

A4-173 ACCIDENT AT HAI YEN – FRIDAY 7 MAY 1965

At 1305 on Friday 7 May 1965, RAAF Caribou A4-173, of RAAF Transport Flight Vietnam (RTFV), crashed at Hai Yen in Vietnam. Hai Yen was a small fortified settlement located on the south-western tip of the Mekong Delta, south of Ca Mau.



Route flown and location of Hai Yen



After landing at Hai Yen

The pilots of the aircraft were Flight Lieutenant Dave Cooper and Flying Officer Brian Hammond. Down the back was the loadmaster Corporal Barry Ingate and assistant loadmaster Leading Aircraftsman E. Massie. It had been a busy morning for the crew. Barry Ingate takes up the story:

“On 7th May 1965 I was assigned to A4-173 to do one of the two so-called milk runs. This one we did on Monday, Wednesday and Friday and involved hauling pax and freight (a lot of mail) around the delta, leaving Saigon and hopping from place to place (always the same places) and eventually arriving back at Saigon and then back to Vung Tau. We were on the return part of the mission and landed at a place called Ca Mau where we were told we had an additional run to do to a place called Hai Yen, not on our normal route and about as far south as you can go in the delta. The VC had hit the place the night before and killed quite a few people (Vietnamese) and they needed coffins.

So we loaded up with what I called D.I.Y. coffins (as they were mostly in pieces to be assembled later) and a few passengers and headed south. Hai Yen had a short P.S.P. (Pierced Steel Planking) strip (about 900 feet I think) set in a vast area of rice paddy fields and mud. It was like landing on a small aircraft carrier and, like an aircraft carrier, if you landed short you were in trouble. Unfortunately, at 1305 that's what happened and we tore the starboard main gear loose, came down on the starboard wing and bent it and the starboard prop. We eventually came to a grinding halt not quite fully off the strip and in the reeds and mud. No-one was hurt although the pilot was understandably pretty upset. Anyway, I got the aircraft unloaded and secured as best I could while the pilots called base (there was a small U.S. Army post at Hai Yen) and arranged for U.S. Army choppers to lift us out.”

Extracted from Unit History Sheets, they departed Vung Tau at 0720 and, after loading up with freight and passengers at Tan Son Nhut (Saigon) they landed at Moc Hoa, Cao Lanh, Kien Giang on their way to Ca Mau. Coincidentally, this was to be the last day of operational flying in Vietnam for Brian Hammond as he departed for Australia on 12 May on completion of his nine-month tour.



View after aircraft skidded to stop



*Looking rear towards runway
US air drop ammo box debris still on runway
Right U/C skid marks off runway*

An initial assessment of the aircraft indicated that it would have to be written off and reduced to spare parts as a replacement right wing was not available. Work commenced to break the aircraft down to spares. In the main, the removed equipment included radios, instruments and electrical items. Most wiring looms were cut rather than disconnected as there was a perceived need to “get in and get out”.

Fortunately, the initial decision for write-off was reversed before larger components had been removed. Recovery of the aircraft became a viable option when the US Army generously offered the loan of a spare wing and transport support thus, enabling the aircraft to be repaired in the field and flown back to home base at Vung Tau. Unfortunately, there was to be more damage inflicted on 173 prior to the recovery team arriving. Charlie Downes was one of the Hai Yen recovery team as an Airframe Fitter. He recalls the event:

“Before our arrival the yanks did a supply drop of ammunition in boxes, and the only drop zone available was the runway. One box landed on the previously undamaged left wing leading edge, near the spar. The damage was not terminal and a temporary fix was done for the return flight to Vung Tau”

It has been suggested that this incident was an embarrassment to the Americans which led them to being so generous with spares and transport assistance. On Tuesday 11 May, a composite crew of RAAF and US Army technical personnel with spares and necessary general support equipment (GSE) was flown to Hai Yen by the 330th Aviation Company. Ron Furze was one of the recovery team that day:

" The recovery team was flown on a US Army Sikorsky H-37 Mojave helicopter from Vung Tau to an intermediate stop (probably Can Tho) to refuel, and the 13-man team were then transported by U.S. Army Iroquois from Can Tho to Hai Yen. The replacement engine, propeller and right wing were later transported to Hai Yen as internal loads on an H-37....."



*In front of H-37 Mojave "Big Ed"
Standing: US Army H-37 Pilot
Kneeling L-R: John Rae, Unknown, Kevin Martin*

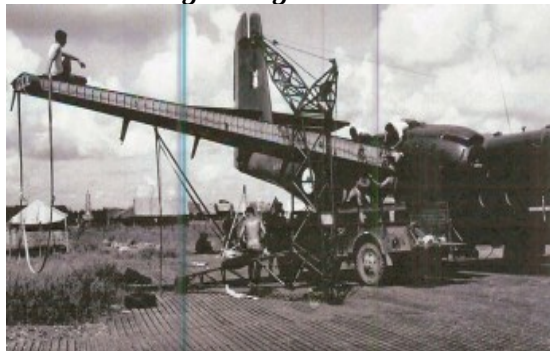
The RAAF recovery team was led by Warrant Officer Engineer (WOE) George McLean. Others in his team were:

Flt Sgt Frank (Jerry) Latham	Senior Engine Fitter
Cpl Fred Fortescue	Engine Fitter
LAC Robin Wright	Engine Fitter
Cpl Charlie Downes	Senior Airframe Fitter
LAC Kevin Martin	Airframe Fitter
LAC Ron Furze	Electrical Fitter
LAC John Rae	Instrument Fitter
LAC Ian Johnston	Radio Technician
LAC Peter Jones	Metal Basher

There were also some US Army technicians, who mainly worked on the airframe, but helped other trades when needed. Their assistance was certainly appreciated.



Right wing removed



Loaned US Army wing being fitted



All hands needed to get it out of bog onto PSP



George McLean with hammer and US Marine techs

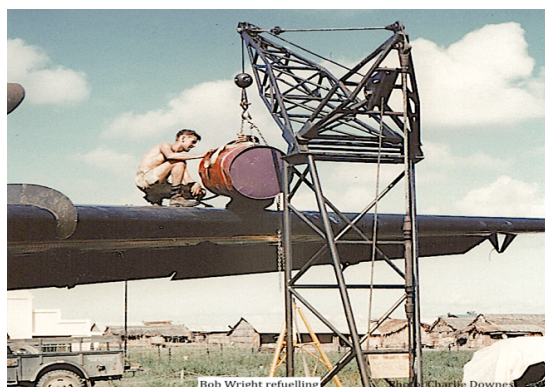
Initially, the right wing was removed, the aircraft jacked and a replacement right undercarriage fitted. Using manpower and an Army truck, the aircraft was towed out of the drain to a PSP hardstand. The right engine was removed and replaced and a second hand US Army Caribou wing, complete with US markings, was fitted. The electricians also had a big task rewiring cockpit instruments and looms which had been cut after the earlier decision to write the aircraft off. The US Army wing fitted perfectly, however not all the ancillary fittings matched up. The aileron runs could not be lined up, so the trim was locked in the “best guess” position for the recovery flight. The technicians were unable to get the flaps operational, so they were locked in the take-off position and remained there for the flight back to Vung Tau. The right main and nose wheel undercarriages were replaced and all were locked down for the recovery flight. The recovery team was required to work in the open without workshop facilities. Interestingly, nearly all the airframe and engine work was carried out without the reference to publications or the signing of work sheets. It was a matter of getting the work done as quickly as possible

and get out of there. They did exceedingly well to get the aircraft flyable in four days, particularly when they were only allowed outside the camp compound to work on the aircraft between 0800 and 1600 each day.

There was a small US Army Special Forces camp based at Hai Yen comprising around ten troops. Their role there was to direct, organise, train and supply the local ARVN troops against the VC. The recovery team were guests of the camp during their five nights there and were provided with basic accommodation and the good old Army rations. Each morning, when the team returned to the aircraft, they found one or two bullet holes. Fortunately, the VC were terrible shots and the damage was easily repaired with a “penny” patch.



John Rae replacing removed instrumentation



Bob Wright refuelling the hard way

By Saturday afternoon, 15 May 1965, the recovery team deemed the aircraft sufficiently airworthy to be flown back to Vung Tau, its home base. Next morning, Flt Lt Rocky Rockliff, the senior RTFV engineering officer, arrived by helicopter with the aircrew to inspect the repairs and give technical approval for the recovery flight. Charlie Downes recalled the first words Rocky said to him after arrival, “Will it fly Charlie?”. Charlie and Jerry Latham walked Rocky around the aircraft pointing out the airframe and engine repairs that had been done. Rocky had a personal interest in the air worthiness of the aircraft as he was to be on board for the recovery flight.

Mid morning, sporting a mixture US Army and RAAF markings A4-173 lifted off at Hai Yen for the recovery flight back to Vung Tau. It was flown by Sqn Ldr Doug Harvey, the Commanding Officer of RTFV. Barry Ingate, the loadmaster on the flight of the accident, was again the loadmaster on this flight. The SENG, Rocky Rockliff, and WOE George McLean were also on board. Mysteriously, the Unit History Sheets do not indicate who was flying in the co-pilot's seat. With the flaps locked in a partially down position and the undercarriage also locked fully down, it was a slow flight home. The pilot had to maintain considerable left aileron to keep the aircraft straight and level. They had to make a stop at Ca Mau enroute for a refuel.



A4-173 preparing to take-off from Hai Yen after in field repairs



*Sqn Ldr Doug Harvey back at Vung Tau
Note US starboard wing markings*

Sqn Ldr Harvey later noted "Without the generous support and co-operation given by the United States Army, the aircraft would have simply been written off." The SENGO, Rocky Rockliff, commented that he tried to recommend several of the recovery maintenance crew for awards of the British Empire Medal, which was the only suitable award available at that time. However, only a Mention in Despatches were awarded to Frank Latham and Charlie Downes.

A4-173 underwent major repairs and overhaul at Vung Tau, including replacing the loaned US Army wing. Four months later, on 9 September, the aircraft was returned to operational flying. Unfortunately, the aircraft was to be involved in a very similar accident thirteen months later at Ba To.

The month of May had not been a good month for the RTFV. In addition to the Hai Yen accident on 7 May, another unit Caribou, A4-171, suffered serious nose wheel undercarriage damage at Tanh Linh on the 13th. It required significant repairs in the field and was also flown back to Vung Tau by Sqn Ldr Harvey with the undercarriage locked down.

SOURCES

- Chris Coulthard-Clark "The RAAF in Vietnam"
- Ron Cuskelly – Queensland Air Museum collection historian
- Charlie Downes – email interviews and photos contribution
- George Odgers "Mission Vietnam"
- Jeff Pedrina "Wallaby Airlines"
- RAAF 35 Squadron Unit History Sheets (FormA50) and Personnel Occurrence Reports
- RADS Association magazines

----- ***Compiled by Jake Jacobsen*** -----