

VIETNAM

Extracted from the autobiography.

A Flier's Life.



by (Flt Lt) Gareth Kimberley

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Gareth 'Gary' Kimberley was born in Fremantle, Western Australia on April 6, 1936.

As a teenager his interest in aircraft led him to join the Air Training Corps as a cadet and in 1955, at the age of 19, he began flying lessons on Tiger Moths at Maylands in Perth. In 1956 he gained his private pilots licence as a result of being selected for aircrew training during National Service in the RAAF.



He joined the Royal Australian Air Force as a pilot in 1960, on No 40 Pilots Course, training on Winjeels at Point Cook in Victoria and finally gaining his wings on Vampires at Pearce in WA. He then went on to serve in a number of different RAAF units including the Air Trials Unit on the Woomera Rocket Range followed by a two year posting to No 10 Squadron at Townsville in North Queensland flying Neptune long range maritime patrol aircraft.

In 1965 he transferred to No 38 Squadron at Richmond NSW to fly Caribou tactical transports and completed a nine month tour of active service in Vietnam in 1965-66. During his time in the war zone Gareth flew 1,109 operational sorties totalling 742 flying hours with his aircraft often fired at and actually hit by enemy ground fire on several occasions. Fortunately the aircraft was not seriously damaged. He also flew extensively throughout Papua-New Guinea and the islands to the north and later served in a non-flying role as an Air Force Fighter Controller with an Australian radar defence unit, No 1 CRU at Brookvale in northern Sydney.

He joined Qantas in 1970 to become an international airline pilot flying Boeing 707s and 747s and subsequently enjoyed numerous overseas short term postings with that airline. In 1978 he designed and built his own ultralight aircraft, the Kimberley *Sky-Rider* and received an outstanding individual achievement award from the Experimental Aircraft Association of the United States. The Sky-Rider was featured in the 1988-89 edition of the aviation 'Bible' Jane's All The World's Aircraft.

The original Sky-Rider has been donated to the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney as an historic aircraft and is now on public display in the Museum's Discovery Centre at Castle Hill.

In 1996 Gareth finally retired from flying as a Qantas Boeing 747 First Officer after clocking up a total of 17,600 hours of flying on more than 30 different aircraft types ranging from Air Force fast jets (Vampires, Meteors and Macchis) to four engine Qantas Jumbos and completing a flying career spanning more than 40 years. He has contributed short stories and anecdotes to several books on the Vietnam War and had a book published in the United States on how to build and fly ultralight aircraft. He also served briefly as the ultralight aircraft correspondent for *Australian Flying* magazine and had numerous articles published in Australian and overseas aviation magazines.

In 1998 he ran unsuccessfully as a candidate for the Australian House of Representatives and continues to publish a monthly non-partisan political newsletter *Fact File* which is now in its 10 th year.

Gareth is currently (May 2010) writing his memoirs and it is from this work that these anecdotes have been taken.

He lives in Sydney with his wife Patricia and has two married daughters.



Flg Off Gareth (Gary) Kimberley outside Base HQ hut Vung Tau, Dec 1965. RTFV became 35 SQN in June 1966.

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SOURCE MATERIAL

Shows autobiography's break-up into separate books.

SECTION I – PROLOGUE

Introductory pictorial summary of Books 1 to 3.

SECTION II – VIETNAM

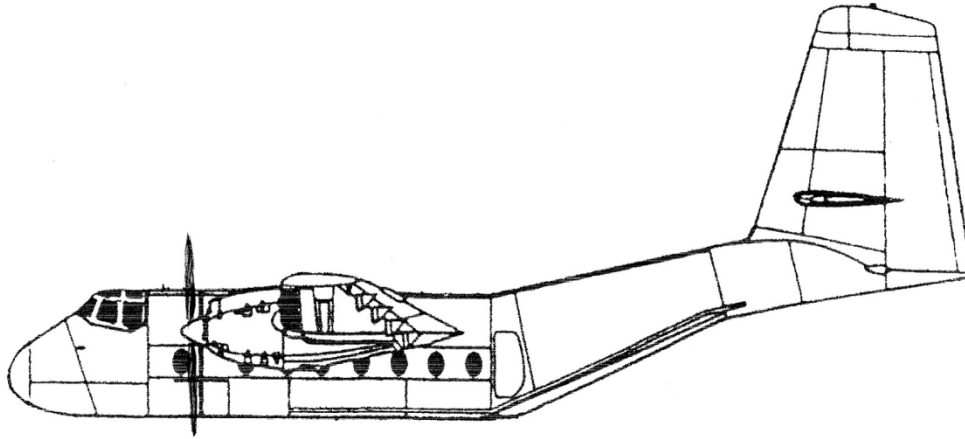
Book 4 - Vietnam, comprising Chapters 17 and 18 complete with text and illustrations.

SECTION III – EPILOGUE

Summary of post Vietnam Caribou operations.

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The de Havilland Canada DHC-4 Caribou tactical transport.



‘I believe that when the history of this conflict is finally written the performance of the RAAF in Vietnam will be remembered as one of the finest achievements in Australian aviation history.’

Senator T.C. Drake-Brockman, DFC
Minister for Air, 1970

RAAF CARIBOUS IN VIETNAM

A BRIEF OVERVIEW

All three Services contributed gallantly to the allied war effort in Vietnam, none more so than the RAAF. On their delivery flight to Australia from the factory in Canada some of the first Australian purchased de Havilland Caribou short take off and landing (STOL) transports were actually diverted directly into active service in the War Zone.

On August 8, 1964, the Royal Australian Air Force established the RAAF Transport Flight Vietnam (RTFV) at Vung Tau in the Republic of South Vietnam. This event marked the first deployment of an RAAF unit to war since Korea. The RTFV, which later became No.35 Squadron, was in Vietnam well before the Task Force arrived and was also the last RAAF unit to leave Vietnam in 1972.

The squadron carried freight, troops, ammunition, dropped flares at night in support of ground forces, and also evacuated casualties from battle areas. It delivered food, medical supplies, passengers, vehicles and also the all important mail. For many soldiers in isolated Special Forces camps, the Caribou was the only link with the big base camps. Its outstanding 'Short Take Off and Landing' and rough field capabilities enabled it to operate into short, unprepared strips where few other aircraft could go. No 35 Squadron set new standards for Caribou flying, maintenance and safety, and was so proficient that the United States Air Force adopted some of the Squadron's operating procedures. While flying only 1.4 per cent of all transport missions in country, its aircraft were delivering 7 per cent of the total freight airlifted. The Aussie 'Wallaby' squadron showed it was able to punch well above its weight.

No.35 Squadron returned to Australia in February 1972, after 7 ½ years of active service in Vietnam. In that time, it flew a total of 44,000 hours comprising 81,000 operational sorties and carried 680,000 passengers and 46,000 tonnes of cargo. It was the first RAAF unit into Vietnam and the last one out.

On the weekend of the 7th and 8th of August 2004, the ex-members of RTFV / 35 Squadron held a 40th anniversary reunion at Coffs Harbour in northern New South Wales and to help celebrate the occasion, No.38 Squadron, now based at RAAF Amberley just west of Brisbane, despatched a Caribou for a ceremonial fly-past over the veterans and their families who had gathered on the Opal Cove beach.

At the veterans' reunion dinner, on the 7th of August, the guest of honour, the Deputy Chief of the Air Force, Air Vice Marshall Roxley McLennan, pointed out that RTFV / 35 Squadron had the unique distinction of introducing a brand new aircraft type into service, in an overseas theatre and directly into battlefield operations all at the same time. Although No.10 Maritime Reconnaissance Squadron might historically contest this claim, the fact is that RTFV / 35 Squadron's record is outstanding by any standard. It was on active service in the war zone for almost eight years – virtually the entire length of the Vietnam War. During that time the unit lost only three aircraft and although frequently struck by enemy ground fire with some crew members being wounded, no aircrew lives were lost.

Despite the huge problems involved in introducing a new aircraft type into service, in its first year of operations in the war zone, RTFV, with only six aircraft, was able to present five aeroplanes on the line every day, seven days a week. This was a truly remarkable achievement and a credit to the unsung heroes of the day, the skilled and dedicated, hard working RAAF ground crews.

No.35 Squadron has since been disbanded and the parent unit, No.38 Squadron, has been relocated from Richmond in NSW, first to Amberley in Queensland and then to Townsville. Incredibly, after more than 45 years since the Caribou was introduced into RAAF service this 'go anywhere' aeroplane still soldiers on – there is simply nothing else in the world quite like it.

Gareth Kimberley 7/4/09

Source material

A FLIER'S LIFE

An Autobiography

Chapters produced so far showing break-up into books

BOOK ONE - *Through Hardship to the Stars*

Introduction	Page 1	
Chapter 1 Early Childhood	Page 2	(9 pages)
Chapter 2 Into The Workforce	Page 10	(9 pages)
Chapter 3 National Service	Page 19	(4 pages)
Chapter 4 Aero Club Flying	Page 23	(7 pages)
Chapter 5 Failure and Frustration	Page 30	(10 pages)
Chapter 6 Per Ardua	Page 40	(15 pages)
Chapter 7 Ad Astra	Page 55	(10 pages)
Chapter 8 Adelaide	Page 65	(9 pages)
Chapter 9 Working for the WRE	Page 74	(14 pages)

BOOK TWO is titled *Rocket Range Pilot* and comprises Chapters 8 to 13

Chapter 10 Home on the Range	Page 88	(11 pages)
Chapter 11 Lake Eyre and the Bluebird	Page 99	(8 pages)
Chapter 12 A Mysterious Malady	Page 107	(6 pages)
Chapter 13 More Adventures in the Outback	Page 113	(15 pages)

BOOK THREE - *From the Outback to the Sea*

Chapter 14 Far North Queensland	Page 128	(13 pages)
Chapter 15 1965 – A Memorable Year	Page 141	(12 pages)
Chapter 16 Richmond	Page 153	(7 pages)

BOOK FOUR - *VIETNAM*

Chapter 17 Vietnam	Page 159	(19 pages)
Chapter 18 The Hundred Day Girl	Page 178	(13 pages)

BOOK FIVE - *Back from The War - Richmond and New Guinea*

Chapter 19 A Round-the-World Odyssey	Page 191	(7 pages)
Chapter 20 Richmond and New Guinea	Page 198	(11 pages)
Chapter 21 A Prisoner of War	Page 209	(16 pages)
Chapter 22 Increasing Responsibilities	Page 225	(5 pages)
Chapter 23 A Night to Remember	Page 230	(8 pages)
Chapter 24 Caribous and Dakotas	Page 238	(17 pages)
Chapter 25 The Malevolent Macchi	Page 255	(7 pages)
Chapter 26 Return to Richmond	Page 262	(8 pages)

BOOK SIX – Subsequent completed chapters

Chapter 27 Qantas and Back to the Bottom	Page 271	(6 pages)
Chapter 28 Grounded	Page 277	(7 pages)
Chapter 29 Bouncing Back	Page 284	(11 pages)
Chapter 30 The Sky-Rider	Page 295	(17 pages)

SECTION I

PROLOGUE

Section I has been added to provide an insight as to the author's background and as a lead-in to the Vietnam narrative.

G K

Learning to fly.



At age 19, learning to fly on Tiger Moths with the Royal Aero Club of WA at Maylands in Perth, July 1955.

Trainee Aircrew Flight, 16th Intake, No 7 National Service Training Unit, RAAF Pearce WA, June 1956.

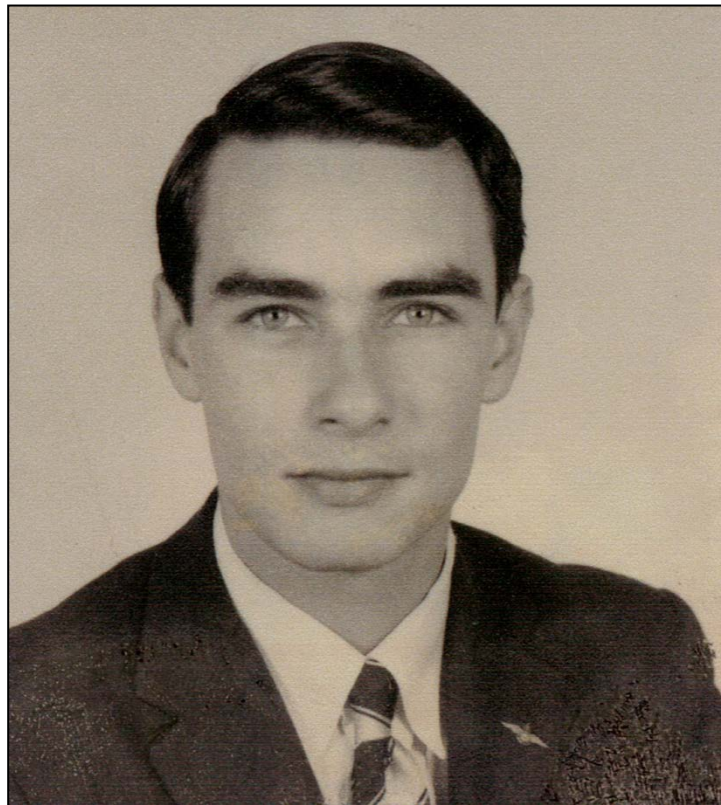


Leon Mouritz, Dick Woodrow, Gerry Buktenika, Bruce Deans, Allan Ross, Eric Maxwell, Cpl Muscroft, Phil Porter
Ray Bosustow, Graeme Owens, Ron deGruchy, Gary Kimberley, Flg Off, Fred Collins

The trainees flew RAC of WA Tiger Moths and Chipmunks and all graduated with Private Pilots Licences.



THE END OF AN ERA. Four Chipmunks in formation in a final fly-past over historic Maylands aerodrome before the move to Guildford (Perth Airport) in April 1959. The Club's Auster J-5B can be seen on the flight line with the meandering Swan River in the background. The photo was taken from the Club's new Cessna 172.



Portrait of the author taken in Perth at the age of 22.



No. 40 Pilots Course, No. 1 Basic Flying Training School, RAAF Base Point Cook, Vic. June 1960.
The Australian designed CAC Winjeel would have to be one of the finest basic trainers ever produced.



About to go off on another high-powered training session.

Pearce



No. 1 Advanced Flying Training School, RAAF Base Pearce, WA. May 1961.
A de Havilland Vampire Mk 35 on a training flight off the coast of Perth with Rottneest Island in the background.



Going solo in the Vampire was a huge thrill.
Although cramped and uncomfortable, the Vampire was exciting to fly.



The graduates of No. 40 Pilots' Course, RAAF Pearce, WA, 12 October 1961.
 Standing: Brian Hammond, Terry Hunt, Paul Smith, Merv Lewis, Allan Pappin and Graeme Nicholson.
 Seated: Gareth Kimberley, John Jacobsen, Flg Off Brian Dirou, Plt Off Bob Thomson and Daryl Sullivan.
 (Of the 19 trainees who commenced the course, only 11 made it through to the Wings Parade)



After the Wings Parade, in the Officers' Mess with the OC, Grp Capt R. H. S. Davis.
 Two brand new Pilot Officers, Gareth Kimberley and Brian Hammond.
 Brian was the only other West Australian on the course.

Adelaide



Off course, Brian Hammond and I were both posted to No. 2 Air Trials Unit at RAAF Edinburgh in SA. as copilots on Dakotas and Bristol Freighters. The RAF Dakota KJ-881 was specially modified for trials work; note the enlarged windcreens for improved visibility.



Our two Bristol Freighters A81-3 and A81-4 were used to transport heavy cargoes to and from Woomera and Maralinga. After 8 months as sprog Pilot Officers on the Daks and Bristol Freighters, Brian and I were posted to Woomera to fly Winjeels and Otters on the Rocket Range.

Woomera



In June 1962 Brian Hammond and I were both posted to No.1 Air Trials Unit on the Woomera Rocket Range. The Winjeels were used for some trials work but mainly for aerial search and location of missile and target wreckage for pick up by the ground recovery teams.

The two Otters were used on the daily 'bus runs' up and down the Range.



1 ATU Woomera 'Tech Area' aircrew with de Havilland DHC-3 Otter range transport aircraft, August 1963.
L to R: Plt Offs Gareth Kimberley and Graeme Boxall, Flt Lts Vic Barkell and Don White, Plt Off Roy Judd and
Flt Lt Doug Tobin (Nav Off)



Impressive aircraft line-up in front of Hangar 1 at 1 ATU Woomera, June 1962.
L to R: Winjeel, Otter, Meteor Mk 7, Meteor Mk 8, Dakota in background and Canberra.
Missing from the photo are the two Royal Navy Sea Vixens and the Sycamore helicopter.



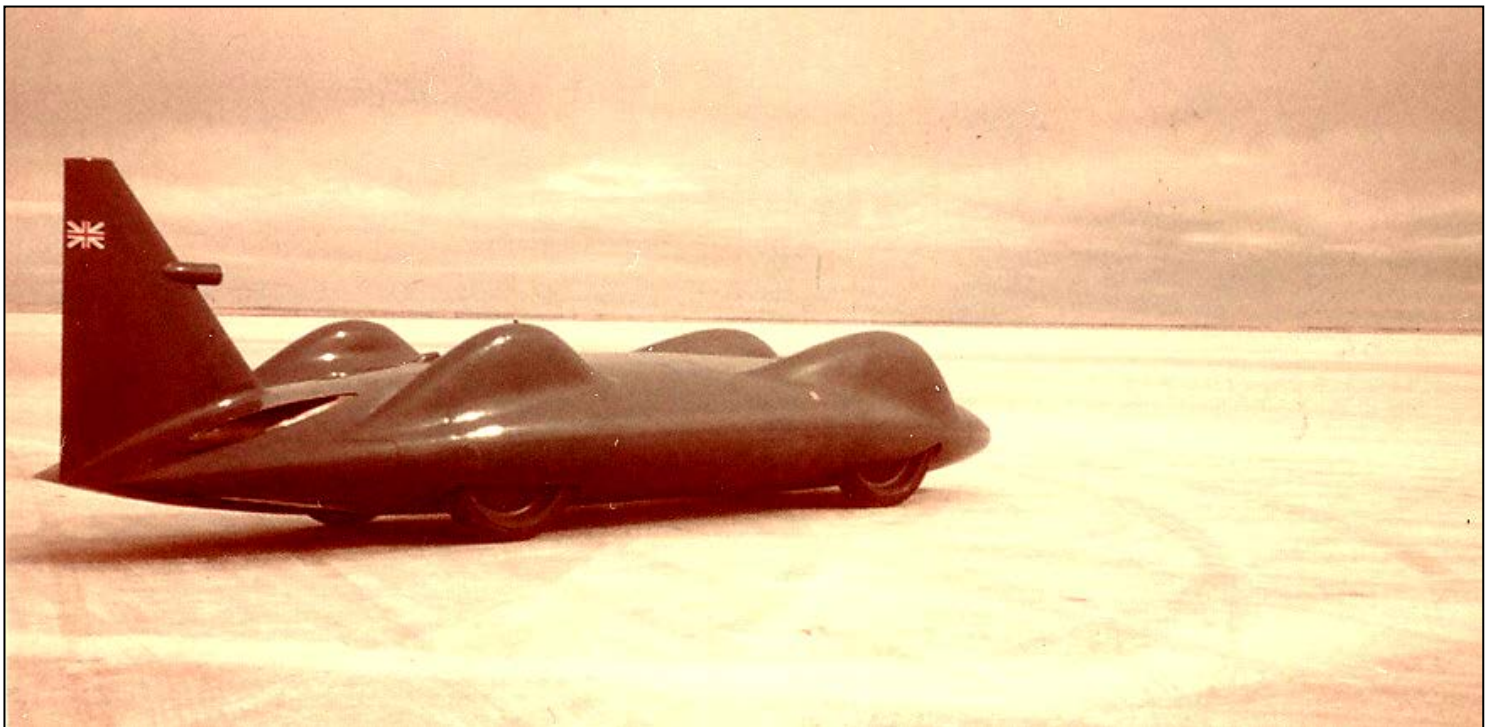
Plt Off Gareth Kimberley flying 1 ATU Winjeel alongside the Otter over Woomera rocket range, 1963.
Photo was taken by a passenger in the Otter. Note the barren, featureless terrain.



Self, taxiing out in Meteor Mk 7, A77-701, October 1962.
At Woomera I could fly up to four different aircraft types in the one day. This was something I could previously only dream about. I could scarcely believe I was being paid to do it. This aeroplane is now displayed as a museum piece in the Woomera missile park.



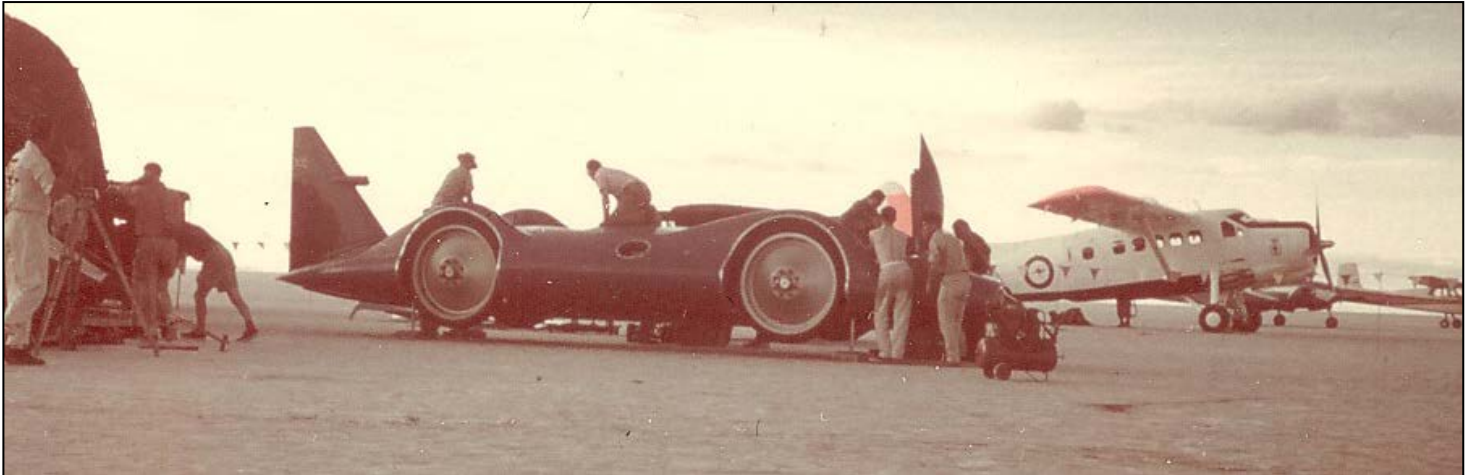
Supporting Donald Campbell on his first attempt at the world land speed record on Lake Eyre in May 1963. Our 1 ATU Otter is pictured above on Lake Eyre with Bluebird and Army tank shelter in the background. At 8,000 lbs (3,600 kgs) AUW, the Otter was the heaviest aircraft ever to land on the lake.



Author's shot of Bluebird moving off on a low speed trial run.

We were airborne with a crash rescue team for every high speed run the Bluebird made. Rain and floodwaters forced us off the lake but Donald returned and broke the record July 17, 1964 with a speed of 403.1 mph. (648.6 kph). On New Years Eve the same year he broke the world water speed record in his Bluebird jet-powered hydroplane on Lake Dumbleyung in WA. Sadly, he was killed in his Bluebird hydroplane on Coniston Water in England whilst trying to break his own water speed record of 276.3 mph. This has since been beaten by Ken Warby in NSW.

Bluebird being prepared for a trial run with our 1 ATU Otter in the background.



Donald came along as my copilot in the Otter on our dye-bombing mission to the Warburton Groove, 10 May 63.





Silver tray presented to No. 1 Air Trials Unit by Donald Campbell for support rendered at Lake Eyre during first land speed record attempt, May 1963. The 1 ATU Lake Eyre detachment consisted of : Sgt Eaglen, Flt Lt Doug Tobin (holding tray), Plt Off Gareth Kimberley, plus two RAF Airmen.



Initially Woomera had two Sycamore helicopters but one crashed just before my arrival. The Sycamore was under-powered with the antiquated Alvis Leonides piston engine, making it quite a challenge to fly. I was extremely disappointed when my helicopter conversion was halted mid-way due to my posting to 10 Squadron.

Townsville



In January 1964 I was posted to No. 10 SQN in Townsville to fly Neptune SP-2H maritime reconnaissance aircraft.



Back to being a copilot again.

Our 10 Squadron Neptune crew about to go off on another nine-hour anti-submarine exercise. June 1964.



On one clandestine mission (spy flight) off the coast of Indonesia I was in my seat for 10 ¼ hours straight.



Two of our Royal Navy exercise submarines, HMS *Taciturn* and HMS *Trump*, called in at Townsville, May 1965. The magical and romantic Magnetic Island can be seen in the background.



On the way to Hawaii for an exercise with the US Navy.



Self, fifth from the left, with crew about to depart on a photographic mission over the Barrier Reef.



My new found friend, English girl, Patricia Large, and my beloved S-Series Valiant at North Ward.



My first sighting of the new Caribous was when one passed through Townsville on a training exercise. I immediately decided I wanted to fly one and throwing caution to the winds, applied for a transfer to 38 Squadron. My posting to 38 Squadron came through remarkably quickly along with a notification I would be going to Vietnam.

Richmond



The entrance to the RAAF Base at Richmond – at that time, the biggest air base in Australia.

In June 1965, I was posted down to 38 Squadron at Richmond to complete a Caribou conversion prior to going to Vietnam. The conversion training was so hectic it was almost like being back on the Pilots Course again.



38 Squadron Caribous at Richmond with my trusty Valiant in the foreground.

CARIBOU



Wingspan: 95' 7"

Length: 72' 7"

Weight Loaded: 28,500 lb

Engines: Two Pratt and Whitney
1,350 hp, 14 cylinder, radial air-cooled engines

Crew: Two pilots, loadmaster

Top Speed: 187 knots

Cruise Speed: 130 knots

Stalling Speed: 56 knots

To give it its amazing take-off and landing runs of only 500' in zero wind conditions, the Caribou has no less than 29 separate moveable control surfaces, most of which are on the wings. Among other features of this unusual aircraft are its use of low pressure tubeless tyres, an electrically heated windscreen to reduce brittleness in the event of bird-strike, six separate pitot heads, and a stalling speed of 56 knots.

The Caribou can carry 32 troops or 26 fully-equipped paratroops, or in an ambulance role up to 22 litter patients, 4 sitting casualties, and 2 attendants. Typical freight loads are 3 tons or two fully-loaded jeeps and a jeep trailer. Single items of up to one ton can be dropped by parachute, as can the jeeps.

No 38 Squadron is one of the RAAF's oldest and most experienced transport squadrons. Crews from No 38 Squadron flew Douglas Dakota aircraft during World War II, in the Berlin air lift, the Australia-Japan post-war courier service, the Malaysian Anti-Terrorist campaign, and during many national emergencies in Australia. These have included flood relief, bush-fire patrol, search and rescue, medical mercy flights, rain-making experiments and grasshopper plague eradication.

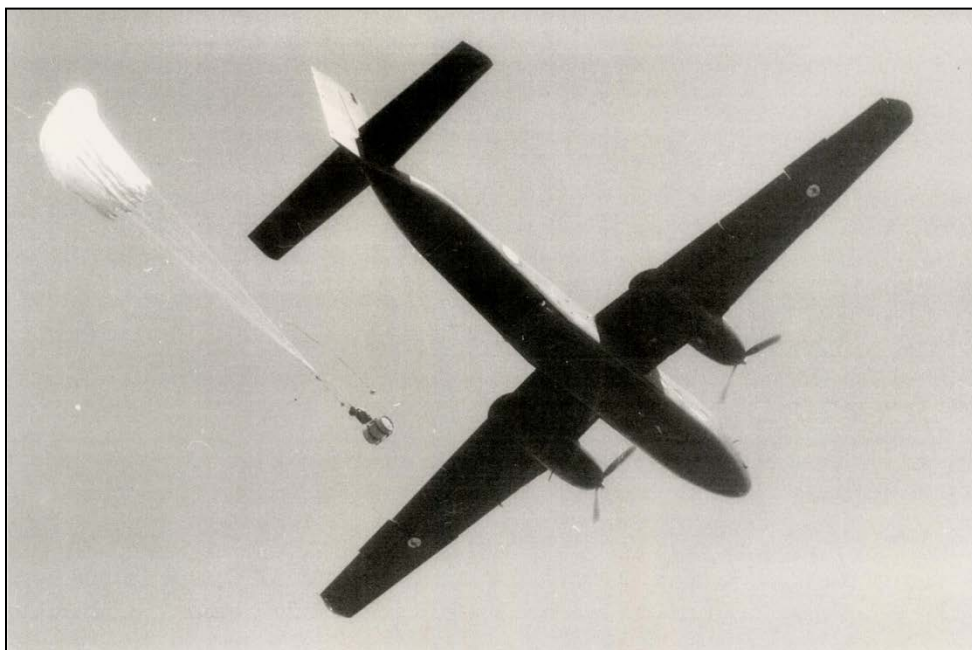
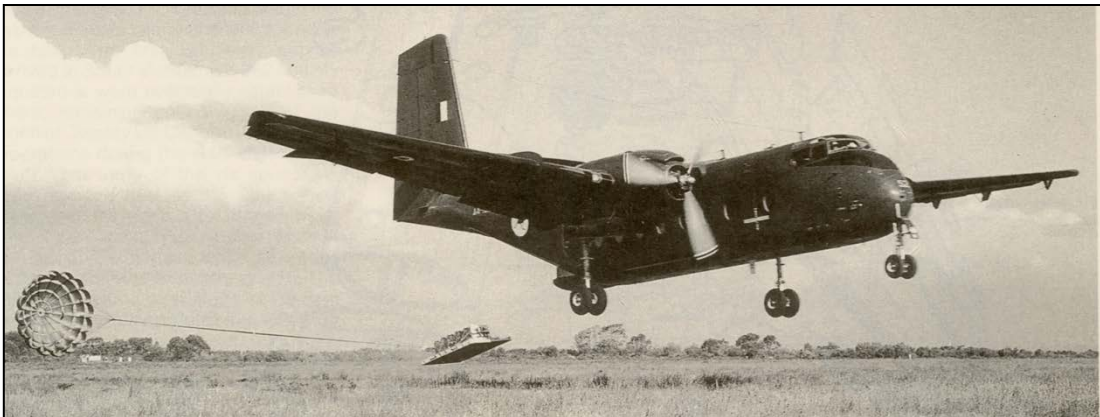
A No. 38 Squadron Caribou over RAAF Richmond – from a squadron briefing sheet, circa 1967.

The engines were, in fact, R2000 7M2s which developed 1,450 hp at 2,700 rpm. The cylinders were in two banks of seven and had exhaust augments tubes which contributed around 500 lbs of thrust at take off power – and the RAAF Caribous where necessary, had a 4-man crew with the addition of an Assistant Loadmaster.

I commenced my Caribou conversion in June 1965 and graduated as a captain in November.



Learning the highly specialised techniques for STOL (short take offs and landings), supply dropping and paratrooping, and LAPES (low altitude parachute extraction system).



Pat and I were married in the RAAF chapel on the Base at Richmond on 23 October 1965 just 2 ½ weeks before my departure for South Vietnam.



The article that was published in the *Windsor and Richmond Gazette*.
Honour Guard: Flg Offs Kev Henderson, Daryl Sullivan, John Staal and Don Pollock

SECTION II

VIETNAM

Section II consists of Chapters 17 and 18 extracted directly from my memoirs.

The page numbers relate to their position in that more extensive body of work.

The maps and photos have been added to help tell the story with pictures.

With a few exceptions the photos were all taken by me with a Pentax Spotmatic 35 mm SLR camera.

In all, I brought back about 500 colour slides from Vietnam.

G K

INTRODUCTION TO BOOK 4 - VIETNAM

I had transferred down to No 38 Squadron, Richmond because I was assured of gaining a captaincy on Caribous quickly. I knew I would have to go to Vietnam but the thought of spending another two years as a copilot on Neptunes at 10 Sqn, Townsville did not appeal to me. My girl friend, Patricia Large, an English girl who had come out to Australia on a working holiday, followed me down to Richmond and we decided to get married. Fortunately, we were able to book the RAAF chapel on the base for our wedding ceremony.

Saturday the 23rd of October 1965 was a wonderful day and the wedding ceremony went off without a hitch. My crew captain from 10 Sqn, Flying Officer Bob Maggs, had insisted on being Best Man and he and my buddy Flg Off Paul Smith had come down from Townsville for the big occasion. My Groomsmen were Tony Bird and Flg Off Keith Hill our Squadron Adjutant (Administration Officer) who had been a good friend to me right from the time of my arrival at 38 Squadron. As things turned out, it was a beautiful day and the little chapel on the RAAF Base was absolutely perfect for our wedding.

As we came out of the chapel we were surprised and delighted to find that four of my friends, Flg Offs Daryl Sullivan, Kevin Henderson, John Stahl and Don Pollock in dress uniform complete with ceremonial swords, had formed an archway with swords held high for Pat and I to walk through. The idea of the Honour Guard was a thoughtful and very much appreciated gesture. A photograph of Pat and I walking through the archway of swords was published in the local paper, *The Windsor and Richmond Gazette*.

Our 'honeymoon' consisted of one night in the Echo Point Motel at Katoomba before returning to Richmond on Sunday afternoon. Pat was teaching P.E. at Richmond High and we both had to be back at work Monday morning.

With my departure date for Vietnam now set at November 13, we didn't have much time. We were able to rent a quaint little house at Springwood in the Blue Mountains and we lived there in Sassafras Gully Road for the next three weeks. The fresh mountain air and the delightful sounds of the bell birds made our brief time at Springwood quite enjoyable. But there was no time for relaxation as my training was entering its final phase.

My Caribou conversion concluded with my trip to Hobart on November 1 as pilot-in-command with one of the new course members, Plt Off Harrison as copilot. The trip down was via Melbourne with an overnight stay at the Wrest Point Hotel in Hobart and return the next day via Laverton. I had finally made the grade. I was now a fully fledged Caribou Captain, proficient in all aspects of Caribou operations, including short take off and landing (STOL) operations, paratroop dropping and supply dropping – and, incredibly, it had all been achieved in less than 4½ months.

Now that I was married my pay went up to 41 pounds 6 shillings and 7 pence per week and Pat and I decided to save our money and put it towards a proper honeymoon on the conclusion of my Vietnam tour. It would be an overseas holiday which would include some time in the UK so that I could meet Pat's family and friends. I had also made arrangements with the local Chrysler dealer in Parramatta to trade my beloved S-Series Valiant in on a new model to be picked up on my return to Australia.

The few weeks prior to my departure were quite depressing with anti-war demonstrations starting and songs on the hit parade such as *The Eve of Destruction*, *Blowin' in the Wind*, *The Times They are a-changing* and *I Aint Marching Anymore*, all promoting an atmosphere of doom and gloom and rebellion. Initially, tours of duty in the war zone were eight months but I ended up extending for a month to facilitate meeting up with Pat in Singapore for the start of our much delayed honeymoon. In 1966 the tours were increased to 12 months – but nine months was plenty long enough for me.

On November 13, 1965, I left Springwood and set out on my journey to Vietnam. I drove to Parramatta with Pat following along behind in her Mini. There I finally handed over my beloved PAY-301, that magnificent car that had carried me safely through so many wonderful adventures. I could only hope the new Valiant that I would pick up on my return would be as good as the old one. Pat then drove me on to Mascot in her Mini where I met up with my travelling companion, Flt Lt Noel Bellamy. There I kissed my bride of three weeks goodbye and boarded the Qantas Boeing 707 on the first stage of my journey to the war zone.

AUTHOR'S ADDITIONAL INTRODUCTORY NOTES

I left for South Vietnam just 2 ½ weeks after we were married and served there as a Caribou pilot from 14 Nov 65 to 6 Aug 66 when I met up with Pat in Singapore for the start of our round-the-world honeymoon.

During my nine months of active service in the war zone I clocked up 724 hours, 468 of which were flown as pilot-in-command, without bending an aeroplane and without anyone in my aircraft ever getting hurt. Others were not so lucky. In major incidents that occurred both before and after my time, we lost several aircraft and although some crew members were wounded, no aircrew lives were lost. I managed to survive 1,109 operational sorties without a scratch and count myself very lucky indeed.

For most of my time in Vietnam I held the rank of Flying Officer. My promotion to Flight Lieutenant came through just prior to the conclusion of my tour of duty there.

Unlike the American and Canadian Caribous which had autopilots fitted as standard, the Australian Government decided that as the aircraft would only be flying very short sectors it could save money by buying the aircraft without the automatic pilots. We subsequently flew Richmond to Perth, Richmond to Darwin, Richmond to Townsville and Port Moresby – transcontinental distances with the aeroplane having to be hand-flown all the way. The US Army Caribous also had weather radar while we were limited to the “Mark I Eyeball”. There were several advantages however. Without the weight of the autopilots and radar we could carry a bit more payload and, of course, there was a commensurate reduction in maintenance and spares.

There were some airstrips the American Caribous would not go into; Plei Me being a notable example. As a result the RAAF Wallaby was the only decent sized aircraft that operated into these isolated camps. In 1966 the United States Air Force took over the US Army Caribous which for a while even further restricted American Caribou operations.

After the mortar attack on our air base at Vung Tau, the surrounding area was sprayed from the air with Agent Orange to kill off the vegetation and deny the Viet Cong their hiding places. Apparently it worked.

Ironically, despite the dangers of operating in the war zone in South Vietnam, we actually lost more aircraft and suffered more casualties operating in Papua New Guinea than we did in Vietnam. The reasons for this were: inaccurate PNG maps, shocking weather, a lack of radio navigational aids, poor communications, mountainous terrain, and some of the most difficult airstrips I have ever had to get into and out of. I had more frightening experiences flying in PNG than I did in Vietnam, but those stories are told in later chapters of my memoirs.

Prior to achieving self-government in Dec 1973, PNG was administered by Australia as a territory, (TPNG).

Perhaps I should also mention here that the Vietnamese language is fundamentally expressed as monosyllables, so names would more correctly be stated as Viet Nam, Sai Gon, Da Nang, A Ro and Thu Dau Mot, for example. However, outside Vietnam, the practice is rarely followed.

The two chapters included here, Nos 17 and 18, covering my time in Vietnam, have been lifted direct from my memoirs and with photos added, compiled into this mini-book. I hope you find it interesting and informative.

Gareth Kimberley

PS

A colleague, Flt Lt Jeff Pedrina, arrived in Vietnam just as I was leaving and subsequently wrote an excellent book entitled *Wallaby Airlines*. For readers interested in continuing the narrative, I can recommend Jeff's book as it follows on seamlessly from this book, covering the period, August 1966 to July 1967.

Wallaby Airlines by Jeffrey Pedrina is available from the book shop in the Australian War Memorial in Canberra or direct from the publisher:

Air Power Development Centre
Level 3
205 Anketell Street
Tuggeranong ACT 2900 Tel: (02) 6266 1355.



Map 1 Southeast Asia region

CHAPTER 17

VIETNAM

Qantas didn't fly to Vietnam so we could only go as far as Singapore with our national carrier. At Singapore we would have to stay overnight and catch the daily Pan American Airways flight to Saigon the next day.

For me the flight to Singapore in the Qantas Boeing 707 was quite exciting for although it was 1965 and I was relatively old at 29, it was the first time I had flown in a large 4-engined jet airliner. After the roaring, rattling Caribou the quietness, smoothness and air conditioned comfort of the 707 was quite a contrast. This was clearly a most civilised way to fly.

After leaving Sydney, as soon as we were settled down in flight I asked if I could visit the cockpit and shortly after was escorted to the flight deck by an attractive young hostess. The Qantas 707's had a five-man crew consisting of the Captain (pilot in command), First Officer (copilot), Second Officer (relief pilot), a Navigator and a Flight Engineer.

The crew were very friendly and very supportive when they heard I was going to Vietnam. I stayed in the cockpit for quite a while and found that all the controls and instruments were pretty standard stuff. There was nothing there that I was not already familiar with. Before leaving the flight deck the crew told me what hotel they were staying at in Singapore and invited me to join them for drinks that evening. I gratefully accepted as it would give me an opportunity to find out what airline flying would be like.

By an amazing coincidence, also on the flight there just happened to be a Qantas aircrew recruiting team headed by an amiable gentleman named Captain Rayment. Captain Rayment had noted my interest in the technical features of the aircraft and told me Qantas was looking for pilots. He was on his way to London to try to recruit pilots in the UK as there was currently a shortage of suitably qualified pilots in Australia. Hearing of my experience, he offered me a job on the spot but the timing was all wrong – I was on my way to Vietnam and because of the return of service required after my pilot training I couldn't get out of the Air Force anyway.

Singapore was a busy, exciting place. It had just seceded from Malaysia under its new Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew and was still celebrating its independence. British rule had previously kept the various racial groups under control but with post war independence, the predominantly Chinese Singapore had objected to being governed by Malays in Kuala Lumpur and had opted for secession. I found the hotel the Qantas crew stayed at – from memory it was the Singapura in Orchard Road, and enjoyed a pleasant few drinks with them. I was quite impressed by their camaraderie and the ease with which they could travel the world, stay in top class hotels and be paid quite well to do it.

On November 14, 1965, Flt Lt Noel Bellamy and I boarded our Pan Am Boeing 707 and were flown the relatively short distance from Singapore to Saigon. We landed at Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport to the news that two Australian Army advisers had been killed in action at Tra Bong the previous day. Warrant Officers Wheatley and Swanton had gone out with a company of Vietnamese troops on a search and destroy patrol when they were engaged by a company of Viet Cong and Swanton was badly wounded. Wheatley courageously stayed behind in a desperate attempt to carry his wounded comrade to safety but they were quickly overrun by the Viet Cong and both men were shot and killed. Kevin "Dasher" Wheatley was subsequently awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross, but hearing of the deaths of Wheatley and Swanton did nothing to boost my morale.

Tan Son Nhut airport was more than a hive of activity, it was absolute Bedlam with aircraft, men and machines flying everywhere. It was like nothing I had ever seen before. We were dumped on the tarmac and simply told to report to the United States Air Force movement control centre, which we did. There we were told that a "Wallaby" Caribou would pick us up and take us to Vung Tau, the US Army airfield where the Australian Caribous were based.

After waiting several hours in sweltering heat our RAAF Wallaby eventually arrived and parked out on the vast apron in amongst Boeing 707's, C-130 Hercules, C-141 Starlifters, giant Globemasters and a plethora of other aircraft which made our little Caribou really look quite insignificant. I had never seen so many aircraft in one place in my whole life. Indeed, at that time Tan Son Nhut was reputedly the busiest airport in the world. We were met by the Wallaby crew and welcomed to South Vietnam. We threw our gear – which in my case consisted of my Air Force issue large steel trunk, a standard suitcase and an overnight bag, into the Caribou and were flown quite unceremoniously across to Vung Tau on the coast – an action-packed 20 minute flight. We were welcomed at RTFV Headquarters on the base by our CO, Sqn Ldr Doug Harvey and then taken by Jeep into town to the 'Villa Anna', a lovely old French villa by the sea where the RTFV officers were billeted.

* * *

My first flight in Vietnam took place on November 16 in Caribou A4-179 as copilot to Flt Lt Tony Abbott and I was completely out of my depth. The places we flew to varied from tiny little dirt strips which were often virtually deserted to Tan Son Nhut (Saigon) which was absolute mayhem. Saigon Airport had three levels of circuit traffic: 500 feet for helicopters which ranged from heavy Chinooks to Iriquois to tiny little Bells; 1,000 feet for standard traffic which was most normal piston engined aircraft; and 1,500 feet for heavy jets and fighters. The air traffic control procedures relied heavily on the pilots' local knowledge and were so high-pressured I had to initially leave the radio to Tony. My first impression of Tan Son Nhut was that of an airfield with a huge swarm of mechanical bees constantly circling overhead.

Tan Son Nhut Airport – Saigon.



Part of the vast apron complex at Tan Son Nhut with the main E-W runway running across the top of the picture.
Count the number of aircraft in the picture (I counted 130) and this is only part of the air base.
An RAAF “Wallaby” can be seen parked on Rebel Ramp in the top RH corner of the photo.
Ho Chi Minh City’s Tan Son Nhut is a lot quieter today.



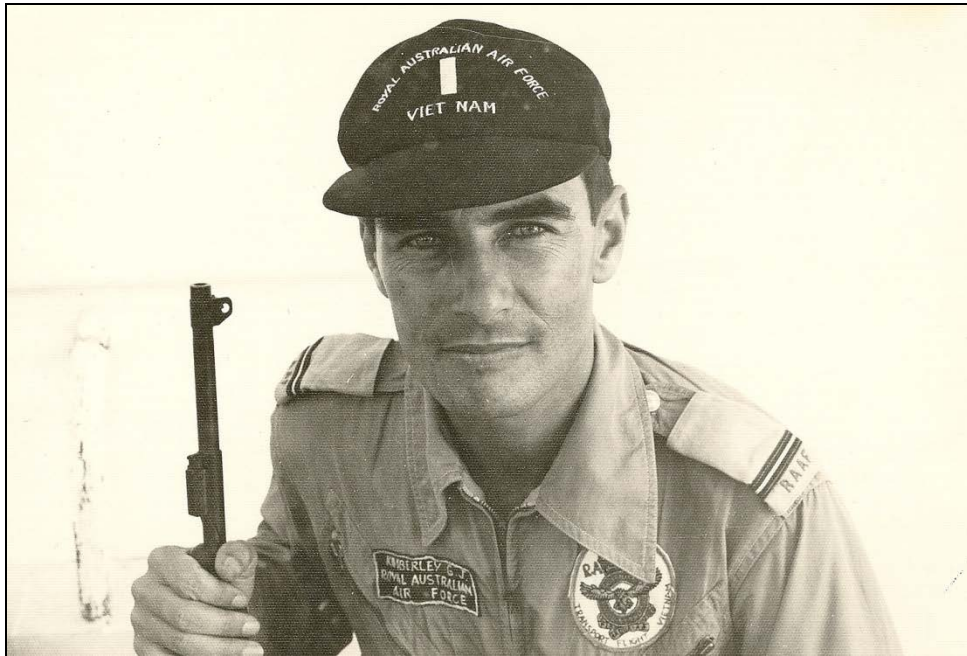
Part of the take-off queue for Runway 36 with an army Caribou on its take-off roll and a USAF C-47 lining up.
There was another queue of heavier higher performance aircraft waiting to take off on the main runway.
A further horde of arriving aircraft were keenly awaiting clearances to land.
At the time, Tan Son Nhut was acknowledged as being the busiest airport in the world.



On arrival in South Vietnam, November 1965.

As the Australian Army had not yet arrived in Vietnam in force, we had to settle for WW II era weapons given to us by the US Army. I was issued with a .45 calibre pistol and a folding stock M2 carbine. I soon found the pistol on the hip heavy and uncomfortable, so I dropped the webbing in favour of a shoulder holster.

On the base at Vung Tau after recent monsoonal rain



A young, bright-eyed, 29-year-old Flying Officer. The single silver bar on my cap signified to the Americans and Vietnamese that I had the equivalent rank of Lieutenant.

Rebel Ramp at Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport.



Landing in the wet at Tan Son Nhut

Visible in the picture are two Phantom fighter-bombers and a C-123 Provider waiting their turn for take off





The Saigon River and some of the marshy country between Vung Tau and Tan Son Nhut.

The US Army/RTFV Caribou flight line Vung Tau, circa January 1966.



The Vung Tau air base was operated by the US Army which had its own Caribous based there, although it called them CV-2Bs and seemed to drive them like trucks. There was also a flight of Mohawk ground attack aircraft, a large number of Iriquois helicopters and a number of Cessna L-19 (redesignated O-1) 'Bird Dog' spotter planes. The Australian Army, which was now starting to arrive in force, also had several Cessna 180s and a couple of Bell Sioux helicopters based there. Although overall, it might seem as if our small force of six Caribous would be almost insignificant, because of the splendid work of our ground crews in keeping the aircraft serviceable, and the efficiency of our operations, we were able to punch well above our weight and had soon earned the respect of the Americans and the Vietnamese alike.

Flying operations in Vietnam were intense. We'd start at around 6.00 am and work through to six at night, often flying up to 10 sorties a day and often having to load and unload the aircraft ourselves. Initially, of course, I had to fly as copilot to more experienced Vietnam veterans but at this rate I quickly learned the ropes and soon I was flying leg-for-leg and eventually I was experienced enough to be sent out on my own with my own crew.

In early December the well known journalist Dorothy Drain arrived and flew the "milk run" up to Nha Trang and back calling at all stops in between. The crew was Flt Lt Noel Bellamy, my old '40 Course mate' Graeme Nicholson, Loadmaster LAC Neil Boss and Assistant Loadmaster LAC Mal 'Blue' Lane. Drain's excellent article titled "Vietnam: Through a cargo door" along with photographs, including one of me, was published in the Australian Women's Weekly of December 15, 1965. Pat was thrilled when she saw it and saved a copy for me.

Many years after my return from Vietnam I put together a series of short stories covering some of the incidents that happened to me during my time in the war zone and I titled the collection *Vietnam Anecdotes*. Some of these stories were used, along with others, by a fellow Vietnam veteran, Lt Col Gary McKay MC in the book *Vietnam Fragments* which he put together for the Sydney publishers Allen & Unwin in 1992, and later in a second book, *Bullets, Beans & Bandages*. My Vietnam anecdotes were also passed on to the Australian War Museum in Canberra and also as a donation to No 38 Squadron for its unit history. They were initially written on 3 September 1991 and are reproduced here in my memoirs as they succinctly encapsulate some of my most memorable experiences.

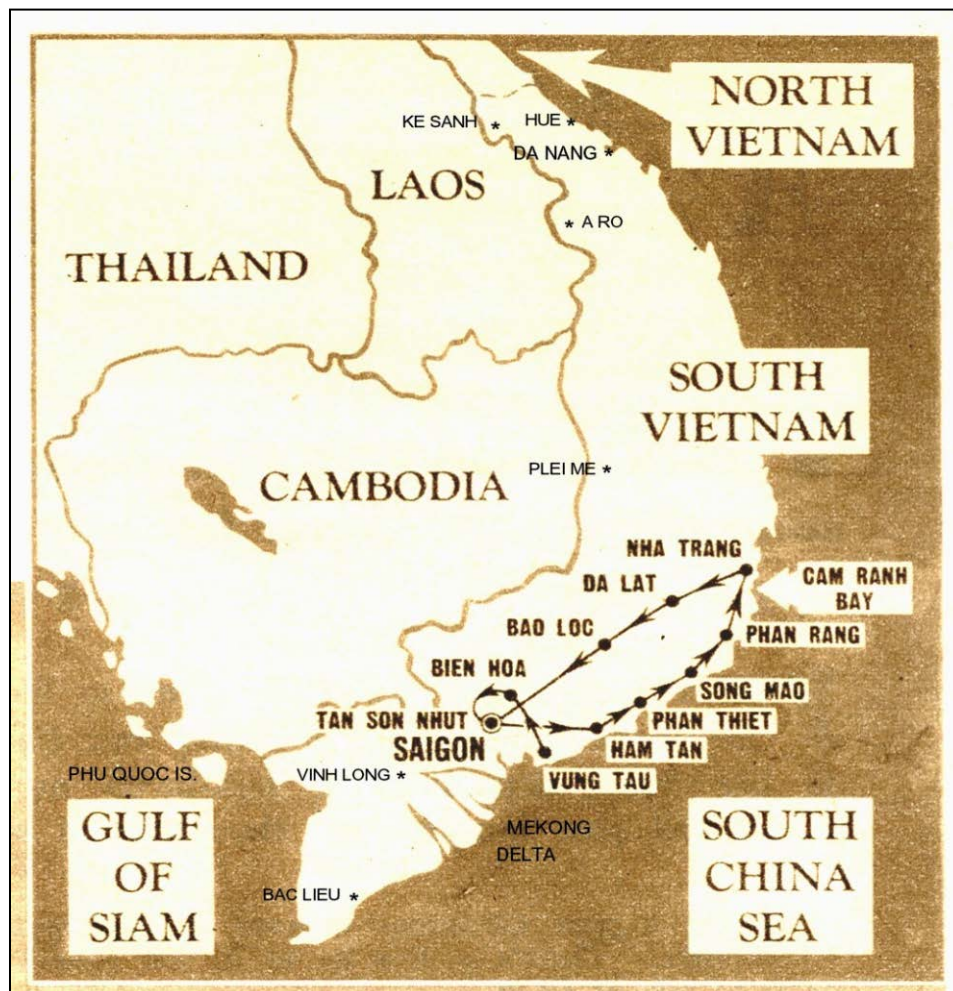
VIETNAM ANECDOTES 1965 / 66 RTFV / 35 SQN RAAF VUNG TAU

by Flight Lieutenant Gareth (Gary) Kimberley

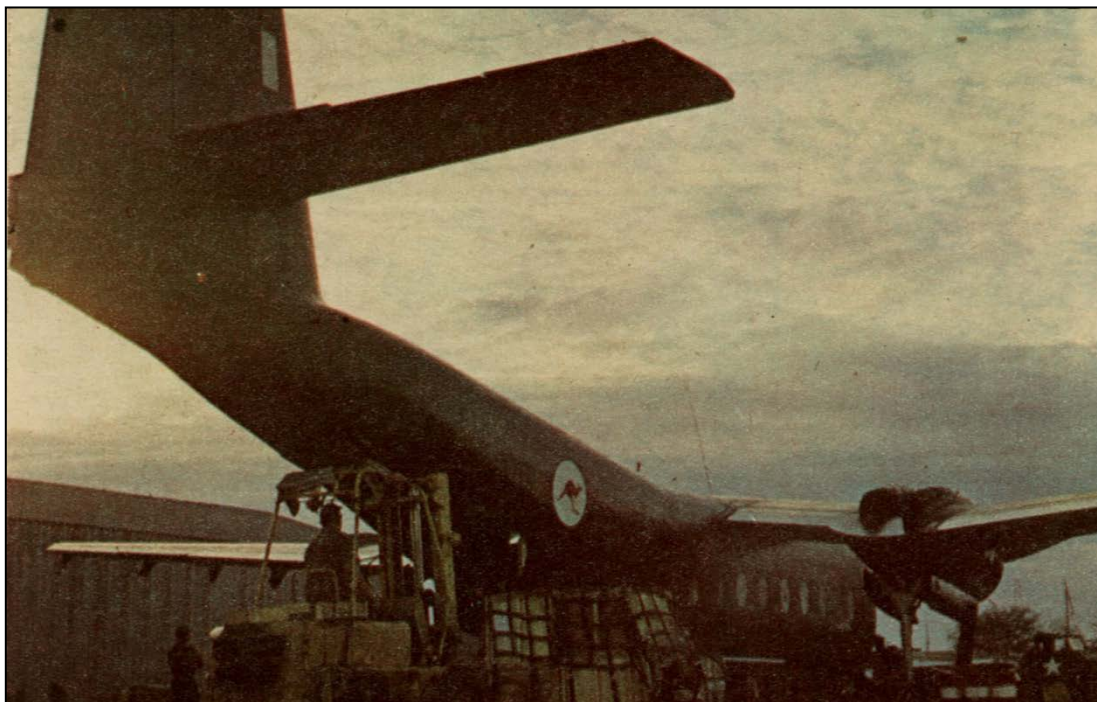
THE JOYS OF FLYING IN SOUTH VIETNAM

Apart from the weather and the topography, the two main hazards to flying in South Vietnam were the risk of a mid-air collision because of the sheer volume of air traffic over the country at the time and the ever present danger of being hit by enemy ground fire. The Caribou tactical transport aircraft operated by the RAAF Transport Flight, Vietnam (which quickly grew to become No 35 Squadron) were large and slow moving targets.

Our answer to the ground fire problem was to avoid flying below 2,500 feet wherever reasonably possible. We figured that the chances of being hit by small arms fire above this height were minimal and experience seemed to bear this out. Heavier, 50 calibre weapons of course were another matter.

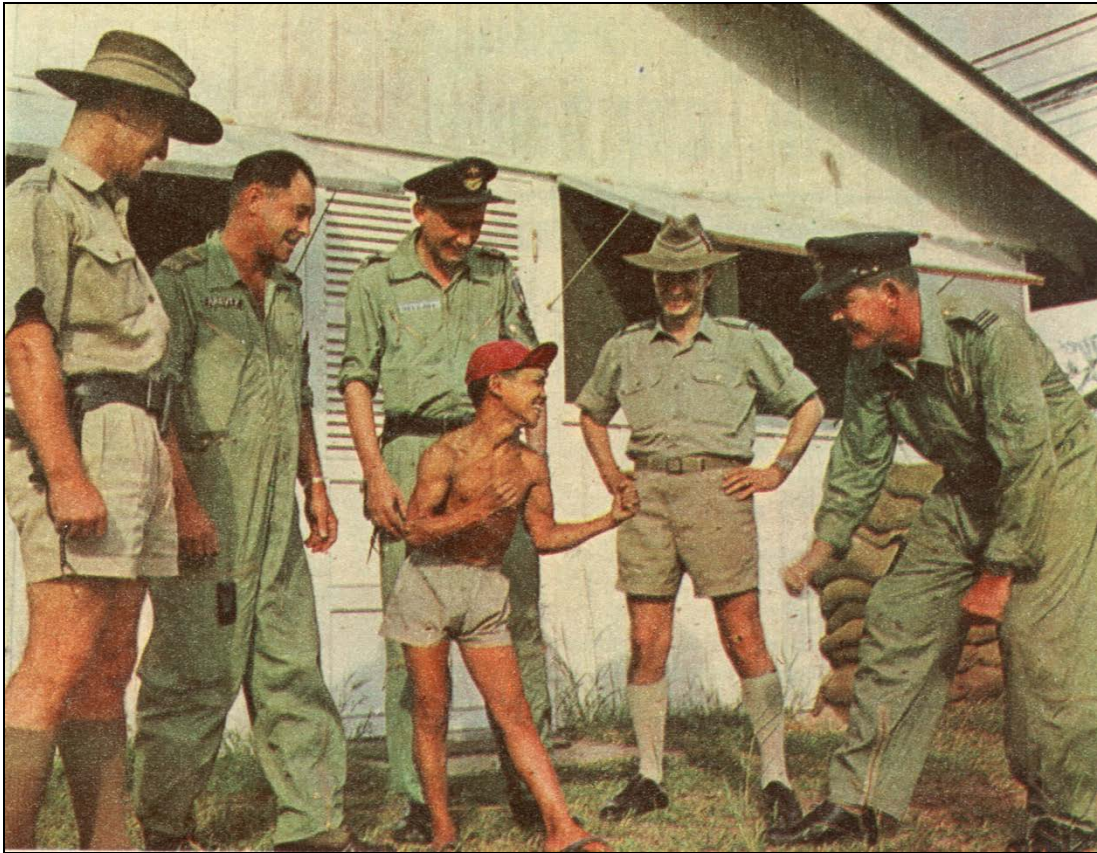


The Wallaby 405 daily 'milk run' to Nha Trang and back via all stops between.
We were so reliable, we gained the nick-name "Wallaby Airlines".



Loading up at Tan Son Nhut for the 405 Mission in the early morning light.
(From *Vietnam, Through a Cargo Door* by Dorothy Drain, Australian Woomen's Weekly, 15 Dec 1965)

Orderly Room Runner, 'The' (pronounced Tay) shapes up to Flt Lt Tony Abbott outside HQ building. Looking on are Plt Off Bob McKernan, Sqn Ldr Doug Harvey, Flt Lt Noel Bellamy and Flg Off Gary Kimberley.



Loadmaster, Neil Boss in position at the cargo ramp.
(Both pics from Australian Women's Weekly 15/12/65)



Flg Off Gareth Kimberley at the controls of his RAAF Caribou over South Vietnam, December 1965.



The view from the pilot's seat looking aft.



Wallaby Airlines

Scheduled Services

The 405 Mission

Vung Tau – Tan Son Nhut – Ham Tan – Phan Thiet – Song Mao – Nha Trang
0700 0800 0855 0925 1000 (1045) 1200

Nha Trang – Da Lat – Gia Nghia – Bao Loc – Tan Son Nhut – Vung Tau
1200 1255 1330 1405 1550 1620

The 406 Mission (Phu Quoc Is.)

Vung Tau – Tan Son Nhut – Cao Lanh – Duong Dong – Ca Mau
0730 0900 0955 1100 (1220) 1305

Ca Mau – Bac Lieu – Tra Vinh – Tan Son Nhut – Vung Tau
1306 1340 1425 1530 1600

The 443 Mission

Vung Tau – Tan Son Nhut – Da Nang
0620 0640 / 0715 1015

One of the many dirt strips we flew into. Note the soft spot and wheel ruts on the strip in the foreground.



Vietnamese airport security Song Mao.

RTFV, TAKEN AT THE VILLA ANNA, VUNG TAU, AROUND JANUARY 1966.



F/I	F/L	F/L	F/O	Chaplain	S/L	F/L	F/L	F/O	P/O	F/L	F/L
Dick	George	Noel	John	Ashworth	Vic	Gareth	Tony	Barrie	Dick	Bruce	Mark
Jones	Godfrey	Bellamy	Steege		Guthrie	Kimberley	Abbott	Brown	Cooper	Tipping	Perrett
Eng/O					C/O					Adj	



My constant companion during my nine months in Vietnam
A standard issue US Army Colt 45 semi-automatic pistol with two fully loaded backup magazines.



“Guns-a-Go-Go” heavily armoured Chinook gunship. Chin-mounted grenade launcher, side-mounted cannons and rocket pods, side and rear firing 50 cal. machine guns.



Typical tropical rain storm, Vung Tau.



Over Van Canh fortified Special Forces camp.



On the ground Van Canh.

We would fly to our destination at a safe height, then when directly over the top, descend in a steep spiral, attempting to remain within the range of the camp's defensive fire. We would leave the same way, climbing up to a safe height directly above the camp before setting course for the next strip. This technique was usually successful, but not always, and every now and again we'd pick up the odd round or two. At that time, we had not had a single passenger or crew member killed or even seriously injured. In fact, the RAAF Wallabies had an excellent reputation for safety and reliability, and none of us wanted to spoil it.

Tours of duty in Vietnam were eight months and RTFV, as it was when I arrived, although operating in support of the USAF's 315th Air Commando Group, was based with an American Army Caribou squadron at Vung Tau, 38 nautical miles south-east of Saigon.

The CO of the Flight when I arrived was Sqn Ldr Doug Harvey. He was replaced in November by Sqn Ldr Vic Guthrie who in turn was replaced by Wg Cdr Charles Melchert in June 1966 when the Flight became No. 35 Squadron. In addition to our two semi-permanent detachments at Nha Trang and Da Nang and the many and varied ad hoc missions we flew, we also operated a number of "bus runs," the two main ones being the 405 mission to the north as far as Nha Trang and the 406 mission around the south of the country which was basically around the Mekong Delta. Both these scheduled services started and terminated at Tan Son Nhut.

Our radio call-sign was "Wallaby" followed by the last two digits of the Mission Number and on these daily bus runs we gained such a good reputation for punctuality and dependability that the Americans christened us "Wallaby Airlines". So good was our reputation that I know for a fact some US Army personnel preferred to fly with us rather than in their own Caribous.

A SHOCK TO THE SYSTEM

At the time (1965-66) Saigon's international airport, Tan Son Nhut, was the busiest airport in the world with a constant cloud of aircraft of almost every type imaginable swarming around it like bees around a hive. The circuit pattern operated at three levels; 500 feet for helicopters, 1,000 feet for normal aircraft and 1,500 feet for fighters and heavy jets. Although theoretically, clearances were required for landing and take off, the system worked largely on a "see and be seen" basis. To a 38 Squadron Caribou pilot used to the quiet and sedate environment of the Richmond circuit, the mass mayhem at Tan Son Nhut was initially overwhelming.

On his first few trips into Saigon a newcomer had to go in with an experienced pilot in order to see how the system worked. Aircraft were constantly entering the circuit for landing, sometimes including a formation of fighters low on fuel and demanding priority, while others on the ground were constantly joining the queue for take off. The tower controllers spoke in an almost non-stop stream of rapid-fire clearances and instructions with very few pauses for acknowledgments or requests.

An RAAF air traffic control officer came with me on one occasion and recorded the radio traffic going into and out of Saigon. He kindly gave me a copy of the tape and it has to be heard to be believed. One had to be extremely alert, for missing your clearance was a no-no. It usually meant it would be some time before the controller could get back to you. Missing your slot not only caused problems for the controllers but also upset all the aircraft in the queue behind you. If you were cleared for an immediate take off, "immediate" meant right now ! If you were told to expedite clearing the runway on landing, it meant there's some one right behind you so if you don't get out of the way you'll get run over.

I remember witnessing one incident where a Beech 18 light twin which had just landed had been told to expedite clearing the runway and the pilot missed the turn off. The Neptune landing behind him had already touched down and was unable to go around. The Neptune pilot swerved around the Beech 18 with the starboard main wheel running off the edge of the strip sending dirt and dust flying everywhere. Fortunately the Neptune has large fat wheels and the pilot was able steer the big plane back onto the runway. The left wing and its tip tank went right over the Beech 18. The Neptune pilot was not very happy, and the Beech 18 pilot must have got the fright of his life.

On another occasion, a Vietnamese controller ended up getting two aircraft taxiing in opposite directions nose to nose on the main taxiway bringing the entire airport to a standstill. It took some clever juggling by the American controller to unclog the system and get things moving again. The volume of air traffic around Saigon was simply awesome. Circuit aircraft included Cessna L-19s, Broncos, Chinooks, Huey helicopters which were everywhere, all sorts of light and medium aircraft, C-47s, C-123s, C-130 Hercs, Globemasters, Phantoms, F-100s, civil airliners and even U-2 spy planes – not to mention the odd Australian Wallaby. I soon grew to have enormous respect for the American air traffic controllers.

FACE TO FACE WITH THE ENEMY

One of my first big missions proved to be quite exciting and turned out to be a pretty good introduction to the type of flying I could look forward to. It was December 16 and I was programmed for a 41 Mission in A4-191 with my old course mate Graeme Nicholson who, like me, held the rank of Flying Officer. Our day's work was to fly various cargoes to the numerous airstrips in the area to the north of Saigon and Vung Tau.

The first call was to a Special Forces camp which was listed as An Loc and having found what we thought was the correct strip we duly landed and taxied towards the clearing at the end of the strip which looked like the loading and unloading area. As we approached the clearing we noticed a small group of Vietnamese men in black pyjamas but there was no sign of any Americans or any US Army equipment. The Vietnamese men were glaring at us and showing no signs of welcome whilst in the background I noticed a sudden flurry of activity.

Graeme said, "I don't like the look of this. Let's get out of here".

I replied without hesitation, "Let's go !" and immediately ran through the take off checks.

Graeme turned the aircraft around and we took off without stopping.

When we asked about this at our next port of call, the American army Lieutenant exclaimed, "Jesus, man ! That's in VC territory. You were lucky to get out of there".

In hindsight, I believe the reason we got away with it was because the Viet Cong was just as surprised as we were, and by taking off again without stopping we were gone before they had time to get organised. We didn't make that mistake again.

We ended up flying 12 sorties that day and arrived back at Vung Tau field well after dark. The last sector was mine and as there had been a power failure on the base I had to land in the dark on the short PSP (perforated steel planking) strip. It had been a long but very interesting day.

The enclosed and secure courtyard in the Villa Anna.
The entrance to the RTFV officers' billet at the Villa Anna, Vung Tau.
In this photo taken in 1965, the Villa's name plate can still be seen on the left hand gate post.



The Unit Jeep.



The Villa Anna in March 2004, taken from the waterfront looking back.



In 2004 the Villa was leased to an oil company, it had a new wall, a new entrance and the name had gone. Compare this picture with the photo on the previous page which was taken from the same angle in 1965.

Our tiny but well patronised bar in the Villa Anna.
Dick Cooper, John Harrison and Noel Bellamy.



Housekeeper Missy Lan.





The Villa Ngoc

RAAF Airmen and NCOs were accommodated in The Hotel Ngoc Huong, shown here in 1967.



Vung Tau, a seaside town with a population of around 40,000.

The large white house in the foreground was the holiday home of AVM Nguyen Cao Ky, RVN Prime Minister 1965-67.

The white 2-storied house with the tiled roof in the centre of the pic is the Villa Anna with the Villa Gnoc in the next block along.



The Back Beach, Vung Tau

It was widely believed that the far end of the beach was also used for R & R by the Viet Cong.



Destroyed American Caribou, Vung Tau.

The VC rocket skimmed the rooftops of the RAAF working area in the background before hitting the US Caribou in an attack on the base in April 1968.

THE PERILS OF GROUND FIRE

You knew when you were hit – it sounded just like an empty beer can hitting the floor. Fortunately, the rounds would usually pass harmlessly through the tail or rear fuselage. On landing, the Loadmaster would carry out an inspection and if no serious damage had been done, he'd simply whack some green tape over the bullet holes and we'd press on heroically. For some reason the Viet Cong didn't seem to have thought about aiming ahead of a moving target and we were sure hoping no one would tell them. In one instance we were hit in the tail on take off out of a remote strip and my copilot, Flg Off Bill Pike, did a rough calculation based on the aircraft's speed and height, and the speed and time of flight of the bullet, and told me I was very lucky. His calculation suggested the VC soldier had aimed at my head.

There was one occasion, however, when my luck almost ran out. It was probably the closest I ever came to being actually shot down.

Of course the dangers were not always just from enemy action as there was also the occasional risk of being hit by friendly fire. There was the famous case of the Caribou that was shot down by friendly artillery fire. The incident was caught on film and the photograph showed in all its horror the aircraft with its tail blown off plummeting to the ground.

On this occasion, however, we had been despatched to Da Nang in the far north of the country with Caribou A4-173 on a six day detachment. We were a standard crew consisting of Captain, Copilot, Loadmaster and Assistant Loadmaster. Operations near the border into places like Dong Ha were particularly tricky, but the first four days went well, with all sorties flown exactly as planned, which is just the way I like it. Then the weather turned bad.

The 25th of February 1966 at Da Nang was not a nice day. Monsoonal weather had really set in. There was low cloud, areas of heavy rain and reduced visibility. We managed to complete our first mission to Quang Ngai but the weather was steadily deteriorating. Our second mission to Ba To had to be aborted due to the low cloud base and poor visibility and we had to return to Da Nang with the load. The third mission was to deliver a load of ammunition up north to Khe Sanh, a beleaguered Special Forces camp in hostile territory just south of the border with North Vietnam. The chances of getting into Khe Sanh were slim but the mission was urgent and the lives of American soldiers were at stake.

My copilot Plt Off Dick Cooper and I had flown together quite a bit and had a pretty good idea of what we could and could not do. We felt that, in spite of the low cloud base and the unfriendly territory, we could get into Khe Sanh by flying at tree top level and maximum speed; the theory being that by the time an enemy soldier on the ground hears you coming, grabs his weapon, cocks it and tries to take aim, you have already disappeared behind the trees. It was risky, but as the troops desperately needed the ammunition we felt the risk was justified. However, this technique does not work over flat open country, as Peter Yates and Bill Pike later found out.

They were flying low and fast over rice paddies and unfortunately had the bad luck to fly right over a platoon of enemy soldiers. The soldiers heard the Caribou coming and had plenty of time to aim their weapons and spray the aircraft with small arms fire. The aeroplane took 11 hits with one round severing a rudder cable causing the relevant rudder pedal to drop uselessly to the floor. They were lucky and got away with it, but a valuable lesson was learnt by all.



F-100 Super Sabre's emergency landing at Vung Tau after being hit by enemy ground fire. After receiving multiple hits from 50 calibre machine gun fire the pilot was lucky to get down in one piece.



With fuel streaming from bullet holes, the pilot had just a few minutes to get the plane back on the ground. Our Caribous were frequently hit by ground fire but fortunately the 'Bou' could take a lot of hits and still keep going.



The aftermath of a B-52 bomber strike.



An air strike in progress by USAF ground attack fighters.
It was essential, of course, that we stay out of their way.

On another occasion, the Loadmaster happened to be sitting on an esky behind the two pilots when a round came up through the belly of the aircraft, penetrated the cockpit floor, passed through the bottom of the esky, continued on through the ice inside and stopped when it lodged in the esky lid – a hair's breadth from the Loadmaster's backside. The Loadmaster, Cpl Bob St John, extricated the bullet and kept it as a particularly personal souvenir.

Anyway, the flight into Khe Sanh, although fairly hairy, worked out according to plan and we were able to deliver a much needed cargo to a very grateful customer. But having got in, we now had to get out and I had this nagging feeling that everything had been going just a little too easily.

Khe Sanh is surrounded by jungle-covered hills. We had to fly low because of the cloud base and the need to remain visual for accurate navigation but the rugged terrain meant it was impossible to get really low and hug the ground. There were areas where we knew we would be vulnerable to ground fire but there wasn't much we could do about it. I decided not to go out along the same route we had flown in as any VC or North Vietnamese soldiers would have been alerted by our earlier flight and would be waiting for us on our return.

This may or may not have been a good decision, depending I guess on one's point of view. Be that as it may, I had made my decision and having unloaded the aircraft and picked up a couple of Medevac patients, we took off. I pulled the landing gear and flaps in as quickly as possible and headed out over the hills and valleys keeping as low as I could.

I had full throttle and a speed of around 140 knots when it happened. There was a loud whoomph ! right outside my window. It was so close I not only heard it but felt it as well, and so did the other members of the crew. Initially we weren't sure whether we'd been hit or not, but the aeroplane continued to handle normally and after checking to make sure no obvious damage had been done, we flew on back to base without further incident.

Although the shock wave shook the aircraft and startled me momentarily, surprisingly, I felt no fear. Of course the adrenalin would have been flowing anyway, but I had always thought that in such a situation the sensation of fear would be uncontrollable. I guess at the time I was too busy to be frightened, but on later reflection it began to sink in just how close we'd come to being blown out of the sky. I don't know what it was that was fired at us, but whatever it was, it certainly would have been big enough and powerful enough to bring down a Caribou – and at that speed and altitude there would have been no survivors. Whoever fired at us missed. He didn't miss by much, but thank God he missed. I guess that one just didn't have my name on it.

BLOWOUT AT BAC LIEU

It was May 13, 1966 and again I was in A4-173. We were on the last half of the Wallaby 406 Mission around the bottom section of South Vietnam. I'd flown the aeroplane down to Ca Mau on the first part of the mission and my colleague, Flt Lt Dave Marland, was flying the second half back to Tan Son Nhut to complete the mission before returning to our home base at Vung Tau. Our next stop, before Tan Son Nhut, was Bac Lieu, just south of the Mekong Delta. It was a very rough strip and it was therefore no real surprise to find that we had blown a tyre on landing. With the outboard tyre on the left main landing gear flat, and faced with a pretty rough surface for take off, it was obvious we were going to be stuck on the tiny strip at Bac Lieu until we could get a new wheel fitted.

I had suffered the indignity of a flat tyre once before. It was early in the piece, when I'd just arrived in country and was flying under the experienced eye of Flt Lt George Godfrey.

It was a remote strip and had been constructed by simply laying PSP (pierced steel plank) over the soft ground. Whilst I was turning during taxiing one of the interlocking lugs of the planking had punctured the right hand nose wheel. As we had now unloaded our cargo and the aircraft was empty George decided to take off with one nose wheel tyre flat. With the strip being in VC controlled territory we didn't want to risk losing the aircraft to enemy mortar fire whilst hanging around waiting to be rescued. I mentally thanked the aircraft designers for having the wisdom to put dual wheels on each undercarriage leg. However, the situation we were now facing at Bac Lieu was different. We were in the Delta area which was relatively safe, the blow out was in one of the main wheels, and the strip was short and extremely narrow.

Most of the land in the Mekong Delta area probably averages about six inches below sea level so the simplest method of building an airstrip is to dig two parallel trenches, piling the earth up between them and building the strip on that. The result was that some of the strips in the Delta area took on the size and proportions of an aircraft carrier – the effect being heightened by the surrounding water in the rice paddys. In fact, the shortest strip we operated into was only 900 feet long – a fairly tight squeeze even for a Caribou with its exceptional STOL (short take off and landing) capabilities. The maximum all-up-weight of a Caribou is 28,500 lbs and payload 6,500 lbs, but for that strip we placed a restriction of 27,000 lbs on it.

The reason we were relatively safe in the Delta area was because the enemy had nowhere to hide. The prominent feature of the southern tip of Vietnam, the area once known as Cochin China, is the delta formed by the mouths of the Mekong. The river splits into four main channels and spreads out over an enormous area before emptying into the South China Sea. Apart from the isolated fishing villages there were few safe havens for guerrilla forces.

On one occasion, as I flew overhead, I watched in awe as three helicopter gunships sank a Viet Cong 'fishing boat' which had been foolish enough to shoot at them.

Anyway, there we were at Bac Lieu with our big ugly Caribou perched embarrassingly on the edge of the strip. The problem was, with such a small parking bay we were taking up valuable space and preventing other aircraft from clearing the strip to load and unload. This reminded me of the time a USAF C-130 Hercules got stuck on a strip further up the coast putting the airstrip out of action. The Army tried to pull the aircraft out of the bog with chains and ended up ripping the nose off the plane. The Army couldn't afford to have the strip out of action so they simply bulldozed the multi-million dollar aeroplane off the side of the strip. We certainly didn't want anything like that to happen to our beloved Caribou so we quickly got on the radio and soon had a rescue aircraft on its way with a nice new replacement wheel.

Dave Marland was an impressive young man who had emigrated to Australia from England and we chatted while we waited for our wheel to arrive. When I mentioned I had married an English girl and we were intending to holiday in the UK he told me of three of his old haunts in Nottingham – The Flying Horse, The Black Boy and The Trip to Jerusalem. Being quite interested in English pubs I told him I'd check them out and, ironically, I actually did.

The wheel duly arrived; but how do you change a Caribou main wheel without a jack when you're on your own out in the Mekong Delta ? No problem to a resourceful Loadmaster like Corporal Jim Mercer. He simply made up a small ramp using locally available sand bags and got us to taxi the aeroplane forward so that the good inboard wheel rode up onto the sand bags. This raised the outer wheel sufficiently clear of the ground to make changing the wheel a breeze. Jim Mercer's resourcefulness saved us a lot of hassles and heartburn.



Blowout at Bac Lieu

With a blown tyre on a main gear leg we needed a wheel change but had no jack.



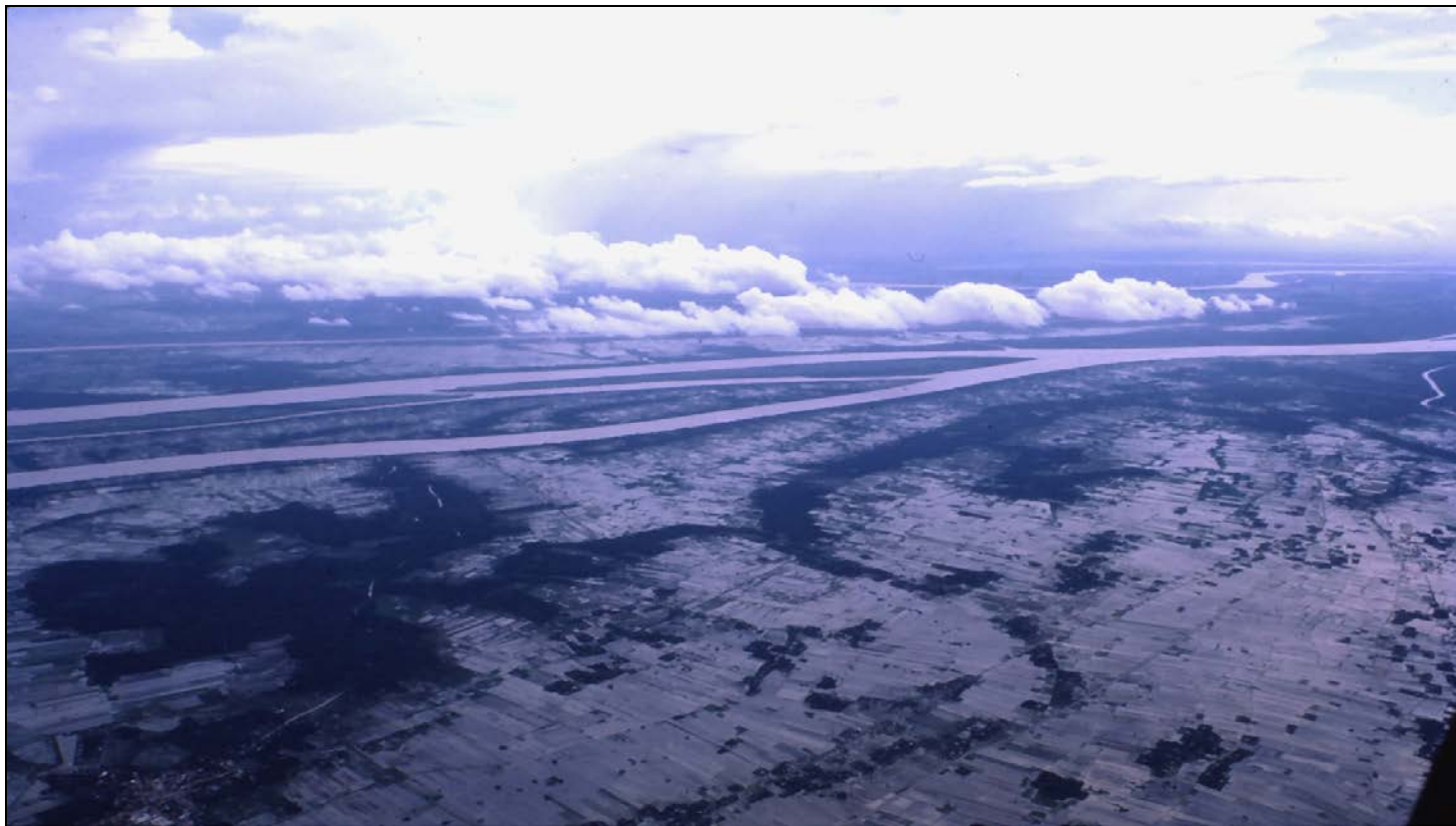
Loadmaster Jim Mercer (wearing the watch) solved the problem with an ingenious sandbag ramp.



Stranded “Wallaby” at Bac Lieu with an army Cessna about to take off.



My friend and comrade-in-arms Flt Lt Dave Marland.



Part of the vast Mekong Delta during the northern wet season.



Mud spattered RAAF workhorse on the PSP ramp at Camau in the Delta.



Turning base for a landing at Phu Tuk



On final for a STOL approach and landing at Phu Tuk.



Turning onto final for the short 900 ft long strip at Cao Lanh.



Short, short final Cao Lanh. It was a bit like landing on an aircraft carrier. Landing short would be disastrous while with the strip barely wide enough for the Caribou's undercarriage you really had to stay on the centreline.



At Song Mao on the Wallaby 405 'Milk Run'.



My erstwhile copilot Plt Off Dick Cooper with A4-208 in the background at Dalat in the highlands.

THE MAGIC BROOMSTICK

Another instance of outstanding resourcefulness and ingenuity by a Caribou Loadmaster occurred when we discovered we had suffered a massive oil leak in one of our engines after we had landed at a dangerous airstrip in the heart of enemy held territory.

With this kind of strip, the idea was to deliver your load and get out as quickly as possible, before the enemy had time to realise your aircraft was grounded and organise an attack. On a later occasion at another remote strip an enemy mortar crew was able set up and start firing mortar bombs as the RAAF Caribou crew was about to start unloading their cargo. The first mortar exploded on the ground just a few yards in front of the aircraft spraying the aeroplane with shrapnel. With the Viet Cong mortar crew clearly intent on zeroing in on the stationary aeroplane the Caribou crew realised the next rounds would hit the aircraft and decided they had to get out of there fast. With the Loadmaster kicking as much of the load as he could out the back of the aircraft they taxied out with mortar bombs raining down around them and managed to get the aeroplane airborne. They were extremely lucky. The aircraft had suffered major damage with hydraulic lines severed and one engine so badly damaged it had to be shut down. They were able to limp back to Bien Hoa for an emergency single engine landing. The captain, Flt Lt Tommy Thomson, was subsequently awarded a DFC (Distinguished Flying Cross).

One look at the vast oil slick over the starboard engine and wing told us we were in trouble. Regrettably, I did not annotate the entry in my log book and with failing memory I am now unable to recall which particular mission it was, or the names of the other crew members but fortunately the Loadmaster was a qualified engine fitter. We quickly unloaded the cargo and opened the engine cowlings to investigate the cause of the problem. What had happened was, a stub pipe on the engine crankcase – probably originally intended to carry an oil temperature sensor or some such – had broken off due to metal fatigue, leaving a hole in the crankcase the size of a man's thumb. With the engine running, oil was being sprayed out into the engine compartment at a frightening rate – indeed we were lucky to have landed when we did – another few minutes and we could have blown the engine and ended up with an engine fire.

I started to get concerned as it became increasingly obvious the aeroplane wouldn't be going anywhere for quite some time and was now terribly vulnerable. Already it was late in the afternoon – too late for any engineering rescue mission . . . and by now every VC in the area would be aware of the big ugly Caribou stuck helplessly on the airstrip. It would certainly be a feather in the cap of any Viet Cong mortar crew commander to be able to claim the destruction of an enemy transport plane.

We contacted Control on the radio and advised them of our predicament but were advised it was too late to mount a rescue operation so we were virtually on our own. I was not terribly worried about the safety of myself or my crew as I was confident we could always be airlifted out – or, if the worst came to the worst, we might have to spend the night inside the nearby Special Forces camp – but I just hated the thought of losing the aeroplane and a mortar attack could now occur at any time. The aircraft was grounded and was now a sitting duck.

The Loadmaster checked the amount of oil remaining and declared there was still enough to enable the engine to run for a while but at the current rate of leakage it would be unlikely to last long enough for a take off. I had briefly toyed with the idea of taking off, then shutting the engine down and flying on one engine to the nearest safe haven in a desperate attempt to save the aeroplane, but the Loadmaster's assessment quickly knocked that idea on the head.

To attempt a take off would be fraught with danger. The engine oil level was already low and could quickly drop to below its critical level. If the engine seized on lift-off we would crash off the end of the strip with the unhappy result that the Air Force would lose both the aeroplane and us. Things were definitely not looking good. The American Green Berets and Vietnamese soldiers had retreated back into their fortified camp, and I kept seeing mental images of VC guerillas setting up their mortars and calculating ranges. It was now just a matter of time.

It was then that the Loadmaster got this brilliant idea. He had been watching his assistant sweeping out the floor of the cargo compartment (for want of something to do) using the mandatory straw broom that was carried on all Caribou aircraft at the time. He suddenly grabbed the broom from his assistant, broke about an eight inch length off the handle and then proceeded to hammer it into the hole in the crankcase. He then took his pliers and snipped a long length of wire from a nearby fence. The wire was wound tightly around the protruding broom handle, wrapped around the engine and tensioned with the pliers so as to hold the broom-handle plug in place.

We hurriedly cleaned the engine down, closed the cowls and took off, thankful at being airborne again and out of immediate danger. Needless to say we took a more than usual interest in the instrument readings for the starboard engine. They were all perfectly normal, and although we watched that engine continuously all the way home, alert for the slightest sign of an oil leak, the Loadmaster's makeshift plug worked beautifully and there wasn't a spot of oil to be seen. I'd say that Loadmaster saved the Air Force a lot of money that day.

THE RELUCTANT LIEUTENANT

This somewhat humorous story highlights the parochialism of some Americans and occurred during one of my frequent five day detachments to Nha Trang, a delightful seaside town about halfway up the coast towards the North Vietnam border. I held the rank of Flying Officer at the time and the equivalent rank in the USAF was First Lieutenant whose insignia of rank was a single silver bar. Each morning I would report to the airfield TMC (Transport Movement Centre) to pick up my orders for the day.

On the first day, I walked into the TMC office and bade a cheery "Good morning" to the American airman behind the desk. He glanced up, saw my single Flying Officer's stripe and said "Howdy Lootenant."

I pointed out gently that I was not a Lieutenant, I was a Flying Officer, and picked up my orders and left.

The next morning the same thing happened again. "Howdy Lootenant."

Again I replied, "I'm not a Lieutenant, I'm a Flying Officer," and I picked up my orders and left.

On the third morning it happened again. "Howdy Lootenant."

I responded – this time slightly miffed, "For the last time, I'm not a *Lootenant*, I'm a bloody Flying Officer."

He didn't even look up, "Sure, sure, Lootenant – anything you say."

THE COW THAT LOST ITS PARACHUTE

This story is funny, sad and yet not so sad. As for whether it's funny or not, I guess it depends on your sense of humour, but it sure was funny the way the Loadmaster described it.

I'm not sure now whether it was Luong Son or Ban Tri, but we had to air drop a live cow in a crate to this particular camp which for one reason or another did not have a useable airstrip.

Anyway, we duly arrived over the drop zone and I made my run in. At the appropriate moment I ordered "Execute ! Execute !" and the Loadmaster let go the load. Out went the crate containing the cow, and according to the Loadmaster, the parachute worked perfectly.

The only trouble was, this particular crate must have been badly put together for although the crate came down beautifully by parachute, the floor separated and kept on going with the cow still standing on it.

According to the Loadmaster, it was one of funniest sights he'd ever seen. There was the cow, standing on a small wooden floor like a surf board, hurtling through the air with its nostrils flared, ears flapping in the wind and its tail streaming out behind it. He claims the cow actually enjoyed it, and swears he could see it grinning.

The sad part of course, is that the cow would have eventually hit the ground and been killed instantly. But then it's perhaps not so sad because the cow was probably going to be slaughtered for beef anyway. At least it died happy and the South Vietnamese soldiers would still have got their steaks. Nevertheless, after that I took care to make sure that this type of incident did not happen again.

ANIMAL CRUELTY

On another occasion we were unloading pigs in crates at a South Vietnamese army strip when to my horror the Vietnamese soldiers started kicking the crates off the aircraft ramp resulting in a drop of about four and a half feet onto the ground.

Many of the animals had their legs protruding through gaps in the crates and were screaming in pain from broken legs and other injuries resulting from the impact with the ground.

I couldn't stand by and watch these hapless animals being treated so badly. I stepped in and forcefully demanded that the crates be lifted from the ramp and lowered to the ground in an upright position. Fortunately, the Vietnamese soldiers, although a little surprised, obeyed my orders and from that point on the unloading proceeded without further problems. I guess it was not so much deliberate cruelty as simply not caring.

THE PASSENGER WITH A DEATH WISH

There was just one occasion when I came close to shooting a man dead. There had been many stories about Viet Cong infiltrators getting aboard aircraft and sabotaging them. One famous story told of a Viet Cong plant in the South Vietnamese Army who as last man out in a paratrooping operation threw a hand grenade back into the aircraft as he jumped. On another occasion, a Hercules was found to have been sabotaged. A length of fine wire had been tied to the ramp after the aircraft had been loaded for a supply drop. The wire led up into the side of the airframe and down onto the pin of a grenade which had been placed in a carton half full of petrol. The carton had been cleverly hidden in the aircraft structure under one of the seats.

The grenade didn't go off because when the ramp was lowered the wire didn't quite pull tight enough to extract the pin. I am probably somewhat cynical and suspicious by nature anyway but after hearing some of these stories I tended to watch the Vietnamese very closely and was always wary of anyone who looked the slightest bit suspicious or did anything unexpectedly or seemingly out of character.

On this occasion I had to pick up a group of Vietnamese soldiers from a remote airstrip near the Cambodian border. Apart from my growing distrust of armed Vietnamese, I was also concerned about accidental discharge of weapons on board the aircraft. My policy was to brief my Loadmaster to make sure that all soldiers travelling as passengers cleared their weapons and removed the magazines, and that all hand grenades were safely secured.

Because the Australian Army had not yet become established in Vietnam when I arrived, we had been equipped with weapons by the US Army. I had been issued with an awkwardly heavy Colt 45 semi-automatic pistol and an American folding stock M-2 carbine which I carried with me in the aeroplane. The pistol was uncomfortable to wear on the hip and was particularly uncomfortable to wear whilst flying. On one of my trips into Saigon I bought a locally made shoulder holster and this enabled me to carry the heavy pistol plus a couple of full magazines with a minimum of discomfort.

The passengers consisted of about a dozen scruffy looking South Vietnamese soldiers and one civilian who was carrying a plastic airline bag and strangely seemed to be the odd man out.

I was sitting up in the left hand pilot's seat watching as my Sergeant Loadmaster checked the soldiers' weapons and got them seated. He was having some difficulty as none of them could speak English. I had seen him speak to the Vietnamese civilian who had been found to have an automatic pistol in his airline bag and had made him remove the magazine from the weapon before turning back to attend to the soldiers at the rear. After the Loadmaster had turned away I saw the Vietnamese push the magazine back into his pistol. This alarmed me and I jumped down from the cockpit and took the pistol off him. I removed the magazine from the pistol and gave them both back to him doing my best to make it clear to him that the weapon and the magazine had to be kept separate. His attitude was unmistakably belligerent and he looked at me in that inscrutable way which sometimes makes it difficult for Westerners to detect expression in the faces of Asians. He was either extremely stupid or up to no good. My policy was, it was better to shoot first and be alive to do the paperwork than to be dead with some one else writing up the report.

I climbed back up into my seat and glanced back down just in time to see the man slam the magazine back into his pistol. He now had the pistol in his right hand with a fully loaded magazine engaged. He was in a position to be able to shoot everyone on board the aircraft.

That was enough for me. This man was now a serious threat to me and my crew – a threat that I was not prepared to tolerate. I unbuttoned the strap on my shoulder holster, grabbed hold of my 45 and was just about to pull it out and shoot the man when the Loadmaster jumped on him. The pistol was taken off him, the magazine removed, and the weapon given back to him minus the magazine. The magazine was returned to him when he left the aircraft at the next stop, but the Loadmaster watched him like a hawk throughout the flight and I was glad to see the last of him.

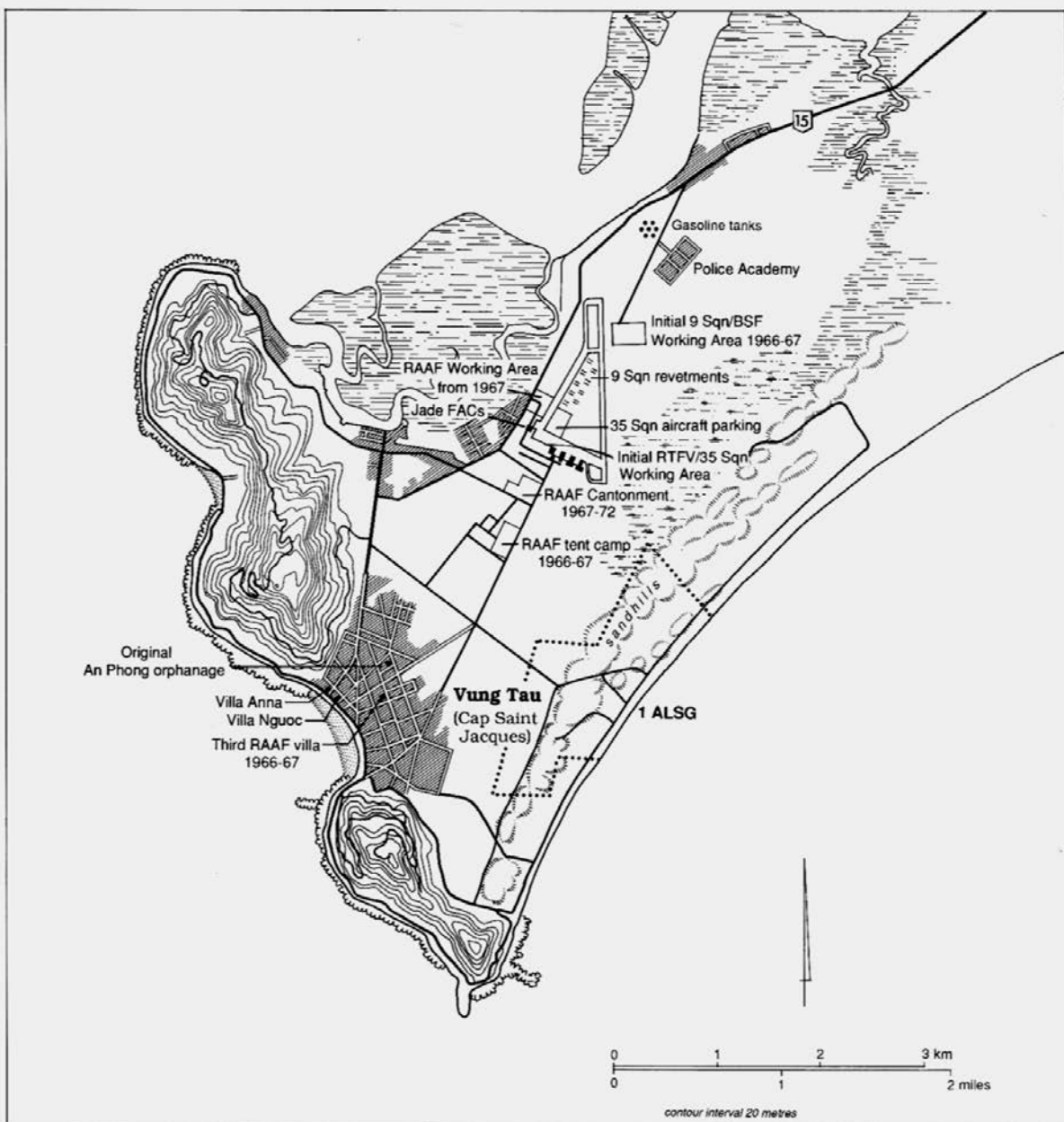
It turned out that he was a Vietnamese military policeman travelling in civilian clothes. Whether he realised it or not, he went very close to becoming a dead military policeman.



In the cabin looking forward towards the cockpit.



Looking aft through the partly open cargo door with A4-179 (Graeme Nicholson) in close line astern.



Map 3 Vung Tau Special Zone

Map shows the Air Base and the long straight road connecting it to the town. The distinctive hills on the end of the peninsula are also clearly shown. They provided an unmistakable landmark for tired pilots making their way home.

Although the airfield was primarily a US Army Caribou base, it was also home to RTFV/35 Squadron and at various times to the RAAF's No 9 helicopter (Iroquois) squadron and the Bell Sioux helicopters and Cessna 180s of the No 16 Army Light Aircraft Squadron that had been brought up from Amberley on the *Sydney* in September 1965.

Vung Tau is situated just 38 nautical miles (70 kms) south-east of Tan Son Nhut, Saigon's international airport – less than 20 minutes flying time in a Caribou. With the Communist victory in South Vietnam, the southern capital's name was changed to Ho Chi Minh City, but old habits die hard and even the local Vietnamese still often refer to it as Saigon.

Originally a quiet holiday resort during French colonial times, Vung Tau is still a pleasant seaside resort and with the influx of Western investment capital is now experiencing rapid development and the old air base is being upgraded to a modern regional airport. A visit to Vung Tau is certainly worth the one hour hydrofoil trip from Ho Chi Minh City.



The end of the Vung Tau peninsular (Cap St Jacques) as seen from the cockpit of a Caribou.



The town of Vung Tau is nestled in the bay between the two hills at the end of the peninsula.
The airfield is obscured by the hill on the left. The infamous Long Hai hills can be seen in the distance.



On final approach to the short runway (Runway 12) at Vung Tau. Care had to be taken not to drift too far right as the clearance between your wing tip and the parked aircraft in front of the hangars did not leave much margin for error.



The view from my window at the Villa Anna.
On one occasion I counted 31 ships waiting to get into Saigon harbour.

DEATH IN A HAND CART

In a war zone full of armed and nervous people a language barrier can be deadly. On this particular occasion I had a Sunday off and decided to go into Saigon to do some duty free shopping. I had flown over to Tan Son Nhut on the morning Caribou and caught the bus into the city.

Approaching the centre of the city we were slowed to a crawl due to the sheer volume of traffic on the roads. Eventually, due to a problem up ahead, we ground to a complete stop right outside a hotel that had been taken over by the US Army as a billet for its personnel.

It was hot and uncomfortable in the bus and all the windows had been opened to catch whatever cooling breeze might come along. Unfortunately, the effectiveness of any cooling breeze was partly negated by the heavy steel mesh covering the windows for protection against terrorists who might be tempted to throw a hand grenade into a bus full of American soldiers. Viet Cong grenade throwers were a constant threat and I was very much aware of this danger whenever I had to drive from an airstrip into the local village. With women, children and men in black pyjamas on the side of the road you never knew when a grenade might lob into your jeep or some one might take a shot at you. As a precaution, even when I went shopping in civilian clothes in Saigon, I always took my pistol with me in my Air Vietnam bag.

As I sat sweltering in the bus outside the hotel I noticed a Vietnamese peasant coming along pushing a large cart loaded with sticks which I assumed was firewood. For some unknown reason the Vietnamese man left the cart right outside the hotel and began to walk off. This immediately upset the black American soldier who had been standing guard in front of the sand-bagged entrance to the hotel. There had recently been several terrorist bombings of hotels and restaurants and guards were now in a heightened state of alert. The abandoned cart was right in front of the entrance to the hotel and right alongside our bus. This was the classic modus operandi of the VC terrorists.

The black American soldier stepped out onto the roadside, raised his rifle and called out to the Vietnamese man to stop. The Vietnamese man kept walking.

I thought about throwing myself flat on the floor but if there was a bomb in the cart powerful enough to blow out the front of the hotel there wouldn't be much left of my bus.

The soldier, now right outside my window, had his rifle aimed at the back of the retreating peasant and called again for the man to stop but he continued walking as if unaware of the guard's warning. As I watched I could actually see the soldier's finger tightening on the trigger, and suddenly I felt real fear. Some one was going to die – and I sure as hell hoped that I wasn't going to go too.

Suddenly, another Vietnamese man who saw what was happening called out to the peasant and gibbering frantically in Vietnamese pointed to the American guard. The peasant turned around and found himself looking down the barrel of a high powered rifle.

The cart owner finally got the message. He hurried back, got behind his cart and trundled it away as fast as he could. The guard lowered his rifle and went back behind his sand bag barricade and we all heaved a sigh of relief. The traffic congestion up ahead had now cleared and we were finally on our way again.

A VARIETY OF CARGOES AND TASKS.

The cargoes we carried in Vietnam were many and varied. I think Dorothy Drain covered it quite well in her article when she said the RAAF Wallabies “carry cargo, supplies (which frequently include live cattle, pigs, and fowls), mail, soldiers and some of the many civilian workers in special services. They drop supplies to forces in the field. The day’s work is always hard and sweaty – and often smelly – in a mostly unspeakable climate”.

We were also involved in supply dropping and paratroop dropping with both the US and the South Vietnamese armies and this sort of work demanded skill and accuracy. The intensity of flying, of course, enabled us to maintain high levels of skill in all facets of Caribou operations.

During my time in Vietnam I carried just about anything that would fit in a Caribou – from Viet Cong prisoners, Ba Muoi Ba beer, the odorous *nuoc mam* cooking oil, to Jeeps and trailers and even a massive sheep’s foot roller – but I drew the line at rotting corpses in leaky coffins.

On that particular occasion we had dropped off a load at a Special Forces camp and as we were about to leave, an American Army Captain asked my colleague if we would take a couple of coffins containing the bodies of Vietnamese soldiers and drop them off at another camp which was not far off our planned route. The other pilot who had flown the plane in was inclined to help the Captain out as a favour, but the next sector was mine and I had already inspected the coffins. They were crudely made tin boxes that were not properly sealed and, sitting in the sun, the corpses were clearly decomposing rapidly with body fluids leaking out onto the ground. As I was the pilot in command for the next sector it was now my decision. I explained as diplomatically as I could that we were not permitted to transport unauthorised cargo and could not deviate from our planned route without authorisation. To a certain extent this was quite true but to be honest I was not prepared to accept responsibility for the bodies and I felt if we loaded the leaking coffins onto the aeroplane the stench of death would permeate the cabin and be almost impossible to completely eradicate. It was bad enough carrying live animals as their urine often penetrated the floor and caused corrosion to the aircraft structure. Fortunately the army Captain accepted my decision without protest but, of course, he then had to find some other way to get rid of the unwanted bodies.

Evacuation of sick and wounded was a different matter and I would always bend the rules if necessary to save a life or ease pain and suffering. On one occasion we arrived at a Special Forces camp just after it had been attacked by a North Vietnamese army unit. The attack had been beaten off but the enemy mortars had done considerable damage and there was still smoke rising from some of the buildings in the camp. We picked up about a dozen wounded, some on stretchers and some able to walk. The wounded included women and children and one little boy of about 10 or 11 who had a hole in his skull with part of his brain clearly visible. Incredibly this courageous little boy was still able to walk.

On one mission to a remote strip in the hinterland we picked up a Montagnard tribesman who was suffering badly from leprosy and brought him back to Nha Trang where he could get urgent specialist treatment. Leprosy, I discovered, is not infectious in adults unless they have been in close contact for long periods . . . although it is infectious in children.

I like to think that by transporting sick and wounded people quickly and safely to centres where they could get urgent medical treatment we saved lives and helped to reduce much pain and suffering.



RAAF Caribous carried a wide variety of loads. Apart from passengers (often Vietnamese civilians and service personnel), cargoes included mail and freight such as ammunition, fuel and supplies, as well as livestock. (CPE: AWM P01948.001)

(Loadmaster CPL Don Lovell in charge)



The morning 'bus run' to Tan Son Nhut.



Loading a Jeep on the PSP ramp at Vung Tau.



Loading drums of fuel. Sometimes, with no ground staff available, we had to load the aircraft ourselves. Here, my copilot Flg Off Dave Rule and L/M Blue Wood and his assistant get things moving to keep us on schedule.



Loadmaster Cpl H R 'Marlow' Sharpe supervising loading of the massive sheep's foot roller at Song Mao.



Early morning practice jump by Vietnamese Army paratroops at Da Nang.



Delivering a load of barbed wire to Tra Bong.



Unloading cows at an isolated Vietnamese village.



Arriving at Special Forces Camp, Plei Djereng, just after an enemy mortar attack.



Medevacing the wounded. One little boy had a hole in his skull exposing part of his brain but was still able to walk. Note Chinook in centre of picture bringing in a field gun.

FUN IN THE AIR

With regard to smells, petrol fumes were the worst. On one mission out of Nha Trang with a load of 44 gallon drums of motor fuel one of the drums sprang a leak. The Loadmaster was unable to seal off the leak and the aircraft began to fill with fumes. I had no choice but to return to base as the aircraft was rapidly turning into a flying bomb. A random spark or a sniper's bullet would have ignited the fuel-air mixture with undoubtedly spectacular results.

On another occasion during a six day detachment to Nha Trang with John Vandersteege (later shortened to Steege) and Cpl Mal 'Bugsy' Rose, we had to jettison a load of 44 gallon drums of petrol. John was flying as pilot-in-command and we had taken off and were about 45 nautical miles north-west over mountainous jungle country when the left Prop-oil Low Level light came on. This was serious because once the propeller ran out of hydraulic fluid it would become uncontrollable and we could end up with a runaway prop. It meant we had to quickly shut down the engine and feather the prop before it lost all its oil.

With the prop feathered (the blades turned into the airflow so they didn't rotate) we turned back towards Nha Trang but with the heavy load of fuel drums on board we were unable to maintain height on one engine and we were over some pretty high country. We had no choice but to jettison the load. As the drums were on their side it was simply a matter of lowering the ramp and rolling them out the back. I hope they didn't land on anybody. After jettisoning the load we were able to maintain height and John flew back to base where he carried out a perfect single engine landing. Somewhere in the mountains at the back of Nha Trang there are some 44 gallon drums of free petrol for anyone interested in looking for them.

A couple of days later during the same detachment I had just taken off from Da Lat in the highlands and was still in the climb just six nautical miles west of the field when the left fire warning alarm sounded. The glaring red light and clanging of the fire warning bell is always disconcerting. This was an emergency and required immediate shut down of the engine and operation of the engine fire extinguisher. It was the same aircraft A4-210 and the same engine only this time it was my turn to deal with the problem.

Having carried out the immediate vital actions and completed the emergency checklist I returned to Da Lat for an emergency landing. Although I could see no sign of a fire I remembered the case of the Neptune that lost its wing at Richmond. The magnesium fire made no smoke and was burning inside the wing. If the aircraft had had a fire extinguishing system its activation might have prevented the fire from spreading to the wing. Following the loss of the aircraft and its crew all Neptunes were retrofitted with engine fire extinguishers. With my load being mainly passengers the aircraft was quite light and relatively easy to handle on one engine. The single engine landing back at Da Lat (elev 5,000 ft) was without further incident. It turned out to be a false fire warning caused by a fault in the system's circuitry.

There was only one other occasion when I had to shut down an engine in flight and again it was A4-210 only this time it was the starboard engine. The engine seemed to be running rough and rather than risk damaging the motor I shut it down as a precautionary measure. Most of our Loadmasters ('Crew Chiefs' in US parlance) were qualified engine or airframe fitters and fully cross-trained. In this instance our extremely capable loadmaster/engineer was able to find the cause of the problem and soon had the engine running sweetly again.

I've often felt our Caribou Loadmasters were not given the recognition they deserved.



Crossing over the mountains out of Nha Trang on the way to Plei Me in the highlands.



Back on the ground at Nha Trang, our Loadmaster Cpl Mal 'Bugsy' Rose was able to quickly fix the leaking propeller problem, with Flg Off John Vandersteege lending some moral support.

SWEPT OUT TO SEA

On this occasion, after a week's detachment at Da Nang in the north of the country, we were returning home to Vung Tau and I decided to fly the slightly longer coastal route as it kept us out over the sea where we could remain visual and clear of most of the air traffic congestion. Down around Nha Trang I noticed weather building up over the land and this began to gradually force me further out to sea. I tried to penetrate the weather several times but was forced to turn away due to low cloud, heavy rain and turbulence. We were now well past Phan Rang and I should be turning south-west for Vung Tau but the weather had turned into a solid wall forcing me to maintain a southerly heading. At this stage we were well out to sea and by now we would have been roughly abeam Vung Tau. This was confirmed by our radio compass which was tuned in to the Vung Tau NDB (radio beacon).

Fuel was now starting to become a problem and the solid wall of weather was forcing us further and further out to sea. My copilot was also becoming concerned about the fuel situation so I decided to throw caution to the winds and try to crash through the weather front. With everyone strapped in tightly I turned into the evil looking maelstrom and almost immediately started running into rain and turbulence. Suddenly I noticed a strange looking pattern forming on the surface of the sea up ahead and to the left. Then a funnel of cloud began spearing down from the overcast to join a rising swirling column of water which quickly turned into a writhing water spout. When another water spout began forming out to our right I decided it was just too dangerous to continue and turned back. I would have to find a safer place to penetrate the weather front but the fuel situation was becoming increasingly worrying and I was fast running out of time.

As the front was steadily forcing us further out to sea I decided we now had no choice but to attempt to penetrate the line of storms. I turned west, chose what looked like the safest point of entry and flew into the wall of weather. For quite a while we had a pretty rough ride in solid cloud, heavy rain and severe turbulence and I had to battle just to keep the aeroplane on an even keel. Flying on instruments through tropical storms is not my idea of fun in the air.

Eventually we broke through and burst out into clear sunny weather and the radio compass needle which had been swinging wildly whilst we were flying through the storms now settled down and pointed the way home. We had been forced so far out to sea that the coast of Vietnam was barely visible on the horizon. Soon, however, we were able to pick out the hills on the tip of Cape St Jacques which overlooked Vung Tau and the airfield. Incredibly, that seemingly straight forward flight from Da Nang to Vung Tau that normally would have taken less than 3 hours ended up taking 4 hours and 15 minutes and we landed with barely 20 minutes of fuel remaining which is starting to get just a bit too tight to be comfortable.

INCIDENT AT PLEI ME

This story goes back to just after my arrival in Vietnam when I was still learning the ropes and in this instance I was flying under the supervision of Flt Lt George Godfrey, a seasoned Vietnam veteran. The incident at Plei Me on the 23rd of December 1965 was probably the closest I ever came to writing myself off, along with the aeroplane and everyone in it.

We were operating out of Nha Trang on the mid north coast of South Vietnam and I was still fairly new in country, having only arrived on October 14. My more experienced colleague, George Godfrey, had flown the first mission – now it was my turn.



Over the top of the isolated Plei Me Special Forces camp. Landing strip is on lower LH side of triangle.



Bullet-riddled entrance to Plei Me Special Forces Camp – note repairs to the hospital roof.



This pic shows the Caribou's huge double-slotted flaps and double-slotted drooping ailerons.
(Note exhaust augmentor tubes on top of the wing)



CHAPTER 18

THE HUNDRED DAY GIRL

1966 was a busy, and as it turned out, quite action-packed year. I, like every one else in the RTFV, was working hard and with no such thing as weekends off, one day was much like another. To keep track of what day of the week it was I bought myself a Seiko, auto-wind, day and date watch.

Earlier, around Christmas Day, a roving reporter from one of the Australian radio stations approached us on the tarmac at Tan Son Nhut and we were able to send brief Christmas messages to our folks back in Australia. It was a thoughtful gesture on the part of the radio station and much appreciated.

They say necessity is the mother invention and in wartime scenarios, operations are embarked on and innovative experiments tried out that would never be contemplated in peacetime operations. The surface materials used on soft or sandy airstrips in Vietnam included PSP (a.k.a. Marsden matting), aluminium planking (as at Cam Ranh Bay) and heavy duty rubber sheeting. It was on a rubber membrane strip on a coastal beach that the C-130 Hercules broke through the sheeting, got hopelessly bogged and was bulldozed off the side of the strip by the US army. I didn't particularly like this strip as the large and relatively low Caribou propellers created powerful ground vortices the suction of which lifted the rubber membrane sometimes to within a foot or two of the whirling propeller blades. This 'bubble' would move along with the aircraft immediately below the propeller as we taxied and I was always concerned that it might lift sufficiently to come into contact with the prop. Fortunately it never did, but I don't think the rubber membrane idea was employed anywhere else.

Our Caribous were used in all sorts of operations that would not be permitted back in Australia. Flare dropping at night was particularly dangerous as the flares themselves were hazardous to handle and in addition to revealing enemy activity on the ground the flares also illuminated the aircraft making it a target for enemy ground fire. I was quite happy not to be involved in any of the flare dropping operations.

In one experiment a Caribou was used to drop 44 gallon drums of petrol fitted with explosives to burn out a particularly dense and inaccessible area of jungle from which it was suspected the Viet Cong were mounting attacks on Australian army units. From the reports I heard, the huge petrol bombs may have been a little too effective. It was claimed the convection caused by the fires generated a large cumulus cloud which quickly turned into a rain storm and the rain apparently put the fires out.



Rubber membrane over sand at Tuy Hoa South.



Result of US Army's ham-fisted attempt to drag bogged Herc out of the sand.



Formating alongside a US Army Caribou. The copilot appeared to be taking a photo of us.



An RAAF Wallaby landing back at Vung Tau.



On the mini-range at Vung Tau, Peter Yates checking out his US issue carbine.



Wall decorations behind the bar in the Villa Anna. We each had our 100-day girl count-down calendar.



Song Be City's approach and departure hazards.
This is the view looking back up the Town Hall approach. Local peasants and cyclists were another hazard.



Looking the other way towards the mountain approach.
Apart from helos and light aircraft, the RAAF Caribous were the only aircraft that could get in and out of Song Be City.

We were sometimes also called upon for search and rescue operations (SAR). On the 6th of February 1966, at Da Nang, Flg Off Peter Yates and I were asked to help in the search for a missing C-123 cargo plane and were allocated a particularly difficult search area in a remote and rugged mountainous region in particularly unpleasant weather. Not long after we began our search in A4-173 the weather began to deteriorate rapidly. Flying operations in the search area quickly became quite hazardous and we were recalled to base. We never did get the full story on the missing C-123 but if the big twin-engine transport did come down in that area there would have been no survivors.

Many of the places we went into were nothing more than short dirt strips, some of which were not permanently manned. On one occasion we had to pick up a cargo of dozens of bags of rice but there were no Vietnamese loaders. The loading area was deserted except for a couple of Vietnamese soldiers whose job it was to guard the building in which the rice was stored. Rather than wait for ground staff who may or may not arrive, I decided to back the Caribou up to the loading bay so we could load the aircraft ourselves. With the Loadmaster out behind the aircraft on his long lead giving me directions, I slipped the propellers into reverse pitch and began backing towards the building. After reversing quite some distance without hearing anything from the Loadmaster I realised the tail must be getting pretty close to the shed and decided to stop to see for myself. At that moment the Loadmaster arrived in the cockpit yelling "Stop! Stop!". His communications lead had become disconnected. The aircraft's tail was actually overhanging the building. This suited me fine however as we now had only a minimal distance to have to carry the quite heavy sacks of rice.

The four of us plus the Vietnamese soldiers soon had the Caribou loaded, with me keeping a wary eye on the aircraft's tail. As the bags of rice were loaded onto the aeroplane the extra weight caused the tail come down so I had to watch it fairly closely. It was hard physical work in such heat and humidity and my flying suit was absolutely saturated with sweat by the time we had finished loading and we finally took off. Once up at cruising altitude I was able to turn on the cold air vents and quickly cool down. But another precious cargo was delivered undamaged and on time to another grateful customer. It was probably this or a similar incident that caused my mysterious bout of pneumonia.

On another occasion we arrived at a strip after a heavy rain storm to find that the airfield had turned into a muddy quagmire and there was no one around to load our aircraft. The weather in Vietnam could often deteriorate fairly quickly, particularly during the monsoon season, with low cloud, heavy rain and restricted visibility. Having ploughed our way through the mud to the parking area, we found our load sitting there on its trailer with a large US Army fork-lift tractor parked nearby unattended. There wasn't a soul in sight. Apparently the loaders thought the weather and the conditions of the strip were so bad we wouldn't turn up. Admittedly the Caribou was slipping and sliding a bit in the soft clay and I had to be careful to avoid getting the aeroplane bogged, but we did have a job to do.

My copilot, Flg Off Dave Rule, claimed to have some expertise at driving tractors and soon mastered the big army fork-lift. In no time at all we had the aircraft loaded but I was concerned at the amount of mud clinging to the wheels as this could cause problems when the undercarriage was retracted into its wheel bays. After take off I left the landing gear down for a little longer than normal to allow the slipstream and the spinning wheels more time to throw off the excess mud. Upon selection, the landing gear retracted normally and once again, despite the rather difficult circumstances, we were able to deliver an urgently needed cargo on time to a pleasantly surprised and thankful recipient.

Heavy tropical rains could often turn otherwise perfectly good dirt strips into dangerous unstable quagmires. My old 40-Course mate and fellow West Australian, Brian Hammond, found this out the hard way.

Brian had preceded me into 38 Squadron and had completed his Vietnam tour and moved on well before I arrived on the Squadron in June 1965. On this particular day in November 1964, Brian had been tasked to deliver vital supplies to a remote Special Forces camp at A Ro to the south-west of Da Nang.

A Ro was well inland in enemy controlled territory close to the Laotian border. Being in mountainous country, the airstrip had been constructed by simply bulldozing the tops of two hills into the gully separating them, to form a rough ridge-top landing strip. Because of the earlier wet weather, it was decided the load would be delivered by means of a LOLEX (low level extraction – now called LAPES) drop so that the aircraft didn't have to land.

With a low level extraction, the load is mounted on a sturdy sled and the aircraft flown with the wheels just a few feet above the ground. At the right moment a parachute is ejected from the rear of the aircraft which pulls the load out of the aeroplane. The load drops onto the ground and slides to a stop while the aircraft climbs away without the wheels actually touching the ground. However, on arriving over A Ro it was discovered that the LOLEX mechanism wouldn't work. With the strip appearing to be in an acceptable condition and having been assured by the people on the ground that it was okay, rather than return to Da Nang with the vital supplies, Brian decided to attempt a landing. Unfortunately, the ground was still slushy and when reverse thrust was selected, mud was sprayed up onto the windscreen. With Brian partially blinded by an obscured windscreen, the right hand main landing gear wheels broke through the soft soil and fell into a washaway. The landing gear leg was torn off causing the aircraft to drop onto its right wing and slew to the right coming to rest right on the edge of the ridge-top strip. Major damage was caused to the right wing, landing gear, engine and propeller.

Much of the aircraft was retrieved and cannibalised as spare parts but the fuselage was not considered worth salvaging. It was left in situ where the nose and forward section were used by the soldiers as a handy observation post and was given the nick-name 'Hammond House',

Brian was extremely unlucky, but being conscious of this famous incident, I was doubly cautious when faced with a similar situation at Luong Son while operating out of Nha Trang. On the 13 of March 1966, Plt Off Dick Cooper and I were tasked to do a supply drop on Luong Son DZ (drop zone) in Caribou A4-208. On arriving over Luong Son the commander of the camp told us that the adjacent strip was in good condition and that we could safely land. However, as we were already set up to parachute the supplies onto the DZ, I elected to go ahead with the supply drop as planned.

Having completed the supply drop I now had an empty aeroplane and as the camp commander desperately wanted me to land to pick up some urgent cargo for Nha Trang I decided to check out the strip for myself from the air to assess whether it really was safe to land. It looked OK and unlike A Ro the terrain was flat and the strip was level, so as I had a light aeroplane I decided to land. The landing worked out fine and as the load the camp commander wanted me to take out was light, the take off also went off without a hitch. However, the ground was soft and spongy and I could see that with just a little more rain the strip would become unsafe to land on, especially with a heavy load.



Approaching monsoonal storm, Vung Tau.



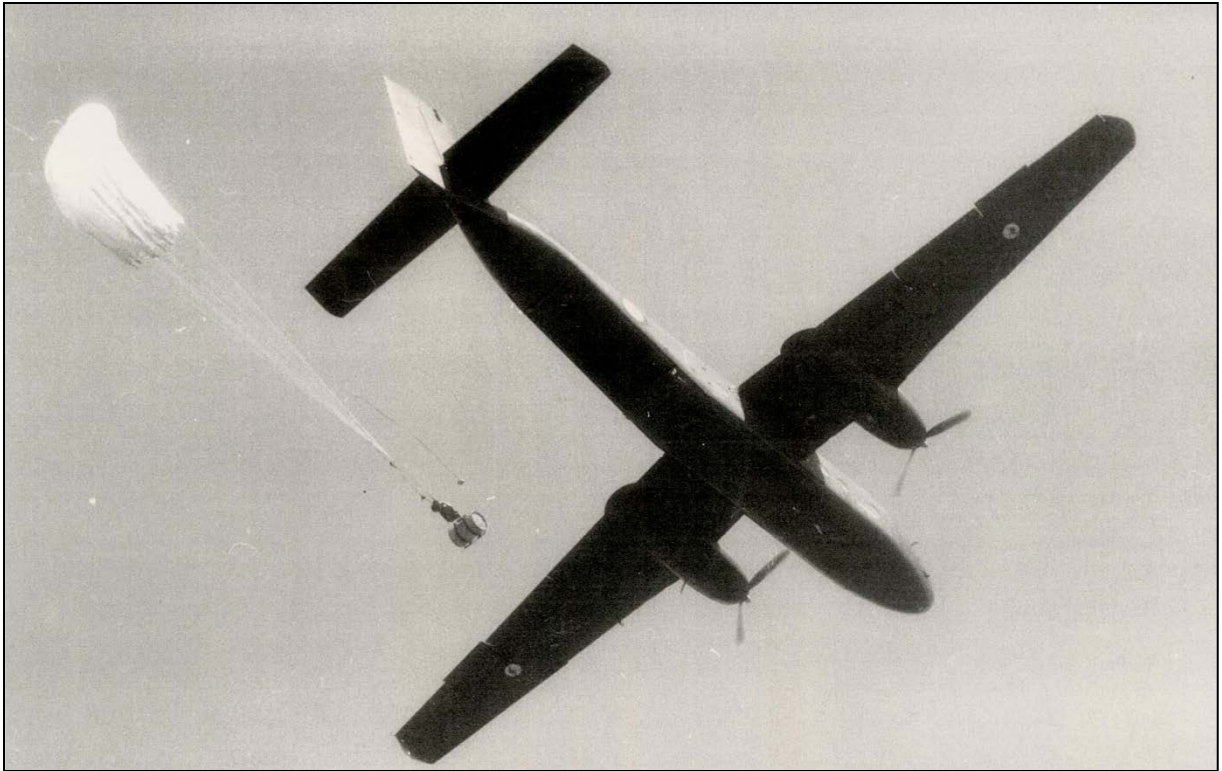
Muddy strip at Tan Rai
Conditions that even caused problems for surface vehicles didn't stop us with our go-anywhere Caribous.

Luong Son with smoke marker to give us wind direction and strength.



When communications with the Loadmaster were lost whilst reversing, I stopped just in time.





Supply dropping – individual packages could be dropped singularly or in sticks of up to five or six.



The LOLEX low level extraction is now called LAPES – low altitude parachute extraction system. It is used where a heavy load has to be delivered accurately to a relatively open and level drop zone.



Brian Hammond's spot of bad luck at A Ro on 18 November 1964.

When the LAPES mechanism failed and with the load 'hung up' Brian decided to land in order to deliver the urgently needed load.

While blinded by mud spray in reverse thrust, his starboard wheel dropped into a washaway on the very narrow strip.

The load was delivered but the aircraft was a write-off.



A4-185 was the first RAAF Caribou lost in Vietnam. It was dismantled on site under the constant threat of enemy fire and recovered for spares. The forward section was put to good use as an observation post by the hard pressed soldiers at A Ro.

The sign on the front reads 'Hammond House'.



RAAF ground crews dismantled A4-185 on site at A Ro under the constant threat of enemy fire.
Engine fitter, Cpl Robert Wark, was later awarded an MID for his efforts in the recovery work.



The rather complex 'LAPES' set-up as displayed by AMTDU at Richmond.
Package sits on a crushable cardboard honeycomb base designed to absorb the impact of the six foot drop.



Wash-away at Kham Duc. Note ridge on approach bulldozed away to enable use by C-123s.



General Westmoreland's C-123 Provider, nick-named "The White Whale".



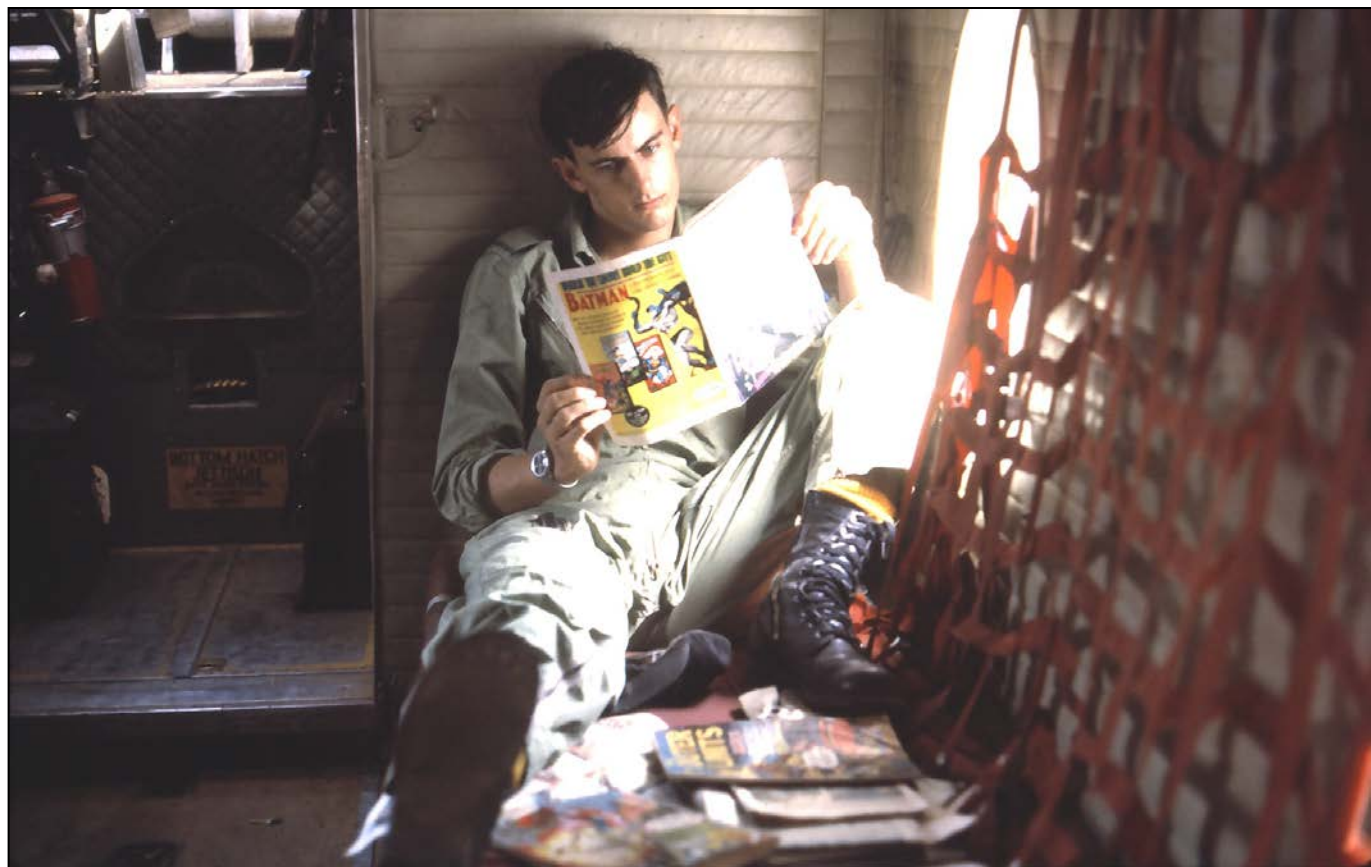
Quang Ngai Tower



Helicopter airborne assault mission taking off from Quang Ngai.



Sergeant Loadmaster Barry Ingate and Plt Off John Harrison with Australian Army W/O in mortar pit at Tra Bong.



My copilot, Pilot Officer John Lanning, relaxes while we wait for our next load to arrive.



Copilot Dave Rule takes a turn at the helm.



Wallaby Zero Two over the Mekong Delta in the late afternoon.

On the 14th and 15th of May 66, I was again tasked to deliver loads to Luong Son, this time with Plt Off John Lanning in A4-210, but they were all air drops and no attempt was made to land.

* * *

Considering the United States Army operated a large fleet of Caribous in South Vietnam, our small unit of six operational aircraft must have seemed puny by comparison. The US Army Caribous, which they called CV-2Bs, carried the extra weight of auto-pilots and weather radar both of which were of limited use in South Vietnam. From my observations, being on the same base as the US Army Caribou units, the Army treated their aircraft like trucks and their pilots were soldiers first and airmen second. Without seeking to disparage the US Army Caribou operations, I liked to think that we in the Australian Air Force were professional aircraft operators. Again, without seeking to blow our own trumpet, I believe this was the main reason for our remarkable success. This success could not have been achieved had it not been for the outstanding performance of our maintenance crews. Full marks must also go to our Engineering Officers, Flt Lts Wally Solomons, “Rocky” Rockcliffe, Dick Jones, and the others who preceded and followed them.

To give us a bit of a break from the rigorous flying regimen in Vietnam we were each rostered for a trip down to the RAAF base at Butterworth in Malaysia for what the Americans called R & R (rest and recreation). Whilst there we would do a compass swing on the Base’s magnetically neutral compass swing pad and correct any errors that may have crept into the aircraft’s compass system. This could usually be carried out in the afternoon of the first day, giving us a couple of days off to relax around the pool and go duty free shopping over on the island of Penang. There I bought myself an electric fan which I desperately needed and which I still have to this day (I have it on right now) and, of course the mandatory Noritake crockery dinner set which Pat and I also still have and bring out for use on special occasions.

Our secondary task (some might say primary) was to buy up supplies, mainly foodstuffs, for our kitchen at the Villa Anna – steaks, sausages, certain types of vegetables and tinned foods and, of course, plenty of good Aussie beer – anything we couldn’t get in Vietnam. We didn’t have a mess as such, simply a large kitchen/dining room. The Unit was paid a monthly allowance and from that we were expected to buy our own food and cook it ourselves. The kitchen was available any time day or night and I soon learned to cook myself up some quite tasty meals. We employed about half a dozen local Vietnamese staff and they made sure the villa was always kept spick and span. The system worked well and most of our food we were able to buy from the Americans or the local Vung Tau market but we always looked forward to the good Aussie tucker that the Butterworth compass swing crew brought back.

Sometimes when we got a bit sick of our own cooking we’d go around to a local Vietnamese restaurant we knew that seemed to be safe and sampled the local food. I could well have been eating dog, cat or rat for all I know but it tasted alright and I never had any tummy problems.

Everyone got at least one trip down to Butterworth. It was an easy four hour flight in a Caribou. I was lucky enough to get two; one with Plt Off Dick Cooper and the second with my friend and colleague Flg Off John Vandersteeg. They provided a much needed break.



36 SQN C-130 fortnightly courier service from Richmond unloading at Vung Tau.



John McDougall repairing stone damage to Caribou propeller.
RTFV/35 SQN ground crews worked 24-7 to keep aircraft on the line.



TOP: The Vung Tau market here we bought most of our fruit and vegetables.



ABOVE: On the back beach at Vung Tau. Although I ate well, I still lost a lot of weight.

There was lots of drama back in Australia too. Our Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies retired after 16 straight years in office. The man the Labor opposition called “Pig Iron Bob” because of his pre-World War 2 sale of iron ore to Japan, had been relentlessly attacked for supporting the US and the South Vietnamese governments in their fight to prevent a communist take over of the country. Labor had also criticised him mercilessly for his decision to replace our ageing Canberras with the long range, supersonic F-111 strike bombers. As it turned out, the F-111 was one of the most astute military purchases the Australian Government has ever made.

Since gaining independence from the Dutch, the expansionist, anti-imperialist Indonesian Government had been eyeing off defenceless Papua New Guinea and the relatively uninhabited north of Australia. It had already declared a war of “confrontation” with Malaysia and was openly challenging Australia’s resolve. Its growing military strength, being built up with the assistance of the Soviet Union (and economic aid from Australia) was now posing a real threat to the stability of the region. The awesome long range strike power of the RAAF’s F-111’s eventually became the main deterrent to Indonesia’s militant expansionism. Even today, at this time of writing in 2004 there is no suitable aircraft to replace it. The proposed F-35 Joint Strike Fighter does not have the range, speed, payload capability or twin-engine reliability of the F-111. The F/A-22 Raptor could do the job but is considered too expensive.

When Menzies stood down, tributes poured in from around the world. Even Britain’s Labour prime minister, Harold Wilson, described him as a great world figure while some in Australia declared him to be one of the few true statesmen this country has produced. Labor, of course, continued to denigrate him. I was keen to know what changes might occur now that Harold Holt had taken over from Menzies and what effect, if any, they would have on me.

Pat and I had decided that we would both save our money for a trip around the world, including some time in the UK, so that I could meet her family and we could have the honeymoon we had missed out on. The plan was for her to finish up at the end of the school term in August and meet me in Singapore where she had spent several years as a young girl. To make this work I had to apply to extend beyond my promulgated return date. Thankfully, my extension was approved and our plans now began to take shape.

On February 15, Australia changed over to decimal currency with our dollar being based on our ten-shilling note, the two-shilling pieces becoming twenty cents and the one-shilling piece ten cents. A two dollar note was printed to replace the ubiquitous pound. Pat sent me up one of the new dollar notes and when I showed it to an American Marine he was so intrigued he bought it off me for two dollars US. At that time the new Aussie dollar was worth considerably more than the US dollar. My pay was now 89 dollars and 4 cents per week.

It was about this time that I started to develop a bit of a cough. It didn’t really affect me all that much but it must have started to worry those around me. Despite my protestations that I was fine, the CO, Sqn Ldr Vic Guthrie, ordered me to report to the US Army medical centre at the airfield. They gave me an X-ray, took a blood sample and promptly advised me that I had pneumonia. I was given a fistful of medicines to take and ordered to bed for five days where I was bored out of my brain. Apart from the cough, I felt perfectly normal and I couldn’t figure out how I could have caught such an ailment. The only thing I could think of was that I had been labouring hard, loading my aircraft in hot, steamy conditions, with my flying suit becoming saturated with sweat. I had then taken off, climbed to altitude and had the cold air vents blowing on me in an attempt to cool down. I could think of no other explanation.

Being confined to my room I started learning to play the guitar and spent a lot of time listening to records, one of my favourites being an LP titled *Come the Day* by The Seekers.

As soon as I was declared fit again I was back in the air and on my way to Nha Trang for the usual five or six day detachment. I loved these detachments to Nha Trang and Da Nang as I had my own aeroplane and crew and could be my own boss. I always felt happier and more confident when I was away from the stifling effect of constant supervision.

In April whilst on a six day detachment to Da Nang with Plt Off Harrison as my copilot I had to fly down to Nha Trang and was surprised to find a reception committee waiting for us when we taxied in. It consisted of Col Gordon F Bradburn USAF, Commander 14 Air Commando Wing, Maj Bui-Quang-Khuong VNAF, Commander Base Support Group and Maj Martin J Granberg USAF, Commander 1879 th Comm Sqn (AFCS). They welcomed us and presented us with a certificate in recognition of the 100,000th air traffic movement.

The certificate which I still have, reads (sic) “Awarded to *fligh officer Gary J Kimberley and his crew in recognition of the 100,000 th Aircraft Movement, flown by Wallaby 03 and Australian Aircraft, on 12 April 1966.*”

An item, complete with photograph, was featured in the following issue of *Stars and Stripes*, the US Military’s in-country newspaper.

* * *

On April 22, our new prime minister Harold Holt visited Vietnam and I got the opportunity to talk to him at Vung Tau. I was favourably impressed. He came across as a quiet, decent and sincere man – traits not usually found in politicians. Back home, his decision to treble the strength of the Australian forces fighting the Communists in South Vietnam enraged the Socialist Labor opposition – and anti-war demonstrations, encouraged by Labor and other left wing organisations began to grow alarmingly. Our Vietnam forces were to increase to 4,500.

One of the main reasons the demonstrations became so fierce was that national service trainees were also being sent to the war zone, but what always seems to be forgotten is that those who went were all volunteers (although there are some who now dispute that claim). The unfairness was that the trainees were chosen by a ballot system. Those whose names came out of the barrel had to serve whilst the lucky ones escaped national service completely. Although I did not agree with the ballot system, I support the principle of national service where every able-bodied young man contributes to the defence and security of the nation.

National service contributes to the health of the nation by providing our young men with education and training which helps them in many ways beyond the basic military requirements. It teaches them pride, discipline, responsibility, teamwork and comradeship, and is one of the best character-building methods there is – and I can speak from experience. I did my national service when every young man had to do his bit for his country, and there were no peace demonstrations then – although there were plenty of conscientious objectors. With regard to the Vietnam war, however, my view at the time was that it should have been left to the professionals. When I joined the RAAF, I did so knowing that I could be sent to war and signed on knowing the risks involved. If the strength of our armed forces at the time was such that our contribution to the war could be only limited, then we’d simply have to go with what we had. But our Nasho volunteers served their country well.



The surprise certificate presented to me and Plt Off John Harrison and our crew on the ramp at Nha Trang.



John Harrison and I being congratulated by our CO, Wg Cdr Charles Melchert, back at Vung Tau.

When PM Harold Holt disappeared whilst surfing alone some years later, many weird and wonderful explanations were put forward – from his being picked up by a Chinese submarine to being kidnapped by aliens. My personal view is that he simply drowned, possibly as a result of a heart attack. The fact that his body was never recovered from the sea is hardly surprising.

It was about this time I got my hundred day girl. Most of the young men in Vietnam who were approaching the end of their tour of duty and had wives and sweethearts to go home to, had their hundred day girl pinned up on the wall beside their bed.

The hundred day girl consisted of a sketch of a voluptuous young woman with her body marked off in one hundred segments starting with segment number One Hundred. The countdown ritual was achieved by colouring in a segment each day on the girl's body until you reached the final day and that delicate delta in the most sensitive part of the female anatomy. Returning from a detachment to Nha Trang or Da Nang I would be a few days behind and colour in my hundred day girl segments with relish. Although the normal tour of duty was eight months I had extended by a month in order to meet up with Pat in Singapore and I was really looking forward to seeing her again.

On June 1, 1966, the Flight was upgraded to the status of a Squadron and renamed No 35 Squadron. It was to be commanded by Wg Cdr Charles Melchert and this worried me as there had been some tension between the CO and me back at 38 Squadron after he had refused to give me a couple of days leave to accompany Pat on her trip down from Brisbane. Now he was going to be my Commanding Officer in Vietnam. My concern increased when, shortly after his arrival, the CO decided to come along with me on a five day Nha Trang detachment. I needn't have worried. Charles Melchert was a pleasure to fly with and from that time on Charles and I became quite good friends.

One of the first things I had done on my arrival in Vietnam was buy myself an expensive Asahi Pentax Spot-matic camera complete with telephoto lens and I subsequently carried it with me everywhere I went. As a result I was able to capture on film some quite unique scenes including dramatic action shots. When I showed some of my colour slides to Charles he was quite interested and we were able to use some of these quite productively later on in Australia.

With my tour of duty in South Vietnam now rapidly coming to an end it was suddenly time for my annual flying check and instrument rating test. This was to be carried out by our new QFI, Flt Lt "Blue" McDonnell who I had not flown with before. I had now turned 30 but I still looked young for my age and having lost some weight I looked even more boyish than usual. My build had always been short and slim but during the nine months I had been in Vietnam I had lost 11 kilos, dropping from my normal weight of around 65 kilograms to a rather scrawny 54 kilos. I was uncertain how I would go with the new QFI. In fact the test was incorporated into the daily work schedule where I felt right at home and had no problems. I was upgraded to a Green Card instrument rating and, interestingly, the CO wrote in the Remarks section of my Flying Hours Return, *A sound average pilot*. Obviously, I was hardly a world beater but at least I had moved up from being merely *Average* to *Sound average*. Anyway, world beater or not, it seems the powers-that-be had decided that I could be relied upon to get the job done safely and well, and that gave me enormous satisfaction.

With my promotion to Flight Lieutenant through and my duty done, on August 6, 1966, I bade goodbye to South Vietnam and at Tan Son Nhut boarded my Pan Am 707 for the short flight down to Singapore, happy in the knowledge that Pat would be there to meet me.

* * *



Wg Cdr Charles Melchert talking with Montagnard tribesmen at a remote strip in the highlands.



Montagnard leper had lost most of his toes.
We took him to Nha Trang for specialist treatment after being assured his disease was not contagious.



The Aussie Wallabies were always popular with the locals.
The arrival of the RAAF Caribou brought out the spectators, scroungers and ever-hopeful hitch-hikers.



Country road Camau.

Driving into the local village from the airstrip was always risky as you never knew whether you might be ambushed by the VC or whether some one might throw a grenade into your vehicle.



Dick Cooper & Co inspect hole in PSP runway made by unexploded VC mortar bomb at Khe Sanh.



Statue of the Virgin Mary at the entrance to Duong Dong Harbour, Ile de Phu Quoc.

During my nine months in the war zone I clocked up 724 hours, 468 of which were as pilot in command, without bending an aeroplane and without anyone in my aircraft ever getting hurt. Others were not so lucky. In August 1967, after my time, a second aircraft was lost when it crashed in the sea whilst attempting to land in a rain storm at the An Thoi strip on the island of Phu Quoc (Duong Dong) off the coast of south-west Vietnam. It seems the pilot lost visual reference on final approach and landed in the sea well short of the strip. Fortunately, the aircraft ended up in fairly shallow water and all on board managed to escape without any serious injuries. The aircraft remained sitting on the bottom with its tail sticking up out of the water until it was eventually blown up by the US Navy.

In October 67 the Squadron was awarded the Duke of Gloucester Cup for outstanding efficiency in active operational support of ground forces but this was not achieved without cost as up to that time the Squadron had twelve instances of aircraft damaged by ground fire resulting in two passengers being killed and one wounded.

The third and only Caribou we lost as a direct result of enemy action was A4-193 in March 1970 which was destroyed by mortar fire whilst unloading at That Son. After coming under heavy fire, the crew was forced to abandon the aeroplane and dive for cover in a nearby trench. The aircraft was carrying drums of fuel which immediately burst into flames. The resulting fire was so intense the aeroplane burnt to the ground. It was a truly dangerous and frightening experience but again the crew got out of it without any serious injuries.

My friend and colleague, Flg Off Max Goodsell, was not so fortunate. He was hit in the face by ground fire and his copilot, Plt Off Ian Cooper, seeing Max's helmet and visor splattered with blood, took over the controls and immediately flew back to base where he landed the aircraft safely, flying from the right hand seat. Ian was awarded an MID for his efforts. Apart from being one of the nicest people you could hope to meet, Max Goodsell was a particularly handsome young man. The plastic surgeons did a wonderful job in putting Max's face back together and when the scars finally healed his good looks were again restored with scarcely a mark to indicate the trauma he had been through. Sadly, I was later to be indirectly involved when cruel fate caught up with Ian Cooper in a Macchi jet trainer at Sale in Victoria.

In at least one case that I know of, one of our passengers, a Vietnamese soldier, was hit in the leg by a bullet that came up through the floor of the aircraft. Although the soldier was seriously wounded and the crew offered to get him to an American base where he could be given urgent expert medical treatment the Vietnamese insisted on looking after him themselves so, as far as I know, his ultimate fate is still unknown.

Our Vietnam Caribous had armour plating fitted to the outboard sides of the pilots' seats and we placed folded flak jackets under the seats for additional protection against bullets coming up through the floor, but our arms and legs (and faces) were still vulnerable. On one occasion a round came up through the cockpit floor, ripped the boot off the pilot's foot, bounced off the Kevlar armour under his seat, grazed his leg and dropped onto the floor.

Although our aircraft were damaged by ground fire on an almost daily basis, only one aeroplane, A4-193, was lost as a result of enemy action, being completely destroyed by mortar fire in the incident at That Son. As for me, I guess I must have had a charmed life. I managed to survive 1,109 operational sorties without a scratch and count myself very lucky indeed.



The wreckage of Caribou A4-171 sitting in the shallows off the end of the runway at An Thoi on Phu Quoc Island. It landed in the water when the crew lost visual contact with the surface while attempting to land in August 1967. Fortunately the water was quite shallow and the crew and passengers managed to get out without serious injuries, but as the wreck was deemed to be a hazard, it was eventually blown up by the US Navy.



All that remains of Caribou A4-193 which was completely destroyed by enemy mortar fire at That Son in March 1970. The aircraft was carrying drums of helicopter fuel and the subsequent fire was so intense all that was left were the engines. The crew was forced to hurriedly abandon the aircraft and were lucky to escape without serious injury.

When a STOL landing goes wrong



A4-173 in its resting place after landing short and running off the strip at Hai Yen on 7 May 1965. The accident required a major repair effort involving replacement of the wing, undercarriage, propeller and other components. The aircraft flew out under its own power four days later, and after being rebuilt was back in service by September.



Landing short at Ba To, August 1966

This was the second landing accident for A4-173 when it hit the lip of the runway threshold at Ba To extensively damaging its left wing, undercarriage and engine. A rescue team was flown in from Vung Tau who worked feverishly to save the aircraft as the camp was under constant threat of mortar attack. Ten days later my old CO, Wg Cdr Charles Melchert, was able to fly the aircraft back to Vung Tau, albeit with the undercarriage fixed down with chains.



RAAF Airman, Geoff Hall, checking damage after A4-210 ran into a ditch at Dalat.



The result of friendly fire. USAF Caribou, (Yellow Tail KE)
This USAF Caribou was hit by American artillery when it flew through a fire zone while maneuvering to land.



Beech 18 after wheels-up landing at Ghia Nghia.



Vietnam Air Force Dakota off the end of the strip at Duong Dong.



VNAF A1 Skyraider ground-attack fighter-bomber overshot and ran off the end of Phan Thiet.



Heavy US Navy Phantom uses drag chute to help slow down on landing at Phan Rang.

We frequently carried American entertainers who put on United Services Organisation (USO) shows for the troops but towards the end of my tour Australian entertainers began coming up to put on shows for us. The Australian celebrities included Lucky Starr, Lucky Grills, Little Pattie, Big Pretzel (Pat Kennedy), Lorraine Desmond and the Irish-Australian funny man, Brian Doyle who was later to become a personal friend. We thoroughly enjoyed and greatly appreciated the show put on by the Lucky Starr group and needless to say the voluptuous and sexy Big Pretzel was a tremendous hit with the Australian troops. I had the greatest respect for entertainers such as the young Normie Rowe who, like Elvis Presley, did his national service training and put in time in the service of his country. I had no respect for those who hung back, enjoying all the benefits of our great nation whilst contributing nothing – in fact doing their best to sabotage the efforts of those who went out to fight to protect it.

Overall, I think the RAAF's performance in Vietnam was something Australia can be very proud of. The Army and Navy also performed magnificently gaining the respect of both friends and foe. The area which the Australian Army was responsible for became one of the few areas in South Vietnam where the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army became unable to operate effectively. The Australians were able to beat the enemy at their own game.

Unfortunately, the efforts of our armed forces in the field of battle were being constantly sabotaged by left wing elements at home. The Seamen's Union refused to man ships and the Communist dock workers refused to load them with the vital stores needed by our forces in the war zone while our university students seemed to find fun in attacking police and claiming police brutality whenever the police hit back. Some academics and student unions actually supported the Viet Cong cause and in one case it was reported that enemy soldiers had been found to be carrying food packages supplied by a Melbourne university.

The left wing media also brought shame on itself with its biased reporting. Anti-war demonstrations and any alleged allied atrocity in Vietnam were given heavily biased headline treatment whilst the constant and on-going Viet Cong atrocities were treated as hardly newsworthy or simply part of a justified fight against American imperialism. In one famous case of blatant media propaganda a well known weekly news magazine published a striking photograph of starving Vietnamese children scrounging for food in a rubbish bin as a result of American bombing. It turned out the unscrupulous journalist had thrown sweets into the bin and photographed the children as they retrieved them. When the lie was exposed the editor printed a tiny retraction which was conveniently buried in amongst ads in the middle of the magazine where it wouldn't be noticed. My faith in the media quickly began to wane.

During my nine months in South Vietnam I covered the entire country from top to bottom including some of the most remote villages and never saw a single starving Vietnamese child. On the contrary I was impressed by the cheeky happy faces of the Vietnamese children and the grace and beauty of the young Vietnamese girls in their lovely flowing ao dais.

On another occasion I happened to get hold of an Australian newspaper that had been sent up from Sydney and read with amazement about a dramatic Viet Cong night attack on Da Nang airport with many people killed and injured. It so happened that I was on a detachment to Da Nang during that week and was living on the base at the time. The bold attack on the base by the brave Viet Cong forces was news to me. Maybe I slept through it – admittedly I did get pretty tired after a hard day's work. Probably, the truth of the matter was, there had been a skirmish near the airport and news of this had been passed on to an unscrupulous journalist who had blown it up out of all proportion and his editor back in Australia did the rest.



Cheeky little scroungers looking for handouts.



Young Vietnamese women in their lovely ao dais.



My happy copilot Plt Off John Harrison with friendly USO showgirl.



Later, Australian entertainers came up to boost our morale, including Lucky Starr, Little Pattie and Col Joye. The Irish-Australian comic Brian Doyle, extreme right in the picture above, was later to become a close friend.

In March '66 Vung Tau airbase was mortared by VC damaging a hangar and several aircraft.

The Viet Cong were not brave soldiers. Like all terrorists, they were basically cowards who preferred to attack unsuspecting targets, then run away and hide rather than face their enemy in open military combat. The shocking attack on the My Canh restaurant proved this.

It should be remembered that at the time, international communism was a growing threat to the nations of the free world and a number of countries saw fit to send military forces to South Vietnam in an attempt to prevent a Communist takeover of that country. Nations with armed forces fighting the Communists in Vietnam included, South Vietnam itself, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, the Philippines and South Korea – all of whom felt threatened by the militant Communist expansion in Asia. Many other free world countries supported South Vietnam's fight against the Communists whilst not actually sending troops.

With the alarming spread of Communism throughout South-East Asia and the very real threat it posed to Australia at the time it would have been impossible for us to claim neutrality and sit on the sidelines leaving other countries to fight our battles for us. The loss of the Vietnam war to the Communists was not because of any military failings on our part, the blame can be laid squarely on the heads of the politicians of the day. The absurd claim that the Vietnam war was unwinnable eventually became accepted as fact. In actual fact, that statement became one of the most successful pieces of left wing propaganda used during the Vietnam conflict. It was hardly surprising that some people on the conservative side of politics claimed that Socialist Labor, some left wing academics, and the Communist dominated unions were actively siding with the enemy. The politics of war can be very nasty indeed.

In Australia, the majority of professional service personnel join up with the idea of working in the service of their country. They carry out the orders given to them by the democratically elected government of the day, even though they may not have voted for it and even if it sometimes means risking their lives. They can't decide individually, which wars they'll fight and which they won't.

I have never been able to come to terms with the fact that on our return home we were insulted and abused – even spat upon – by the Australian people when all we were doing was serving our country. Here, as in the United States, the split between left and right even divided families. I was particularly hurt when my own uncle, Uncle Jim, sent me a Christmas card containing a note which criticised me for my part in the “murder” of innocent Vietnamese civilians. He was a highly educated man and a teacher of outstanding ability. He had been a mentor to me and I had respected him enormously. I never spoke to him again.

It wasn't until after Uncle Jim died in January 1980 that I learned of his Socialist leanings and his left wing activities. When I was posted off course to the No 2 Air Trials Unit at Edinburgh in South Australia, because I would be involved in top secret weapons trials, my security clearance needed to be upgraded. In connection with this, officers from our national security establishment visited Uncle Jim to enquire into my background. Looking back now I find it ironic that our security organisation was checking on me with a man who himself might well have been a subject of their investigations.

The fanatical promotion of guilt and shame by our left wing academics and misguided idealists never ceases to amaze me. Our history books are being rewritten to make them politically correct and our children are being taught at school to be ashamed of our history and our Anglo-Celtic heritage and that they must now embrace globalisation and the wonderful benefits of multiculturalism. What kind of society is this creating ?



Sign in the village square, Vung Tau, showing countries supporting South Vietnam, although few actually sent troops.



Relaxing on the Back Beach at Vung Tau with protective helicopter gunship in the background.
Jeff Willans and John Steege standing with Dick Brice and Mark Perret lying on the sand.

Sadly, I believe the disgraceful treatment meted out to the Vietnam veterans will leave a permanent stain on our nation's history. If we abuse our young people for going to war, how can we expect them to fight for us if the need should arise in the future ?

* * *

I left Vietnam on August 6, 1966, just 12 days before the historic battle of Long Tan.

The arrival of the Australian Task Force in the Phuoc Tuy province of South Vietnam caused major problems for the Communist forces in the Australian area of responsibility and the enemy commanders decided it was necessary to achieve a crushing and morale-sapping victory over the troublesome newcomers. An attack in force was organised against the Australians.

On August 18, 108 members of D Company, 6th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, ran into a reinforced Viet Cong Regiment in the Long Tan rubber plantation, about 4 kms east of the Australian Army base at Nui Dat in what was virtually an enemy ambush. Although the Australians were heavily outnumbered, in the ensuing six hour battle the Diggers fought off numerous company and battalion attacks until eventually relieved by A Company 6 RAR and 3 Troop, No 1 Armoured Personnel Carrier Squadron. The battle was fought in pouring rain with 18 Australian soldiers killed and 21 wounded, but despite this the Diggers ended up killing 245 of the enemy and wounded another 500, inflicting on it a remarkable and decisive defeat. With the Diggers running low on ammunition my old BFTS instructor, Flt Lt Frank Riley, and another chopper crew, flew through heavy rain, failing light and poor visibility to drop ammo to the encircled soldiers in the heat of battle. His DFC was well and truly earned.

To summarise the heroic battle: some 2,500 Viet Cong and tough North Vietnamese regulars – who had not lost a battle elsewhere in the previous two years – were thwarted by a combination of gutsy conscripts, inspiring leadership, tactical acumen, unrelenting artillery support, a brave ammunition resupply by two RAAF helicopters, and an armoured rescue mission. What should have been an overwhelming rout of the Australians turned into a major and costly battle for the enemy.

The Battle of Long Tan incurred the greatest number of casualties suffered by any Australian unit in Vietnam, and the 18th of August has now been adopted as Vietnam Veterans' Day. It is the most revered day in the Vietnam Veterans' calendar. A simple cross was erected at the site as a memorial to the men of D Coy, 6 RAR who were killed in the battle. During the war in Vietnam 47,000 Australian service personnel served there, we suffered 496 casualties and 2,500 wounded. It must be appreciated, of course, that not all these casualties were caused by direct enemy action. Many were simply the result of accidents while others, particularly on the American side, were caused by so called "friendly fire". Increasingly, however, the battle of Long Tan is becoming the focus of remembrance for many Australian and New Zealand army, navy and air force veterans of the Vietnam conflict and the humble memorial at the battle site is starting to attract many younger Australians as they visit that part of Vietnam.

The part played by our National Service conscripts should not be overlooked. Between 1951 and 1972 when National Service was abolished by the newly elected Whitlam Government, a total of 287,000 young Australian men were called up in two separate schemes for compulsory training in the Navy, Army and Air Force. Of them, 187 were killed and 1,479 wounded on active service in Vietnam, Malaysia and Borneo. National Service was part of Australia's defence preparedness for three decades.



The first RAAF gunship, dubbed 'Ned Kelly', showing the trial armament system fitted to UH-1B A2-1025 in March 1968. Pictured with the aircraft are members of the project team (from left): Sergeant E.E. Moore, Flight Lieutenant R.C. Thompson, Squadron Leader J.H. Cox. At right is armament fitter, Leading Aircraftman E.G. Maxwell. (DEPAIR FILE 417/5/48[1], DD: AWM P01942.002)

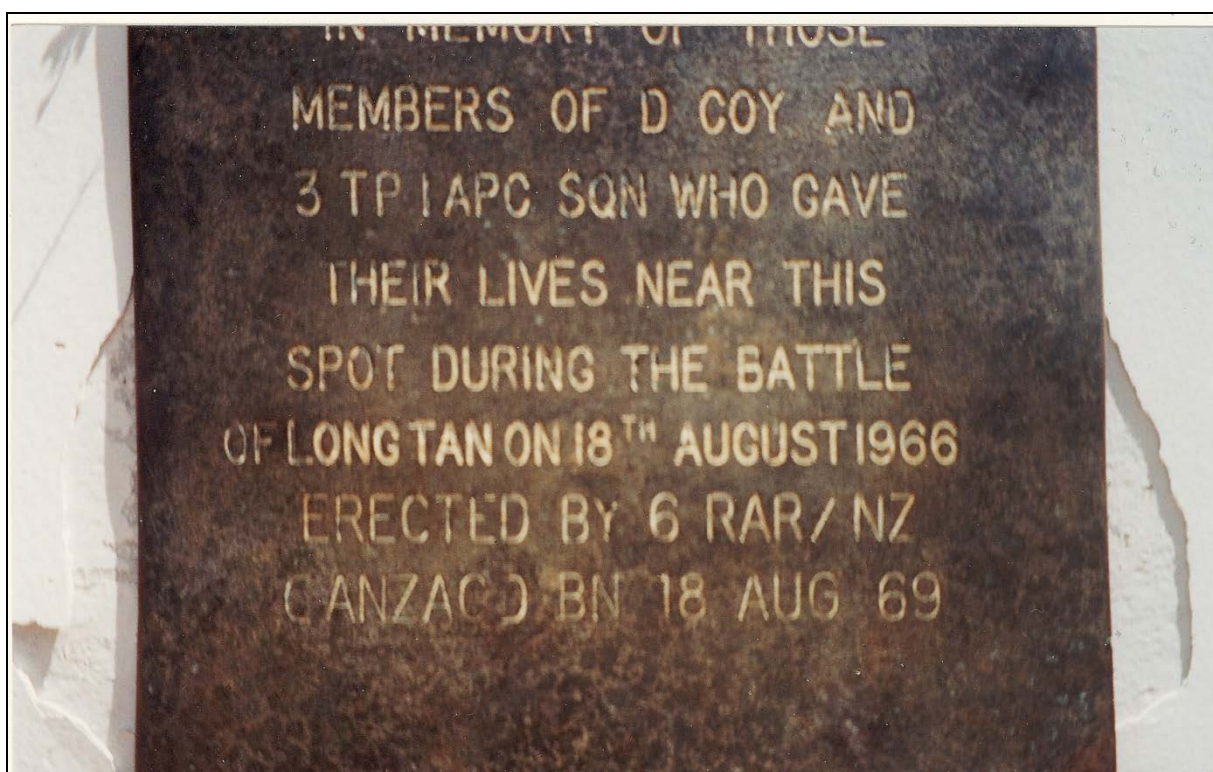


Squadron Leader B.L.J. Dirou, project officer during the development phase for the RAAF 'Bushrangers', is shown here during the arming of one of the 9 Squadron gunships. (J.A. PAULE)

9 Sqn's helicopter gunships, featuring two of my old course-mates from No. 40 Pilots Course, Bob Thompson and Brian Dirou.



Long Tan – the now sacred site in the rubber plantation where the historic battle took place.



The inscription on the plaque hanging from the cross at Long Tan. When we visited in February 2004, the plaque was not kept on the cross but had to be picked up and signed for from the local police station.

Sadly, since the abolition of National Service training, today's youth seems to be suffering from a lack of discipline and social responsibility and is clearly becoming increasingly idle and self-centred.

All three Services contributed gallantly to the allied war effort in Vietnam, none more so than the RAAF. On their delivery flight to Australia from the factory in Canada some of the first Australian purchased Caribous were diverted directly into active service in the War Zone. On August 8, 1964, the Air Force established the RAAF Transport Flight (RTFV) at Vung Tau in the Republic of South Vietnam. This event marked the first deployment of an RAAF unit to war since Korea. The RTFV, which later became No 35 Squadron, was in Vietnam well before the Task Force arrived and was also the last RAAF unit to leave Vietnam in 1972.

To put things in perspective, however, it should be appreciated that the US war effort in Vietnam was truly enormous, culminating in the Americans having up to half a million military personnel operating in country. This compares with 48,000 South Korean troops and 11,000 Thais. By comparison, the Australian Army peaked at a mere 8,300 in late 1967. The Koreans in particular were very effective in their operations against the Viet Cong. Often, of a morning, I would see them jogging around the airfield perimeter in small groups naked except for tiny loin cloths. They were tough and extremely fit, and probably the only troops the VC really feared.

Right from the beginning it became obvious that the very different operational styles of the Australians and the Americans meant that the Australian Army would simply be unable to function as part of the monstrous US Army. The Australians were highly experienced at relatively small scale jungle fighting and anti-guerilla operations as a result of their extensive Malayan and Borneo campaigns. There was simply no way they were going to fit into the Americans' massive steamroller type of operations. The result was the setting up of the independent Australian task force at Nui Dat which was given the responsibility of pacifying and controlling the Phuoc Tuy province – a task which it carried out with distinction.

It is probably not surprising that in American histories of the Vietnam War the Australian contribution doesn't even rate a mention. What is less excusable, however, is that in Australian histories of the war, coverage is restricted almost entirely to the exploits of the Army. Despite the important role played by the RAAF throughout the entire period of the war, the Air Force is rarely mentioned. Even in the critical battle of Long Tan the vital role played by the RAAF Iriquois helicopters in delivering the ammunition to the beleaguered troops in impossible weather and under enemy fire doesn't even rate a mention.

In November 1967, General Westmoreland returned to Washington to tell congress that although the enemy was not yet defeated, there was 'light at the end of the tunnel'. However, in January 1968 the surprise Tet Offensive by the Communist forces, although in fact a military failure for the enemy, shocked the Americans and did much to destroy American resolve. Ho Chi Minh and his Communist cohort took advantage of the subsequent political wavering by our politicians back home in the US and in Australia, and cleverly turned what could have been an ultimate allied victory into what resulted in an easy victory by the North over the South after the allies had naively withdrawn. It seems that even for a super power victory is not assured without determination and the will to win. The great American President, Theodore Roosevelt expressed his foreign policy as, "Speak softly and carry a big stick". A big stick is fine but you must be prepared to use it, and use it effectively. Nevertheless, although Communism was not defeated in Vietnam, in the 10 years it was held at bay there, it lost its momentum and soon began to self-destruct. In that sense, we can probably claim Vietnam as a victory.



A rather uninviting, unidentified dirt strip somewhere in South Vietnam.

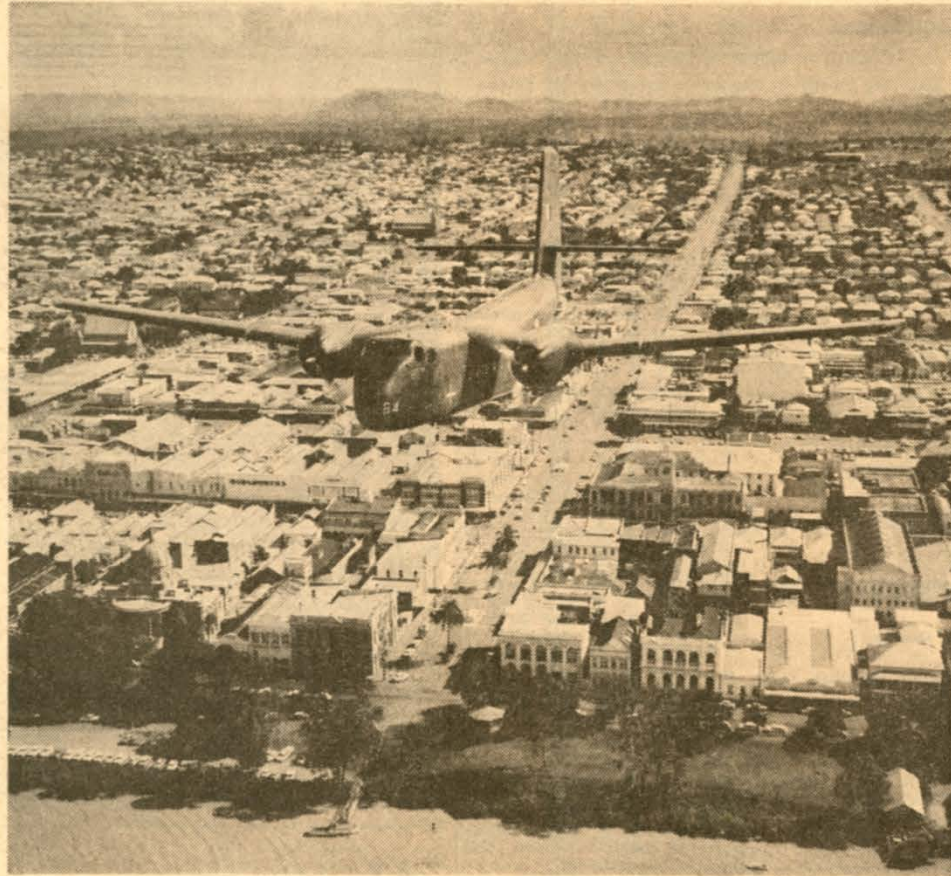


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ital OVER CITY AND OFF TO SHOALWATER BAY



Self with Plt Off John Rydstrom fly out over Rockhampton on one of the seven shuttles we flew in A4-164 to and from The Plains on March 31 during Exercise 'Get Set'.

The incredible de Havilland Canada DHC-4 Caribou transport has turned out to be one of the best military purchases our government has made. Its outstanding short take off and landing ability and its rugged rough field capability are unmatched.

Since its introduction into the RAAF in 1964 this remarkable aircraft has been filling a vital role – and there is no suitable replacement in sight.

A Caribou aircraft flies low over the heart of Rockhampton on one of 47 sorties to The Plains on Exercise Get Set, being held in Shoalwater Bay. Three Caribou yesterday lifted 262,860 lb. of freight, 714 troops, six howitzers, 10 four-wheel - drive vehicles, five trailers and one ambulance. This was the lift of 2 R.A.R., which moved into the area for the final phase of training before going to Vietnam.



READY—"GET SET"

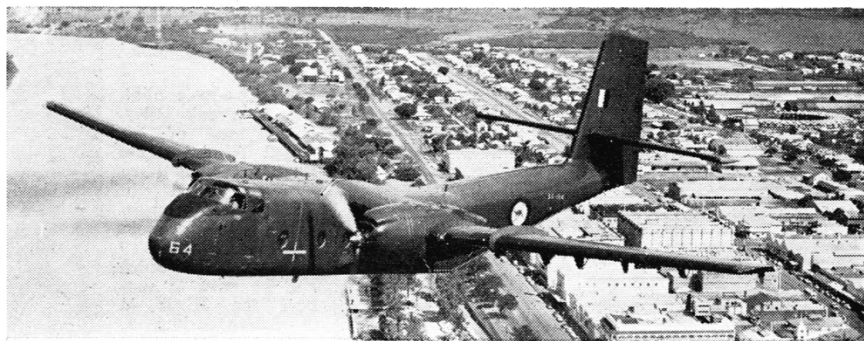
The RAAF returned to Shoalwater Bay during March-April for Exercise "Get Set".

The RAAF role was similar to the recent Exercise "Nilla Qua" held in the same area. Exercises of this nature will be held at regular intervals in Shoalwater Bay, which is now the Army's main training area.

A tactical Air Support Force was set up at the Plains. This was commanded by Wg Cdr

Plt Off John Byrnes, Maj William Emrie, USAF, Capt Bill Regtop, Flt Lt Tom Ward, and Flg Off Neal Bowers check over a map before taking off during Exercise "Get Set".

Below: A RAAF Caribou flies over Rockhampton whilst ferrying troops and supplies from Rockhampton to the Shoalwater Bay training area.



tangs and 61 Liberators.

In 1947, Trans Australia Airlines was formed, and had as its first equipment a number of Dakota aircraft which were transferred from the RAAF.

Later, CTO's inspections and test flights were carried out at No 3 Aircraft Depot on Mustang aircraft destined for the occupation of Japan and these aircraft took part in the early stages of the Korean War. Engine Repair Squadron, which remained in operation until about 1960, had by this time changed over to the overhaul of Rolls Royce Merlin engines for Mustang, Mosquito and Lincoln aircraft.

In addition, Rolls Royce Nene and Derwent jet engines were serviced by the unit, which was equipped with full engine test stands for running both piston and jet engines.

At present, E Servicing are carried out on Canberra and Sabre aircraft, and certain equipment from Mirage aircraft are also overhauled at this unit. Present strength is about 600.

The major task of No 3 Aircraft Depot in the future will be the overhaul of Pratt and Whitney TF 30 engines for the F-111C aircraft, and the E Servicing of that aircraft. For this task, a considerable works program is now under way. The F-111C will be the 28th type of aircraft handled by No 3 Aircraft Depot.

Cong positions.

His aircraft was hit twice by enemy ground fire, one bullet passing through the canopy only inches from his head.

"RAAF NEWS" is compiled by the Directorate of Public Relations and printed by RAAF Printing and Publications Unit.

Sydney March For Veterans



● More than 100 RAAF members took part in a march of Vietnam veterans through Sydney streets in May. The RAAF Contingent was led by Wg Cdr Charles Melchert, a former CO of No 35 Sqn. The smartly turned out RAAF marchers and their Army comrades of 5 RAR were given a rousing reception from enthusiastic onlookers.

PICS.

TOP: As a coincidence, I was later to learn that Capt Bill Regtop happened to be the brother of the girl involved in our dramatic medevac flight to Glen Innes on the night of 15 May 1968.

ABOVE: This photo Plt Off Jack Rydstrom and me in A4-164 was one of a series taken by Sgt Derek Travers from RAAF Public Relations on one of the seven shuttles we flew between Rocky and The Plains on 31 March 1967. This photo was used on the Squadron's 67 Christmas card.

RIGHT: Our march through Sydney in May 1967. Our CO, Wg Cdr Charles Melchert, is leading, followed by the tall Flt Lt John Vandersteeg.

RAAF Caribous range far and wide.



We witnessed the eruption of the Long Island volcano off the north coast of TPNG in February 1967.



On the ground, Rabaul, on the island of New Britain in the Bismarck Archipelago.



One of the three all-white RAAF Caribous on UN peacekeeping duties in Pakistan between 1975 and 1979.



A No. 35 SQN Caribou from Townsville landing on the grass foreshore of Langley Park, Perth as part of an emergency feasibility exercise in conjunction with Royal Perth Hospital in 1997.



With Lt Col Gary McKay at the Officers Mess ADFA / Duntroon, 2 October 1992.
As a contributing author, I was invited to the launch of his book *Vietnam Fragments*.



Vietnam Dedication Weekend, Canberra, 3-4 th October 1992.
RAAF 38 SQN reunion dinner at Raiders Rugby League Club, Queanbeyan, Sat 3 Oct 1992.
Present with wives were: Peter Franks, Chuck Connor, John Griffiths, Gary Kimberley and Fred Heuke.



Vietnam revisited

Pat and I cruising on the Mekong during our holiday in South Vietnam in Feb/March 2004.
Australians are now welcomed in Vietnam.



The magnificent joint Australian-Vietnamese built bridge over a branch of the Mekong near Vinh Long.

Driving up the long straight road from Vung Tau village to the air base you'll now find the old entrance to the base has been walled off. The 35 Sqn headquarters hut was just inside and around to the left. The airport now has a modern new terminal.



Nothing remains of the Australian army camp at Nui Dat.
The overgrown and crumbling airstrip now serves as the main street for the local village.



Standing proudly by the Unit banner on the beach at Opal Cove Resort prior to 38 SQN Caribou flypast.
The establishment of RTFV in Vietnam on 8 August 1964 was the first deployment of a RAAF unit to war since the Korean War. RTFV/35 SQN was also the last RAAF unit to leave Vietnam – returning home in February 1972 after 7½ years in the war zone.



Vietnam vets at Coffs Harbour for the RTFV/35 Sqn reunion, Coffs Harbour Airport, Sunday 8 August 2004.
Ron 'Sticky' Glew (Asst L/M), Max Wilson (Asst L/M), Mick Gwin (L/M) and Gary Kimberley (pilot).



Presentation of Air Medals to ex-Vietnam aircrew members at Australian War Memorial, Canberra by US Ambassador and unveiling of Squadron bronze plaque prior to its placement in the war memorial, 4 April 2008.



Being presented with Air Medal by US Ambassador Mr Robert D. McCallum Jr.
In the background: Bill Pike (rear) and Peter Yates.



RTFV/35 SQN Vietnam Vets 45th anniversary reunion, Coffs Harbour, 1 August 2009.



Jeff Pedrina poses with one of the Caribou crews.



Vets and their wives were taken up for short flights along the coast – Pat Kimberley choosing a seat.



Sitting in the driver's seat one last time.



The Caribou driver's work station.



CARIBOUS TO GO

The Rudd Labor Government confirmed in its May 12 Budget that the RAAF's Caribous would be retired at the end of the year and would not be replaced as no equivalent replacement aircraft was available.

The Caribou's light weight, useful load carrying capacity, remarkable STOL capabilities and ability to operate from rough unprepared dirt fields, gives it a usefulness that will be sorely missed.

The remarkably successful F-111 long range strike bombers are also to be retired without a suitable replacement.

The departure of the F-111s and the Caribous will leave two gaping holes in the nation's defence capabilities.

Having flown the fabulous Caribous for almost five years of my Air Force career, I will be saddened to see them go.

Gareth Kimberley

9 June 2009



RAAF

Above: A DHC-4 conducts a Low Altitude Parachute Extraction System drop.

Right: A Caribou taxis during the RAMSI intervention in the Solomon Islands in mid 2003.



RAAF

RAAF DHC4 CARIBOUS TO RETIRE

TOWNSVILLE: The RAAF will withdraw its fleet of 13 DHC-4 Caribou transport aircraft from service this year.

Difficulties maintaining Caribou serviceability due to corrosion, airframe fatigue issues and systems obsolescence forced the RAAF decision as the aircraft became increasingly expensive to keep airworthy.

The RAAF's Caribous are operated by 38 Sqn at RAAF Base Amberley west of Brisbane and with the 38 Sqn Detachment at RAAF Base Townsville.

Caribou A4-285 was written off after being damaged during a hard landing at Efogi airport in Papua New Guinea on September 5 last year. The aircraft was disassembled prior to being flown back to Australia.

The RAAF initially acquired the DHC-4 Caribou as a replacement for the DC-3 Dakota with 18 aircraft acquired in 1964 and a follow on purchase of seven aircraft in 1966. Four additional aircraft were purchased to replace lost airframes.

During the Caribou's 45 year service with the RAAF the aircraft were operated by 38

Squadron, 35 Squadron and served with the RAAF Transport Flight Vietnam.

Current Caribou operator 38 Sqn will transition to the Hawker Pacific King Air turbo prop aircraft. An additional five Hawker Pacific B300 King Air aircraft will be leased to replace the Caribous, with current Caribou tasks divided between the new King Airs and the RAAF's fleet of C-130J/H Hercules transports.

The RAAF's 32 Sqn operates the King Air B350 from RAAF East Sale where the aircraft are used by the School of Aviation Warfare as a training platform.

Three B350 King Airs operated by the Army's 173 Surveillance Squadron will be transferred to 38 Squadron to place all of the ADF King Air airframes under one parent unit. Army King Air aircrew and maintainers will be given the choice of transferring to the RAAF or transferring to other Army units.

The King Airs will remain in service until at least 2013 when a replacement Tactical Battlefield Airlifter was due to enter service. The Government

has announced that it will probably not have arrangements in place for a replacement type within the four year time frame. The RAAF is currently evaluating options for a replacement platform. The Defence White Paper 2009 calls for ten Light Tactical Aircraft under Air 8000 Phase 2.

The Caribou will be the RAAF's second longest serving aircraft after the DC-3 when it is retired later this year. During its long service, the Caribou was deployed on operations in South Vietnam for six years. The aircraft was also deployed to Kashmir and Sumatra as well as being the mainstay of recent RAAF airlift operations in East Timor and the Solomon Islands.

Caribous were also based in

Port Moresby to support ADF operations prior to PNG's independence in 1975 and aircraft were permanently based at RMAF Butterworth to support RAAF Mirage IIIO operations.

RAAF DHC-4s flying under the Red Cross symbol also flew a daily aid mission into Dili, East Timor during the initial independence conflict after the Portuguese withdrawal in 1975.

During the six years of flight operations in South Vietnam with the RAAF Transport Flight Vietnam (nicknamed Wallaby Airlines), Caribous transported 600,000 personnel without loss but a number of aircraft were destroyed or damaged by hostile fire during the deployment.

Two Caribous will be retained as museum exhibits with Caribou A4-140 going on static display at the Australian War Memorial and A4-152 being donated to the RAAF Museum at Point Cook as a flying exhibit.



Two of the RAAF's 32 Sqn B350 King Air training aircraft.



RAAF



FAREWELL BRAVE AND FAITHFUL SERVANT.

On Saturday 7 November, No. 38 Squadron, now based at RAAF Garbutt, Townsville, will conduct a ceremony to mark the retirement of the magnificent Caribou tactical transport aircraft from RAAF service. Since entering service with the RAAF in 1964, the de Havilland Canada DHC-4 Caribou has served us well in both peace and war. In Vietnam it supported troops in front line battlefield conditions, with its amazing short take-off and landing ability enabling it to get into and out of places that no other aircraft of comparable size could go. It could, and did, take many hits from enemy ground fire and still kept flying. This magnificent machine carried anything and everything, from passengers, paratroops and medevac patients to mail, food, medical supplies, jeeps, trailers, field guns, and 44 gallon drums of fuel – often having to paradrop supplies onto restricted drop zones not much bigger than a tennis court.

The RAAF Caribous have rendered outstanding service in PNG and the islands to the north, in East Timor, Indonesia and even in Pakistan where they worked in support of UN agencies. At home in Australia, the Caribou has worked tirelessly on tasks such as flood relief, drought relief and emergency medevac missions, apart from its primary role of front line support for the Army. It has been aptly called 'a flying 3-tonne truck' and there is nothing else in the world at the moment that is capable of replacing it. To all those people who have come to know and love the Caribou, 38 Squadron is holding farewell functions on the Base on November 7 but security restrictions apply. For further info contact LACW Natalie Cowell on (07) 4752 1312 or email: 38SQN.45Yrs@defence.gov.au

Having flown the 'Bou' for almost five years of my 11-year air force career, I will be especially sad to see it go.

A DEFENCE HIATUS After a remarkable 45 years of outstanding service, the venerable Caribou is about to fly off to that great heavenly hangar in the sky. What a pity all but two will be chopped up for scrap. One is planned to go to the Australian War Memorial in Canberra as a static exhibit while a second will go the RAAF Museum at Point Cook in Victoria where hopefully it will be kept in flying condition. What about putting one on display at the entrance to the RAAF Base at Richmond where it spent most of its life, like they did with the Neptune outside the guard gate at Garbutt? And what about offering one to the Historic Aircraft Restoration Society who I'm sure would keep it in flying condition, and there'd be no shortage of people who could fly it.

With no replacement for our STOL front line transport, and with the remarkably successful F-111 swing-wing strike bombers also on the way out, we've got a serious problem. The ageing F/A-18 fighters are to be replaced by the 24 Super Hornets but neither the Super Hornet nor the JSF have the long range strike capability of the F-111. The departure of the F-111s and the Caribous will leave two gaping holes in our defence capabilities.

RUDD'S REFUGEE PUSH-PULL BLOOPER When Kevin-0-7 came to power he trumpeted to the world that he would abolish the Howard Government's hardline policies on illegal immigrants and adopt a more caring and humane approach. With people smuggling being almost completely stopped as a result of the Howard Government's tough policies, Rudd's softer, more humane approach has brought the boat people back with a vengeance.

In a desperate attempt to wriggle out of their predicament, Rudd and his Immigration Minister, Senator Chris Evans, are now claiming the increase in the number of refugees heading for Australia is just a coincidence and been brought about as a result of "push factors" in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Unfortunately, this attempt at spin has backfired as it has now become clear that Rudd & Co have turned Australia into a refugee magnet and it is the "pull factor" that is driving the asylum seeker invasion.

RUDD CREATES HIS OWN TAMPA CRISIS. After throwing open the immigration flood gates and loudly proclaiming his softer "more humane" approach to asylum seekers, Kevin-oh-Heaven comes on television and says he makes no apology for his hardline stance! Our master of spin is clearly making an art form out of saying one thing while doing the opposite. While the Oceanic Viking with its rescued asylum seekers on board sails around in circles waiting for permission to dock in Merak, Rudd is now talking to the Indonesian President in a desperate attempt to replace John Howard's 'Pacific Solution' with his own version of an Indonesian Solution. But relying on Indonesia to solve your problems is fraught with danger.



38 Squadron's Enfield on tail tells of years of outstanding service to the nation.



Caribou head protruding from cockpit at farewell party in hangar on 7 November 2009.



The last of the Caribous outside the 38 SQN hangar at Townsville, about to vanish into history.

BEECH KING AIRS TO REPLACE CARIBOUS Nigel Pittaway, *Defence Today*, September 2009.

There's little doubt that the ADF needs a battlefield airlift capability to replace the Caribou, even though it is widely acknowledged that its unique capabilities cannot be fully replicated. The recovery efforts following the recent (October 2009) tragic loss of a civil Twin Otter at Kokoda in PNG displayed these irreplaceable attributes admirably. Pictures of a Caribou at an austere grass airfield close to the accident scene unloading cargo (including drums of fuel) underline its value during civil disasters. This is one capability the replacement King Air can never hope to fill and will be sorely missed by both the ADF and our civilian relief agencies.





With Loadmaster John McDougall at the farewell BBQ on The Strand, 8 Nov 2010.



CARIBOU CARGO Queensland company Caribou Cargo plans to soon commence operations and is offering a re-engined turbo Caribou STOL transport to customers in Australia, PNG and Asia who require loads of up to 4500kg to be carried into small or unprepared airstrips. Company principal, Paul Strike, says the aircraft has been retrofitted by US based Caribou specialist Pen Turbo under a supplementary type certificate (STC) to remove the old radial engines and replace them with PT6A turboprops and associated propellers. (Caribou Cargo)

What might have been.
(From *Australian Aviation*, May 2010)

To continue the story with 38 SQN, post Vietnam, see Book Five

Back from the War Richmond and New Guinea

from the autobiography
A Flier's Life



by (Flt Lt) Gareth Kimberley

Book Five – Chapters 19 to 26

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