

A4-173 ACCIDENT AT BA TO – 16 AUGUST 1966

At 1200 on Tuesday 16 August 1966, RAAF Caribou A4-173, of No 35 Squadron Vietnam, crashed at Ba To. Ba To was a small US Special Forces Camp, designated A-106, located in Quang Ngai Province, about 82 nm south of Danang and 22nm south of Quang Ngai.



Location of Ba To airfield



Looking north east towards Ba To airfield

The airfield at Ba To was typical of most US Special Force camps in the highlands to the south of Da Nang. They were dirt or gravel based, narrow, short and often constructed on the top of elevated ground where the top of a hill had been bulldozed off. Those challenges, coupled with the vagaries of tropical weather, often meant the pilots had to fly to their own and the aircraft's limits. In his book "Wallaby Airlines", Jeff Pedrina describes the airfield located at Ba To:

"Ba To lies ten miles inland in a thin wedge of jungle sandwiched between rising terrain and the coast. The dirt runway is 1400 feet long from end to end with, as the *Aerodrome Directory* warned, a fifty foot drop-off both ends. The drop-offs were sheer cliffs, making a guaranteed touchdown after the threshold much more important than other strips with tapered overruns."



Ba To Airfield at bottom of image



The crash site at entrance of Special Forces Camp

The pilots of the aircraft were Pilot Officer Dick Cooper and Pilot Officer Stew Spinks. Down the back was the loadmaster Corporal Barry Ingate and assistant loadmaster Corporal Fred Robinson. On Monday, the previous day, they departed home base at Vung Tau early for a week long detachment to Da Nang. They landed at Saigon enroute to onload freight. On arrival at Da Nang, they were tasked to deliver 4820lb of freight and eight passengers to the Special Forces camp at Ba To, then return to Da Nang for the night. Early next morning, the day of the accident, they did a second uneventful flight to Ba To with 5000lb of freight and again returned to Da Nang for another load.

They departed Da Nang on the third flight at 1110, with 5000lb of building supplies and two passengers. Unfortunately, the landing at Ba To did not go as planned. For Barry Ingate, the loadmaster, this was to be the second similar accident he had experienced in the same aircraft. He was the loadmaster 15 months earlier when 173 landed short at Hai Yen down in the Delta. Barry's recollections of the Ba To accident follow:

"We were flying pax and freight into Ba To, an "A" camp about an hour south-west (I think) from Da Nang. This area was very hilly and the strip (short and gravel) was cut into the side of one of the hills - only one way in and the opposite way out. The approach was along a deep valley and a starboard turn to line up. It was an "aircraft carrier" type of strip too, with the end of the runway dropping off steeply into the valley. No landing short there either, but again, unfortunately, that's what happened, this time knocking the port undercarriage back and bending the wing and prop on that side. This time we came to a halt near the entrance to the camp and in a mine field (luckily, they were Claymores which don't explode on impact). Again, no-one was hurt and I got the aircraft unloaded and secured while the pilots arranged transport."

Fred Robinson, the assistant loadmaster, had this to say about the event:

"There were 2 passengers 1 US and 1 SVN. There were no injuries which is a tribute to the old 'green gravel truck'. The accident was caused by a small drop of the port wing as we came in to land, the port wheels impacted the edge of the runway (such as it was) about 12-18 inches below the flat of the runway and tore the undercarriage retraction mechanism apart. As we bounced along the strip the port wing struck an engine from a previous US Caribou crash which caused all the damage to the wing structure and flaps. I recall exiting the aircraft smartly and going around to check the damage, seeing that there was fuel leaking I returned to let the rest of the crew know."



Communications were so poor throughout Vietnam at that time, it was not until early evening, six hours after the crash, that the Squadron's Commanding Officer, Wing Commander Charles Melchert, knew anything of the accident. The report stated: "Wallaby 03, nosewheel collapsed while landing Ba To, no casualties" and no other information was available.

By first light on next day, Wednesday, a Caribou flown by Wing Commander Melchert departed Vung Tau on its way to Ba To. On board was 35 Squadron's Engineering Officer, Flight Lieutenant Wally Solomons, and ten of his maintenance staff:

Sgt Wally Hill	Airframe Fitter
LAC Peter Mansfield	Airframe Fitter
LAC John McDougall	Engine Fitter
LAC Laurie Rappo	Engine Fitter
Cpl Bill Coyer	Radtech
LAC Graham Johnson	Electrical Fitter
LAC John Davies	Electrical Fitter
LAC Graham Bushell	Instrument Fitter
Unknown	
Unknown	

They took along tools and spares to repair the nosewheel however, when they arrived overhead Ba To nearly three hours later, it looked as though there was far greater damage than just the nosewheel. Unable to land due to the tail of the stricken aircraft obstructing the runway, they diverted to Quang Ngai where the US Army provided an Iroquois helicopter to shuttle the recovery team and spares to Ba To.

On the ground, Flt Lt Solomons who had only been in country for a month, set to work and listed the things that needed to be done before the crashed Caribou could be flown out. As well as the nosewheel, in order make A4-173 flyable it would be necessary for the team to repair or change the port wing, flaps, ailerons, engine, propeller and undercarriage. The essential spares for this work were not available through normal logistic channels so, the big scrounge began. Sergeant E.G. Allen, an equipment assistant back at Vung Tau, managed to ensure the replacement parts were obtained. The resourcefulness and initiative shown by this airman were to earn him a mention in despatches.

The first priority was to clear 173 from the runway so that normal air operations into and out of Ba To could resume. The team got to work that afternoon. They jacked up the nose and cut lengths of timber to shore up the nosewheel assembly. They then used the jack on the port wing extending it until full extension then, supporting the wing with sand bags from the camp bunkers, they relocated the jack on a wooden platform so the wing could be raised further. When sufficient height had been reached, they used timber to brace the damaged undercarriage. Using a US Special Forces truck and lots of manpower, the aircraft was dragged back across the runway on to the aircraft parking ramp. It had been a mammoth day for the team and were rewarded that night with a new experience; camping rough in a US Special Forces camp near an unfriendly jungle.

With the runway open, spares and equipment could be flown in by squadron aircraft as they became available. The tyres, brakes and undercarriage were available through RAAF spares. The flaps and propeller came from Qui Nhon and the engine, without accessories, was provided by the US Army. A replacement wing was obtained from a burnt-out US Army Caribou at Vung Tau. It was too big to fit in a squadron Caribou so it was flown to Quang Ngai by C130 Hercules and then by Chinook helicopter to Ba To on the Sunday.

Whilst waiting for spares to arrive, the team spent Thursday and Friday morning stripping damaged components.



When the main undercarriage jacks arrived at lunch time Friday, they began the slow physical task of raising the aircraft using drums and sand bags until the jacks could be put in position. By nightfall on Friday, the aircraft was securely tied down with the replacement port main undercarriage fitted and securely locked down with chains.

Working conditions were far from ideal. The humidity was high and, without the benefit of a hangar, they had to work in the sun with temperatures, at times, reaching 50 degrees C inside the wing and engine compartments. There was a lot of creativeness, making it up as they went along; making do with what they could get their hands on. When it came to installing replacement parts, particularly those that were second hand, integration of cables and linkages often wasted valuable time. Some parts of the aircraft control surfaces had to be held by chains. The securing points for the flaps had been driven up into the wing by the impact of the crash and a chain had to be passed through them and lashed to the undercarriage to draw them into alignment.

As if these troubles were not enough, Ba To was under direct threat from Vietcong in the surrounding jungle outside the camp perimeter. On Thursday night, a machine gun sprayed the area around the Special Forces Camp and the maintenance men were ordered to the concrete 'last stand' bunker. On another night an infiltrator tried to breach the barbed wire perimeter and tripped a signal flare and once more the RAAF ground crew were ordered to the bunkers by the US Officer in Charge. Around the spot where the flare had been ignited, the Marines let loose with their grenade launchers and peppered the area with 30 rounds. There is no doubt that the novelty of being at Ba To was wearing thin for the recovery team.

By late afternoon on Wednesday 24 August, eight days after the accident, Wally Solomons deemed the aircraft to be sufficiently airworthy for the recovery flight back to Vung Tau. The Squadron's Commanding Officer, Wing Commander Charles Melchert, would only allow himself, his Flight Commander Flt Lt John "Blue" McDonnell and loadmaster Corporal Mal "Bugsy" Rose on board the Caribou for the take-off. To the relief of everyone, the take-off at 1600 went without a hitch with the undercarriage locked down with chains. Not wanting to fly after dark, they did a short flight to Qui Nhon where they spent the night. It was fortuitous that they did not depart Ba To the next day as an attack on the airfield that night would have seen the certain destruction of the aircraft from enemy attack.

Next morning, they continued on to Vung Tau, arriving safely at 1040. The perils of this flight were to win Wg Cdr Melchert the Distinguished Flying Cross.



Jubilant recovery team on arrival back at Vung Tau



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P05583.079

A4-173 undergoing maintenance at Vung Tau

The return of 173 to Vung Tau marked the beginning of over six months of hard work to get the Caribou fully serviceable again. On 5 September it was accepted by the 330th Transport Liaison Company to carry out some of the major repair work. It later returned to 35 Squadron for the engineering staff to finish the job. Overall, the work included significant repairs to most sections of the airframe, two new mainplanes, new leading edges and control surfaces and two new engines. Delays in obtaining spares was often frustrating.

On Monday 2 March 1967, six and a half months after the Ba To accident, A4-173 was ready for a test flight. Appropriately, Wing Commander Melchert took the controls and it was to be his last flight in Vietnam before handing over command to Squadron Leader Tony Fookes. Full credit to the engineering staff, defects found during the flight including trim adjustments, were minor.

As an aside, Caribou A4-173 probably had more major repair work and wing changes than any other Caribou in the Squadron. It was involved in a similar accident at Hai Yen during May 1965 which required significant repair work including starboard wing replacement. During July 1966, only a month before the Ba To accident, 173 underwent a major "E" servicing with Air Vietnam. During that servicing, an early model wing was removed and replaced the latest modified wing. Records do not indicate which wing but it would be interesting to know if it was the port wing damaged in the Ba To accident. If it was, that wing had a very short life.

SOURCES

- Chris Coulthard-Clark "The RAAF in Vietnam"
- Ron Cuskelly – Queensland Air Museum collection historian
- John McDougall – email interviews
- 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*** -----