as 'Pussy Mountain'.

It was somewhere in the vicinity of Pussy Mountain that our radio frequency had to be changed from Pleiku Radio to Nha Trang radio. The mountains are about 5000 feet high. There we were cruising along at about 7000 feet, minding our own business, when all of a sudden a whole hill, at 10 o'clock below us, simply blew up. A frantic call to Pleiku Radio ascertained that they knew nothing. They told us we would be getting very close to Nha Trang Radio area, perhaps we should get in touch with them.

Nha Trang Radio: "Wallaby 05, Wallaby 05, where are you?"

Wallaby: "At about (*co-ordinates given*) on route from Pleiku to Nha Trang."

Nha Trang Radio: (*in the background "Son of a bitch!"*) "Wallaby 05, Wallaby 05, turn right onto heading 180 degrees immediately. I repeat, turn right onto heading 180 degrees immediately. You are in the middle of a B52 strike."

The plane just about got whiplash the pilot had it over so fast. The trouble is you don't know where to fly...in the middle of a B52 strike. Those little suckers are up there somewhere with their heads in the clouds, calmly laying eggs all over the place. Once we were pretty sure we were out of it, we contacted Nha Trang Radio again and asked how we could have possibly stumbled into the middle of a B52 strike.

"Well we give a ten minute warning because we don't want to give Charlie time to get out of there. Where were you ten minutes before the burst?" "We were on Pleiku Radio."

"Well...what do I say....you're lucky you're still alive man."

Our bloke wasn't transmitting when he gave his reply. But the rest of the crew heard it. That pilot was definitely recruited straight from the wharves.

† - Richard 'Lurch' De Friskbom 10/11/1935 - 12/7/05 (RIP)

Extracts from Dutchy's 'Notes From The Rear'.

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