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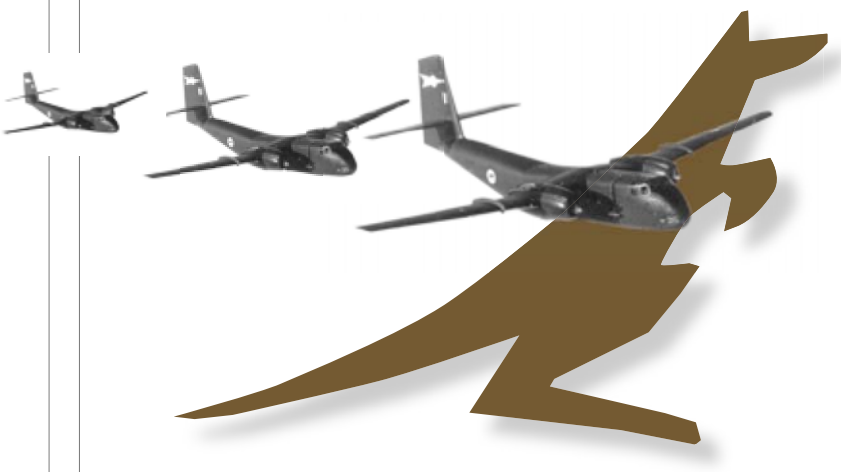
HERITAGE AWARDS

WALLABY AIRLINES

TWELVE MONTHS CARIBOU FLYING IN VIETNAM

JEFF PEDRINA



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Wallaby Crew

L-R: Blue Campbell, Ian Baldwin, Stew Bonett, Jeff Rudd

INTRODUCTION

The story you are about to read was written nearly 30 years ago. Many of the thoughts and feelings expressed were taken from personal letters and the diary of a young Air Force officer and pilot a little unsure of what to make of the strange world around him.

In offering the book for publication now, I resisted the temptation to rewrite it completely, feeling that it would become a different story. For better or worse, the words stand.

Vietnam, once shunned by the West, is now well on the road to recovery. Its next generation will, hopefully, have a promising future.

Vietnam and its people suffered more than many imagine. Years after the war was over, many Vietnamese waged another war against the elements, pirates and starvation to reach a country that once held out such promise. Some Australians were sympathetic and generous. Others wanted to ship them home to an unknown fate.

I hope this book helps all Australians understand why they deserved our help.

The sources of information for the book were my personal diary, personal letters to family members, my flying logbook and a collection of photographic slides. My personal sources were augmented by large slices of memory, except in the Ba To story, where squadron engineering officer Wally Solomons filled in a lot of holes for me. Sadly, Wally has since passed away.

The material presented is, to the best of my recollection, accurate in content, if not in sequence. However, I apologise in advance for any lapses in memory, or omissions, which readers may identify. I also apologise for any offence that may be taken at anything in this book, as none is intended.

Jeff Pedrina

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ABBREVIATIONS AND GLOSSARY

I, II, III, IV Corps	The four Military Regions into which South Vietnam was divided during the Vietnam War. (See map page xviii)
1ATF	1st Australian Task Force – based in Phuoc Tuy Province.
6 RAR	6th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment
5 RAR	5th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment
No 2 Squadron	RAAF tactical bomber squadron, based at Phan Rang, operating Canberra aircraft.
No 9 Squadron	RAAF helicopter squadron, based at Vung Tau, operating Bell Iroquois UH-1 helicopters.
No 35 Squadron	RAAF tactical transport squadron, based at Vung Tau, operating DHC-4 Caribou aircraft.
A-1 Skyraider	Douglas piston-engined ex-USAF ground attack aircraft used by the VNAF.
AGL	Above Ground Level
Air America	Mixed-fleet airline, supposedly set up and run by the CIA.
Amah	Domestic servant in Malaysia
Ao dai	Vietnamese national dress (female) made of cotton or silk, with close-fitting bodice and split long skirt worn over long white pants.
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)
B-52	US Military designation for the Boeing Stratofortress strategic bomber aircraft, used in Vietnam for carpet-bombing with high explosive iron bombs.

B-57	US Military designation for the Martin bomber aircraft, used in Vietnam for tactical bombing duties. This aircraft was derived from the English Electric Canberra bomber operated in Vietnam by the RAAF.
C-123	US Military designation for the Fairchild Provider transport aircraft; a mid-sized aircraft which could operate into shorter strips than the larger C-130.
C-130	US Military designation for the Lockheed Hercules transport aircraft; the largest such aircraft that operated regularly in South Vietnam.
C-141	US Military designation for the Lockheed Starlifter strategic transport aircraft, used to transport cargo and personnel into Vietnam from the USA.
CV-2 or C-7A	US Army and USAF designations for the De Havilland Canada DHC-4 Caribou tactical transport aircraft; a smaller aircraft capable of short field operations. It was operated in Vietnam by the RAAF and, until 1 January 1967, by the US Army. After that date the US Army aircraft were transferred to the USAF.
C-46	US Military designation for the Curtiss Commando twin-engined World War II vintage transport aircraft.
C-47	US Military designation for the Douglas DC-3 transport aircraft, modified for use in Vietnam for Psychological Warfare duties, or fitted with sideways-firing Gatling guns for offensive operations.
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency – the intelligence arm of the US Government.
Chinook	Twin-rotor heavy helicopter operated by the US Army.
Chopper	Helicopter

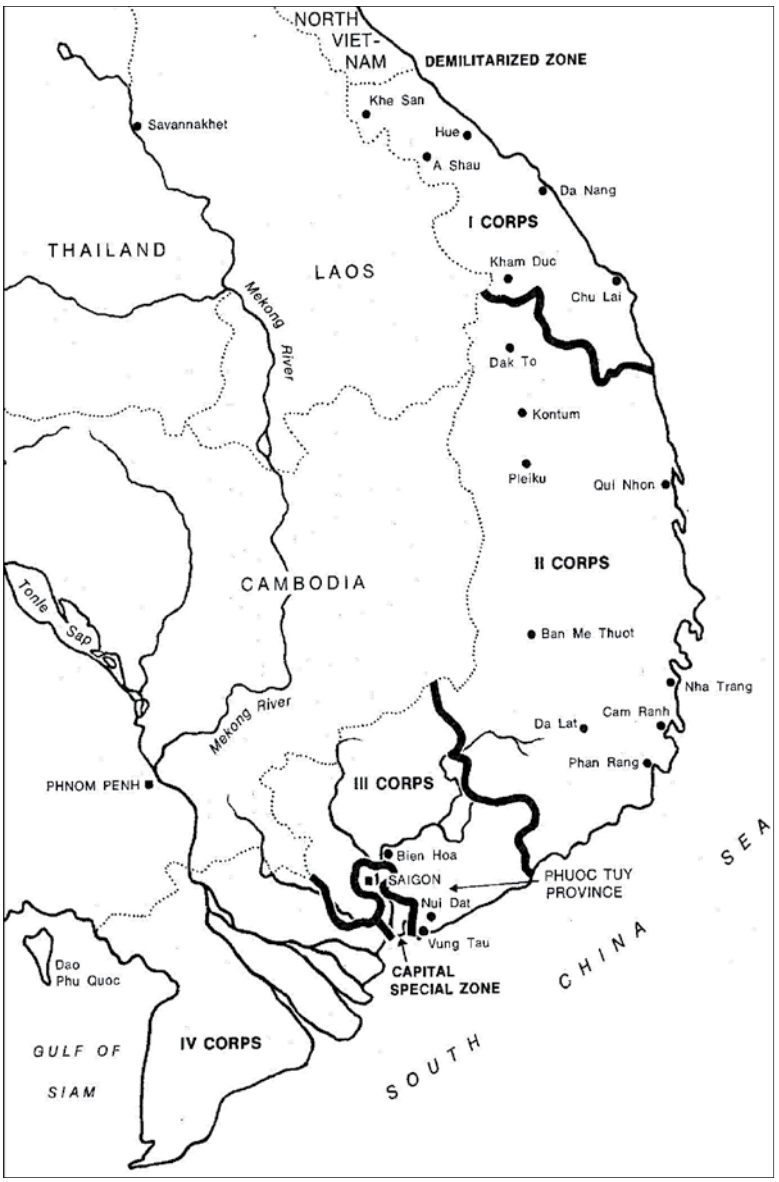
Circuit	A rectangular area around a runway used by aircraft making a visual approach to extend undercarriage and flaps, and progressively reduce speed prior to landing. There is usually a downwind leg parallel to the runway, a base leg at right angles, and a final leg aligned with the runway centreline.
CO	Commanding Officer
Diem	President Ngo Dinh Diem, first President of the Republic of South Vietnam.
Digger	Australian soldier
DFC	Distinguished Flying Cross – awarded to officers and warrant officers for an act or acts of valour, courage or devotion to duty performed whilst flying in active operations against the enemy.
DFM	Distinguished Flying Medal – awarded to non-commissioned officers and other ranks for an act or acts of valour, courage or devotion to duty performed whilst flying in active operations against the enemy.
DME	Distance Measuring Equipment – a ground-based radio navigation aid.
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone – area between North and South Vietnam before reunification.
DOD	Department of Defense (US
Duty Pilot	Squadron pilot given the job for the day of ferrying aircrews to and from the base, filling out flight plans and distributing the flying program.
Exhaust augmentor tubes	The version of the Pratt & Whitney R-2000 engine fitted to the Caribou aircraft routed engine exhaust gases to the front of the engine, thence over the top of the engine through stainless steel tubes to slipstream. This gave a measurable amount of extra thrust, as well as giving the Caribou engine a distinctive 'crackling' sound.

F-100	US Military designation for the North American Super Sabre, fighter aircraft operated by the USAF.
F-102	US Military designation for the Convair Delta Dart fighter aircraft operated by the USAF.
F-105	US Military designation for the Republic Thunderchief fighter aircraft operated by the USAF.
F-4	US Military designation for the McDonnell Phantom fighter/ground attack aircraft operated by the USAF.
FAC	Forward Air Controller – pilot controlling air strikes by fighters and bombers from low flying light aircraft using radio communications to guide ground attack aircraft onto targets.
GCA	Ground Controlled Approach – a precision radar instrument approach to a runway, controlled by an air traffic controller giving an aircraft vectors to steer to intercept and remain on runway centreline and glidepath.
GI	General Infantryman (US Army soldier)
Grunt	Infantryman or foot soldier
High-speed taxiway	A curved taxiway leading from a runway to an apron area, the curvature allowing an aircraft to exit the runway at higher than normal taxi speed.
High-tension leads	Electrical leads between the magnetos and the spark plugs.
Hooch	Sandbag, timber and galvanised iron hut in US Army Special Forces camps.
Huey	Nickname for Bell UH-1 Iroquois helicopter operated by the US Army and RAAF.
KIA	Killed in Action
Knucklehead	Derogatory term used by RAAF transport pilots for a fighter pilot.
Loadies	Loadmasters

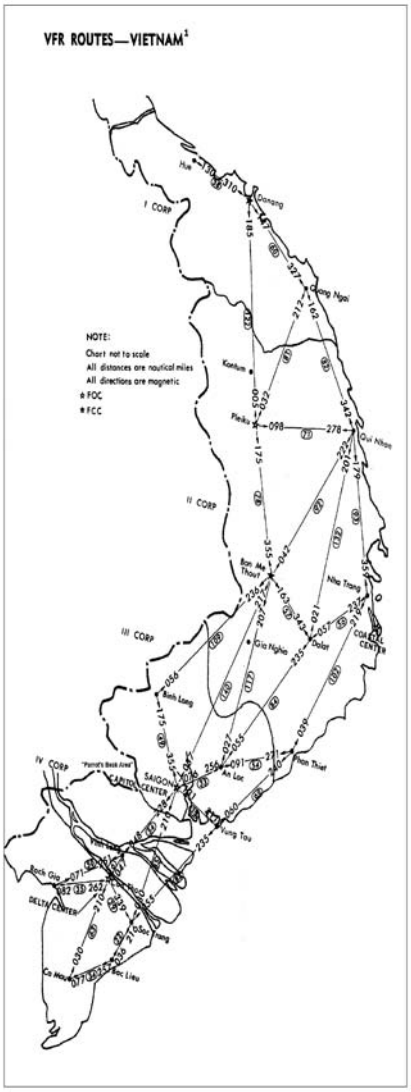
MACV	Military Assistance Command Vietnam (US)
Magneto	Electrical spark generator in an internal combustion engine.
Manifold air pressure gauge	Gauge on a piston-engine aircraft instrument panel that registers engine manifold air pressure and, indirectly, engine power.
Membrane or T-17 membrane	A coated nylon material laid over a prepared surface as a runway or apron.
Mess	A place used by Military personnel for eating, recreation etc.
Mission	Scheduled transport services supporting the general transport effort were given a mission number by the USAF. For example, RAAF Caribou Missions 405, 406 etc.
MPC	Military Payment Certificate(s) – US military notes of various denominations in US dollars, used to pay Service personnel and, supposedly, for use only on US military establishments. They were actually freely used in downtown bars etc. RAAF personnel were also paid in MPC.
Nashos	Australian National Servicemen (conscripts)
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
NDB	Non-Directional Beacon – a ground-based radio navigation aid.
Nuoc mam	A fermented fish sauce used as a condiment in Vietnamese dining.
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
Ops	Operations – a briefing office, which provided weather and operational data at major bases for flight planning purposes.

Otter	De Havilland Canada single piston-engined light transport aircraft.
Pax	Passengers
Pitch and break	Manoeuvre for entering an aerodrome traffic pattern, performed by high-speed military aircraft.
Phuoc Tuy	Province around Vung Tau, which became the 1ATF area of operations.
Plugs	Electrical spark plugs which provide ignition in an internal combustion engine.
POL	Petrol, Oils and Lubricants – cargo usually carried in 44-gallon drums.
Pre-flight	Safety inspection carried out by a pilot on an aircraft before flight.
PSP	Perforated Steel Plate – designed to lock together in each direction to form a flat surface, laid on semi-prepared surfaces for aircraft take-off and landing, and taxying purposes.
PX	Post Exchange – a USAF 'supermarket'
QFI	Qualified Flying Instructor
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
Ramp	US term for an aircraft parking area. Different ramps were given different names.
RAR	Royal Australian Regiment
R&R	Rest and Recuperation (Leave)
Revetment	Protective enclosure of PSP and sandbags or earthworks, designed to protect parked aircraft from damage due to shrapnel.
SF	(US Army) Special Forces
Sortie	One single trip, from take-off to landing

STOL	Short take-off and landing
TACAN	Tactical Air Navigation (System) – a ground-based radio navigation aid.
TMC	Transport Movement Control – transport aircraft receipt and dispatch centre, usually passing parking and loading instructions to arriving aircraft on a discrete radio channel.
Uc Dai Loi	Vietnamese for 'Australia' (Great Southern Land)
US	United States
USAF	United States Air Force
VC	Viet Cong – South Vietnamese Communists who used guerrilla warfare tactics. By comparison, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) used regular army tactics (mostly unsuccessfully against American opposition.
VFR	Visual Flight Rules – aircraft navigation principally by visual reference.
VFR routes	Standard VFR navigational tracks between bases. (See map page xix.)
VHF	Very High Frequency – a band in the radio spectrum.
VNAF	Republic of Vietnam Air Force (Air Force of South Vietnam)
Wallaby	Nickname for RAAF Caribou aircraft in Vietnam. Also used as a squadron call sign.



Map of South Vietnam showing US Military Region or Corps Boundaries



Map of South Vietnam showing Main Bases and VFR Routes[1]

PROLOGUE

Have you ever woken from a deep sleep in strange surroundings, somewhat disorientated, wondering where you are and how you got there? You shake your head and look around, fixating on some piece of furniture which looks somehow unfamiliar, analysing the position of the bed with respect to doors and windows, trying to recall the picture you went to sleep with. This is a little bit how I felt on my first day in Vietnam, transported from family and a comfortable way of life into a controversial, confusing war.

The Vietnam I found myself in was the relatively secure Vietnam of 1966–67, prior to the notorious 1968 Tet Offensive,[2] and shortly before allied involvement reached its peak. The country was a dynamo of activity. A string of major bases bristled with military activity.[3] Fighters and bombers roared off round-the-clock bound for various targets. Large cargo aircraft brought in war supplies from the States, while an armada of smaller aircraft dispersed these goods around the country. Our own C-130s brought supplies for our forces from Australia. A massive fleet of ships anchored off the coast, waiting their turn to enter the port of Saigon to unload more cargo.

I arrived in Vietnam on 2 August 1966 for a 12-month tour of duty with 'Wallaby Airlines', officially No 35 Squadron RAAF, to join other pilots flying the De Havilland DHC-4 Caribou, or Wallaby as it was affectionately known. Even Chris Sugden, the first Commanding Officer of RAAF Transport Flight Vietnam (RTFV), predecessor of No 35 Squadron, does not know who chose the name 'Wallaby' as the radio call sign for the RAAF Caribou aircraft. This very Australian moniker would have been selected to fit in with the call sign system used by allied aircraft operating in Vietnam. In any case the Americans, and everyone else, were soon referring to the Aussie Caribou squadron as 'Wallaby Airlines'.

In 1966, No 35 Squadron operations in Vietnam were fully integrated into the United States Air Force (USAF) airlift system supporting the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV). Operational control of the squadron was exercised on a routine basis by the US 7th Air Force through the 834th Air Division. Of course, specific Australian tasks took priority, especially after the arrival of the 1st Australian Task Force (1ATF) in Phuoc Tuy Province in late 1966.

With only seven aircraft, a small proportion of the total Caribous in the country, Wallaby Airlines carried far more than its numerical share of the load. A USAF monthly report in March 1965 stated that 'RAAF Caribou hauled 1010 tons with

6 aircraft, while the US Army hauled 5095 tons with 42 aircraft'. The Americans were intrigued with the curious mixture of skilful enthusiasm and nonchalance with which the Australian squadron operated its workhorse, and respected its impressive performance.

In Vietnam, RAAF Caribous carried a crew of four made up of two pilots, a loadmaster/mechanic (called a crew chief) and an assistant loadmaster. One pilot was always a qualified aircraft captain and, except when training other pilots, sat in the left-hand seat. The other pilot could be copilot qualified only, and stayed in the right-hand seat, or if also captain qualified shared the flying on a leg-for-leg or a daily basis with the other pilot. The crew chief was responsible for computing weight and balance information for the captain prior to each flight, and for arranging the load within weight and balance limits with the help of his assistant. Both also looked after refuelling and aircraft maintenance away from base.

Although crews were not permanently rostered together, they were often sent on detachment to other bases for up to a week. For this reason, strong bonds developed between pilots and 'loadies', creating a good team spirit. This was especially valuable when mechanical problems developed while away from home base at Vung Tau, when the whole crew pitched in to rectify the problem.

Many of the squadron's tasks were in support of the United States Army Special Forces.[4] The Wallaby had already established an impressive reputation with the Special Forces (SF) by the time I arrived.

Special Forces units were scattered throughout the highlands in makeshift fortified camps,[5] strategically situated in the mountainous north-west along remote border areas. The camps were often former Montagnard villages rebuilt in more defensible locations. They were manned by the Montagnards, mountain tribesmen ethnically different from lowland Vietnamese, part of the so-called Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG) advised by men of the US Army Special Forces. The Special Forces 'advisers' in reality acted as platoon leaders of the Montagnard forces, who were enlisted as mercenary soldiers by the US Army in the early stages of American involvement.

Each camp had its own short rudimentary airstrip, sometimes surfaced with gravel, but more often simply graded dirt. And many were impossibly short. The Caribou was the ideal aircraft to resupply these camps.

Other squadron tasks supported MACV units in lowland areas. The airstrips here were generally better than those in the highlands, with perforated steel

plate (PSP) or membrane (nylon matting) surfaces, but were often so short that the Caribou was the only larger aircraft able to operate on resupply missions into these camps.

Later, after the build-up of 1ATF and its relocation from Bien Hoa to Nui Dat, many more 35 Squadron operations were concentrated in Phuoc Tuy Province, the Task Force area of responsibility. Once an airfield, named Luscombe,[6] was built near the Nui Dat base, Wallaby Airlines began more regular operations in support of 1ATF.

In normal times the Montagnards had been hunter-gatherers. Their traditional activities had been interrupted by the war. Wallaby Airlines, therefore, carried a wide variety of cargoes including livestock and other food to 'pay' the Montagnards, as well as regular supplies and building materials for the Special Forces, weapons and ammunition to artillery bases, and mail and passengers to isolated outposts in the Delta. Sadly, we also often carried KIAs,[7] the bodies of war dead in caskets or body bags. But whether it was rockets or roofing iron, rice or rifles, we were always busy, always being asked to take one more load before nightfall, or cram in one more passenger. Most times, we did.

It was only when the small dirt strips around Vietnam began to be upgraded to longer PSP or membrane runways that the C-123 Provider and C-130 Hercules began moving in. Even then, there was always a job for the Wallaby.

Caribou flying in Vietnam presented a continual challenge, both because of the demands of operating into substandard strips and because you were frequently operating on your own initiative, without reference to the squadron hierarchy.

Though not actively involved in combat, our aircraft were frequently fired at, mainly during landing and take-off at remote camps. Being big and slow and painted a solid dark brown, the Caribou was an easy target. The number of skin patches on aircraft fuselages bore witness to the fact that we did not always escape unscathed.

There were other hazards. Finding and landing at a 400-metre strip surrounded by concealing jungle in monsoonal weather was not an activity for the faint-hearted. The density of air traffic around the major bases, and the uncertainties of negotiating areas of artillery fire and air strikes were additional challenges, and all our pilots quickly became adept at keeping a good lookout.

I must admit that I got a kick out of flying this strange aircraft, which handled more like a Cessna than a bulky transport, but which could bite you hard if you

did not give it the concentration it required. Any pilot who did not learn more about flying and his own personal capabilities in his tour with Wallaby Airlines was, in my opinion, 'unteachable'.

Vietnam intrigued me too. Initially revolted by the sights, sounds and smells of the squalor around the towns, oppressed by the overpowering military presence everywhere and a little shocked by the pragmatism and callousness of people at war, I came to understand my part in what was going on there. I could not help admiring the brave optimism of the Vietnamese people though, heaven knows, I could see little cause for optimism.

Naturally my enthusiasm for the job and my feelings for the country became harder to sustain as the months wore on, bereft of family and normal entertainment, living an austere life with few creature comforts. At least we lived in bricks and mortar with power and town water, unlike some of our Army compatriots who lived under canvas. Like everyone before me, I began to count the days. Having arrived apprehensive but enthusiastic, I finished my tour jaded and weary, no longer interested in anything but getting out, and rediscovering a normal life.

Publishers say 'avoid writing in the first person'. I cannot think of any other way to tell a story about Vietnam. Every one of the thousands of servicemen who came and went, part of a nine-year procession of people, had his own personal experiences.

The Vietnam War, with its 12-month rotational tour of duty, was like a big 'sausage factory'. Every airman, soldier and sailor who participated in it has a story that is his alone. Sadly, not every serviceman returned to tell it. Fortunately for Wallaby Airlines, although there were many combat-related injuries during its seven-year tour of duty, there were no fatalities.

This book is a narrative account of what I saw and did during a most unusual period of my life. I hope that people who shared my experiences, or had similar ones of their own, might find the story interesting, and those with no knowledge of Australian involvement in Vietnam might find themselves a little sympathetic to the history, if not the cause.

In any case this story is not just about people but also about a remarkable aircraft, the De Havilland Canada DHC-4 Caribou. I wanted to convey the impression of what it felt like to be a Caribou pilot in that strange war. The Caribou was the first mass-produced short take-off and landing (STOL) aircraft of its size. For some years it was the backbone of the airlift effort in the highlands of Vietnam. It is still operated by the RAAF today, although its days are numbered.

Wallaby Airlines came home in 1972. Though the Wallaby flies on, the characters in this book have moved on to other things, thankfully, but perhaps a touch regretfully.

The biggest disappointment to returning servicemen was the attitude they found in the people back home. It varied from outright hostility to almost complete indifference—they just did not want to know. In Vietnam, Australian servicemen felt that they were doing a worthwhile job for their country. Back in Australia it seemed to be 'business as usual'.

Vietnam has been called the 'Forgotten War'. I do not believe many Australians ever knew much about it. Commentators saturated us with the historical and ideological issues. Correspondents and photographers followed the bombs and bullets, splashing carnage onto front pages and TV screens. It was like a movie of a shooting gallery, with close-ups of the targets, but nothing about the participants.

There were real people involved, not only Americans, Australians and other allies, but Vietnamese too. I feel sad at their suffering and loss. The action was occurring in a real place, with people, towns, roads, and traffic. The countryside of Vietnam, where I spent a year of my life flying the Wallabies, is as real to me as any place in Australia.

People still ask: 'Should Australia have been involved in Vietnam? Wasn't it all a waste of time?' My only retort is that many of us were sent to Vietnam to do a job, which, at the time, seemed worthwhile and which we did as well as we could. Whether or not our efforts were wasted, I leave to the historians.

364 DAYS TO GO
TUESDAY 2 AUGUST 1966

If first impressions are the most important, my first glimpse of Vietnam was a lousy introduction.

Framed in the window of the Pan Am Boeing 707 was a snakelike pattern of muddy brown streams barely discernible against a watery background. The main stream broke up into numerous tributaries as it meandered towards the coast forming a delta, which spread out over a huge area. From my vantage point in the aircraft there appeared to be more water in this area than land, with isolated villages looking like islands in the watery landscape. This was the heart of the Mekong Delta, the former rice bowl of Asia, south-west of Saigon.

The Delta

My picture dissolved into cloud, like a fleeting thought.

I had left Australia only the day before on 1 August 1966. Yesterday and yesteryear were already like a dream. The wrench of saying goodbye to my wife of 18 months, the luxury of first class air travel on a UTA French Airlines DC-8, then the brief and tantalising stopover in Singapore all added an air of unreality to the last two days travel.

Australia, and my familiar way of life, were now 5000 miles away.

At this moment not all of my feelings about my home country were charitable. We had been told we were flying Pan Am because Qantas pilots demanded danger money to fly into Vietnam. Our reward for 12 months hazardous flying here would be a couple of medals.

Due to the number of different aircraft types operated by the RAAF and a rotational posting system in place since the Air Force commitment in 1964, many of our Service colleagues would never see duty in Vietnam. In contrast to the general public's knowledge of the Army commitment, with all its attendant publicity, only a fraction of the population was even aware the Air Force was in Vietnam.

I thought of my wife looking so alone and forlorn standing on the tarmac at Sydney, hiding tear-stained eyes behind dark glasses. After only 18 months of married life she was pretty upset at my going. I waved at the window hoping she would see me, but she did not. To this day she does not understand why, when I had a choice of posting, I chose a squadron knowing it led to service in Vietnam. I am not sure I can figure it out either. Maybe I wanted to prove something to myself. Whatever it was I made a big mistake not discussing it with her.

A few months ago I had hardly thought about Vietnam. But as the time for departure drew nearer there were moments of anxiety and self-doubt, and a growing awareness that I would feel so terribly lonely without Robyn by my side for 12 whole months.

On the Saturday night before I left we had dinner in town. The evening was supposed to be special, but turned into a bit of a disaster. It was my fault. I was in a melancholy mood and drank too much. I did not fully appreciate how Robyn was feeling. She finished the meal in tears. Nothing I said would console her.

On the following Monday I awoke conscious that it was my last day on Australian soil, at least for 12 months if my luck held out. The wait at the airport was a

torture, neither of us quite knowing what to say. It was almost a relief when the flight was finally called.

Her last words, as we embraced, were: 'Promise you'll write to me every day'.

As the aircraft taxied out I could see Robyn standing with Judy Lewino and other family members of fellow travellers. I waved at the window hoping she would see me, but I knew from her blank expression that she did not.

Born and raised in a country town, I joined the Air Force straight out of school, as my father had 20 years earlier. No one else in my family or my school did such an unusual thing. I saw the Air Force as a career. No doubt my father did too when he joined the RAAF in 1938, though I never got to know how he felt. In 1939 he was operating out of Darwin on reconnaissance missions along the west coast. By early 1942 he was caught up directly in the war with Japan in New Guinea. Decorated for gallantry after bombing Japanese ships at Gasmata he was shot by a sniper while flying a Lockheed Hudson on a low-level supply-drop mission near Buna. After eight years in uniform, I was going off to war myself. I felt scarcely prepared.

The security of married life and flying in a peacetime environment were behind me. As a cadet at the RAAF Academy, the major training centre for career Air Force officers, I had studied military history from Hannibal's campaigns to the Six-Day War with the detachment of the scholar. I was about to become embroiled in a real conflict in a foreign country I knew precious little about.

Five years earlier at age 21, amid the pomp and ceremony of graduation, war of any kind had seemed a remote possibility. Korea and Suez were long past; the missile peace of the Cold War prevailed. But after pinning on our wings, the Governor-General, Lord d'Lisle, reminded us that we had joined a fighting service and should expect to be involved in combat in the future. He was right. There is always a war on somewhere. A professional military man cannot avoid it.

I looked across at my travelling companions, fellow pilots Mick Lewino and Dick Simpson. They looked as pensive as I felt, even the irrepressible Mick.

Mick was a year ahead of me at the Academy. Quick-witted, he could always be counted on to crack a joke. We had both been checked out as Caribou captains at Richmond, but would have to serve a short apprenticeship in Vietnam before

flying as captains there. Dick Simpson, a younger pilot fresh from training, would be checked out when he got some more experience.

The Boeing slipped out of cloud again, and the reality of the present pushed aside the phantoms of the past. Saigon came into view, an untidy urban sprawl with a river running through the middle.

A twangy southern American accent on the PA told us:

> *The Captain has turned on the seat belt sign. Please extinguish all smoking materials, place your seat in the upright position, and check your seat belts are securely fastened. I'll be coming by soon to see if you boys are doing it right.*

With that, the matronly senior stewardess walked along the isle, adjusting seats and checking belts. After she passed a young shaven-headed marine turned to me and remarked: 'Man! That lady is old enough to be my grandmother.'

He was probably near the truth. Back home the 'hosties' were still single, young and pretty.

I settled back in my seat. The new adventure was about to begin.

It was only eleven in the morning when we taxied into the passenger terminal at Saigon International Airport. I am not sure what we expected—maybe a brass band, or hundreds of grateful Vietnamese waving flags—but it was just another day here. There was no welcoming committee, just a lone RAAF flight sergeant who met and assisted us through customs and immigration.

Mick, as usual, made a joke of it.

'Don't worry fellas. The local officials are going to tell us we're unacceptable, and send us straight back home.'

No such luck.

The flight sergeant drove us around to a huge rectangle of concrete called Rebel Ramp,[8] the name the USAF gave to the cargo aircraft terminal at Tan Son Nhut air base, the military part of the airport.

'Wait here for the Wallaby', was all he said.

'What time is it due?' we wanted to know.

'It'll come—it always does', was his laconic reply, as he drove off in a cloud of dust.

Tan Son Nhut air base and the adjoining International Airport between them sprawled over several hundred acres. Knowing nothing about the layout of this huge facility, and half expecting a bullet from an over-eager guard if we poked our noses in where we were not wanted, we could do little but sit on our cabin trunks in the midday sun, and wait.

Unlike our American counterparts, we travelled to and from Vietnam in civilian clothes. Our suits and ties must have looked ridiculous in the oppressive monsoonal heat amongst the crates, boxes and barrels of oil piled everywhere. Before long we were removing jackets and ties, and rolling up our sleeves. But the heat did not let up. We finally gave up trying to look like presentable new arrivals. No one seemed interested in us anyhow.

It is almost impossible to describe adequately what was going on around us.

Tan Son Nhut was like a nest of angry hornets. It made Sydney airport in peak traffic look like a country aerodrome. There were hundreds of aircraft of all types, some of which I had seen only in aviation magazines. Civil 707s, DC-8s, Caravelles and DC-4s jostled for take-off clearance among military Phantoms, F-105s, B-57s, C-130s, C-123s, DC-3s, Caribous, Globemasters, Starlifters, Skyraiders, Mohawks and a host of others, most in drab brown and olive green camouflage. Helicopters of various types buzzed around all over the place, seemingly at random.

There was non-stop activity everywhere. Aircraft were loading and unloading, taking off and landing; roaring overhead.

Fighters and bombers were parked each side of the taxiways in steel revetments, which protected them against mortar attack. After being loaded with bombs, rockets and shells, they screamed off, lighting their afterburners with a loud crack.

Cargo aircraft, from the cavernous Starlifter to the humble 'Gooneybird' (the affectionate nickname of the military DC-3), rumbled in and out of Rebel Ramp. Forklifts and flat loaders bustled about continuously, but the piles of war materials scattered around never seemed to grow any smaller.

We were in the middle of a war that was not going to stop just because three new aircrew had arrived.

By three o'clock, we felt like grease spots on our cabin trunks. We were relieved to finally see a Wallaby rumbling in our direction. We felt more at home when we saw its kangaroo roundel, distinctive among the Stars and Stripes of the other aircraft.

The propellers had barely stopped before the pilot, the squadron Commanding Officer (CO), Wing Commander Charles Melchert, jumped down from the Wallaby's cargo ramp to greet us.

'Welcome to Vietnam', he said. 'There's a few blokes back at Vung Tau who'll be mighty glad to see you.'

He was referring to the people we had come to replace. Suddenly the 12-month tour seemed more like a gaol term.

This flight was the so-called afternoon 'courier' and not a special pick-up for us. The squadron operated these courier flights twice daily between Vung Tau, our home base while in Vietnam, Bien Hoa and Saigon. There was never a shortage of passengers on this run.

The other crew members came over for a brief chat before busying themselves with the aircraft.

Even though I knew the crew well and had flown with them back home, I had a strange feeling of being initiated into their world as we climbed into the cabin of the Wallaby and sat down on the canvas and webbing seats. It was the first time I had ever been a passenger in a Caribou. We must have looked out of place among the collection of military and civilian passengers of various nationalities waiting for its departure.

This Wallaby was not like the smart, new-looking Caribous of my old squadron in Australia. The paintwork was faded and grimy-looking, and here and there on the fuselage were small patches, scars from operational sorties—patched bullet holes, I learned with some apprehension. Inside the cockpit, the seats were well worn, and surrounded with armour plate. The trim was chipped. Back in the cargo compartment, a faint odour of sweaty bodies and rotten vegetables hung permanently in the air.

We were soon en route on the short flight to Vung Tau US Army air base, home base of the RAAF's No 35 Caribou Squadron and No 9 Iroquois (helicopter) Squadron, as well as many US Army, USAF, US Marines and Vietnamese units.

The CO pointed out landmarks on the way—the German Red Cross hospital ship tied up at the wharf at the end of Tu Do, the main street of the city; ships zigzagging up the river to the port of Saigon, some 40 miles inland, to avoid mudbanks and snipers. Vung Tau was on the coast on a peninsula about 20 air minutes away, a short hop from the new base at Nui Dat in Phuoc Tuy Province, built to house the recently formed 1ATF.

The base at Vung Tau took its name from the coastal town, which had once been a beach resort for French colonials living in Saigon. A large town by South Vietnamese standards, Vung Tau now also accommodated American, Australian, New Zealand and South Korean military personnel.

The airfield, an ugly scar on the beautiful Cap St Jacques, was small in area compared with Tan Son Nhut, and contained a fantastic jumble of runways, aircraft and hangars. Its three runways formed an open triangle. Around every side of the triangle, and in the middle, were dozens of aircraft—Caribous, Mohawks, Bird Dogs and Otter fixed-wing aircraft, as well as 'Huey' and Chinook helicopters.

We landed with a clatter on the main north-south runway, the springy PSP sheets bottoming onto the underlying earth, the top layer of which had been washed away by recent monsoonal rains.

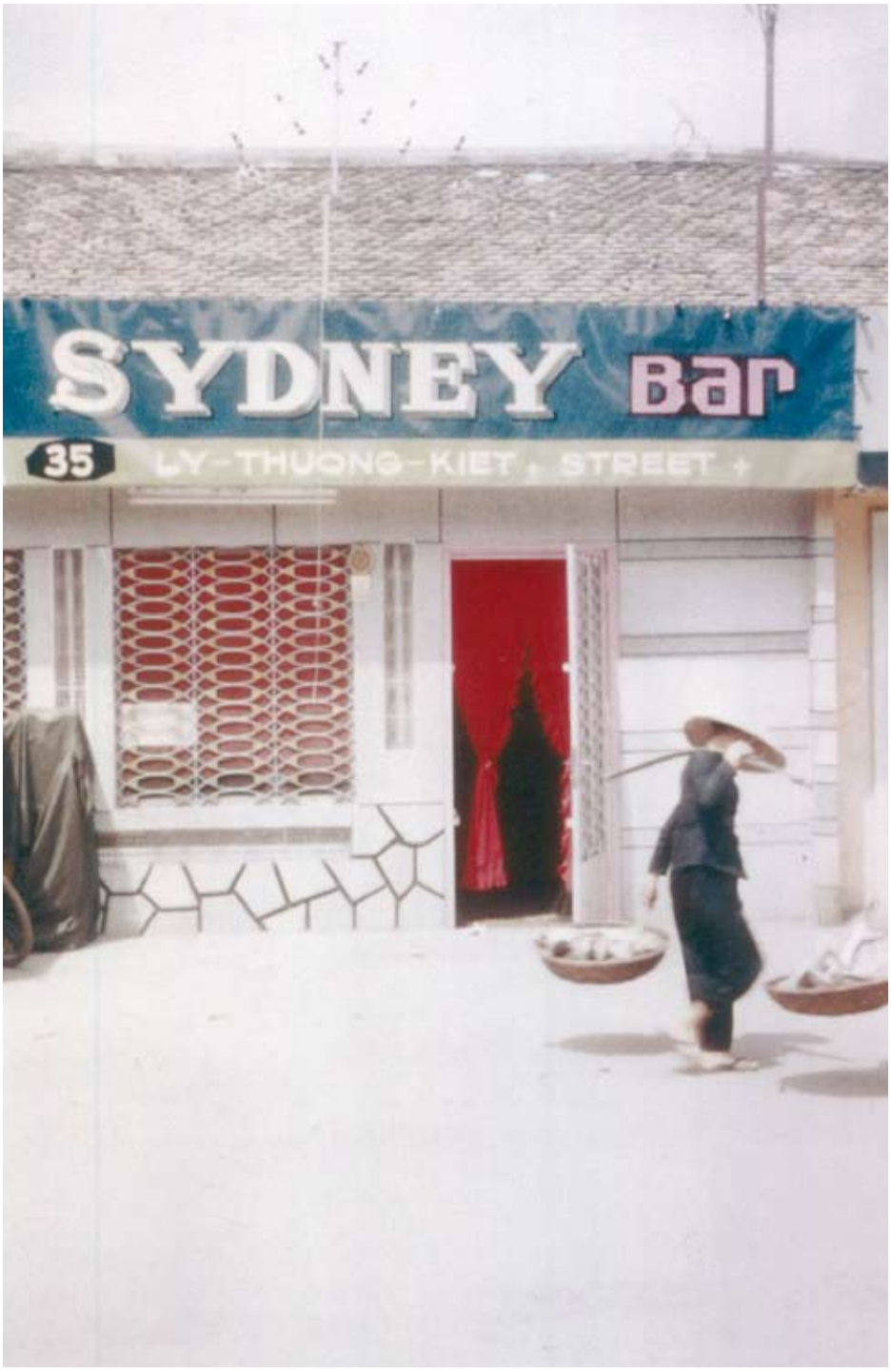
'It's quite safe really', the CO responded to our remarks. It seemed we would have to get used to something less than the military precision we accustomed to back in Australia.

After a few post-flight formalities, we climbed into the CO's jeep for the ride to our quarters, the Villa Anna, our 'home' for the next 12 months.

The CO kept up his commentary.

'See that bar', he said gesturing towards a decrepit-looking building apparently built from scrap materials, and luridly painted to attract the passing trade, 'an American GI on R&R leave was killed in there by a VC.

I was not sure of the authenticity of this amazing story or why we were told. Right now, I would have preferred he kept his eyes on the road, as he jockeyed the jeep around olive green army trucks, staff cars, motorbikes, trishaws, pushbikes and three-wheel Lambretta taxis, impossibly crowded with eight or nine Vietnamese.



The Sydney Bar

Soldiers and civilians in almost equal numbers walked on either side of the road. The jungle green uniforms belonged to black and white Americans, tough-looking Koreans and diminutive Vietnamese. Coolie-hatted workers, men and women, staggered under heavy loads; the men wearing the traditional black pyjamas, the women in black pants and white tops. Fragile-looking schoolgirls pedalled bicycles, their white ao dais (traditional Vietnamese dress) flapping behind them. A mischievous schoolboy tossed rocks into the open drain at the side of the road.

It had been raining heavily and the potholed, narrow roads were covered in water several inches deep in places. People jumped aside to avoid spray as we passed.

The sides of the road looked none too clean. Here and there, men stopped to urinate in full view of passers-by; old ladies squatted more discreetly in the long grass. Housewives tossed scraps into the drains. The rain-soaked grass verges yielded up their odours, only temporarily disguised by the wafting aroma of a camphor-wood carpentry shop, whose proprietor was busily moving his wares outside again after the recent rain.

The CO must have read our minds.

'The standards here are not what we're used to back home', he commented.

Most of the buildings we saw were made of temporary-looking whitewashed masonry blocks. The few grander ones were embellished with coloured tiles or gargoyles. All buildings, without exception, had a decrepit appearance, even the newer ones. Local housing in this part of town ranged from substantial-looking but run down stone places to wood and date palm shacks.

But worse was to come.

To reach our quarters, we drove through the middle of a shantytown of roofing iron, flattened petrol drums and flywire. In the coming months we would notice such crude dwellings clustered around the outskirts of many Vietnamese towns. These were where peasant farmers turned city refugees made their homes after being driven off their land by Viet Cong extortion or American bombing.

'Well, here's the Villa Anna', announced the CO brightly.

Our new home was a walled sanctuary amidst the shanties, its imposing facade overlooking the South China Sea. Though in need of a facelift, the high fence, flagged courtyard and elegant two-storey stucco and terracotta construction

The Villa Anna

Washing Clothes at the Villa Anna

identified it as a luxurious seaside residence from days gone by. Even now, it retained an air of charming decadence. It was one of a number of substantial two-storey villas built along the foreshore in French colonial times.

As the jeep swept through the back gate, past a guard who saluted with an Armalite rifle, two Vietnamese girls looked up from their task of washing clothes. They sat cross-legged on the flagstones, dipping shirts into a wooden tub filled with soapy water and slapping them on the stones. At this stage we did not know our clothes would be out there in a day or two.

We climbed an impressive flight of marble steps, which led into a foyer laid with patterned Mediterranean tiles. Either side of the doorway hung two gigantic oil paintings, once magnificent, now damaged by time, weather and careless tenants.

The graceful carved wooden staircase we had to share with a rat, which chose that moment to dart across our path. The CO grabbed a broom and swung viciously at it.

'Filthy damn things!' he muttered.

Visions of medieval London sprang to mind. Fortunately our Air Force medicos had inoculated us against plague before we left Australia.

Upstairs, the shutters on the enormous windows were open, admitting a cool breeze and a view of the front garden with the bay beyond. The garden had once been a showpiece of terraced flowerbeds and frangipani trees. The frangipanis now bloomed amid unkempt kikuyu, rotary clothes lines adorned with dripping flying suits and underpants, and coils of barbed wire 'to keep the VC out' as the CO put it.

Across the street from the Villa, in the yard of a crude dwelling made from flattened petrol drums, a young Vietnamese stood in a metal dish soaping himself and washing off the suds with a jug of water. Such cleanliness seemed out of place among the squalor.

The CO showed me to a room with five or six beds in it; a room that was basically tidy, but had an air of communal male scruffiness about it. He pointed to one of the beds. 'You'll have to sleep here for now Pedro, until Mark leaves', he said.

I was Mark Perrett's replacement. There were no spare beds. So until he left, I would have to sleep in a bed belonging to someone away on detachment, like a relative awaiting a bequest.

A Vietnamese woman appeared. The CO spoke to her in a weird kind of Pidgin English.

'Missy Lanh, bring clean sheets please for Mr Pedrina. He come long time now Mr Perrett fini go home.'

'Ah, Mistah Perr-ina, I clean shoes, make bed, wash clothes same same Mistah Perrett', announced Lanh enthusiastically.

Lanh was not slender and attractive, like many of the Vietnamese girls we had seen on our way here. She was short and rather dumpy, her black slacks and loose white top exaggerating her rather homely proportions. But her face was mobile and happy. She was one of a number of local women employed to do all the housekeeping chores while squadron members were away at their work.

I was only too happy to get out of my rumpled, travel-weary clothes, shower and change, and join Mike and Dick in the officers' bar.

Familiar faces began to drift in from the day's activities; Caribou and 'Huey' (Iroquois chopper) pilots from Nos 9 and 35 Squadrons, operations officers, engineers, adjutants, the doctor and the accountant—only a handful really to do what twice as many people would do at home.

My earlier uncertainty mellowed by a few drinks, I joined easily the bar room conversation. Back in Australia, the Vietnam 'veterans' had always seemed to form cliques, their conversations laced with experiences peculiar to Vietnam in a way that precluded outsiders from joining in. Here the talk was more down to earth.

Right now, there was one very popular topic of discussion. Everyone was asking everyone else: 'How many days to go?'

Our arrival had started them all counting, like prisoners awaiting the end of a sentence.

It did not take too long to figure out the point of their conversation. Of all those in the bar, only we three had 364 days to go!

I started counting then and there.

Chapter 2

DOWN THE DELTA
FRIDAY 5 AUGUST 1966

A hand roughly shaking my shoulder woke me from a deathlike sleep. It was Dick Brice, the Duty Pilot of the day, making sure I would be on time for my first operational sortie.

I have never been too bright first thing in the morning, but at five o'clock I could barely muster a grunt. I rummaged around in the dark for my flying gear, the pre-twilight calm broken only by the shallow breathing and occasional stirring of my room-mates. Beyond the open balcony doors, the bay was inky black under a moonless sky yet to show the first streaks of dawn. I crept into the adjoining bathroom to get ready.

It was my fourth day in Vietnam. I was programmed to fly a 'mail run' mission, called the 406,[9] down through the Delta, that part of the country which fanned out from the Cambodian border to the east coast, embracing the many tributaries of the Mekong River. It occupied most of the area south-west of Saigon known as IV Corps Military Region. In fact, everyone referred to the entire area, right down to the tip of the Ca Mau peninsula, as 'the Delta'.

The previous two days had been spent on administration and introductions. We had an introductory address by Group Captain Peter Raw, Officer Commanding RAAF Contingent Vung Tau. The CO followed up with lectures on the dangers of the Viet Cong (VC), monsoonal weather and sexually transmitted diseases, not necessarily in that order. We were then issued with weapons and flak jackets, and paid in Military Payment Certificates (MPC),[10] the monopoly money of this particular war. Now we were allegedly ready for action.

After a less than satisfying breakfast, I climbed into the jeep with Dick and the other crew members, and sat zombie-like as we jolted along the road to the airfield. The chattering of the jeep's tyres on the metal taxiway roused me and we were soon walking towards the lines of parked aircraft, black hulks against the ghostly grey of the lightening sky. We found our aircraft, pre-flighted it by torchlight, and shattered the early morning calm with the staccato of the Pratt & Whitney R-2000 radial engines as we cranked them into life. By the time we

taxied round to Charlie Ramp, the cargo and passenger loading area, the first tinges of cerise were creeping over the South China Sea.

Charlie Ramp

Our flight was a scheduled run, operating on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays every week. Its purpose was to carry mail, passengers and cargo to and from Saigon to a number of military outposts in the Delta area, where American and other allied military 'advisers' were stationed. Our duty day was sun-up to sundown and, because of the south-east monsoon, our chances of encountering bad weather and ground fire going into and out of the rough-and-ready strips on this route were pretty high.

Vung Tau is situated on the coast on a narrow peninsula, which the French named the Cap St Jacques. Saigon is some 40 miles inland, about 20 minutes flying time away in a Caribou. Even on this short flight there was plenty to keep me busy. As this was my first sortie in the country, I was in the copilot's seat to ease me into the system. Since I had to make all the radio calls, this was worse than actually flying the aeroplane.

I found myself talking to a strange voice called 'Paris Control', a radar air traffic facility which advised aircraft in its assigned area of other aircraft movements and

artillery fire. I barely understood a word the American operator said, what with the accent and unfamiliar terminology. Dick Cooper, the captain, frequently had to translate. But I understood immediately when the voice said: 'Wallaby Zero One, turn right heading zero six zero to avoid artillery fire five miles ahead.'

As it turned out, it was not artillery. As we turned, two F-4 Phantom fighters appeared from nowhere in a screaming dive and let off a salvo of missiles at what looked like a small fishing boat on the river below. Obviously, someone had decided it was not as innocent as it looked. Bar talk claimed such boats were sometimes used as cover for VC trying to infiltrate the port of Saigon.

'Does this happen all the time?' I asked Dick, trying to sound as casual as possible.

'Now and again,' was his brief reply.

Paris called again: 'Wallaby Zero One, make a visual approach to Saigon, runway two five. Join on a left downwind. Call Saigon Tower on two three six decimal six.'

We joined the gaggle of aircraft jockeying for position in the air traffic pattern, the exercise made more difficult by an 800-foot broken cloud base.

More confusion when we changed to Tower frequency. The American drawl changed to a Vietnamese singsong. The traffic was so dense the instructions from the control tower were an unbroken babble:

> *Dragon four one clear lan ruway too fie rebel tree too clear take-off ruway too fie snoopy fie eight hold position hold position be ready immediate take-off ruway tree six classic eight four clear take-off ruway too fie warraby zero one clear lan ruway too fie turn off first left snoopy fie eight clear immediate take-off ruway tree six Pan Am Boeing on final ruway too fie go roun GO ROUN ...*

Dick saw my puzzled expression.

'He's given us a landing clearance on runway two five', he said.

I moved on to the next problem—keeping a lookout for other traffic.

In 1966 Saigon/Tan Son Nhut was the busiest airport in the world. As the main international airport in Vietnam, it handled most of the out-of-country air traffic. American and other foreign registered civil aircraft came here, as did USAF

C-141s, C-133s and C-124s from the States, and C-130s from US bases in Japan and the Philippines, all involved in lifting men and materials into the combat zone. Our own C-130s also came in here, though most often they operated directly into Vung Tau.

Rebel Ramp, the air cargo terminal, was the biggest in the country.

In addition to cargo aircraft, Tan Son Nhut was home base for many fighter, bomber, reconnaissance and helicopter squadrons. Small wonder there were usually more than 20 aircraft waiting to land or take off, and that to speed up traffic flow, synchronised operations on three different runways were common.

We finally got onto the ground and were soon passing the fighter revetments on our way to Rebel Ramp. Everywhere there was noise; the whine of starting jets, the crump of afterburners igniting on take-off, the whistle of fighters doing a pitch and break overhead, the throaty roar of propellers going into reverse pitch on landing.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw an amazing sight. About ten miles north of the circuit area an F-105 fighter was diving almost vertically. At the last minute the pilot ejected before the aircraft impacted in a ball of flame. I heard nothing on the radio—the drama must have been on another frequency.

We were still talking on the radio as we taxied into the ramp.

'Hi Wallaby', came the voice of TMC,[11] the USAF Transport Movement Control Centre which coordinated all loading and unloading operations on the ramp. 'We got three pallets and some pax [passengers] for yuh. Come on in beside the one-twenty-three [C-123 Provider].'

Before the engines had stopped and the cargo door was fully open, a forklift was on its way with a pallet of cargo and mail. The black American driver pushed some papers in the side door for our perusal and signature, then quickly and expertly manoeuvred his vehicle under the upswept tail to the open cargo door. Passengers started to amble over.

By the time Dick's and my pre-flight duties were complete, our crew chief, Barry Ingate, and his assistant had tied down the load, which we now had to climb over to get back to the cockpit. Right up front was a pallet of food for the US Navy detachment on Phu Quoc Island. The rest of the cargo compartment was chock-a-block with mailbags for our other ports of call.

Barry had folded down two rows of seats from their stowage positions on the sidewalls of the aircraft for the dozen or so passengers we were to carry. Due to the crowded cabin, these people would have to sit cross-legged like Buddha, or put their feet up on the mailbags. Barry 'frisked' them as they came on board, making them clear their weapons outside, then place them in a pile at the front of the cabin. He did not want to have to explain another hole in the cabin ceiling.

We were soon on our way to Cao Lanh, the first stop on the 406, and transferring from Paris to Paddy Control,[12] the next radar flight follow facility. The sky above was latticed with contrails from high-flying jets. The C-123 beside us at Rebel Ramp was also westward bound, and visible just ahead of us. Three Phantoms climbed away on our starboard wing bound for an unknown target. Below, against the checkerboard of the Delta, two Skyraiders performed graceful pirouettes, their rockets a momentary shaft of brilliance before the warheads made little puffs of white smoke against the dull green background. From 6000 feet, I felt a sort of unreal detachment and security.

Cao Lanh was a short strip, even for a Caribou, which was specially designed to operate into minimum length runways. According to the *Aerodrome Directory*[13] it was Type 1 for a Caribou. The Type 1 classification said:

> *TYPE 1 – (EMERGENCY). The lowest standard of construction that can be used under favourable operating conditions. Safety features will be at a minimum and operations are hazardous and inefficient.*

No problem for Wallaby Airlines. Cao Lanh was a regular stop on the 406 mission, which was scheduled Monday, Wednesday and Friday of every week.

The runway was a 1500-foot strip of compacted gravel, about twice the length of a football oval and equivalent to the touchdown zone of a full size runway. Though we had all made many approaches at Richmond using only the first 1500 feet of its 8000-foot runway, in preparation for our flying here, the requirement to land on an actual short strip produced displays of concentration and sweat rarely seen at home. Dick made it look easy. I knew next time that it would be my turn.

Not only was Cao Lanh short, its 58-foot width was barely enough to turn around. After a careful 180-degree turn we taxied back to the tiny parking area which was about half the size of a suburban block. We squeezed in beside a US Army Otter, also on a mail run, and waited a few minutes while two American soldiers from the nearby compound finished unloading it.

Having exchanged our passengers, mail and a few parcels without stopping the engines, we headed off for our next stop on Phu Quoc Island, about 30 miles off the coast in the extreme western corner of Vietnam. In the past its ownership had been disputed with Cambodia. In another setting, it could have been a south sea resort, with its mild sunny weather and white sandy beaches.

There were two airfields here, and both were scheduled stops on this mission.

Duong Dong, a VC prisoner of war camp, was the first. Its 3300 feet of PSP presented no problem to us but obviously had to the pilot of the wrecked C-123 lying in a ditch to one side of the runway. The Yanks obviously did not have the same attitude to salvage as our shoestring operation. The *Aerodrome Directory* warned of an obstacle on the north-east side of the runway—I guess this was it.

Our engine noise brought a soldier in a jeep racing out to meet us in the ample parking area.

An Thoi, the other port on the island, was built on a sandy peninsula on the extreme southern tip of Phu Quoc. As it was only 15 miles away, and the weather was fine, Dick decided to cruise just off the coast at a couple of hundred feet, enjoying the sun, sand and waves.

We could have been back home, perhaps somewhere off the NSW central coast. There was no sign of habitation. No noise, except the drone of our engines, disturbed the calm. Seabirds wheeled and dived. Whitecaps foamed at random on the tropical sea. Our first sight of An Thoi was a hilltop antenna, which suddenly came into view over the sand dunes, interrupting my reverie.

We popped up to our circuit height of a thousand feet for landing on the finger of PSP, which jutted out into the emerald bay. Due to a stiff sea breeze we landed to the north towards the bay, and taxied back along the runway to the small parking area.

Built as an outpost for the embryonic Vietnamese Navy, An Thoi offered an attractive contrast to the drabness of the Delta. Its peninsula runway and a small headland enclosed a crescent shaped bay in which were moored naval gunboats. The wharf, aircraft parking area and the camp huddled together at the head of the bay. US Coast Guard and Vietnamese Navy personnel manned this base.

Our airborne call to ‘Barbados’, the local air/ground agency, brought a jeep and half-ton truck scuttling out to meet us. This time we stopped the engines

since most of the remaining cargo and all the passengers were terminating here. An eager team of US and Vietnamese personnel unloaded our cargo, mailbags and tinned food, and replaced it with a load for Saigon. We had three return passengers—a Vietnamese naval officer, his attractive wife and baby. He, like many Vietnamese, did not look old enough to be in uniform, let alone have a family. They settled themselves as comfortably as possible amongst the boxes and mailbags, and away we went again.

Ca Mau, our fuel and lunch stop, was a provincial capital with its own MACV headquarters. It had quite a large team of US advisers. The airfield was virtually in the centre of the town and, incredibly, had a road running across the middle of the runway. A Vietnamese military policeman was on duty and, like a city traffic cop, held the vehicular and pedestrian traffic at bay while we approached across the thatch-roofed, kerosene tin houses and landed on the short gravel strip.

The MACV compound was a few minutes walk from the parking area. After negotiating the quagmire inside the arched gateway, we came upon the local tourist attraction—three large pythons in a wire cage. The biggest would have been 11 or 12 feet long, and as thick as a man's leg. They lay there apparently docile, entwined in an ugly embrace, until an American GI threw a scraggly-looking live chicken into the cage. The feeding frenzy which followed was not a pretty sight.

The mess hall was a rough wooden and galvanised iron building, with chicken wire between the walls and roof in place of windows. Wooden trestle tables and benches were set out in rows on the concrete floor.

Our Army hosts, though friendly, were not gourmet diners. We sat down to a stew of black-looking beans and minced meat, garnished with rice, served on enamel plates. It tasted almost as bad as it looked, but I was too hungry to leave it.

The GI next to me must have read the lack of enthusiasm in my expression.

'Hey, Aussie, you need some ketchup', he said, passing me a huge bottle of the US-style tomato sauce.

I followed his example, deluged my plate with ketchup, and washed the whole mess down with iced tea.

Bac Lieu

Bac Lieu, the next stop, was another provincial centre only a few miles inland from the coast. Its 1900-foot runway, at 45 feet wide, was even narrower than Cao Lanh was. Since the Caribou wingspan is around 90 feet, and the wheel separation 30 feet, there was little margin for error in the event of a strong cross-wind. Turning bays at the ends of the runway allowed us to do a 180-degree turn after landing to taxi back to the small ramp.

Two dozen or so 'Hueys' were parked each side of the runway, their crews preparing for a search and destroy operation. They were intent on beating the afternoon storms, and took little notice of us.

After the monsoon rains, the town and airfield were like islands in a huge inland sea.

As it meanders towards the South China Sea, the Mekong River breaks up into a multitude of small tributaries, forming the famous Delta, which spreads out over an area of several hundred square miles. Flying over this area during the wet season, one sees more water than land. Many villages in this area are surrounded by water. Bac Lieu was right in the middle.

From Ca Mau through here almost to Tra Vinh, the next stop, was a dead flat, featureless stretch of water with only vague outlines of rivers, canals and rice paddies. The coastline itself was almost obliterated by watery mangrove swamps. It would remain this way until the dry season.

Towards Tra Vinh, the watertable dropped and welcome shades of green reappeared. The sketch lines of roads and canals gave way to a full canvas of fields, foliage and dotted houses. Two beautiful old temples surrounded by groves of trees, rose like jewels out of the landscape, intriguing me. But in the hundreds of times I flew over them in the coming months, I never found out what they were or why they were there until after I returned to Australia. It seems they were Khmer pagodas, Tra Vinh Province being home to a large ethnic Khmer community. The many Khmer pagodas around Tra Vinh maintained the Khmer language and culture through organised schools within their precincts.

Arriving at any of these outposts was quite an event. Swarms of Vietnamese kids appeared from nowhere, shouting 'Hi, Uc Dai Loi' (Hi, Australian), no doubt hoping to scrounge something, and just being plain friendly. We were also popular with the military because we brought the mail.

Pleasantries and unloading over, we headed off for Saigon to complete the mission. More babbling air traffic controllers, swarms of aircraft, quick decisions and reactions, and bustling Rebel Ramp.

We shuttled back to Vung Tau practically empty, arriving around 5.30 pm. It had been a long day—ten take-offs and landings, six hours in the air and twelve-and-a-half hours since I got out of bed, all in the sticky, monsoonal heat of the Delta.

The first beer in the mess barely touched the sides.

NORTH BOUND
TUESDAY 9 AUGUST 1966

The front beach was a black void as I walked down to breakfast in the morning darkness to our dining room, which was a block away from the Villa Anna behind the Sergeants Mess. A few scattered lights indicated others were up early. Far out in the bay, lights twinkled on anchored ships.

I had spent Saturday and Sunday flying short trips to Tan Son Nhut, Bien Hoa and back with the CO and 'Blue' McDonnell. Blue's real name was John Terrence and some people referred to him as Terry. I never heard him called anything but 'Blue'.

My diary entry for Monday records one word: 'diarrhoea'. Apparently I was not up to much else. The washbasins in the Villa had signs over them saying that the water was not potable. Even so, most people cleaned their teeth with it. So if only for this reason it was not a surprise to come down with a dose of the trots. The other blokes told me that it was a fairly common condition.

Next day I was back to normal. I was programmed for the 405 Mission, a northbound mail run operating Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays to various MACV and Special Forces outposts between Saigon and the air force base at Nha Trang. Nha Trang is a large coastal city about 200 miles north-east of Saigon in that part of the country designated the II Corps Military Region by the Americans.

The trip was also a left-hand seat check out with Blue McDonnell, the squadron QFI (Qualified Flying Instructor),[14] before I flew as captain myself. So today I was pleased to know that I would do most of the flying.

Any Australian reader would realise Blue got his nickname because of his red hair. The other personality trait that often went with red hair was a volatile temper. Blue did not qualify here. He was quite unexcitable, even under trying conditions, which was a good attribute for anyone involved in flying training. He also had an offbeat sense of humour. You never knew whether he was joking or serious.

Blue flew the first leg out of Saigon himself to show me the defensive spiral descent procedure developed and used by the squadron to minimise exposure to ground fire.

In 1966 towns and military bases in South Vietnam were secure 'islands' in an unfriendly 'sea' of VC-controlled countryside. Connecting roads were unsafe except in a convoy. Even trains, when they operated, included a tank-like carriage with a large calibre weapon to ward off VC attack. Rural and mountain areas, even at a relatively short distance from a major population centre or government outpost, often harboured snipers or worse, small teams of VC irregulars armed with more dangerous, large calibre weapons, who took pot shots at low flying aircraft.

Snipers strategically placed around the boundary of an airfield, concealed in patches of jungle, usually had plenty time to aim and fire at aircraft due to the slow speeds used during approach and landing.

To minimise this hazard, No 35 Squadron had developed ground fire safety procedures. To start with, it was squadron policy not to cruise below 2500 feet above ground level. This afforded protection against small arms fire. In fact, most pilots flew at 5000–6000 feet.

The second procedure was designed to ensure some protection during approach and landing when the aircraft was most vulnerable. Approaching the destination airfield the aircraft was set up in a tight, high-speed spiral descent over the runway from 2500 feet down to circuit height, normally 1000 feet. (A circuit consists of a downwind, a base and a final leg.) At the last possible moment the aircraft was slowed so that the undercarriage and flaps could be extended abeam the point of landing, prior to a tight base turn. It worked very well. We could never understand why our American colleagues did not use it.

Blue was about to demonstrate the descent procedure to me.

We arrived over Ham Tan, our first port of call out of Saigon, at 2500 feet and 165 knots. Staying within about half a mile of the runway, Blue spiralled down, maintaining speed until we were abeam the runway threshold, our landing point. He then throttled back and levelled off until the airspeed came back sufficiently to lower the undercarriage and flaps. After a tight base turn and super short finals, we were on the ground.

After this demonstration, I was not surprised our squadron had taken very few hits compared with our American counterparts, who used a more conventional

approach technique. If this procedure was necessary to avoid VC ground fire, I needed no further encouragement to use it.

Ham Tan was a classic defensive triangle on a model developed by the US Army Special Forces. The camp was surrounded by a triangular fortification of sandbags and trenches with a central lookout tower. The triangular shape gave a wide field of fire from the trenches when the camp was under attack. The airfield, a fairly rough gravel runway and parking area, was outside the triangle running along parallel to one side. It was more than adequate for our needs.

After ten minutes on the ground dropping passengers and mail, we were soon airborne again heading for the coast, and Phan Thiet.

The aircraft was now under my control.

After the drab Delta, the north was like a Garden of Eden. The terrain changed from browns to greens, from alluvial plains to purple highlands. Along the coast, the azure sea sparkled as it can do only under a tropical sky. Everything looked clean, at least from our cruising altitude. I felt good.

Phan Thiet is a coastal town with its airport clinging to the top of a windswept cliff. Although the runway was reasonably long, the approach was rather hairy due to a vicious wind shear caused by offshore winds on the cliff, and a forest of aerials on the approach path. Both ensured my active concentration all the way to the ground.

After landing, we squeezed into the tiny parking area beside a USAF C-123 Provider. We exchanged passengers and mail with motors running.

Further north was Song Mao. The airfield was built on a narrow plain sandwiched between mountain ranges and the coast, and was short enough to be interesting.

More than the usual number of kids crowded out to see us, pushing against the wire barricade bordering the ramp. Three small children, the oldest in a miniature sailor suit and looking more like an American kid, enjoyed a better view from the back of a jeep. They were the children of the province chief, a Vietnamese colonel.

Kids at Song Mao

Departing Song Mao, we had to climb overhead beyond the usual 2500 feet to clear the mountain range by a safe margin. The Caribou climbed effortlessly, like a glider, its thick cambered wings picking up thermals induced by the strong south-easterly on the sloping terrain.

As we climbed we tracked over a large area pockmarked with bomb craters, the result of an earlier B-52 carpet-bombing. It looked like the surface of the Moon. A strip of jungle almost a mile wide and several miles long had been blasted off the map, along with whoever or whatever was in it at the time. One can only imagine the pandemonium among ground forces when the giant bomber's load of 1000-pound high explosive iron bombs rained down on them.

Crossing the first mountain range, we saw Cam Ranh Bay glistening in the hot sun. The bay and the surrounding countryside looked particularly beautiful from the air. No doubt if we descended from cruising altitude to fly low level over the small, close-packed towns which dot the way, their shanties elbowing each other greedily for space beside the river, the squalor would be the same as the towns of the Delta.

The Americans were developing Cam Ranh Bay from a superb natural harbour surrounded by rolling sand dunes into one of the country's biggest naval and air bases. The bay was already a major supply port for the II Corps region, its waters crowded with shipping. The adjacent airfield was undergoing a transition from a supply base for C-130 and smaller cargo aircraft to one capable of handling larger cargo aircraft, as well as high-performance fighters and bombers. Construction teams were busy grading the sand dunes flat prior to laying acres of AM-2, solid aluminium matting similar to PSP.

Beyond the next range was Nha Trang, a large and beautiful coastal city set in a narrow river valley whose mountain walls rise to around 4000 feet.

We approached from the south-west, across the ranges, at 6000 feet. At this level the city was hidden from view behind the mountains until we were quite close, when it was suddenly revealed like a scene from a picture postcard. The blue mountains, the verdant green valley, the sapphire sea and a magnificent white Buddha towering over the city—those were unforgettable first impressions. At this level also the decrepit buildings and shantytown, which are features of most Vietnamese cities, were mercifully hidden from view.

Nha Trang airfield was also a busy transport base, supplying many government outposts and Special Forces camps in the II Corps Military Region. USAF C-123 and C-130 squadrons, a US Army Caribou detachment, and a host of

smaller aircraft and helicopters were based here, as well as training aircraft of the fledgling Vietnamese Air Force. One of our Wallabies was also kept here on semi-permanent detachment, and was parked on the loading ramp when we arrived.

Like Tan Son Nhut, there was a TMC to allocate parking, and coordinate loading and unloading. We were given a parking position on the radio. Parking here was at a premium, the aircraft being parked nose to nose in eight double rows, making ground manoeuvring difficult, as I was to find later to my cost. Taxiing in was easy. Coming out in a tight reverse turn was another matter.

The loading supervisor, a youthful-looking sergeant second grade, pencil on right ear, clipboard in hand, poked his head through the side door as we climbed down from the cockpit.

'Hi, Aussie', he began with the universal American greeting. 'We got nuthin' much for yuh—just a few bags of mail and six pax. The other Wallaby cleaned us out.'

This was good news for Malcolm 'Bugs' Rose, the crew chief, and his assistant 'Blue' Campbell. Aside from the refuelling operation, there would be little for them to do.

I followed Blue McDonnell over to a two-storey wooden building behind the aircraft lines.

'TMC is downstairs, Ops [Operations] up top', he explained as we climbed the steep flight of external steps to the balcony above. Operations had no new information for us, so Blue started back towards the aircraft.

It was nearly midday.

'What about lunch?' I inquired hopefully, my stomach triggering alarm signals. In my humble opinion, civilised people normally eat something in the middle of the day.

'There's a snack bar round the corner', said Blue 'but I don't usually bother. TMC will sell you a Coke.'

'Show me the snack bar', I insisted.

The snack bar was a semi-enclosed counter at the end of the building manned by a Vietnamese wearing a white apron and an American-diner style peaked cap.

A rough sign advertised meat sandwiches at an exorbitant price. They looked unappetising, but I was determined to eat.

'Two sandwiches please', I requested, holding up two fingers.

The Vietnamese handed over two pre-wrapped packages. I paid him with a wad of MPC and opened one packet. The sandwich consisted of a thick slab of dry-looking ham between two equally thick slices of half-stale bread, with no butter. Almost choking on my first mouthful, I threw the rest into the nearest bin, much to Blue's ill-concealed amusement. I bought a Coke at TMC.

After chatting to the crew of the other Wallaby we fired up our Caribou again. This time the going was not so easy. The afternoon clouds, initially cotton wool puffs, swelled rapidly into bubbling cumulus towers as we headed west into the mountains.

The next three stops were mountain bases without radio navigation aids. The only way to make a visual approach and landing at these bases in these conditions was to descend visually through holes in the rapidly increasing cloud cover, doing our best to adapt the spiral descent to get down without compromising our safety by being too low too far out from each airfield.

Our first port of call in the mountains was Dalat Cam Ly, the main airport for the mountain-top city of Dalat.

Sixty miles south-west of Nha Trang, Dalat was a surprising city on a plateau 5000 feet above sea level surrounded by a ring of mountains. I saw fine public buildings, curved tree-lined boulevards, and elegant houses. Originally built as a cool and lofty retreat for the French well-to-do to escape the sticky Saigon summer, it now belonged to wealthy Vietnamese.

The runway at Cam Ly was 4400 feet long. This was a potential trap for Caribou pilots used to operating from runways a quarter as long at sea level. Due to the high altitude and often above 30°C temperatures, take-off performance was greatly reduced. Pilots had to be aware of this and compensate by restricting the available outbound payload.

Another 60 miles west was Gia Nghia, a US Army Special Forces camp.

There were many Special Forces camps scattered throughout the highlands. Each camp was virtually a fortified Montagnard village, the whole population and the Special Forces personnel living inside the boundary.

The French originally coined the term Montagnard to describe the ethnic minority peoples living in the highlands. The Special Forces recruited the Montagnards, and trained them in guerrilla warfare. The Montagnards were willing participants since they had no love of lowland Vietnamese and hated the VC in particular for disrupting their traditional lifestyle. Because the men were diverted from their traditional hunting and gathering activities, they were 'paid' for their efforts in livestock and vegetables, flown in by Caribou or C-123. (More on the Montagnards later.)

Gia Nghia was listed in the *Aerodrome Directory* as a Type 2 runway for Caribous:

> *TYPE 2 – (MINIMUM OPERATIONAL). A facility constructed to provide a sub-standard but operable margin of safety. Operations from this facility will be reasonably efficient, but may be seriously jeopardised under adverse operating conditions.*

They were not committing themselves much, were they?

Bulldozing the tops of two adjacent mountains into the dividing saddle had formed the unique dumbbell shaped, red gravel runway at Gia Nghia. The bulldozers, of course, had to be airlifted in by heavy helicopter. The result was a 2000-foot narrow ochre-red strip with sheer drop offs at ends and sides, 2100 feet above sea level and lashed by unpredictable winds.

As I came bucking down finals towards this incredible tabletop runway and realised I was going to have to land on it, my adrenalin glands started pumping full bore. I made a full STOL approach, arrived with a thump on the ground, and pulled up in half the distance available in a cloud of dust thrown up by the reverse thrust of the propellers.

To use an Air Force expression, the passengers sat behind us 'fat, dumb and happy', unaware that I had chalked up a first. Blue, unflappable as ever, said nothing.

Of course, we had practised STOL approaches and landings back home with the backup of a full-length runway in case we stuffed up. Here it was the real thing. The Caribou is a strange beast in the STOL configuration. It does not really want to fly at the very low speeds necessary for STOL performance. To get around that, its designers resorted to aerodynamic trickery by using an incredible wing with two different aerofoil sections bolted together, the inboard section with anhedral (angled down) and the outboard with dihedral (angled up), and full-length triple-slotted Fowler flaps which extended down to a huge 47 degrees.

Handling a 28,000-pound Caribou at speeds as low as 58 knots required considerable skill. To make the task easier, the pilot was given a special gadget called a short field approach indicator. It was mounted on the glare shield at the top of the instrument panel, just below eye level, so that he could see it without looking away from the runway. A computer calculated the optimum speed above the stall and drove a needle on the indicator, which the pilot had to keep aligned with an index mark appropriate to the aircraft weight. Any changes in power setting or aircraft attitude, or turbulence, produced immediate fluctuations of the needle. The pilot had to interpret these fluctuations and avoid 'chasing the needle'. Furthermore, at very low speed a lot of muscle power was required to move the controls to obtain the large control surface deflections required. For these reasons it is easy to understand why even the most proficient pilot found himself in a lather of sweat on a full STOL approach.

Having forced the unwilling brute down to a position just over the intended touchdown point, hopefully close to the ground, the pilot then rotated the aircraft to a landing attitude. Since this placed it below stalling speed, the aeroplane then literally fell out of the sky. Having 'arrived' on the ground in this fashion the long, forgiving undercarriage legs soaked up the inevitable shock. The only thing left to do was to apply maximum braking and full reverse power and—presto—there you were sitting in a stationary aircraft after a 700–800-foot landing roll trying to look calm and disguise your rapid breathing.

Fortunately, few runways required this unnerving performance and most pilots adopted a modified STOL technique, using only 30 degree flap and a higher approach speed, for all but the shortest of them.

Back to Gia Nghia, I mentally reclassified it as a 'modified STOL' runway.

Blao, our next stop, was also high in the hills. It was shortish, sloping and slippery due to a recent shower of rain on its membrane surface. It was set in the midst of vast tea plantations which, in spite of the war, were surprisingly still operated by a private company. The tea was sold in attractively decorated tins. I later bought several and sent them home as gifts.

The loading team here, rifles slung over their shoulders, appeared like wraiths from among the tea shrubs which surrounded the parking area. Having taken the mailbags and whatever else we had for them, they disappeared again without waiting to see us rumbling down the runway towards the gulch at the bottom, the staccato of our exhaust augmentors at take-off power shattering the whispering calm of the plantation.

Ahead of us was the longest leg of the day, a 200-mile run to Saigon. Dodging this way and that, we found a clear path out of the highlands around the many large cloud build-ups that now towered all around us. After diverting us around an air strike, Paris Control left us to make our own way back to Saigon, and we were soon back again in the babble and roar of Tan Son Nhut.

The return flight to Vung Tau was an anticlimax. Once again, I was tired and thirsty.

Chapter 4

THE ELUSIVE BUDDHA
THURSDAY 11 AUGUST – TUESDAY 16 AUGUST

On Thursday, Dick Brice and I, with 'Bugs' Rose and 'Blue' Campbell as crew members, set off for Nha Trang to take over from the crew who had been there since Saturday. We would be relieved in turn the following Tuesday.

Dick and I were both qualified captains, but squadron procedure called for pilots to see difficult airfields from the right-hand seat first, before operating as captain into those fields. I was the new boy on this detachment so, although sharing the flying, Dick would fly into the difficult airfields.

Both of us were 'hour hogs', but for different reasons. Dick had ideas of later joining an airline. I had taken two years off flying duties to complete a degree, and wanted to catch up to my contemporaries. And so we were both keen to log as much flying time as we could in Vietnam. The detachments provided an ideal opportunity.

While away from Vung Tau, we were virtually our own masters. No limits had been placed on us, and we could therefore accept as many tasks from our USAF coordinators as the limits of daylight, weather and fatigue would allow. Most of the squadron pilots, being young and keen, felt the same way. This willingness to fly had given the squadron a 'can-do' reputation among the Special Forces for getting the job done, even under difficult conditions; a reputation which many US squadrons, operating 'by the book' as they would in the States, did not enjoy. It is hard to imagine a handful of aircraft and crews gaining such a reputation amongst the huge airlift effort of the USAF and US Army, but the backslapping welcome we received everywhere from the Special Forces proved the point.

Some of our loadies must have wondered why their pilots were so obsessive about logging flight time. It made no difference to them how much they flew since their main job was on the ground. But they did not complain when we talked them into one more sortie. Bugs was enthusiastic and capable, and did everything he could to help us along, while the taciturn Blue took it all in his stride.

Our detachment tasks were unscheduled resupply missions to any one of dozens of small Special Forces camps from the two main supply bases in the II Corps Military Region, Nha Trang and Pleiku. These camps were scattered throughout the mountainous region to the west and north-west of Nha Trang. Each camp had its own rudimentary airstrip. Some were short, narrow and rough, and suitable only for Caribous, light aircraft and helicopters. Others were longer, with PSP or T-17 membrane surfaces suitable for larger aircraft. Many were perched on top of a hill, or squeezed into a narrow valley, requiring full STOL performance from the Caribou.

The weather today was overcast turning the sea a steely grey. On our way north, the port engine began running roughly. Not wishing to spend a six-day detachment plagued with engine trouble, we diverted back into Vung Tau to have it checked.

Once at Nha Trang the engine began playing up again. Bugs had already cleaned the plugs, so he decided to replace them with the spare set we always carried. Still the engine coughed and backfired when we checked the magnetos. As a last resort, Bugs changed the high-tension leads, and at last the engine ran sweetly.

By this time, it was midafternoon. We called up TMC and were given our first and only task for the day, a load for Plei Me.

Plei Me was a Special Forces camp 110 miles north-west of Nha Trang. The Caribou was the largest fixed-wing aircraft that could get into its 1200-foot length. It was definitely a Type 1 airfield. Only RAAF Caribous went into Plei Me. US Army Caribous did not. This made us very popular with the Special Forces team there, and they were always trying to coax us to do extra sorties for them.

Since Plei Me was not only short, but also 1200 feet above sea level, it was marginal, even for a Caribou. Dick, who had been there only a few times himself, flew this sortie. He was soon in a lather of sweat, the wet patch on the back of his flying suit spreading as he manhandled the aircraft down to touch down on the first hundred feet of the strip.

From finals, the strip looked impossibly short, since it had a hump in the middle, and you could not see the other half until you were rolling down the runway after landing. It was a case of psyching yourself into believing that there really was an adequate strip there, and doing all the right things to pull up before you ran off the other end.

On the ground Bugs and Blue, sweating profusely in the muggy heat, helped the Special Forces team push our cargo of three 1500-pound pallets of boxed food onto the tray of a battered army truck, backed up with its tailgate almost against the Wallaby's cargo ramp. There was nothing as sophisticated as a forklift way out here. Behind us, the red and yellow South Vietnamese flag fluttered bravely over the sandbagged trenches and makeshift timber and galvanised iron buildings that constituted the camp.

With only an hour until last light, we wasted little time on pleasantries. The dust from our landing had barely settled when Dick had the first engine turning as the truck pulled away with the last pallet.

The Buddha was vermilion in the setting sun as we joined the circuit at Nha Trang. The outskirts of the base merged with the horizon, rapidly darkening in the short tropical twilight, revealing only the featureless bulk of the nearby mountains, and the stark rectangles of the VHF ground communications antennae that transmitted telephone conversations from base to base in the absence of secure landline communications.

We finished our post-flight paperwork sitting on the cargo ramp, drinking cans of Budweiser beer from the TMC fridge.

Next day, we had two long runs. The first, which I flew, was north of Pleiku to Plei Mrong, a 3000-foot PSP strip. The other was to Dak Pek, further north again, and was Dick's sortie.

Dick had told me over the previous night's Budweisers about 'the dreaded Dak Pek'. When we got there, I could see what he meant. The camp and strip were in a mountainous river valley six miles from the Cambodian border, and close to the notorious Ho Chi Minh Trail. The *Aerodrome Directory* warned: 'Check SF for security. Airfield usually secure sunrise to sunset. VC on hills to west', encouraging us to use our defensive spiral descent.

As we spiralled down, I gazed up at the jungle-shrouded ridgelines above us, wondering whether a VC was looking at us down the barrel of a gun. Several months later I was to find out.

Descriptions do little justice to Dak Pek airfield. Although not the shortest strip our Caribous went into, it was certainly one of the worst. It was Type 2 for Caribous.

Dak Pek Airfield

The 1400-foot dirt runway, 2350 feet above sea level, ran along the narrow valley within a bend in the river, and on the only flat area around. On one side was a knoll on which was perched the fortified Special Forces camp, overlooking the river and hills to the west, and on the other side the high valley wall to the east. The approach to one end of the strip was over a steep, timbered hill; to the other end over the river towards a claustrophobic cutting through which the strip passed. Dick had been there only once before, as copilot. Now he was sweating it out himself, as I would be next time.

It was obvious that time for another sortie today was running out so, after unloading, we accepted the offer of a cup of coffee with the team. It was a stiff climb to the camp, which had a grandstand view of the surrounding valley, a very desirable attribute in this part of the country. Montagnard children, the smaller ones completely naked, played on a discarded artillery piece, waiting for their fathers and older brothers to return from scouring the nearby mountain trails looking for VC. Montagnard women trudged by, large urns on their heads, on their way to collect water from the river.

Sitting around a rough trestle table in their ramshackle command hut our Special Forces hosts quizzed us about the war. What a joke! We knew as little as they did. Although we picked up snippets of information as we moved around the

country, we had to rely on week-old Australian newspapers or dial up Radio Australia on our HF radio to give us an overall picture of what was going on.

I did not envy the Special Forces teams. There were usually about a dozen men in each camp, all highly trained in hand-to-hand combat and weapon handling. Although they were officially classified as 'advisers', in places like Dak Pek they were organised on company lines, the senior man, usually a captain, acting as company commander and directing all activities. His men acted as platoon sergeants to groups of Montagnards drawn from the village population. They lived under primitive conditions, and were absolutely dependent on aerial resupply for not only ammunition and materials, but also food and any creature comforts they enjoyed. It was no wonder they cultivated our friendship, and offered us hospitality, reliant on us as they were for bringing in everything they needed on a day-to-day basis.

As dusk was again approaching we had to end the conversation and get back to Nha Trang.

After dinner, Dick and I decided to look for the Buddha, which we had seen so far only from the air. We set off downtown in our scrounged and battered vehicle, a Ford F-100 automatic pick-up, which had large rust holes in the cabin floor and tray, and an ominous noise in the transmission.

The truck had an interesting history. Apparently it had been on its way to the scrap heap, but was somehow diverted when a smooth-talking Aussie crew chief persuaded a US Army drinking buddy to look the other way. Since then it had been passed on to successive Nha Trang detachment crews, who had appreciated the independence of having their own transport away from base.

Nha Trang looked cleaner and more sophisticated than Vung Tau did, and less symmetrical due to its position astride the river estuary. It was also more expensive, thanks to the Yanks.

We passed the grand-looking entrance to the Vietnamese Air Force Academy, an archway topped with a huge bronze eagle. Inside the grounds a World War II Bearcat fighter was set up on a pylon as an ornament on the lawn. The choice of aircraft seemed inappropriate. The fledgling Republic of Vietnam Air Force (VNAF) flew mainly retired USAF Skyraiders and C-47s. As far as I know the Bearcat was never part of their operational line-up. Freedom Fighter jets, their first new aircraft, were presently being introduced at the Bien Hoa fighter base near Saigon under a US assistance plan.

The Buddha, whose white bulk stood out like a beacon from the air, eluded us among the side streets of the city. We gave up, and decided to explore the town instead. We parked the truck and wandered down the main street. As at Vung Tau, military uniforms rubbed shoulders with ao dais. Trishaws and Lambrettas dropped off American GIs and rushed away with another fare. An old lady at a mobile food cart tried to tempt us with some savoury meat on a satay stick. The aroma of her cooking lingered as we walked into one of the many bars, our eyes momentarily blinded in the soft reddish light inside.

A bargirl quickly appeared from behind a lurid, beaded curtain. Her slim, attractive figure was vulgarised by tight-fitting Western dress, and her face overly made up. She spotted the 'Australia' caption on Dick's cap.

'Hi Aussie. How 'bout a beer, or maybe "Saigon Tea"?', she said suggestively. The latter, quoted at 750p (about US$7.50), seemed to involve more than a drink.

'What comes with the Saigon Tea?' Dick wanted to know.

'Short time with me', replied the girl with a wink.

'How much all night?' asked Dick.

Fuel Cells at Plei Me

'Fifty dollar', she said firmly. When Dick laughed, she said impatiently, 'What you want, Aussie?'

'Give us a "bar me bar"',[15] replied Dick, grinning at me.

The girl, realising she had been had, laughed too, and went away to get our drinks. She came back with two bottles and two grubby-looking glasses. We drank our 'bar me bar', ignoring the sludge in the bottom of the bottle and the faint taste of formalin, which left you with a horrendous gut-ache if you drank too much. If you believed the rumour, 'bar me bar' was made from Saigon River water and the formalin, more commonly used as an embalming fluid, was added to kill the bugs!

Retrieving the truck, we managed to find our way back to our quarters at the MACV compound. In spite of its pleasant location on the beachfront, the compound offered few creature comforts. Dick and I had to share an austere room equipped only with two beds, sheets and mosquito nets. We soon gravitated back to the bar, which had tables and chairs, a few poker machines and the prospect of conversation, although none of the Americans we came into contact with at the base lived in this mess.

We struck up a conversation with a couple of civilian engineers who came here from New York to work on building projects contracted to Pacific Architects and Engineers, an American construction firm. They told us Polish and Jewish jokes all night. Some of the stories were not very complimentary to either ethnic group, but I suppose they would say the same about our Irish and Aboriginal jokes.

Next morning, like all mornings here, we had to face another American-style breakfast. We joined the crowd shambling past the servery in the cafeteria-style dining room. Regardless of my indications or protestations, I seemed to get the same each morning; two hard fried eggs 'sunny side up', several pieces of overdone bacon glued together with fat, a 'stack' of pancakes, with the whole lot floating in a sea of maple syrup. As I looked at this gastronomic nightmare, my stomach churned. But I was too hungry not to eat it.

On the bright side, today the flying was all mine, and I was looking forward to it.

TMC ran over the day's activities with us. We had ammunition for Plei Me and building materials and POL[16] for Tuy Hoa South.

Getting into Plei Me was interesting, as I had to descend through a minute hole in the cloud cover in a very tight spiral, avoiding swarms of choppers taking part in a heliborne assault operation. Dozens more were parked in lines each side of the short, narrow strip, making the landing even more difficult. A mixture of 'Huey' gunships and troop carriers, they refuelled from huge rubber fuel cells brought in from Pleiku by Chinook (heavy helicopter). The air was full of dust stirred up by their rotor blades, and the characteristic wokka-wokka sound mingled with the intermittent rat-a-tat of distant gunfire. The busy Special Forces team had our load of ammunition onto the truck and into the choppers in a few minutes. We were truly part of the action here

My first landing at the minute Plei Me strip was an anticlimax. As I recorded in my diary: 'I managed to hack it ie. We're still alive, even though some fool Yank parked too close to the strip.'

Just off the end of the runway at Tuy Hoa was a wrecked C-130. A C-123 pilot told us that the pilot of the C-130 had misjudged his approach, and overrun the short PSP strip, becoming bogged in the soft sandy soil. As the unfortunate, but at this stage undamaged aircraft, was interfering with the approach path on the other runway, the Army colonel running the base ordered it towed away. After two abortive attempts, during which the nose wheel assembly was ripped off and the fuselage skin torn and wrinkled, the next instruction was to push the C-130 away with a bulldozer. This operation was successful, that is, in removing the forlorn aircraft, but the end result was an eight million-dollar pile of scrap metal. The hulk remained there for months until it was blown up to make way for a new runway. By contrast, on the rare occasions when an aircraft in our shoestring operation came to grief, it was carefully put back together with salvaged or improvised bits and pieces and returned to service as soon as possible.

Sunday was Dick's day but the weather, quite good until now, finally stopped us. We were unable to get into Plei Mrong, its valley being socked in with low cloud. This forced us into nearby Pleiku on a GCA (Ground Controlled Approach).

Wondering what to do for the rest of the day, our interest quickened when the GCA controller told us to drop our load and proceed to nearby Holloway to pick up some travelling entertainers waiting for a lift to Tuy Hoa. Expecting buxom showgirls, we wasted no time getting airborne again, but were disappointed to find a troupe of male folk singers waiting for us at Holloway. As we found in the coming months, many entertainers, sponsored or giving their services free, visited Vietnam regularly. Several well-known Australian personalities performed for us at Vung Tau, Lorrae Desmond and Dinah Lee to name a couple.

After dropping off our folk singers, we continued on back to Nha Trang for our next assignment.

Later in the day, we were given a load for Qui Nhon, and instructions to return via Tuy Hoa to pick up the folk singers. Since Tuy Hoa was also on the coast we took the opportunity to fly up low level, enjoying the coastal scenery. The seafront here is very rocky, with many inlets and small islands. On one rocky promontory stood a large lighthouse and what looked like a monastery. Many small craft dotted the blue waters, fishing the coastal shelf.

Qui Nhon is a large port city in the area then known as I Corps Military Region (colloquially 'i' Corps), the northernmost part of the country. Many warships and freighters were tied up in the harbour. A large Catholic Church dominated the landscape from its position on a hillside.

After dropping our load, we returned once more low level along the coast.

Ten miles north of Tuy Hoa, the main highway and railway from Qui Nhon meet the coast and parallel it for the rest of the way to Nha Trang. Both were deserted. Bus and train services had been virtually abandoned after frequent ambushes and atrocities. In my 12 months in Vietnam, I saw only one functioning train, even though there were hundreds of miles of railway track. Only peasant farmers dared to travel unprotected on the roads, their bullock wagons no doubt testifying to their innocent objectives. Military convoys, of course, were always well protected.

It was nearly six o'clock when we saw the Buddha again. Another long day.

After dinner, there was entertainment in the MACV bar—Sunday special. A local rock group performed. The electric guitars, the showbiz clothes, the mop heads and the accents—all were pure Beatles. Only the Asian faces broke the illusion, and seemed oddly incongruous in the American club atmosphere where no other Vietnamese were present. But they put on a good show. Even the Texan C-123 pilot we were sitting with commented: 'Goddamn good—for slopeheads'.[17] An Australian girl named Shirley, who sang some impromptu songs, followed the Viet Beatles. Our Texan friend informed us: 'She'll do a strip show if the price is right'. I am not sure where Shirley, or the Texan's information, came from.

Monday was my day again. We dropped Bugs and Blue at the Special Forces ramp, as usual, before driving down to Ops to submit our flight plan. As we drove back into the ramp, we witnessed a sight which was more like a scene from a hillbilly western. At the back of the Wallaby was a forklift, its prongs level with

Cow at Nha Trang

the cargo ramp, and supporting a wooden cage. Inside the cage was part of our cargo, a mournful-looking cow. The forklift driver, a diminutive Vietnamese wearing a crash helmet with his black pyjamas was, with characteristic Asian patience, trying to get the cow from the cage into the aircraft. He was having little success. The cow seemed unwilling to forsake its cramped cage for the unknown perils of the Wallaby, particularly when, on its first tentative step, it put its hoof down the gap between cage and cargo ramp. Its bovine expression changed to stubbornness. The Vietnamese shrugged helplessly. But the cow reckoned without Bugs Rose. Aiming a swift kick at its rump, he jumped into the aircraft, bellowing like a fan at a football final as he hauled on the cow's tethering rope. The Vietnamese beamed in admiration as the reluctant animal trotted forward.

And so I set off for Van Canh with my first 'veg and livestock' cargo, a mixture of boxed cabbages, crated geese and the recalcitrant cow tethered to the sidewall of the cargo compartment. The Wallaby smelt more like a farmyard than an aeroplane.

Van Canh, reasonably long at 2000 feet, was wedged in on both sides by steep mountain ranges. I misjudged the first approach and, playing safe, went round for another go. The next approach was much better, and after landing I parked beside a US Army Caribou already on the ramp.

Now came the sequel to the loading story. Bugs opened the cargo ramp fully, which angled it down about 30 degrees towards the ground. The cow seemed to have overcome its distaste for the aircraft, and now wanted to stay inside. Bugs' solution to this problem was to hand the end of the tether rope outside to a Montagnard soldier waiting to claim this food on the hoof. Bugs repeated his famous bellow, and gave the cow another kick on the rump. The unfortunate animal lurched forward, stepped onto the sloping ramp, immediately lost its footing and slid the rest of the way on its rump. Picking itself up after this undignified exit, the cow found itself in the open looking at the surprised Montagnard meekly holding its rope. The Montagnard, reading the cow's terrible expression, turned to run, a little late. The enraged animal leaped forward, head lowered, until its horns, which fortunately had been clipped, found the retreating soldier's buttocks. This produced a burst of speed from him, further encouraging the cow. And so it went on until both disappeared from view.

After another less eventful run to Van Canh, we were sent on a mail run-type mission through three bases in central II Corps—Buon Brieng, Phan Rang and Cam Ranh Bay.

Buon Brieng was another membrane strip. The runway and parking ramp were covered with the nylon-coated matting which, after a shower of rain, was very slippery. Having skidded slightly when taxiing the Caribou into the sloping ramp, I watched with concern as a jeep, zooming out from the nearby compound to meet us, went into a four-wheel drift towards our aircraft. The driver, cursing and swearing, cranked the steering wheel in both directions until the vehicle at last responded, and the potential disaster was averted.

A Special Forces lieutenant invited Dick and me up to the camp for coffee while the crew finished unloading. I got the impression he wanted us 'fly-boys with cushy jobs' to see how the war was really fought, though all we could see here were tents, mud and Montagnards.

Some of the advisers here were on their second or third tours, and were decidedly weird. After exchanging pleasantries, they lapsed into a world of their own. Living in this muddy, makeshift camp, miles from anywhere in a foreign country, training unsophisticated mountain tribesmen in the art of counterinsurgency warfare, who would blame them? Only one man seemed cheerful and well adjusted. He was a huge black man with reddish hair and Asian eyes who told us he had 'married' a Montagnard woman. He asked all sorts of questions about 'Orstralia', the Davis Cup, and 'those little Cola bears'.

The detachment ended quietly on Tuesday morning with a run to a place called Tan Rai. Here, the village had been fortified in a pentagonal arrangement of sandbags and slit trenches, looking like a copy book example from the Special Forces manual, if there was such a thing. The captain, a sandy-haired Virginian, was especially pleased with our cargo of hessian bags and roofing iron. The Special Forces team was expecting trouble, and was in the process of sandbagging their quarters and digging more bunkers.

On return to Nha Trang, we handed over to the incoming Wallaby, and continued home to Vung Tau. The six days just ended had been full of interest for me. I had seen new places and people, flown into challenging airstrips in difficult weather and carried an amazing variety of cargoes. Better still I had added 41 hours to my logbook. Our reception everywhere had been gratifying, with our Special Forces allies lauding our efforts to get supplies to them.

Whatever else I felt about being in Vietnam, at least I was doing something useful!

VUNG TAU AND LIFE IN THE VILLA ANNA

SATURDAY – SUNDAY 20 – 21 AUGUST 1966

A quick look at my diary showed that I had flown on 13 out of 15 days since my first mission on 5 August. I was ready for some time to myself. It was a Saturday and, although I was Duty Pilot, I had most of the day free.

Being Duty Pilot was a breeze after the dawn to dusk hassle of a flying day. All I had to do was drive crews out to the airfield in the morning, pick them up in the late afternoon, and in between complete some minor administrative tasks, including making out flight plans for the following day. Today being Saturday was also the day to pick up and distribute the flying program.

After dropping the crews at the flight line I drove over to Squadron Headquarters.

No 35 Squadron Headquarters

Yesterday there had been a lot of talk about a big Task Force operation at Long Tan, a rubber plantation in Phuoc Tuy Province near Nui Dat. (This famous engagement entered Army annals as the Battle of Long Tan.) The VC had clearly been bent on testing the resolve of the newly constituted Australian force. The Australians accounted for themselves very well. The operation cost 18 Australian lives against a body count of 245 VC dead. We found out later that D Company, 6 RAR[18] earned a United States Presidential Citation for 'extraordinary heroism in operations against an opposing armed force'.

Our squadron was not involved. No 9 Squadron and US Army 'Huey' squadrons were the key providers of aerial support. However, everyone at Headquarters was still talking about it.

Xuan (pronounced 'Swan'), our office girl, was already busy typing the flying program when I arrived. She was a cheerful young soul, like our house girl Lanh. But there the resemblance ended. Xuan was attractive and slender and still wore the white ao dai of a young unmarried girl. Not long out of school and from a reasonably well-to-do Catholic family, she displayed a charming naivety, and was therefore constantly teased. The poor girl took fright at the slightest amorous advance (and there were plenty), blushing at enquiries from red-blooded single pilots about her boyfriends. But she was also a good sport and always ended up laughing with her Australian tormentors.

After collecting the programs, I drove the jeep around to the various places on the distribution list. There was our sister squadron, No 9 Squadron, as well as TMC and our maintenance hangar. At this stage I had never been into the hangar where our engineer, Wally Solomons, and his hardworking maintenance team serviced and patched up our aircraft. I was well aware though that to keep four, sometimes five, of our seven aircraft in the air each day, Wally's men had to work through the night under floodlights. Our dawn to dusk schedule did not help matters either.

Our squadron shared hangar space with No 9 Squadron, so maintenance work on the Caribous often had to be carried out outside the hangar. The floodlights, specially designed and made in Australia, had their own power plants so night-time work could be carried out on aircraft parked at some distance from the hangar. The lights were particularly useful for doing routine smoothing of propellers damaged by debris thrown up during landings on rough strips. Work on the tall tailplane was possible using a 'cherry picker' brought to Vung Tau by C-130 in the early days. Wally and his team were instrumental in earning

the Australian Caribous the reputation of 'the best maintained machines in Vietnam'.

Looking around for Wally's office I was conscious of a black pyjama-clad figure standing behind me. It was not an infiltrating VC but 'Charlie' (from Victor Charlie), our Vietnamese hangar odd-job man. I am sure he moved as quietly as his namesakes did, but he did not look too menacing, grinning as he directed me to Wally's office.

After distributing the programs I headed off back to the Villa intending to write a letter to my wife.

Wearing only a pair of boxer shorts, I was sitting at the desk in my room, writing pad open in front of me, when Lanh walked in. She picked up Robyn's photo from my bedside table and looked at me, eyes round with curiosity.

'This your woman Mistah Perr-ina?' she asked.

'Yes, Missy Lanh', I replied. 'That is my wife back in Uc Dai Loi [Australia]'.

'Where your kids Mistah Perr-ina?' she continued.

'No kids Lanh. Just my wife and me.'

'You got Vietnam girlfriend?' she persisted.

'No, Missy Lanh', I replied.

'Ah Mistah Perr-ina', she said, eyes twinkling, 'You cherry boy!' She meant I was a virgin.

She gave me a playful dig in the ribs and laughed uproariously at her joke. I laughed with her. It was hard not to. She was such a cheerful girl and flirted with everyone.

It would have been easy to take it one step further. Someone already had. Lanh was rumoured to be the de facto widow of an American GI. She had a young son to support. He was downstairs now, playing in our yard with some other Vietnamese children.

I watched her as she bustled about the room placing laundered clothes in neat piles on each bed, and collecting the dirty clothes from the laundry baskets underneath.

Then she went out into the corridor to join the other girls, who were cleaning our flying boots and shoes. They sat on the tiled floor polishing, chattering in Vietnamese, and giggling. They would stay there until Missy Kim, the senior girl, came in to hustle them on to another task. (Kim had a pleasant, serene demeanour—I was surprised to hear she was later sacked for stealing.)

As might be expected, a few of the blokes did have downtown Vietnamese girlfriends, in spite of horrendous stories of dreaded diseases and vengeful fathers committing acts of violence against potential suitors. One or two lived semi-permanently in private houses in a part of town dubbed 'the married patch'. I had already decided that the best way to stay out of trouble was to keep as busy as possible by volunteering to fly at every opportunity, and honouring my promise to write home every day. What else can you do when you abandon your new bride for 12 long months?

I picked up my wife's picture and stared at it. It seemed like months since I had seen Robyn, yet it was only a matter of weeks. It was three o'clock here. It would be six at home. What would she be doing? Perhaps taking our dog for a walk, or preparing dinner. Maybe she was out in the garden. We had quite a colourful garden in our small house just outside the base. It was a long time before I would see them both again.

I looked around the room at the seven beds, each with a mosquito net draped over four poles, one at each corner. Mine also had a flying suit hanging on one pole, ready to put on. Each bed had a small locker beside it which contained, along with the cabin trunks we brought with us, the simple personal belongings necessary to sustain our austere life here. Austere it might be, but it was a helluva lot better than Special Forces 'hooches' or Army tents. I was thankful for that.

My desk was near French windows leading onto a balcony. I had switched off the ceiling fans, enjoying the cool afternoon sea breeze that wafted through, softening the oppressive monsoonal heat. The balcony overlooked the front beach and the sweep of the bay. I counted 30 ships anchored off shore, waiting their turn to move up the Nha Be River to the port of Saigon where they would unload their war cargoes.

It was about to rain, usual for this time of day. The distant roll of thunder made a change from the crump of artillery, which could often be heard in the quiet of the evening.

I felt drained after the last two days' frantic activity. My writing pad still lay open in front of me, untouched. But I would get around to writing. I had written

each day so far, and enjoyed receiving my wife's return letters. They were the only link with the real world outside, which was becoming more remote and less believable each day.

View from the Front of Villa Anna

Since Mark's departure two days ago I had had my own permanent bed, under which I found several dozen boxes of ammunition, along with miscellaneous flares and smoke grenades. Mark must have been expecting a VC assault on the Villa since there was enough ammunition under the bed to hold off a battalion. My first bit of housekeeping was to move it to a safer location before I was accidentally or deliberately blown to kingdom come in the middle of a pleasant dream.

We all had personal issue Colt .45 automatic pistols. Most of us discarded the issue webbing belts and holsters in favour of cowboy-style leather belts and holsters made by an enterprising downtown leather worker. These included extra storage space for ammunition, loops on the belt and clip holders. Wearing this get-up over our flying suits, along with black peaked caps, we must have looked like extras on a western movie set.

Mark had also left me an M1 rifle, which most of the pilots considered would be more useful if bailed up with an unserviceable aircraft in some remote location. As an accessory Mark had taped two large ammunition banana clips together, presumably to double his chances in a shoot-out. It did not occur to me to question his reasoning. I took all this firepower with me whenever I went flying.

Compared to the rigid weapon control procedures at RAAF bases back home, the approach to guns and ammunition in Vietnam was casual to say the least. Everyone's personal weapons were kept near their beds where they were put down after the day's work, some on bedside lockers, others hanging on bedposts. In spite of this, the only weapons mishap so far was when a 9 Squadron pilot downstairs at the Villa, while cleaning his pistol, accidentally discharged a round into the ceiling (and our floor). The solid construction of the Villa limited the damage to the underpants of those of us in the rooms above.

The rain had now started. There would be the usual few inches, inundating the roads, flushing out the storm drains, cleansing the streets, and turning the dusty roads into thick, brown mud. I was alone now, except for the girls in the corridor. They would disappear before dinner reappearing in the morning, as they always did, to collect our laundry and disturb the slumber of those lucky enough to be able to sleep in. Soon I would also have to leave to drive to the airfield to pick up crews from the returning aircraft. There would be no one here to see the two flights of bats, which lived in our attic, whir down from a manhole in the high ceiling and out through the open corridor windows, minutes apart, as they did each evening at dusk. We called them 'A Flight' and 'B Flight'.

I still had not written my letter but it was time to go. After sitting in a cool room in boxer shorts it was an effort to put on my flying gear and side-arms again. Since it was still raining, I pulled on a waterproof poncho as well.

Bumping along the potholed, waterlogged roads at the hair-raising speed of 35 miles per hour, was not exactly a picnic. The poncho failed to keep off the torrential rain, which poured in through the open sides of the jeep. There were few footpaths in Vung Tau; everyone walked on the road. The inadequate windscreen wipers did little to help me avoid pedestrians, cars, trucks, bicycles, Lambrettas, trishaws and pony carts along the way. That morning, I had nearly run down a young girl on a motor scooter when she decided to execute a particularly unpredictable manoeuvre in front of me.

On the way home, Dick Brice urged me to hurry.

'It's Saturday night, party night', he said. 'I've heard some nurses are coming over'. Dick had plans for sprucing himself up, and winning a heart.

Parties here were much the same as any other night except the food was better and, if it is possible, more grog was consumed. Air Force cooks have always enjoyed a good reputation. But there is little anyone can do with frozen ham steaks, pressed turkey, etherised eggs and an endless supply of lima beans—our staple fare. I had never heard of etherised eggs or lima beans until I went to Vietnam, then they were served up 365 days in a row. As for ham and turkey, it took about three years after I returned home before I could look at either. On my first Christmas home the family wondered why I nearly threw up when the traditional roast turkey was proudly placed on the table.

But tonight was different. Now and then we were able to get fresh food. The catering officer had contacts that occasionally produced prawns and lobster, and we could sometimes get salad vegetables from Dalat and cheeses from home via the C-130 couriers. The dining room staff had everything arranged decoratively, buffet style, in the bar annexe.

I looked around for the nurses. There were two of them, a white-haired US Army colonel and her sidekick, a portly major who must have been at least 45, their matronly figures squeezed into jungle green fatigues. Both were talking animatedly to a couple of our senior mess members. My eyes met those of Dick who was dejectedly draining his beer glass. I went over to commiserate.

'Not much chop, eh Dick?' I said, handing him a fresh beer.

I followed his gaze across to the bar door. In swept another female also in green fatigues. This one was decidedly better looking, and about 15 years younger than the nurses.

'Who's she?' I asked Dick.

'That's Jeannie, the Red Cross bird', said Dick with a wink. 'Don't worry, we won't get a look in. She only goes for American flyboys.'

Sure enough, after doing the rounds of the bar, talking and laughing loudly, she left arm in arm with a US Army lieutenant colonel who had been talking to our CO.

'Not to worry, Dick', I consoled him. 'We'll have a few grogs instead'.

Sunday, like every other day, was a working day, although the scale of activity was less than during the rest of the week. I had drawn the only flying sortie, the Saigon-Bien Hoa courier. This mission ran first thing in the morning, and again late in the afternoon. There was time in between to join a jeep load of people going to the beach.

The back beach, where we swam, was on the other side of town. It was supposedly unpolluted, unlike the front beach near the Villa Anna. Getting there involved a drive through the outskirts of town, past the large stucco and terracotta tiled Catholic Church and, further on, two Buddhist temples decorated with dragon-head gargoyles and religious symbols, which looked like a back-to-front swastika. We passed two saffron-robed monks from the temples, shaven heads perspiring, sandalled feet splashed with mud, walking on the side of the road towards town.

The beach was hidden from the road by clumps of bamboo growing in the marshy flats between the sand and a meandering stream.

There were crowds of people sprawled on the sand or playing handball. They were nearly all off duty military personnel, many in uniform or a zany mixture of uniform and civilian clothes. The Americans, with their crew cuts and check shorts, were easily distinguishable from the more conservative Australians, as were the chunky-looking Koreans from the slim Vietnamese.

As we arrived a VNAF Skyraider flew along the water's edge at about 20 feet causing several bathers to throw themselves flat on the sand, and others to shake their fists angrily as it zoomed out of sight behind the nearby headland. Perhaps this was why the following notice later appeared in the *Aerodrome Directory* under 'Aerodrome Remarks' for Vung Tau: 'Flights along beach area below 500 feet prohibited'.

'Dumb asshole', remarked an American laying out his towel on the sand near us.

There were no inspectors or change rooms at this beach. One simply stripped off in full view of the other bathers, even though there were a few women present. We splashed in like six-year-olds. The water, not quite tepid, was nevertheless invigorating. I felt purged and fit again.

As I waded back up to the shore a sea snake wriggled its way into the water beside me. No one seemed to take any notice, as though this happened all the time, and the snake did not seem interested in me or the other bathers. So I

affected an air of nonchalance, preferring to risk death from its venomous fangs than to make a fuss about nothing.

The afternoon shadows were lengthening as the CO and I climbed into our aircraft for the pm courier. The Caribous were parked nose-in along the wall of our maintenance hangar so that you had to reverse out of the lines onto the PSP apron adjacent to the east-west runway. The crew chief sat on the open back ramp, his headset on a long lead so he could give directions to us over the intercom.

It seemed funny going to work after a half-day at the beach, but that was typical of our routine here. We had no set days off. If we were required to fly we flew, sometimes ten days in a row. If we were not required for flying we were free to come and go as we pleased, within the restrictive limits placed on us by security and transport. The town of Vung Tau was secure so you could walk downtown, or go to the beach if a jeep was available. But you could not go anywhere outside the town unless it was on a military aircraft. Some of our passengers, therefore, were off duty military personnel, returning to Saigon after a day off here. There would be Vung Tau people waiting at Saigon for our return flight.

We climbed out around the green hill on the tip of the Cap St Jacques peninsula, and over the ships at the mouth of the river. Because of the low cloud the CO chose to fly low level up the river along the shipping lane. This did afford a measure of protection since the river was two miles wide at this point. But I felt a twinge of uneasiness as the mangrove swampland each side had been known to harbour snipers, and aircraft and shipping had been fired on.

Vung Tau itself had actually been subject to a mortar attack from a mud island in the river estuary the previous March, causing a hole in the hangar roof and minor damage to two aircraft.

Recently, for added protection, much of the mangrove areas had been defoliated with chemicals sprayed from the air. I had seen the defoliation aircraft from above, converted C-123s, flying in patterns towards Saigon and back, trailing clouds of poisonous spray, which turned the green marshes into a brown wasteland. God knows what it did to people.

Bien Hoa was a large fighter base near the city of the same name about ten miles north-east of Saigon. We came in here these days with mail and supplies for the Australian medical team, a volunteer group of civilian doctors and nurses who had set up a hospital here under a civil aid plan. Prior to this, squadron aircraft

came in support of the Australian Army battalion, which had been based here since April 1965.

When the Australian Army commitment was increased by another battalion and support units, the newly constituted Task Force moved to Phuoc Tuy Province, its new area of responsibility. This event happened a couple of months before I arrived in the country.

Our greatest problem getting into Bien Hoa was avoiding gaggles of fighters, which were continually arriving and departing. We had to fly uncomfortably low at some distance from the field, giving the CO the opportunity to point out a bridge blown up by the VC a week ago, then dart in during a break in the traffic.

TMC at Tan Son Nhut had 24 passengers for our return flight to Vung Tau, including Americans, Australians and Vietnamese. There were more than twice that number of Vietnamese clamouring around the aircraft, waiting for a sign that they might be accepted, or waiting to be pushed away.

At some of the smaller airfields, swarms of Vietnamese often rushed out to the aircraft, sometimes even trying to jump onto the open cargo compartment door while the aircraft was taxiing. They rarely seemed to know or care where the aircraft was going, as long as it was somewhere else, or realise they needed military authorisation to travel. Here at Saigon they were more subdued, thanks to base security and the efforts of TMC. But they were going to try all the same.

Our crew chief today was Dick De Friskbom, a sergeant and the senior loadmaster at Vung Tau.

When we climbed aboard Dick was scratching his head. The manifest listed 24 passengers, but a head count produced 25. All claimed the right to travel.

He decided to call names. After calling 23 names a grizzled US Army sergeant and an impassive Vietnamese private remained. Dick's credulity was severely strained when he called the last name—'MacRobertson'—and both the American and the Vietnamese replied, 'Present'. The unfortunate Vietnamese was ejected.

That evening I drove downtown for the first time so Mick Lewino could pick up a pair of slacks he had had made at one of the many Indian tailor shops. We drove through the town square, with its monument bedecked in allied flags and

banners bravely proclaiming 'Peace and Prosperity with the Help of Our Allies' in Vietnamese, to the huddle of open-fronted buildings covered in lurid signs which constituted the shopping area.

I waited outside the tailor shop in the jeep, fascinated by the passing scene. A bargirl came out of her crummy-glittery-dark premises to try to attract more custom. Business was slack so she bought a snack from a wizened old man sitting at a tiny kerbside pushcart with a little kerosene stove on top. He cut up and cooked strange-looking meat, mixed with a spaghetti-like substance, which he put out for sale on paper plates. A fuel lamp on top of the cart provided only enough light to make his activities look sinister.

Two young boys arrived nearby and opened cases containing sunglasses, combs and curios. They squatted on the footpath beside their wares, loudly exhorting custom from passers-by. Seeing me, one came over offering goods, then his sister, and finally his brother. I politely declined each in turn. Grubby children fought the way children do anywhere. A middle-aged Vietnamese woman held a baby up to me. She did not look destitute so I did not know what she wanted me to do. I might have helped in some way if I could have understood what she was saying. A wretched, legless beggar lying on a small, four-wheeled cart dragged himself across the street with surprising dexterity. Other Vietnamese shouted at him as if he was a nuisance.

I glanced over at the tailor shop. So many men were coming out of it I suspected there was more going on inside than clothing manufacture. Finally Mick came out with his slacks, dispelling my suspicions, and we left the bustling scene behind.

The Villa was quiet when I returned, in contrast to the previous night's festive atmosphere. A small group at the bar was ordering rounds of exotic drinks to relieve their boredom. At 25 cents a drink this was an inexpensive pastime. John Harris and a couple of other blokes were about to start a game of cards. John motioned me towards an empty chair. I sat sipping a rum and coke, half-concentrating on the game, wondering what the next week would bring. I had packed a lot into my first few weeks here, seen half the country in the process, and logged quite a few flying hours. I was starting to feel at home in this strange environment.

Next week I would cover new territory, operating into Special Forces bases in the northern part of the country on my first Danang detachment.

I must say I was looking forward to it.

CRASH AT BA TO
LATE AUGUST 1966

'The Danang Wallaby has pranged!'

It was late on a Tuesday when we heard about it. The news sent shock waves around the squadron, jolting me out of late afternoon lethargy after an uninspiring day down the Delta.

Operating as we did into substandard strips in marginally secure areas in bad weather, disaster was closer than most of us would admit. One gradually acquired a facade of nonchalance, which finally became almost a state of mind. An event such as this brought the reality of our situation abruptly into focus, along with unwelcome sensations of vulnerability. When pilots regularly operate near their own and their aircraft's limits, it is only a matter of time before an accident occurs.

Ba To from the Air

The crash site was Ba To, an isolated government outpost in a strip of coastal jungle south of Danang. Bar conversations, usually of a less serious nature, were interlaced with speculation, particularly from those who had seen the camp, which was near a hotbed of VC activity. We all wanted more details about how aircraft and crew came to grief so we could avoid getting into a similar situation ourselves.

The squadron hierarchy were in a huddle getting details of the prang and organising a recovery operation. Later that evening, the CO finally appeared to tell us that the crew was alive and well, but the aircraft was too damaged to fly out. His main worry was keeping it intact until a repair team could be sent in to patch it up enough to ferry out. If VC mortars hidden in the surrounding jungle found it first, there would be nothing left to repair.

Early next day, John Harris and the CO headed north to pick up the stranded crew and drop in a maintenance team under the command of Wally Solomons, our engineering officer. Unfortunately they were unable to land as the crashed aircraft was blocking the strip, and had to continue to Quang Ngai. When he and his team finally arrived in a US Army chopper, Wally assessed that the damaged aircraft could be repaired and flown out, even though the job would have to be done under a scorching tropical sun in the dirt parking ramp beside the strip using little else but muscle power.[19]

The following Monday another Wallaby, crewed by John Harris and myself, again with Bugs Rose and Blue Campbell, departed for Danang to take over the detachment prematurely terminated by the prang. We set off unsure of the duration of this detachment since the pressure put on the flying program by the loss of the crashed aircraft could well require us to be recalled for more important tasks.

Danang is the second largest city in South Vietnam, and the major port for the northern provinces. It was also home to the largest fighter and bomber base outside Saigon, from which were mounted round-the-clock strikes against targets not only in South Vietnam, but north of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) too.

The DMZ was an area five kilometres (2.7 nautical miles) either side of the Ben Hai river, which divided Vietnam into North and South under the 1954 Geneva Agreement.

Because of Danang's strategic importance and position close to the DMZ, it was regularly threatened with attack by subversion and sabotage, or more directly

with mortar and rockets. At this time, it was well protected by a US Marine Division, and crack units of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).

On this detachment, as at Nha Trang, we would be flying Special Forces resupply missions, but this time in the I Corps Military Region for which Danang was the major supply centre.

I was glad to be getting away from Vung Tau again. August was almost over, and I was well and truly used to the local mail run missions. Flying out of Vung Tau seemed dull and pedestrian after the Nha Trang detachment, and included extras such as morning briefing with No 9 Squadron. Prior to commencing operations in support of the Task Force, our pre-flight activities were concentrated on the mission at hand. These days we got body count, along with weather and artillery.

The chopper squadron was currently operating at full blast in support of the Task Force, which was consolidating its position after the successful battle of Long Tan. The briefing officer gave his body count numbers triumphantly, like an accountant reviewing an audit. I found it difficult to share his enthusiasm, or to believe all his figures. American body count figures released to the media were even more amazing. At the rate the allies were supposed to be wiping the VC out, the war would be over in no time.

Danang is 400 miles from Vung Tau, some three hours flying time in a Caribou. It is located on a widened section of the coastal plain, surrounded by marshy flats and meandering streams.

The Wallaby looked out of place among scores of F-4s, F-105s, B-57s, F-102s and other 'hot ships' as we taxied in off the 10,000-foot concrete runway. We parked dwarf-like, beside a giant USAF C-133 Cargomaster from the States.

The TMC crew was full of commiseration about the pranged Wallaby, and anxious about the effect its loss might have on future detachments. Our squadron provided the only Caribou regularly at its disposal, and many strips in the I Corps area were unsuitable for larger aircraft.

TMC planned to send us shuttling down the coast for the rest of the day to Tien Phuoc, a newly established camp. The advisers there were living in tents, and anxious to start work on more permanent accommodation with the building materials we were tasked to fly in to them.

John and I soon discovered that the Danang TMC crew was not as professional or reliable as their colleagues at Nha Trang were. Taxiing out with our first load, I noticed that the Wallaby's nose wheel steering seemed very heavy, making the aircraft hard to turn.

Our load was a stack of galvanised roofing iron. I called up Bugs Rose on the intercom.

'Bugs, the aircraft feels really strange, very heavy on the steering. Are you sure we got the right load?'

Bugs counted the sheets. 'TMC's given us a double load', he said.

We were grossly overweight. We might have got off the ground but an engine failure after take-off would have put us straight into the rice paddies at the end of the runway.

We turned back to rectify the mistake.

Tien Phuoc Strip

Tien Phuoc is in an extremely narrow valley in a clearing hacked out of virgin jungle. Earlier in the morning, it had been blanketed with fog. When we arrived, the fog had lifted to become a thin, low layer of broken cloud. Although we could see the camp from directly overhead, there was too much low cloud to make a normal circuit and landing and not enough room to manoeuvre in the narrow valley to get under the cloud near the camp. Yet when we descended under the cloud layer where it stopped five to ten miles down the valley, we lost our bearings among featureless jungle.

John hit upon a smart idea. At his suggestion we flew over the camp and away down the valley on a timed run. At the edge of the cloud, we turned onto a reciprocal heading and commenced timing. Bucketing along between the treetops and the base of the cloud with nothing visible ahead but more jungle, I wondered whether this unconventional procedure was really such a good idea. But all of a sudden, the camp in its clearing appeared, and after a quick bit of manoeuvring we were on the ground.

Tien Phuoc Special Forces Camp

As far as the Special Forces team was concerned, our load of galvanised iron might have been gold bullion. They showered praise on us, and were even more exuberant when told that we would be back with cement, wire netting and sandbags. We were glad we had made the effort to get in, even though

our unorthodox method would not have fitted the rigid operational environment back home.

After a busy day, which ended when darkness finally overtook us, we discovered one frustration of the Danang detachment. In contrast to the familiarity and semi-permanence of our detachment at Nha Trang with its unofficial vehicle and permanent allocation of quarters, here we had to rely on USAF transport, and fossick around at the end of the day looking for bedding and a place to put it. Not belonging to a regular unit here no one seemed to know what to do with us, or to want to make a decision about where to put us, even though we had put in a full day's flying for them. In desperation, we eventually dumped our gear on two unoccupied beds and hoped it would still be there each day when we returned from flying.

In the USAF Officers' Club the pilots were initially friendly and interested, but soon lapsed into the universal fighter pilot game of manual aerobatics. This game, which can be played by any number, consists of waving the hands around in an unusual manner while describing some aerial manoeuvre, such as a dive-bombing attack.

Finding ourselves odd men out and somewhat sickened by a sadistic turn the conversation was taking, we soon left them and retired to a quiet corner with our beers and barbecued steaks. The beefsteaks here were regularly flown in fresh from the States, making these pilots the best fed in the country. They were the size of a small roast of beef at home. I felt a twinge of jealousy when I thought of the frozen ham steaks and lima beans at Vung Tau, but had to admit that pilots on night bombing sorties over North Vietnam probably deserved a bit extra.

After our five-star meals and a few drinks we retraced our steps to find our beds, with our personal gear still intact. A fitful night followed, broken by the irregular roar of jet afterburners as aircraft took off on night or early morning strikes. In the morning, after the usual breakfast of fried ham and eggs with maple syrup, we set off on the first of the next day's missions, a run to Ba To, scene of the Wallaby prang.

We now knew that the cause of the accident was officially that scourge of flight crew everywhere—pilot error. In other words, an error of judgment. I was interested to see what sort of strip had put this blemish on the reputation of one of the squadron's more experienced pilots.

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 from end to end with, as the

Aerodrome Directory warned, a 'fifty foot drop-off both ends'.[20] The drop-offs were not inclines, but sheer cliffs, making a guaranteed touchdown after the threshold much more important than other strips with tapered overruns.

Our unfortunate colleague had aimed a little too close to the approach end. The Wallaby's port undercarriage leg had clipped the edge of the drop-off, and collapsed, allowing the aircraft to come down onto the left propeller and wing as it slewed round to an untidy halt. As he set up the approach, I am sure John was thinking, as I was, that it could have happened to any one of us.

We climbed out of our aircraft and walked over to talk to Wally Solomons and his team. Wally, indistinguishable from his men in boots, shorts and 'Hat, Floppy, Ridiculous', sunburnt and sweating after toiling in the open, brought us up to date on the repair operation.

Crash Repairs at Ba To

The aircraft had pranged a week ago. Wally had been one of the first on the scene. The repair job he faced must have been rather daunting, even to an engineer of his experience. The unhappy Wallaby had come to rest in a muddy depression across the gateway to the Special Forces camp, perilously close to a line of defensive Claymore mines[21] protecting the camp's entrance.

In a strange twist of fate the port wing was resting on an old Caribou propeller and reduction gearing, debris from a previous accident. The port undercarriage was folded forward, as if in a semi-retracted position. Both nose gear tyres were flat and torn by the barbed wire entanglement in which they had come to rest. The starboard undercarriage was almost undamaged, but the wing had obviously whipped viciously on impact, as the control surfaces were broken and hanging, torn and buckled, from their attachment points. The port propeller was buckled due to ground contact, and the engine was cracked completely around the rear end of the reduction gear case. The port flaps, wing and rear of the engine nacelle were bent, buckled and torn by contact with the ground, the collapsed undercarriage and the old Caribou propeller. The radio antennae under the rear end of the fuselage had been torn off as the aircraft skidded over metal stakes and barbed wire.

A replacement wing, engine, propeller and undercarriage assembly would be required. These items, and all the men and equipment required for the repair operation, would have to be flown in to Ba To, and before this could happen, the wreck had to be moved clear of the strip.

Wally arranged another helicopter mission that afternoon to bring in five of his airmen, a nose wheel jack and other tools.

After jacking up the nose, they cut lengths of timber 'borrowed' from the Special Forces camp and used it to shore up the nose wheel assembly. Then they used the jack on the port wing, raising it until they reached the extension limit of the jack, supporting the wing with a pad of sandbags from the camp bunkers while they relocated the jack on a platform of timber so that the wing could be raised higher. When they had enough clearance, they cut more timber to make temporary braces for the damaged undercarriage.

By late afternoon, they were ready to drag the Wallaby back into the parking ramp using the only available vehicle, a two-and-a-half tonne truck with no brakes, and all available manpower.

By evening, they were ready to listen to a briefing on bunker drill from the camp commander before settling down to an uneasy night on the edge of an unfriendly jungle.

Early Thursday morning, Wally began a more detailed inspection.

He decided to repair the aircraft sufficiently so that it could be flown back to Vung Tau with the gear down. With the strip now open, arrangements were

made to bring in by Wallaby more tools and spares, including main gear jacks, an engine and propeller. The largest item of equipment, a wing taken from the wreck of a US Army Caribou at Vung Tau, would have to be brought in by Chinook helicopter.

Thursday and Friday were spent stripping damaged components from the aircraft, such as flaps and the left-hand propeller, and preparing the engine for removal.

After lunch Friday, John Harris and the CO had duly arrived with replacement flaps and undercarriage components, and the much needed main undercarriage jacks. Then commenced the tedious business of raising the aircraft even higher on 44-gallon drums and sandbags, so that the jacks could be put in position.

By midafternoon, the aircraft was securely jacked and tied down, and another Wallaby arrived with a propeller and engine. By nightfall, the port undercarriage had been replaced and chained in the down position.

On Saturday, the port engine was changed, and the wing prepared for removal first thing next morning. The replacement wing arrived by Chinook at 1400 hours on Sunday.

All available manpower, including some curious Vietnamese civilians who, in Wally's words, 'happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time', was used to lift the wing into position, again using 44-gallon drums topped with sandbags. The old wing was now removed.

On Monday, the new wing was lifted into place using a set of hydraulic steps borrowed from Qui Nhon, not without incident since the steps failed halfway, lowering the wing back to the ground. However, after repairs to the steps had been made, the wing was raised again and bolted in place.

What we now saw was the almost completed aircraft, awaiting only transfer of control cables and fuel tanks from the damaged wing, and installation of flaps and ailerons, before it could be flown out.

Wally's main worry so far had not been the repair work, but the possibility of mortar attack from the surrounding jungle. He was sure the jungle grapevine would have alerted the VC to the repair activities going on. As it was someone had set off a Claymore mine on the camp perimeter on the Thursday night, while on Monday night mortars and flares were fired to counter VC penetration of

an outer bunker. We knew Wally and his team would be glad to see the last of Ba To.

When we returned on Wednesday, repairs had been completed without interference from the VC, and the patched up aircraft was ready to be flown out. The CO and Blue had arrived and were preparing for departure. The recovery of the badly damaged Wallaby had taken just over a week.

By the time we had unloaded our aircraft, they were safely airborne and heading for home. I must say, I felt proud to belong to an outfit that could go to such lengths to keep its aircraft flying.

Twenty miles north of Ba To, and crowded by surrounding mountains, a river and the coast, was a picture postcard town called Tra Bong. This sleepy-looking settlement nestled at the foot of jungle-covered hills, which completely cut it off from the interior.

Many of the buildings were whitewashed stone with terracotta roofs ravaged by weather and time. The grandest of them all was the Catholic Church, with its belltower and a statue in front, looking down protectively from its prominent position above the town. The poorest were thatched-roofed huts owned by peasant farmers. In the background trickled a waterfall, a silvery twinkle against the green mystery of the jungle. The whole scene looked more Mediterranean than Vietnamese.

The airstrip had a road running parallel to it, made of the same laterite (crushed gravel) material. Tra Bong airfield was located on the only flat area around, among rice paddies near the river. The paddies at this time of year were an unbelievable green, with a telltale sparkle of water shimmering through the carpet of young rice shoots. A painted stone arch and brush fence separated the village from the strip. The arch proudly bore the words 'Tra Bong, Cong Hua Viet Nam' (Tra Bong, Republic of Vietnam) emblazoned across it.

Tra Bong was a typical Type 1 Caribou airfield. The strip was only 1000 feet long,[22] just about the minimum for a Caribou. It was also narrow, and had no parking ramp. After landing, John stopped the aircraft on the runway, and in front of the arch, for unloading. Dozens of laughing kids appeared, shouting the now familiar 'Hi, Uc Dai Loi'. We fossicked around and found some sweets for them. The kids here were like kids anywhere, inquisitive, noisy and likeable. I wondered how they would grow up in this backward, isolated outpost, which was as far from Saigon as it was from Hanoi.

Tra Bong

The villagers, though lowlanders not Montagnards, were very unsophisticated and unused to aircraft. The unloading team, jabbering, gesticulating and giggling like the many onlookers, stumbled about ineffectually. A heavy pallet dropped to the ground with a crash. A bag of rice was torn open spilling all over the aircraft floor. Finally, in their own bumbling way and, miraculously, without injury, these earnest but clumsy rural villagers removed all our cargo, and even swept up and put aside the spilled rice, enabling us to get back to business again.

Tra Bong also had an Australian connection. A team of Australian Army advisers, consisting of a captain and seven warrant officers, had been sent here in August 1965 to help the ARVN gain a foothold in the adjacent valley to counter a known VC regimental headquarters in the mountains to the west. An Army warrant officer met and chatted with us during our short time on the ground.

We spent Thursday and Friday shuttling to Ba To and Tra Bong again, and to An Hoa and Quang Ngai, both United States Marine Corps (USMC) bases.

Arriving at Quang Ngai in the middle of the day, we found the temperature and humidity almost unbearable. I had started the day feeling rather seedy, and almost passed out during unloading, even though I sat in the shade under the aircraft wing. Although we usually had a scratch lunch on the run, on this occasion I readily accepted the unloading team's offer of lunch at the Marines' Club.

It was a half-hour drive from the airfield to the Marine base, located on a hill overlooking the town. Our driver was a black staff sergeant. I had already met many black Americans in day-to-day operations, which was not surprising since I had been told that 20 per cent of personnel in the US armed forces were blacks, as against 10 per cent in the overall population of the USA. It was more like 30 per cent serving in Vietnam.

The sergeant spoke of the Marine Corps as one would of a benevolent relative. It had given him an education, he said, looked after him well and provided for his family. As this was his second tour, he had obviously repaid his benefactor handsomely.

He made no mention of racial prejudice, which was quite obvious in a few isolated camps where, significantly, there were no blacks. In these camps we had noticed racial prejudice of a particularly nasty kind. I recall one conversation which began by congratulating us on our 'nigger policy', particularly the 'Tasmanian episode'. This seemed to be the only bit of Australian history known to some Americans. I know Australia is not completely free of racism, but I believe most of us are willing to give everyone a fair go, regardless of race.

Quang Ngai had a down at heel appearance, perhaps because of its location in the foothills where civilisation seemed to have scarcely encroached, or perhaps because of its large refugee population. Even though it was a large town, many of the very small houses had straw mat roofs and mud walls, like the peasant's houses in the Delta.

Small children played naked in the dust. Outside one house a young girl in the universal black pants and white top pumped up her bicycle tyres. An old lady staggered down the road, her back bent with twin coolie loads of vegetables for the market, taking mincing steps to ease the strain. On the bridge, a young boy urinated in a carefree manner into the river.

On the hill was a half-finished church, scaffolding still in place, begun during Diem's rule but never completed. Our driver told us that the shell accommodated a hundred refugee families.

I cannot remember much about the Marines' Club except that the people we met were friendly and courteous, and the meal was better than our usual fare.

On Saturday afternoon, it was time to head for home base again. It had been an interesting detachment, but the efficiency of cargo handling in Danang did not match Nha Trang. Our relations with our American allies had been cordial, but it was hard not to be irritated by the impression they gave that whatever they did for us came under some kind of aid plan when, in fact, we were paying our way under contractual arrangements—the 'country cousin' syndrome.

Our passengers for the return flight were a young Vietnamese lieutenant and his three sons. I tried talking to him in French, but he did not seem to understand. Perhaps my schoolboy French was a bit rusty. It was rather frustrating knowing no Vietnamese.

This pointed up the irony of our situation here. The Americans and their allies were in the country in such numbers that the Vietnamese must have felt like foreigners in their own land. Their thoughts and feelings were lost in the language barrier, our only communication with them being the one-way gobbledegook we spoke to our employees, shopkeepers and bargirls.

BEATING THE MONSOON
SEPTEMBER – OCTOBER 1966

August, my first month in country, had been and gone. So far no Wallaby had taken a hit from ground fire. The telltale metal patches on all the aircraft were evidence that they had taken small arms fire in the past. And, of course, there were daily accounts from other squadrons that aircraft were still being shot at. There was a war going on around us. It seemed to be only a matter of time before one of us picked up a stray round.

We all knew how and when any of us would take a hit. It would be on some occasion when we were forced by bad weather to fly low over insecure areas to carry out a resupply mission. And, while no one seemed to lose any sleep worrying about when it would happen, the tension in the crew was palpable whenever we had to abandon the safety of our normal procedures and get down close to the ground.

With the Delta in the grip of the monsoon, the weather around and south of Vung Tau and Saigon was frequently terrible, making flying operations very difficult. Small fluffy cumulus clouds formed shortly after the first rays of the sun appeared. During the day they swelled into gigantic towers, fed by warm, moist tropical air from the South China Sea. Tower bred tower until lines of these storm clouds might stretch right across the Delta from the coast to the Cambodian border. Late in the afternoon would come torrential rain, blotting out the landscape. Conditions sometimes improved as the storm clouds drifted away, or worsened as the cool rain falling on the warm surface below formed patchy, fog-like cloud down to ground level.

Of course, there was nothing to stop us flying in cloud. The aircraft were well equipped for instrument flight, and we were all instrument-rated pilots. But although the country was liberally equipped with navigation aids, these were located at major bases, and were of little use to a Wallaby pilot attempting to get into a small outpost in bad weather. The only way to find such places was to maintain visual contact with known ground features, and fly below cloud. If this meant flying below 2500 feet, our ground fire safety height, the unwritten rule was: ‘Fly as low as possible!’ A corollary to the rule was: ‘Ignore the startled looks of the passengers’.

At this time of year Camau, our 406 mission fuel and lunch stop, always seemed to be under a line of storm clouds, and almost invisible in torrential rain. On many occasions during this period, I remember having to get around and under the rain-bearing cells to get in. One particular day, the clouds stretched right across the Delta. The only way in was to make a low-level dart under the showers from about five miles out. As I pushed the aeroplane down to treetop height, I wondered again if anyone on the ground had us in his gunsights.

The airfield was harder to find these days, especially in bad weather, having been rebuilt and relocated five miles out of town. I was relieved finally to see the strip of wet PSP glistening through the curtain of rain, and wasted no time loitering over the surrounding rice paddies, most of which were effectively under Viet Cong control.

At the edge of the parking ramp were stacks of metal pallets left behind by C-130 aircraft. Empty POL drums, the drums forming pillars at each corner, supported the pallets. Here and there, the spaces between the drums were filled in with hessian, drawn back to reveal the faces of curious children peeping out. Through the gaps, I could also see adults, and simple personal belongings. The unloading team told us that these pallet-homes sheltered refugee families who preferred the frugal security of a makeshift airfield dwelling to the harassment and tax extortion which were part of rural life out here.

On the other side of the road outside the airfield, more fortunate families lived in mud-walled, thatch-roofed humpies, nudging one another for a place beside the river, which is the universal instrument for irrigation, water supply, bathing and sanitation. At least these people had a river to toss their garbage into unlike the shanty dwellers of Vung Tau, who had to make do with the gutter.

We now had to drive a few miles into town for lunch. The absolute flatness of the Delta stretched away to the horizon either side of the road, the watery monotony of the paddies broken only by a rectangular grid of walkways and clumps of houses. Peasant men and women, coolie hats shading their faces, bent low tending the rice, much of which would find its way into VC stomachs.

At the side of the road, grinning kids paused in their play to wave and shout the usual ‘Hi! Uc Dai Loi’, as our vehicle drove madly past. The older ones cheekily wheeled their bikes toward us, slowing our progress. A huge sow grubbed around the mulch of the gutter, searching for food. A water buffalo stood motionless in a paddy completely immersed, except for its head, staring into infinity. The adults we saw, particularly the very old women, looked impassively

in our direction without making eye contact. I wondered how much these simple people understood or cared about the recent elections for a consultative body to draft a constitution.

Even getting out of Vung Tau and into Saigon in bad weather could be a problem. It often rained all night in Vung Tau. Storms, which formed on the higher ground to the west, moved down the Saigon River and out to sea. Being at the tip of a narrow peninsula, we often got up in the morning to find ourselves cut off from the 'mainland' by a wall of cloud right down to sea level.

One such morning, we were bound for Saigon on the daily courier, and climbed over the base in a spiral before calling Paris to advise them we were 'going Popeye' (into cloud). Paris acknowledged in a rather bored voice, instructing us to climb to 12,000 feet and proceed to and hold over the Saigon NDB. He added, almost as an afterthought, that we were 'number 26' in the approach sequence!

I had never been above six or seven thousand feet since arriving in this country. We joined the stack of aircraft over the NDB and started our holding patterns.

Every few minutes, as an aircraft landed, Paris brought us down a thousand feet as our sequence number decreased. Other aircraft, arriving after us, were stacked 'on top' of us. Still more were orbiting in stacks over two other NDBs. Finally, after almost an hour, we heard the magic words:

> *Wallaby Zero One, take up a heading of zero seven zero, downwind for precision radar approach runway two five. Call Saigon Approach Control on three six three decimal eight.*

After five minutes prattling from the GCA controller, who gave us headings to steer and rates of descent to maintain our approach path, we were on the ground at Tan Son Nhut and once more rumbling towards Rebel Ramp.

Two people had cause to be pleased about our delayed arrival. Graeme 'Splinter' Boxall and Brian Young, replacement pilots for Dick Cooper and John Lanning, were standing on the ramp beside their cabin trunks. Because of the delay, they were able to go back with us on the morning courier, instead of waiting around all day, as our group had to do on arrival a month ago.

I must admit, I was selfishly pleased to see them, and to remind them that they had 364 days to go. It made my own 'sentence' so much lighter. They stared wide-eyed at the fantastic array of aircraft around them, just as I had on my first day.

There was a good reason for not flying in cloud if it could be avoided—there was a definite risk of a midair collision. While most parts of the country were covered by radar, only jets and out-of-country aircraft were provided with positive radar control. Transports and light aircraft were provided with a 'flight follow' service which gave no specific instructions unless there was a known collision risk, or there were notified air strikes or artillery fire in the area. Such aircraft were not subject to any other restrictions on their movement. When their pilots called 'Popeye', the flight follow agency was supposed to provide them with traffic information so that they could separate themselves from other aircraft in the area. But since relevant air traffic might include aircraft operating in the same general area which had not called 'Popeye', and whose movement details were not accurately known, this information was of questionable value.

A recent near miss highlighted this and made me determined to fly visually whenever possible.

I had been flying a 405 mission on an absolutely foul day. I had already missed Ham Tan, socked in with low cloud and rain, and was heading north, looking for Phan Thiet. We were about ten miles off the coast and around a thousand feet under, and seawards of, the cloud cover. Straining to see the cliffs and aerials of Phan Thiet through the murk, I was suddenly conscious of a dark patch below and ahead of us. Reacting instinctively, I banked the aircraft away violently just in time to avoid colliding with a C-123 that materialised out of the gloom. I could not imagine how its crew expected to survive flying low level in cloud, unnotified.

The hazards of monsoonal weather were not limited to flying. After dodging thunderstorms all day, I decided to go downtown after dinner for a haircut. The weather looked threatening, but it had not rained yet, and I picked my way through the usual crowds of street hawkers, shoppers and pleasure-seekers to the funny little barbershop we patronised.

Sitting in the barber's chair wrapped in white smock and towel, I realised that a night haircut was a mistake. There was a tremendous flash of lightning followed by a crash of thunder as the storm broke, and all the lights went out—and I mean all—both street and shop lights. They came on again in a few minutes, then went out and came on again another three times. I sat there in the pitch-blackness, acutely aware of my non-English speaking Vietnamese barber whose cutthroat razor was inches away from my throat. Could he be trusted? After all, an American soldier had been killed in a brothel near here when a person or persons unknown had lobbed in a hand grenade. But with superb detachment,

I sat there quietly in the blackness, preferring to die rather than make a fool of myself by leaving with half a haircut.

Of course, when the lights finally came on and stayed on, my throat had not been cut and my wallet was still secure. As far as I could see, the other two patrons were similarly intact.

With September half over, I was still a 'ground fire virgin'; in fact the whole squadron seemed blessed with good luck, in spite of frequent exposure to possible risk. I had done several mail run missions in bad weather, and been forced to fly low to get into places like Camau several times, but had encountered nothing unusual. I began to wonder whether some of the stories we had heard were exaggerated, or whether the pilots involved had been particularly foolhardy.

As if in answer to this question, a US Army Caribou limped home to Vung Tau one day after taking a direct hit from a large calibre weapon. The crew had been on a Special Forces resupply mission north-west of Saigon, and had strayed a little too close to the border. The shell that hit the Caribou had blasted a jagged hole about two feet in diameter in the tailplane. A group of us stood on the ramp underneath the tail staring up at blue sky through the hole, realising that a few inches either way meant the difference between a safe landing and oblivion. A cold hand clutched at my stomach. I am sure we all thought: 'It could have happened to me'.

It was good to get away from the dreariness of the Delta and monsoonal weather, and head off again for Nha Trang. The northern part of the country was still in its dry season. The monsoon here came some months later than that of the south. My flying partner was again John Harris. We had not flown together since Danang, and were both looking forward to six busy days of Special Forces resupply work.

Coming out of Saigon, Paris gave us several vectors around air strikes that were in progress in the foothills of Phuoc Tuy Province. No doubt the VC were making their presence felt during the current build-up of Australian Army forces in the area. We gave the gaggle of F-100 fighters a wide berth, although we could quite clearly see the brilliant flashes made by the phosphorus warheads of their rockets as they thudded into their targets far below. A tiny Cessna 'Bird Dog' FAC (Forward Air Controller) aircraft circled just above the treetops, calling the fighters in on each run. Perhaps the pilot was one of our RAAF colleagues. There were no RAAF fighter squadrons in Vietnam so some fighter pilots were posted in as FACs to get operational experience.

As we approached the coast, we noticed a large battleship anchored a couple of miles out, its guns pointing inland and periodically belching fire and smoke. From the angle of the gun barrels, it appeared to be aiming at the same general area being softened up by the F-100s, and firing right across our flight path. This was a little disconcerting, and we asked Paris about it. They advised in a matter-of-fact manner that they had no information on any naval firing, and asked what were our intentions. No brilliant ideas came to mind. We decided to continue, judging we were below the apogee of the shells, trying to ignore the angle of the gun barrels and our tingling sphincters.

Resupply, Chu Dron

The pace of this detachment was hectic, as usual. We shuttled west to Gia Nghia and north to Duc My, Van Canh, Tan Rai and Buon Brieng with roofing iron, nails, timber, boxes of canned food, livestock and POL. We also carted artillery shells and mortar bombs to a place called Chu Dron, one of a string of new artillery bases north-west of Nha Trang, and six miles from the border. If we

were going to get shot out of the sky like our US colleague, this was as good a place as any.

This was my first visit to an artillery base. Fire Support Base Chu Dron was well within a shell's range of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the VC supply route from North Vietnam. It stood on a clearing hacked out of virgin jungle miles from anywhere. It was there for one reason only, to pound the Trail with its huge 175mm artillery pieces to slow down the flood of men and materials from the north. Our part in this activity was to feed these fearsome-looking monsters.

Big Guns, Chu Dron

The M-107 175mm self-propelled gun was an awesome piece of equipment. According to James Arnold's book,[23] it was the longest-range gun operated by the US artillery in Vietnam. It was capable of shooting a 175-pound shell some 20 miles in a fast, low trajectory, but paid for its long range in accuracy. The M-107 had a hydraulically operated earth-moving blade on the back allowing

it to fortify its own position. Its major use was in preparatory bombardments for establishing bases where the enemy least expected or least desired them. A typical battery had six guns, but was often split into three two-gun units each combined with similar numbers of smaller weapons. The key to successful artillery operation was a sophisticated radio network connecting gun crews and infantry so that rounds could be in the air before opposing forces had time to dig in.

Ten miles out from Chu Dron, we called on the local artillery advisory frequency. The voice at the other end sounded too busy to talk to us, as though its owner had one hand on the breach block and the other on his radio transmit button.

The artillery pounded away continuously, the deafening roar accompanying each fiery belch making the whole landscape shudder. A pall of dust and smoke hung in the air, and the acrid smell of cordite penetrated every corner of the aircraft, even before we landed.

Our Wallaby was one of an armada of aircraft shuttling shells to feed the hungry guns. The sides of the red dirt runway were stacked with random piles of ammunition. There was no parking area. Aircraft simply arrived, reversed to the edge of the strip, and dumped their pallets of ordnance. Armoured personnel carriers (APCs) and caterpillar-tracked vehicles crowded the space around the mobile artillery pieces, moving the shells to where they could be manhandled into the loading chambers of the mammoth guns by teams of sweating 'grunts', as they call US foot soldiers. Hundreds of empty shell cases littered the ground.

The base had been set up in such a hurry that the tents used to accommodate the gun crews were also right beside the strip, in the middle of the red dirt and stacked ammunition. You could not get much closer to your job than this.

Next day, we were tasked to do an airfield survey on a place called Duc Lap, 80 miles west of Nha Trang, and a mere two miles from the Cambodian border. The camp and strip had been abandoned after being overrun by the VC 18 months ago. We were told that the strip had been recently re-secured, and was now required to mount search and destroy missions. Our job was to check its suitability for Caribou and C-123 resupply operations. A C-123 pilot and a photographer from a squadron at Nha Trang were detailed to accompany us to obtain pilot briefing material.

Duc Lap was not far from the spot where the US Army Caribou from Vung Tau had been hit a couple of weeks before, and uncomfortably close to the border. Finding the camp and strip among featureless jungle was a major problem, as it was on the fringe of radar and TACAN coverage, and the accuracy of maps in

this area was suspect. We certainly did not want to suffer the same fate as our US Army counterparts had due to a navigational error.

We arrived at the given reference point, a certain bearing and distance from Ban Me Thuot, the nearest TACAN. Underneath the aircraft was an unbroken carpet of green. By unanimous agreement we agreed to stay for 30 minutes only, and give it away if we could not locate our target airfield.

We began a cautious search pattern north and south of the reference point, finding a track and what looked like a strip several miles from where Duc Lap was supposed to be on the map. It vaguely resembled the layout of the camp on our briefing diagram. In this atmosphere of uncertainty, we called up on the radio frequency we had been given and, to our relief, an American drawl answered.

On approach, the neglect of the past 18 months became obvious. The area around the strip was overgrown with lantana, the vines reaching down to its edges, explaining why it was difficult to identify it as a runway. The surrounding thick jungle revealed no signs of habitation or occupation whatever. But for the voice on the radio, we would have had no alternative but to turn back for Nha Trang.

During the landing run, a flash of sunlight glinting on steel momentary distracted me from steering the Wallaby down the springy green strip, which was more like a fairway on a golf course than a landing field. At intervals each side of us and hidden among the lantana, I noticed brown faces and hands holding rifles, the connecting bodies in camouflaged fatigues almost invisible amongst the jungle vines. They looked like Montagnards, but I could not be sure.

As we slowed to a stop, the soldiers moved out from their hiding places towards us, faces expressionless, rifles aimed at the aircraft cockpit. While we were considering whether to stay or get the hell out of there, a lanky American strode out from the jungle, barking orders in a foreign language. I caught the words ‘Uc Dai Loi’. Rifles were lowered and aggressive gestures were replaced by friendly smiles. These troops were Montagnards and had never seen a Wallaby before. They recognised the Stars and Stripes, but our roundel had them really confused. They began an inquisitive inspection of the aircraft, and were delighted when we invited them to take a look inside. We chatted to the American while our C-123 pilot passenger paced out the runway, and the photographer snapped pictures to add to those he had taken from the air.

Finishing early one afternoon due to worsening weather, John and I decided to make an all out effort to find the Buddha. Having lost it previously with Dick

Brice among the maze of Nha Trang side streets, this time we had pinpointed its position from the air to help us find it in the Ford pick-up.

From the ground it was even more impressive, towering majestically 50 feet or more on top of a hill behind a large temple complex set in a garden of tropical trees and shrubs. Huge flights of stone steps ascended from ground level to the Buddha's feet and, from where we stood, seemed to rise to heaven itself. The spicy aroma of incense wafted through the bougainvillea as devotees lit joss sticks to honour their ancestors. Saffron-robed monks told fortunes for, and accepted offerings from, peasants, soldiers and businessmen in an unreal island of calm amid the tension and noise of war.

After Nha Trang, John and I were glad of a day off. We decided to spend it looking around Saigon. We hitched a ride on the morning courier, intending to spend several hours exploring the city centre.

Everything in Saigon was on a larger scale than Vung Tau or Nha Trang, the shantytowns on the outskirts, the public buildings, and the traffic. The drive from the airport was hair-raising, with maniacal drivers seemingly hell-bent on passing everything and mowing down whoever or whatever got in their way. The worst drivers were behind the wheels of tiny blue Renault taxicabs that darted among convoys of military vehicles, trishaws and Lambrettas like crabs on a beach. We were therefore dismayed when our vehicle, a blue USAF bus driven by a Vietnamese, terminated at the Cholon PX (Post Exchange – a USAF 'supermarket'). This meant continuing by taxi.

After the inevitable few minutes haggling with the driver of the cab, which screeched to a halt at the kerb as we hailed it, we agreed on a fare and squeezed into the miniature vehicle. The next few minutes I could have cheerfully done without, as we weaved around trishaws, and terrorised pedestrians. I am sure the driver must have been a Viet Cong on R&R.

The so-called Twin City of Cholon, Saigon's Chinatown, lies just across the river from Saigon proper. After passing through the market area, situated in a large square in front of the defunct railway station, we drove through well-heeled residential suburbs on the outskirts of the city. Here solid masonry and scented gardens contrasted cruelly with the flattened POL drum construction of the shanties along the airport road. Our driver dropped us in the centre of the city.

The buildings in the city centre were far more imposing and permanent-looking than those of Vung Tau, and showed few signs of the various terrorist incidents we had read about in the newspapers.

We saw the famous Xa Loi pagoda, a vast complex of ornate buildings, and headquarters of the Buddhist movement. I remembered reading newspaper articles about violent clashes between government militia and Buddhists in the Diem era, and seeing pictures of the fiery self-immolation of Thic Tri Quang and other protesting monks.

Around an elegant, tree-lined city square, the Gothic arches of the Notre Dame Catholic Cathedral blended harmoniously with the graceful colonial architecture of business houses and government buildings. As we stared up at the lofty buttresses of the church, a shifty-looking Vietnamese sidled up, brandishing a handful of old *Time* magazines. We brushed him aside, but he persisted and, grinning to show a mouthful of gold teeth, opened the top magazine to reveal pornographic pictures loose inside; a somewhat incongruous activity in the shadow of the church. We finally shook him off and strolled down Tu Do, the main business street.

This was the heart of the diplomatic sector. All the foreign embassies were within a grenade's throw of here. Our own embassy occupied one floor of the smart-looking Hotel Caravelle across the street.

Many prosperous merchants had their shops in Tu Do selling gemstones, local art works, and antiques. Browsing through these shops, it took a conscious effort to remember we were in the capital city of a country at war. One antique shop featured, as its central display, an exquisitely hand-carved, enamelled 20-place banquet setting. The table and chairs were decorated with inlaid gold leaf and pieces of jade. The asking price was equivalent to several thousand US dollars, probably a bargain to a diplomatic client. I could not help marvelling that the quiet, mandarin-like gentleman at my elbow could run such a business profitably only a few miles from where his countrymen were dying from VC bullets.

The most enjoyable part of our day was a sumptuous lunch in the rooftop restaurant at the Caravelle. We must have looked out of place in our casual dress among the business suits and dress uniforms of the diplomatic clientele, and the formal attire of the waiters. Unconcerned, we enjoyed our *canard l'orange* and French wine in unaccustomed airconditioned comfort, and paid the outrageous bill without quibbling.

At this time of day, the rooftop outlook was rather uninspiring. By night, when the dock area and squalid outskirts of the city were blanketed in darkness, patrons enjoyed a different view. The diplomatic and command staff and their visitors who came here were treated to a fireworks display of artillery and air-to-ground ordnance flashing around the protected island of the city. This would no doubt serve to remind them that there really was a war going on here, and provide conversation pieces for their dinner parties back home.

At last it happened. On 21 September 1966 one of our aircraft finally took some shots, the first since my arrival. The crew was forced into an approach and landing in bad weather, a situation that presented one of the few opportunities for a small arms marksman on the ground. Fortunately no one was hurt. So much for our lucky run.

I mentioned this in a letter home, also that '... I have been rather sick over the last two days. Am still not 100% today. It seems in this germ-infested place one must be reconciled to being off colour every few weeks.' Rather melodramatic. It was my first 'medical incident' since late August when I had a violent reaction to a routine inoculation. It started as an unbearably itchy rash that spread all over my body. I had had to abandon my Duty Pilot role and ask another pilot to run me down to see the medical officer. He gave me a knockout injection, which put me to sleep for 14 hours. At least I did not suffer from chronic health problems like a couple of unfortunate colleagues.

After a couple of days off, I was soon back in the Delta dodging thunderstorms, trudging through mud at Camau, and getting soaked in monsoonal rain. In two short months, I had worked harder than ever before, amassed more flying hours than I would in twice the time back home, and seen most of the country. The long days, the monsoonal weather, and our austere diet were starting to become a drag, particularly during any lengthy period spent at Vung Tau. And, of course, I was homesick.

In mid October, I 'escaped'. It was my turn to fly the monthly courier to Butterworth, Malaysia. After a week's postponement due to aircraft serviceability problems the trip was finally on.

I could not believe I was actually leaving Vietnam until I saw the Soc Trang TACAN, the southernmost navigation aid in the country, ticking off the miles behind me.

What did not excite me was the knowledge that in five days time I had to come back.

Chapter 8

LEADING A CHARMED LIFE
MID – OCTOBER 1966

It is hard to say which was the greater shock to the system—going to Butterworth, or coming back.

Dave Marland and I were sharing the flying on this trip, with Dick De Friskbom looking after the aircraft. Dave and I go way back. He was a year behind me at Point Cook, so we shared three years there. Even allowing for the fact that he is a 'Pom' and a year older we always got on quite well together.

Packing for the trip was a bit more complicated than going on a Nha Trang detachment, where we wore either flying suits or second-best casuals. We needed flying suits for the trip down and back, but would have to wear drabs (normal summer uniform) in the mess at Butterworth, and some smarter gear downtown. And of course we needed some real money, rather than the MPC 'funny money' we used in Vietnam.

Then we were told there would be a week's delay. Maybe the whole thing would be cancelled. Our disappointment was overshadowed with the news that a 9 Squadron chopper had crashed and burnt. Peter Middleton, the copilot, was seriously hurt. I felt really sorry for him.

It was the first loss of a 9 Squadron aircraft. The chopper was supporting 5 RAR in an operation against VC base areas in western Phuoc Tuy Province. On board were the crew of four, two Army engineers as passengers and five boxes of explosives. After arriving at the 5 RAR position the pilot, Cliff Dohle, decided the area was too small to land safely so he commenced an overshoot. The aircraft subsequently crashed into the jungle and caught fire. The crewman, Sergeant Gordon Buttriss, at great personal risk, managed to get Middleton out of the wreckage. His efforts earned him a George Medal for gallantry.[24]

Our week's wait was filled in with a couple of 406s and a 405 and the usual extracurricular activities, including an attempt to go shooting on a day off. I had not fired a shot in Vietnam so far, which seemed rather ridiculous. (Others would say fortuitous.) The range was in some rough country behind the back beach. Very rough, we found. After fording three flooded portions of road, we

came upon another section too deep for the jeep. Good fun playing around with the four-wheel drive though. But no shooting.

The great day finally arrived. We felt a bit superior heading off on this jaunt while the poor sods who shared our jeep ride to the base prepared for an exciting day down the Delta.

Our flight plan took us direct from the Vung Tau NDB, past Soc Trang, across the Camau peninsula and the Gulf of Thailand to a point abeam Alor Star on the north-east coast of the Malayan peninsula. From there we planned to track straight down across to Butterworth on the opposite coast.

It was strange overflying the Delta at an unaccustomed 8000 feet, without stopping at any of the usual military outposts. But we took it in our stride. This being an international flight we were not even talking to Paris and Paddy as usual, but to Saigon Control. At long last, somewhere over the gulf, we entered Malaysian airspace and were handed over to Kuala Lumpur Control.

Dave was waving at the window. 'Goodbye Vietnam', he said, or was it 'Get stuffed!'

The Soc Trang TACAN dropped out at 235 nautical miles, the best performance I had seen, and an uneasy 20 minutes or so followed while our aircraft TACAN set searched for Alor Star on the coast of the Malayan peninsula. It finally locked on and we knew we were on plan.

After the frenetic activity of military bases in Vietnam, RAAF Base Butterworth was like 'Sleepy Hollow'. Our arrival barely raised a ripple. We were the only aircraft in the circuit.

Although this was our frontline fighter base, aircraft departed and arrived in dribs and drabs. The pilots here flew about twenty hours per month. I'd averaged one hundred in each of my first two months in Vietnam, and several times that number of sorties.

Our only duty was to carry out a compass swing on the aircraft; a procedure for checking the correct alignment of the various compass systems in the aircraft against an external compass. This would take two hours at the most. An extracurricular duty was, according to Dave, to sample the local cuisine, especially the Indian variety. Dave, having been born and spent part of his childhood in India, was a curry fiend. Our menu at Vung Tau was not big on

curry. But there were heaps of curry houses on Penang Island, a short ferry ride from the base on the mainland. Also there was shopping to do. In these days of reel-to-reel tapes and ignorance of copyright, you could walk into any music shop in Penang and select the records you wanted taped. But my number one priority was a phone call to Robyn. We had five days in which to do it all.

After the compass swing the RAAF Air Movements staff drove us up to the Officers Mess where we had rooms booked. The mess was a tropical-colonial building set in manicured gardens of frangipani and bougainvillea. Tamil ladies kept the lush grass at a respectable length by swinging around their heads a blade on a leather thong. Their languid motion somehow matched the level of activity at the airfield. It was a bit hard to adjust our own pace. No one here seemed to be in a hurry to do anything.

After dining in the mess, sitting at carved oak tables covered in starched white cloths laid with silverware under sighing punkah-louvres, waited on by soft-spoken Malays in traditional lap-laps, we were collected for drinks at the home of Bill and Carolyn Baggett. Bill was an ex-38 Squadron Richmond pilot, now based here to fly the search and rescue Dakota. A few other pilots and their wives also dropped in.

Even though we knew everyone we felt like aliens in this genteel environment. Vietnam barely rated a mention. The major problems discussed by the wives centred on finding a reliable amah to housekeep and mind their children so that they could play more bridge and tennis. Carolyn kindly asked how Robyn was coping, having endured time by herself in similar circumstances.

The knuckleheads (fighter pilots) seemed to suffer a guilt complex that they were not in Vietnam. They regaled us with stories of being on alert (whatever that was) in Ubon in Thailand.

Next night we dined in our own company on Penang Island, satisfying Dave's lust for curry.

This was my first time in Penang. The pattern of the East was repeated in the small open-fronted shops, grubby monsoon drains and strange smells. Although the title 'Pearl of the Orient' was a little pretentious, Penang was much cleaner than Vietnam. It had a beautiful park and paved streets, and looked more prosperous. Even the monkeys in the park looked well fed.

After a few days sightseeing, shopping for tapes and a recorder to play them on, and more curries, our temporary idyll was over. We reluctantly packed our bags

and headed for the airfield and Vung Tau, the elusive scent of a semi-normal existence lingering in our nostrils.

I wrote in my diary: 'Heading back, one had the feeling of a leper who, having spent a day in half-communion with society, knows that he must return to his colony before dark.'

It was hard to settle down again, even after such a short time away. Setting up my new tape recorder and playing one of my many pirated tapes diverted my attention from a routine that was already starting to drag. The recorder came with headphones so I could lie on my bed listening to music of my choice without disturbing anyone else in the room.

Returning to Vietnam meant getting used to all the sights, sounds and smells again. Back in August I sent home a postcard folder with the following message:

> *In the post card folder, the camera does lie. It could only be accurate if it conveyed smell.*

I also remarked in a letter:

> *The tragic thing about Vietnam is that, except for the 'dirty Delta', basically it is a beautiful country. The soil is rich, the vegetation the greenest of green, the beaches beautiful and, in the north, mountains rivalling New Guinea in beauty if not in stature. From the air, it is hard to picture the fierce reality of hand-to-hand combat, though one often sees air-to-ground operations.*
>
> *On the ground, of course, one comes face to face with the reality that altitude mercifully hides. Many of the towns have large sections of vermin-infested hovels, where garbage is simply thrown into the street. Vung Tau is no exception. Wandering round the shopping centre here is best left till dark when the heat of the sun is not present to assist the assault of decaying matter on the olfactory senses. [I think I meant, 'it stinks'.]*

John Harris goaded me into checking out the Vung Tau market. I thought I knew what decaying vegetables and rotten meat smelt like until I went there. The smell of leftovers of various kinds, which had been thrown into a central drain running through the market, was unbelievable. It was rat heaven. The fruit and vegetables on the stalls looked appetising enough, if you could stay long enough not to throw up at the smell, but I cannot say the same for the dead chickens and

carcasses of meat hanging on butcher's hooks in the open, surrounded by clouds of flies.

Vung Tau Market

I think John's challenge followed remarks I had made the previous evening. A group of us had taken our drinks from the bar to an open-sided anteroom at the back of the Villa. We played mah-jong there since there was a large table available. In the middle of the game a rat the size of a chihuahua ran around a ledge halfway up the wall behind us. In the commotion which followed someone unsuccessfully pursued the rat while the rest of us got fresh drinks, taking care to put them on the table instead of the ledge.

'I hope these filthy creatures aren't in our kitchen', I said to no one in particular.

'If you want to see a health hazard, check out the local market', said John. I wished I had not.

Most of us stayed pretty healthy, although one bloke had permanent dysentery. (More about that later.) My diary records I was crook for two to three days in late September. And I remember filling in for other pilots who felt the need to stay close to home.

Coming back again refocused our attention on the hazards of our operations. No one else had taken any ground fire while we were away. It was over a month since the last hit. If we needed proof the VC were still there, the activity going on all around the country confirmed it. I wrote home:

> *The large airports are like wasp nests, hundreds of transports flying war materials and provisions in and out by the hour, and a similar number of fighters and bombers leaving for and returning from air to ground attacks with bombs, rockets and napalm. Everywhere you fly you see the smoke of some air attack far below you (fortunately — the farther the better) and often it is hard to believe there are nasty little men running around on the ground below you. Often, when we land at dirt strips belonging to the Special Forces with our cargoes of rice, vegies, cattle, pigs, groceries, timber, barbed wire or whatever the VC are only 2–3 miles away ... So far I haven't been hit. Naturally I'm not complaining.*

Even the Yanks were getting hit. Were we luckier, or more careful, or were the VC packing up and going home? Of course, we knew our luck would eventually run out, even though we did things like always putting on our left flying boot before the right. In spite of their technical training, pilots are a superstitious bunch.

All the short-time people (those getting ready to go home) remarked on how quiet it was.

'You should have been here when there was a real war on', they said. Of course, we said the same thing later when we were short-timers. But it was a bit strange.

I did not have too much time to think about it. Two days after returning from Butterworth I was off to Nha Trang again, this time with the CO, who let me do most of the flying. Most of our operations were out of Pleiku, resupplying Phu Tuc and camps to the north-west, Dak Pek, Dak Sieng and Plei Mrong. We had one sortie to Luong Son, an unfamiliar Type 1 field south-west of Nha Trang.

There was a lot of action going on all around us. At briefing we were told that there were two VC divisions across the border from Dak Pak, and a VC anti-aircraft division across from Pleiku. Two choppers were shot down near Pleiku. The crews were rescued by another 'Huey'. While we were unloading cargo at Phu Tuc, a US Army truck was blown up crossing a bridge half a mile away from the field. The unloading team was understandably nervous and wanted to get the job done without delay.

TMC were very keen for us to go down to Dak Seang, a new strip in the same valley as Dak Pek. On arrival, since we could see earth-moving machinery from the air, we overflew the strip. The briefing sheet, after warning about occasional sniper fire from the hills, had identified it as another Type 1 field. Like Gia Nghia, it straddled two hilltops, its uneven shape a red scar a thousand feet above the Poko River. It looked decidedly hairy—and unfinished. Since I was flying I offered the opinion that we should take our load of sandbags and roofing iron back to Pleiku.

The CO called up the camp on the Special Forces frequency. We were amazed to hear the reply: 'Come on in Wallaby, you all are clear for a landing', the voice on the radio assured us.

Dak Seang proved to be a terrible strip, the worst in the country, short, sloping, and with dangerous approaches. It was only during the approach, too late to go around, that we saw that we would have to land in a graded furrow two feet deep and only slightly wider than the Wallaby's wheel span. We had been conned into a landing while the strip was still under construction.

Dak Seang

Being the junior man I stayed in the background while the CO gave the Special Forces captain who met us a dressing-down. He shrugged off our terse complaints with the comment that they needed our pallets of building materials to finish the camp. The CO emphatically refused to land again until construction work on the strip was completed, and informed TMC on our return to Pleiku.

Not to be outdone, TMC sent us straight back with POL drums, which had to be air dropped. This was even hairier than the earlier landing. Again the CO chose to let me fly. We had to fly a few feet above the strip, ready to roll the drums out where they were least likely to be damaged. Alex Martini, the crew chief, and his assistant, strapped to the side of the aircraft so they would not fall out the gaping cargo door, waited for our signal to operate the quick release buckles on the straps holding the drums. I flashed them a green light, and they began kicking the drums out one by one, watching them bounce on the soft earth below. I was more concerned with the changing centre of gravity as the drums went out, and the rising ground ahead of us. We lost only one drum, and managed to climb out well clear of 100-foot trees at the boundary of the strip.

We survived all of this and got back to Vung Tau unscathed. The VC left us alone.

I still seemed to be living a charmed life.

Back at Vung Tau I had more time to play with my new toy, the tape recorder I bought at Penang. I found John Harris had a similar machine that we could hook up to mine and record each other's tapes, thus doubling our libraries. Next trip away I would buy a record player and some LPs, and so record my own tapes. The USAF PXs had quite a good selection of LPs.

After Ba To and the difficult logistic exercise of the repair operation, the Danang detachment had been abandoned. In its place, an aircraft was permanently allocated to resupply missions out of Vung Tau, which had greatly expanded its cargo handling capacity. The allocated aircraft had a new name, the 41 mission. It operated directly out of Vung Tau, usually around the Delta area.

When flying the 41 or the courier our days were not quite so long giving us a bit more free time, enough to squeeze in a trip to the beach if a jeep was available. After-hours time was invariably spent in the bar. Drinks and cigarettes were so cheap most people drank far too much and smoked like chimneys. I even took up smoking for a while until I got tired of carrying packs of cigarettes everywhere. After flogging around the Delta in sticky monsoonal weather a long session in the bar at the end of the day was becoming a habit.

One Saturday night I was set for another such predictable night when Dick Brice said, 'Let's go to the Neptune for dinner'.

I had never heard of it. It was a French-style restaurant around the corner from the front beach. The waiters were all dressed up in black with bow ties and the food was wonderful, especially after ham steaks and lima beans. The wine was of course outrageously expensive. After dinner we went into the bar next door. I am not sure what happened here. My diary merely says: 'Hilarious'.

On the way back we walked along the boulevard, which ran along the front beach. In better times this attractive tree-lined street with its grand residences must have been the 'Riviera of South-East Asia'. By day fishermen mended their nets on the paved walkways around the beach-side kiosks, while vendors sold food and soft drinks to passers-by. At this time of night the only people around were people like us, either walking back to their quarters or riding in rickshaws.

Front Beach

Further down the road was a palatial house reputedly owned by Air Vice-Marshal Ngyen Cao Ky, the Vice President. We did not visit the Air Vice-Marshal that night, however, turning up the side street to the Villa Anna.

Next day, being Sunday, was unusual for two reasons. I had the full day off, and I also decided to try going to Mass again. I had only been once since arriving in Vietnam.

Back home my wife and I were regular churchgoers. But some things I had seen and heard here made me very cynical about the Church. War and religion do not seem to mix too well.

The church service I went to was conducted by an Army chaplain downtown at the Grand Hotel in the centre of town. The padre seemed to sense my feelings as he gave his down-to-earth sermon. It was good, but not enough to change my mind. I did not go to Mass again in Vietnam.

In this almost all-male military environment, full of red-blooded manhood, the talk was often of sex. Mostly it was just talk. Passing through Tan Son Nhut one afternoon, en route from the Delta to Vung Tau, we called in at TMC and ended up chatting over coffee to the lieutenant colonel in charge. He confided that he had only been here ten days and already had himself 'set up'.

'She told me she was suntanned all over and I told her I didn't believe it, and asked her to take her clothes off. Course you wouldn't believe it if I told you she did.'

When we offered no comment—what could you say—he continued: 'Before I left home my wife said: "I know you're going to have an oriental girlfriend while you're away. I'm never going to mention it again and I don't want you to." Wow!'

He then showed us pictures of his charming wife and four kids, the oldest in academic robes, in front of an expensive-looking house. I think he got more satisfaction out of telling us about his extramarital adventure than the affair itself.

It would be easy to be moralistic and condemn the man. But we all fitted into one of two categories, frustrated loyal spouses/fiancées or free players. I just do not know why it was so important for him to tell his story to two complete strangers.

On a lighter note I later heard an amusing bar room story. A well-known character described in slurred tones how a young Vietnamese lady guided him

by the hand from a local bar to her father's house. The father was standing at the gate, evidently to protect his daughter, armed with a chain encased in plastic. The daughter took our friend to a back room where he revealed that his total wealth amounted to $3.40 in MPC. This was sufficient only for her to strip to the waist after which he retired, presumably in as graceful a manner as his condition would allow, past the sentinel at the gate. On the way back to the Villa he broke up an argument between two Diggers and a rickshaw driver by threatening to punch the latter in the head. After this he sought the solace of our friendly bar to recount his amazing adventures in far more colourful language than mine.

The end of the month brought a letter and a Melbourne newspaper from my mother. She thought I might be interested in all the ballyhoo surrounding the visit to Australia of President Lyndon Johnson. If only she could have heard what some of the American GIs in Vietnam were saying about him.

Whatever was going on down there it did not have much effect on the routine here.

Chapter 9

FLYING WITH A JINX
OCTOBER – NOVEMBER 1966

Early one Monday morning I set out on a 406 mission with Stu Spinks. It was our first trip together.

Fifteen miles out of Saigon, the Wallaby lurched. There was a sudden loss of power on the left engine. I could see by the left manifold air pressure gauge that we had a problem with the engine, which started coughing and spluttering when I pulled back the throttle. Alex Martini, the crew chief, looked at the engine through the cargo compartment windows, but could see nothing unusual.

'Call the Tower, tell them about the situation, and request a straight in approach on runway 25', I told Stu.

'Saigon Tower, Wallaby Zero One, five miles south-east with a partial engine failure, request straight in runway 25', he transmitted.

The Tower gave us a priority approach. We joined finals for runway 25 and got a clearance to land.

On touchdown the left engine quit as I closed the throttles and soon after all left engine fire warning lights came on. Smoke poured from the engine cowl. The drama was heightened by two airport fire engines, which I could see out of the corners of my eyes, keeping pace with us down the runway. I was conscious also of crew chief Alex Martini's anxious face in the doorway behind us.

A twin-rotor chopper dangling an outsize fire extinguisher bottle hovered overhead, responding to our earlier emergency call. These choppers were operational on major bases for rescue and firefighting purposes. The chopper crewman would be watching us closely for signs of an out of control fire, ready to trigger the bottle and cover us with fire-smothering foam.

I shut the left engine down and pulled the fire extinguisher handle. By this time, we were in the final stages of the landing run, and turning off the runway onto a high-speed taxiway. I pulled up and looked out the side window. The smoke

had stopped and the fire warning lights were out. Stu looked across, relief on his face. I exhaled slowly.

'Have a good look at the engine', I called to Alex, 'and don't let those cowboys cover us with foam', I continued, jerking a thumb towards the fire trucks parked beside us, beacons flashing.

As I looked back towards the failed engine, I noticed a USAF F-4 fighter taking off on the runway we had just vacated. Unfortunately Stu, with fires and gasoline still on his mind, could not see it. So when it cut in its afterburner with an ear-shattering crump directly behind us, he lifted about a foot off his seat, thinking his last moments had arrived.

Meanwhile Alex had jumped back on board.

'No problem now boss', he reported, 'I'll have a good look back at the ramp'.

We taxied clear of the high-speed taxiway and headed for Rebel Ramp using the remaining engine.

Alex borrowed an engine stand and had the cowls up in no time. His close inspection of the failed engine revealed that the inlet manifold hose to the number 6 cylinder had vibrated loose, allowing raw fuel to pour into the engine bay. During flight, with a flow of air through the engine, most of this fuel was carried away in the slipstream, and the engine ran after a fashion. But on landing, as the slipstream decreased, the raw fuel ignited on hot engine components, causing the fire. Fortunately, the fire did not burn long enough to cause much damage, or present any real danger. A few seconds more though, and it might have been a different story.

As Stu put it in his inimitable style: 'I thought we were up shit creek there for a while'.

I phoned the squadron from TMC to report the details. Blue McDonnell answered the call, telling me he would send a replacement aircraft over from Vung Tau, and we were to continue on the 406 with that aircraft. Sounded good to me.

Blue himself arrived an hour later with Brian Young. We swapped aircraft and continued on our way.

I wrote home about this incident, finishing with the line: 'They say variety is the spice of life. Of course, spice is better in small doses.'

The following Friday, Stu and I were rostered together again. It had been raining heavily during the night, and there was water everywhere inside the aircraft, even in the vinyl lining on the ceiling of the cargo compartment, making it sag down like a beer drinker's pot belly. After cleaning all the water out, we turned on the power prior to start up. Both engine fire warning lights immediately came on. Of course we were not on fire this time, since the engines were stationary. The rain had simply penetrated the fire warning system, shorting it out and rendering it useless. Once again we transferred to another aircraft.

This time, we got an engine going. While starting the left engine, there was a tremendous backfire. I throttled back while the mechanic outside inspected the exhaust augmentor tubes for damage. He gave us the thumbs up signal, so we continued.

About five minutes out of Bien Hoa, our starting difficulties long forgotten, there was a loud 'crack' from somewhere outside the aircraft. It did not sound like a backfire and, still being 'ground fire virgins', we were prepared to believe it was a shot. We were both decidedly twitchy after Monday's events, and Stu made no facetious comment about my abbreviated circuit and landing. But when we stopped and looked over the aircraft, there were no bullet holes or any other visible damage.

Next day, however, after shut down in the same aircraft at Tan Son Nhut, we found the left engine spewing masses of oil. The rocker box covers on two cylinders were warped and leaking. There was no spare aircraft for us this time. The next aircraft arriving from Vung Tau dropped spare parts and a mechanic, and we waited around while repairs were carried out.

Passing time sipping coffee in the TMC building, Stu and I joked about whether the events of the past week indicated that one of us was jinxed. Since he had been copilot in the Ba To prang and I had led a charmed life up to now, we decided it must have been him.

'I'm getting married when I get back, Pedro', he confided, 'I don't need any more drama'.

Fortunately, our delay did not stop us getting back in time for a farewell party in the mess that evening. Farewell parties here were peculiar affairs, the elation of the lucky few and the envy of the remaining many combining to produce a mood of euphoric abandon. Hence the grog flowed even more freely than usual, and conversations became more and more animated, with those being farewelled rubbing in their good fortune, and the others trying to forget they were staying.

Around midnight Frank Riley, one of the mess 'characters' teetered on a table performing his favourite party trick of stopping the overhead electric fan with his bald head. Suddenly there was a thump on the metal roof of the bar annexe, followed by two shots. In the sudden silence that followed, some quick thinker turned off the lights, plunging the room into total darkness. My beer-addled brain did not make sense out of this, so I decided to go outside and investigate. As I groped my way unsteadily out the door, glass in hand, a certain trigger-happy chopper pilot, clad only in underpants, materialised in the gloom at the top of the Villa stairs, cocking his M1 rifle. At this point, I decided that drinking in the dark was less hazardous than looking for trouble outside, particularly as the object on the roof, whatever it was, had not gone off. Back inside, the conversation became a buzz, then again a racket. An hour later, the incident was totally forgotten. Much later I went up to bed.

Next day, I spoke to the guard who explained that the previous night's drama was caused by a local larrikin throwing a brick on the roof. He had fired off a couple of warning shots before he realised that we were not under attack by the VC. It was a measure of the relatively casual acceptance of weapons here that no one in the bar took more than a passing interest in the incident.

Not only the guard but everyone else in the Villa was armed to the teeth. With the proliferation of guns and ammunition, most of it stored in cupboards and under people's beds, the risk of accidental shooting might have been greater than that of being shot by the enemy.

We all carried weapons everywhere on duty. Naturally, military passengers on our aircraft carried arms too. Passengers accidentally discharging loaded weapons as they made themselves comfortable before flight had caused at least a few of the bullet holes in the Wallabies! Our crew chiefs now made sure all the passengers' weapons were cleared prior to boarding.

Some time after our engine fire incident, Stu Spinks and I were programmed to do a Nha Trang detachment together. Apart from joking about jinxes over a beer, we had not given our joint misfortunes another thought. Both of us would have vehemently denied being superstitious. Yet the disastrous detachment which followed made us wonder whether we ought to fly together again.

On our first day away, I was backing out of the crowded ramp at Nha Trang for a third and final shuttle to Song Mao. The aircraft were, as usual, parked nose to nose in double rows, with laneways between each line of aircraft tails. Noticing a vacant space to the right in the aircraft line facing us, I thought it would be

easier to turn and go forward through it, rather than carry out the usual reverse turn manoeuvre. I stopped, and began to turn towards the space. Bad mistake. Looking out to get clearance on the left wingtip, my horrified gaze fell on a large, portable fire extinguisher, previously out of sight in front of the nose, but now ahead of the advancing left propeller. Obviously Bugs Rose, the crew chief, sitting on the edge of the open cargo ramp, had not seen it either. I slammed on the brakes and shut down the engine. But it was too late. Click, clang, chop. All three blades contacted the extinguisher with increasing severity. Ugly scars appeared. A propeller change would be necessary.

Crestfallen, I headed for the telephone. By the time I reached the CO via the complicated VHF phone patching system, which connected with Vung Tau via Cam Ranh Bay and Bien Hoa exchanges, my stomach felt like lead. To any pilot a taxiing accident, even under such circumstances, is considered inexcusable. Surprisingly, the CO did not chew my ear, but said he would send up a spare propeller next day. Easy solution. We were to change it ourselves and continue on detachment. No problem!

A Wallaby duly arrived next morning and left us all alone with a replacement propeller. Bugs, ever resourceful, borrowed a stand and some tools from a local USAF squadron and the rest of us rolled up our sleeves and became his apprentices. We soon had the damaged prop off, and manhandled the new one into position. By midafternoon, we had the engine running again.

Encouraged, I called up a load from TMC so that we could start again first thing in the morning, and make up for lost time.

After a run to Song Mao, TMC sent us up to Pleiku for the day. We were given a load for Dak Seang, the new Special Forces camp south of Dak Pek. My two previous visits there on detachment with the CO had not impressed me, especially after being conned into a landing while the strip was still under construction. The casual attitude of the advisory team had not endeared me to the place either.

Now I was here again with Stu Spinks, wondering if the runway was any better. According to TMC this would be only the second time a fixed-wing aircraft had landed here. Determined not to be caught out again I made a low approach, confirming that the strip was indeed finished. Not that the subsequent earthworks had improved things much. Fourteen hundred feet from end to end, the first three hundred feet of one end was so steeply sloping that it was unusable. On finals, there was a roaring cross-wind, to be expected since the wind blew straight

down the valley from Dak Pek and over the hilltop camp site at right angles to the strip.

A cutting masked the first part of the strip, where the bulldozers had dug down to try to level the surface. As we entered this cutting, at the very point where the aircraft had to be flared for landing, the cross-wind suddenly disappeared. The Wallaby thumped onto the ground sideways. Fortunately, the strip widened slightly into a parking area into which we skidded in a cloud of dust.

Having arrived in this undignified manner, I was only too keen to get out of the place. We were again carrying drums of POL, so I left the motors running while Bugs disappeared down the back to supervise what should have been a simple unloading. Suddenly, the aircraft lurched forward with a bone-jarring shudder. Shutting down the engines, I ran down the back, scarcely daring to look. A flat-top truck, reversing in to accept the load, had slammed into the cargo ramp before Bugs and his assistant had time to fit the rubber buffer and position wheel chocks behind the truck, our standard practice. The ramp was dented and its hydraulic jacks damaged. It could no longer be closed. Hoping to redeem myself after the fire extinguisher episode, I had ended up in a worse situation.

The driver mumbled apologies, claiming the truck had no brakes. Bugs had a different story. He had heard talk of a drinking binge the previous night, and smelt liquor on the driver's breath. However, even though I felt like assaulting the driver, he belonged to someone else's outfit. Making a scene would not change anything. We pushed the remaining drums out onto the ground and, demoralised and dispirited, I headed back to Pleiku and the VHF telephone to tell the CO we were coming home. We flew direct to Vung Tau with the ramp down, bypassing Nha Trang.

When I got back, I went straight to the CO's office to get whatever was coming over with. He must have realised how I felt after this series of disasters, since he commiserated with, rather than admonished me. I was duly awarded 'penance' of a fortnight's duty as copilot only for the fire extinguisher incident, which was considered my responsibility. I accepted this with relief.

But I could not help wondering about the 'jinx'.

Chapter 10

PLEIKU AND THE TRAIL
NOVEMBER – DECEMBER 1966

Towards the end of 1966 the Special Forces resupply effort shifted north to the Pleiku area, following the current increased activity on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Nha Trang TMC began sending us up to operate out of Pleiku for some or all of each detachment. It was often easier to stay overnight rather than waste a couple of hours in transit.

The city of Pleiku was the traditional capital of the Montagnard people. Situated on a windy plain nearly 2500 feet above sea level in the heart of the mountainous north-west, it was only 35 miles from the Cambodian border, making it a handy command and supply centre for search and destroy operations in the area. Its location also rendered it vulnerable to attack from the west.

There were two main bases in the Pleiku area. One, called Pleiku Holloway, was an Army base and the centre of intensive helicopter operations. Large choppers, such as Chinooks and Flying Cranes, were based here, along with hundreds of 'Hueys', the workhorses of the search and destroy mission. It was a good place for fixed-wing aircraft to avoid although not easy, since the other airfield, Pleiku City, was only two miles away, and the circuit areas overlapped.

The *Aerodrome Directory* warned pilots about hazardous traffic under Aerodrome Remarks:

> *CAUTION: Reduced runway separation standards are in effect ... Cross Pleiku area (Holloway) at or above 3500 feet due to heavy helicopter traffic ... Use extreme caution during approach and departure due to extensive helicopter operations in local area not controlled by Tower.*

As if the swarms of choppers were not enough to keep us on our toes there was an additional remark:

> *Report specific location of ground fire encountered to Tower.*

In other words it was a 'bunfight' and, being close to the action, we may get shot at in the circuit.

Most of the fixed-wing traffic came to the USAF base at Pleiku City, which was presently undergoing a painful transformation from a small support airfield to a major supply base. The small ramp was chock-a-block with cargo, completely inadequate to accommodate the haphazard piles of materials that sprawled halfway up the grassy hill behind the camp, almost to the VHF phone patch antennae that connected the base with Danang, Cam Ranh Bay and Bien Hoa.

Pleiku Ramp

Much of the stuff was now brought in direct from Japan or the States by C-141 or C-130. A TMC unit had been set up, but at this stage it was just a small tin shed with a radio, a harassed and youthful lieutenant, and a handful of troops with walkie-talkies. Right now, the incoming supplies were arriving faster than they could get them out on the C-123s and Caribous at their disposal.

I first operated out of Pleiku as a base in November when I went there with Dave Marland. To begin with, the TMC lieutenant was not sure what to do with us.

The USAF had recently taken over all the US Army Caribous, and was far from happy about some of the jobs they were being called on to do.

Pleiku was surrounded by difficult outposts, with dangerous approaches and short strips, all high above sea level—places like Plei Me, Mang Buk, Dak Seang and Dak Pek. After a recent fatality at Dak Pek, in which a Caribou had crashed and burned at the end of the strip, the USAF had banned Caribou operations there. Maybe they needed extra time to check out their pilots. Plei Me and Dak Seang were already on the black list.

Wallabies had been operating to all of these places for some time. When TMC found that no bans applied to us, they wasted no time allocating to us a big backlog of cargo.

Our first two days were spent shuttling into two of the 'banned' fields, Plei Me and Dak Pek, and also Kontum and Dak To, the latter bristling with choppers. At Dak Pek, the burnt out shell of the crashed USAF Caribou lay upside down near the threshold of runway 02, where it had come to rest, reminding us that this was one of our more dangerous strips.

There was plenty of action going on around the area. Two VC infantry divisions had been located across the border from Dak Pek, and an anti-aircraft division across from Pleiku. On hearing about this we were even more cautious getting into the camps along the Poko River, which ran down from the mountains near Dak Pek past Dak To and Dak Seang to the plains around Ban Me Thuot.

At Holloway, Operation *Paul Revere*, a big Air Cavalry operation, was in full swing with choppers buzzing about everywhere. On our first day at Pleiku, two were shot down, and a third took a direct hit while trying to rescue the grounded crews. The preceding B-52 bombing sorties, designed to soften up the VC before the heliborne assault operation, had obviously not cleaned out all resistance.

At this time statistical bulletins were showing that the Americans had lost over 1500 aircraft since the beginning of Vietnam involvement, over a thousand of which were helicopters.[25]

A lot of the foodstuffs we carried to the Special Forces camps, especially the livestock, were for the Montagnards, primitive mountain people ethnically different from the lowland Vietnamese. Prior to the war the Montagnards had lived a tribal existence, hunting game and defending their villages from enemy attack with crossbows. The Americans had discovered that these warlike attributes could be used to good effect in an anti-guerrilla warfare campaign

in the highlands, based on a network of fortified villages run by the US Army Special Forces.

While the Montagnards had no love for the lowlanders, they had even less time for the Viet Cong who had burned their houses and looted their food supplies. They were therefore quite happy to help the Americans hunt them down. But the Montagnards, like all mercenaries, would not fight for nothing. They had to be paid and since money had no value and their hunting activities had been curtailed, they were paid with food. That is where we came in.

Each Special Forces camp was a fortified village in which lived not only the Special Forces team but also the entire Montagnard population. A few villages still used the original circular huts, made from bamboo and thatched palm leaves, which had served their inhabitants for generations. But most had been relocated and rebuilt by the Special Forces in more defensible areas, using timber and galvanised iron flown in from the nearest supply base. Another job for us.

Plei Me was one of the latter kind. The Special Forces advisers here were embarrassingly friendly. We knew they had been well served by Wallabies in the past, but due to changing allocations by TMC, no Wallaby had been in for some time. Because American Caribous did not come in here, they had to rely on smaller aircraft, with their obvious load limitations. And so we were showered with hospitality, even having to politely decline the offer of cans of beer in the middle of the day. We settled for coffee and listened patiently as our hosts praised the squadron and solicited our support.

On our first night in Pleiku, after finding our beds and depositing our gear, we sat down to a rather dull meal, followed by an equally dull evening in the Officers' Club, where there were only two or three other officers present. Next day, we mentioned this to a sergeant from Plei Me who was hitching a ride with us back to Pleiku.

'Goddamn, Aussie!' he exclaimed. 'No one here drinks at the Officers' Club. Come on down to the Enlisted Men's Club tonight.'

Sure enough, when we arrived at the timber, galvanised iron and flywire building, dressed for the occasion in clean flying suits and polished boots, the place was crammed and noisy. We were welcomed into the club by Paddy O'Reilly, a beefy master sergeant who must have been 6 foot 6 inches tall and 20 stone in weight. He explained that tonight was entertainment night. A belly dancer was due to perform at eight o'clock. Obviously, the evening would be anything but dull.

Paddy, like many other Special Forces people we had met, showered praise on the squadron—it certainly enjoyed a good reputation in this area—and instructed the barman that we were not to pay for any drinks. He left us in the hands of our friend from Plei Me who, having temporarily escaped from the collection of sandbags and roofing iron that had been his home for the last six months, was getting quietly stoned.

Master Sergeant O'Reilly returned to another guest, a greying but quite attractive lady in the jungle green uniform of a half colonel. To our surprise, she turned out to be Martha Raye, one of many US entertainers on private or sponsored visits to Vietnam. Our large host shouted for quiet, announced pride in his Irish extraction, and his desire to hear Martha sing 'Danny Boy'.

As Martha moved forward, a commotion broke out next to us. Our friend from Plei Me, no longer quiet, was brawling with a fellow sergeant. Paddy, furious at this sacrilegious interruption, marched over to the offenders, picked each up in turn by collar and trousers, and threw them bodily through the inward opening flywire door, which commenced to flap ineffectually in either direction. Having established order in this way, his expression transformed into gentle rapture as Miss Raye put her heart and soul into the Irish ballad.

Next it was time for the hired entertainment. The belly dancer swept in, veils floating, bangles jangling. Conscious of the act she was following, she put everything into her performance, and soon held a captive audience. She noticed Dave, almost falling off his barstool with each flutter of a veil. To his embarrassment, she took his hand and pulled him into the centre of the floor. The mock seduction that followed had everybody, Dave included, laughing until they were sore. Dave ended up on the floor with the well-endowed dancer gyrating over him until he disappeared under her skirts. He still will not tell me the colour of her underwear, or even if she had any.

Now the dancer tried to steal some of Martha's thunder by bringing her into the act. But Martha upstaged her. Skinny as a beanpole, she brought the house down with an exaggerated parody of the voluptuous dancer's routine, following her wildly gyrating hip movements and come-hither facial expressions.

In the morning, the Plei Me sergeant, little the worse for the previous night's ordeal, arrived to hitch a ride back to his camp with our first load. He seemed unusually protective of the pallets, which contained foodstuffs and building materials, and in a hurry to get away. When pressed, he revealed that he had scrounged it all. According to his story, the US Army provided Special Forces

advisory teams with only the barest essentials. To improve their lot, they had to beg, borrow or steal. This was expected, even condoned in some quarters, as long as it was someone else's supplies that disappeared. And so, with TMC, we became accessories after the fact.

After three days operating out of Pleiku, TMC sent us back to Nha Trang. We only just got in, as the towering afternoon build-ups were about to bring torrential rain which would close the airfield. It rained throughout the night and continued next morning. Nha Trang and its valley were completely socked in with low cloud and rain. Although the south-east monsoonal weather in the Delta had cleared, Nha Trang and the mountain region were now in the grip of a north-east monsoon which would last through until February.

We spent most of the day staring glumly at the cloud and rain. Then we packed our bags and decided to get out and back to Vung Tau at the first opportunity. During a temporary improvement, we fired up the Caribou and were soon hurtling down the main runway, windscreen wipers at full speed, straining to see the runway ahead. Halfway down, the right engine began coughing and spluttering. One magneto, waterlogged after the torrential rains, had given up the ghost. We aborted the take-off and taxied back to the ramp, determined to try again in the morning.

The Special Forces Mess at Nha Trang was rather dull after the lively evenings at Pleiku. The only disruption to the staid murmur of conversation was the rattle of ice cubes in glasses and the intermittent hiccupping of a popcorn machine, the latest creature comfort to be installed in this well-equipped mess.

A couple of Otter pilots we were drinking with asked us what was going on in the Delta. We were not much help. I had the strangest feeling that, due to our busy routine and wide-ranging activities, we did not ever follow through on what was going on in any one place. We probably knew as little about the war as did any other transport pilots.

Next morning, Stew Bonett, our resourceful crew chief, had us all helping him with the right engine. We took the magneto and high-tension leads off the engine, and cleaned and dried them. After replacing the components and dropping the engine cowl back into place, the engine ran up normally. Now, however, a power check on the left engine showed a magneto defect, so we had to repeat the process on that engine. Meanwhile, the rain continued remorselessly, so that each time we got an engine going, the opposite one began to play up. Frustrated, Stew scrounged around the base and managed to borrow two covered engine

stands. After drying out one engine, we placed a cover over it until we had the other one running smoothly. At long last, we had two good engines.

As soon as the weather cleared, we whipped the covers off the engines and got airborne before either the weather or the magnetos could stop us again. This was the one and only time I was glad to get out of Nha Trang and back to Vung Tau.

It was not long before I was back at Pleiku. On subsequent visits our efforts were focused on artillery bases to the west. In addition to Chu Dron, firebases were operating at Plei Djerang, Plei Mrong and Polei Kleng, a string of bases a few miles inside the border. All were operating full blast to counter the VC traffic on the Trail. In the monsoonal weather the red highland dirt turned into red mud. With our moulded-sole flying boots it was hard to keep it out of the aircraft.

New strips, capable of taking C-130[26] in dry conditions, were under construction. But at this stage, with the strips only half-finished and larger aircraft not available, Caribous were still needed to carry in pallets of artillery shells and mortar bombs.

Wallaby Airlines was again doing its part in stopping the southerly march of the Viet Cong.

A DAY OFF FOR CHRISTMAS
DECEMBER 1966 – JANUARY 1967

Back at home base the pace was hotting up. I wrote home in early December. Though it's quite late (10.45 pm) I must dash off a few lines as I'm working for the next ten days straight and don't know when I'll next get the chance to write.

December was the busiest month of the tour so far, and coincided with a gradual change in the tasking of the squadron. The new 41 mission kept an aircraft operating permanently out of Vung Tau. This aircraft was also available for Task Force air support.

This fitted in with two current situations, the greater effort required to support the increased Australian Army presence in Phuoc Tuy Province and the expectation of an upsurge in VC activity in the Delta after the wet season.

In early December 1966 the new airfield at Nui Dat opened. It was named Luscombe Field.[27] On 5 December, Luscombe was included in the daily Saigon courier. John Harris and I, with Keith Bosley as crew chief, took one of the first Wallaby flights into Luscombe two days later.

And so began a more active Task Force support role for Wallaby Airlines. Although we retained those operations that were integrated with the US airlift, we now flew more missions in direct support of the Australian Task Force, carrying men and equipment into Luscombe, or to outlying fields in Phuoc Tuy Province.

Although all our operations to date had been air landing of cargo and passengers, we began practising supply and flare dropping. We spent many nights sleeping at the base on the floor of the operations room on 'flare drop standby', waiting to be called out to support a night operation which never eventuated (not in my time anyway). I must say, I was not very enthusiastic about this sort of work since at the height and speed required for dropping, a Caribou would be a sitting duck for sniper fire. I could not help recalling that my own father had been killed by a sniper's bullet in World War II while flying his Hudson bomber on a supply-dropping mission in New Guinea during the Buna-Gona campaign.

As expected the onset of the dry season produced a flurry of activity in the Delta, as the airlift effort focused on building up fuel supplies at MACV outposts to be used as forward bases for helicopter gunship operations. We were heavily involved in supporting these operations.

In the Delta the combination of lush jungle, tall grasses and mangrove swamps provided an ideal sanctuary for the VC, as well as plentiful food supplies from rice-growing areas. However a high civilian population meant that indiscriminate bombing operations, such as B-52 carpet-bombing, used in the north could not be used here. Hence the reliance on small-scale search and destroy missions.

I saw a lot of Soc Trang, Cao Lanh, My Tho and Binh Thuy during November. We seemed to be aiming to cover them over with drums of POL, so often did we carry this type of cargo.

One day, Mick Lewino and I were given the job of carting POL to My Tho for the whole day. To relieve the tedium of the operation, we decided to try to set some kind of record. With the cooperation and hard work of Stew Bonett and Blue Campbell, the other crew members, and the support of an enthusiastic forklift driver at Charlie Ramp, we made ten return trips to My Tho, in the middle of the Delta. That day we logged 10 hours 30 minutes, at that stage the most flying time by a squadron crew during daylight hours.

The forklift driver shook his head and muttered 'Goddamn Aussies', as we hustled him each time for a quick turnaround. But he made sure we had loading priority, and was obviously proud of his part in our little scheme. Our turnarounds at My Tho took only about two minutes as we reversed to the side of the strip and rolled the drums out the back. By the time we had finished there were one hundred more POL drums beside the strip at My Tho.

A few days later Mick and I were on a different kind of task, which I wished had been unnecessary. We picked up seven corpses from Tan Son Nhut. All were the bodies of Australian soldiers killed in recent action in Phuoc Tuy Province. They had been brought from the military mortuary at Saigon to Rebel Ramp. After travelling with us they were scheduled to go home in the cargo compartment of the RAAF C-130 courier from Vung Tau instead of by airline jet as their luckier comrades would.

I walked past the aluminium caskets, stacked either side of the cargo compartment on my way to the cockpit, feeling sorry for the occupants and a little unsettled about the trip. I did not even know who they were or how they had died, thousands

Loading Caskets at Tan Son Nhut

of miles from home. Except for a flash of interest by the newspapers, all but a few grieving friends and relatives would remember them only as statistics.

Later that same day we shuttled from Xuan Loc to Dat Do, both airfields in Phuoc Tuy Province, with 70 young Vietnamese troops, reinforcements for a big Australian action going on there. I thought again of the caskets. The Vietnamese looked nervous packed like sardines into the Caribou with their weapons. Perhaps it was only fear of air travel. At Dat Do, they jogged away to unknown fates while nearby 150 mm howitzers pounded away, softening up the VC ready to do battle. How many would survive?

There was also a lot of action to the west of Saigon. There was talk of much of the men and equipment, which had been steadily arriving from the Ho Chi Minh Trail, being poised for a large-scale attack on Saigon. One day, Ian Baldwin and I flew four round trips shuttling ammunition from Tan Son Nhut into Moc Hoa, five miles from the Cambodian border in the so-called 'Parrot's Beak'[28] area west of Saigon. This area jutted out from Cambodia into South Vietnam, the

Reinforcements at Dat Do

point of the beak only 20-odd miles from the capital. It was in an ideal position for the enemy to mass forces close to Saigon. There was some kind of airborne assault operation going on even further to the west. We counted 27 C-130s, in a large loose formation, en route. We had to wait on the Australian newspapers to see pictures of C-130s disgorging men and equipment in a spectacular mass paradrop to realise the significance of what we had seen.

Apparently, after several months of secret preparation, the US 173rd Airborne Brigade had conducted a battalion-size parachute assault north of the Parrot's Beak. The drop zone was a wide clearing in the jungle four miles from the border near a crossroads hamlet called Katum, thought to be the site of COSVN, the Central Office for South Vietnam, the top enemy headquarters in South Vietnam. The 778-man jump was successful, with only 11 minor injuries, but the aim of the mission was not. The drop was unopposed and COSVN was not located.[29]

The 173rd returned to helicopter-borne operations.

With the dry season upon it, the Delta was now much kinder making the 406 a pleasant run. I felt on top of things. But an unwelcome incident intervened to deflate my sense of wellbeing.

Arriving at Cao Lanh one day, I noticed with some annoyance that the wind was a strong easterly. This meant a landing away from the end of the strip which widened out into the small parking area. A U-turn on the very narrow runway would therefore be required. Normally this was no problem as you could taxi off the gravel onto the dirt and make a wide radius turn. But after the recent rains, the gravel runway was an island, and venturing off it would mean certain bogging. So I began a short radius turn. Halfway round, I felt a 'graunch' and the steering wheel locked.

Alex Martini, the crew chief, jumped out to inspect the nose wheel and brought back some bad news. The nose wheel steering mechanism had overrun a stop, causing it to jam. I shut down the engines, and we tried to free the nose gear by pushing and pulling, all the passengers lending a hand, but to no avail. We were stuck. My jinx again?

We got a message through to the squadron, and made arrangements for repairs. Because we were obstructing the short 1500-foot strip, there was no hope of getting another Wallaby in. The squadron sent back a message that spare parts and a mechanic would be sent in on a Pilatus Porter, which would arrive in about three hours time.

There was no point in staying at the field, so we bundled crew and passengers inside and on the bonnet of a grossly overloaded half-ton truck belonging to the unloading team, and set out for the MACV compound, five miles away.

Up to this point I had never travelled more than half a mile outside urban areas. Five miles by road in the countryside can seem like 50, particularly on a minor road in the Delta. The locals along the way did not seem to me nearly as friendly as did the people at Camau. After the driver had finished telling us about recent VC ambushes and terrorist incidents, I was ready to leap into the nearest ditch if any of the innocent-looking peasants we saw suddenly brandished a firearm.

After meeting the Vietnamese province chief, an ARVN colonel, and drinking coffee with the MACV team, I was glad to get back to the airfield to supervise the repair operation. We arrived in time to see the Pilatus Porter with our tool kit on board approach over our aircraft and land in the remaining 500 feet of the strip. This aircraft, I thought, is even more remarkable than the Caribou. With

the extra tools and some brute force, the mechanic and Alex soon had the nose wheel back to normal.

The 406 now included a stop at Long Xuyen, just across the Bassac River from Cao Lanh. Civilian Australian doctors and nurses from the Royal Melbourne Hospital worked at the hospital here, adding their surgical and nursing skills to the overworked and understaffed local medical team. It was a pleasant change to see a smiling Australian face waiting for the mail, and to share nostalgically the news from home.

A feature in the town was a huge, half-completed Catholic Church begun during the Diem regime,[30] like the one I had seen at Quang Ngai. We were told that, here also, when construction was abandoned many refugee families moved in and made it their home.

Another Australian we often saw at Tra Vinh these days was Tony Powell, who was doing a forward air controllers' course at the USAF FAC School at nearby Binh Thuy. Tony survived many hazardous operational missions controlling air strikes from Cessna Bird Dogs and carrying out visual reconnaissance and other FAC duties. He also assisted No 2 Squadron to work out a system for FAC control of daylight raids by Australian Canberra bombers.[31] For his efforts he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO). Tragically, he and his wife were later killed in a car accident back in Australia.

Towards the end of the year, both our squadron and the chopper squadron seemed to be working at full throttle. I remember that I rarely had more than a day a week off, sometimes less. Most of the other pilots were working just as hard. Inevitably, tensions rose. One night, a simple disagreement in the bar led to a fistfight. In this closed male community, even personality traits could grate on people. There were other unpleasant incidents too as the pilots, tired after long working days in trying conditions, and with few outlets for their feelings, unwound in the bar. On reflection I can understand how these things happened. I remember feeling myself getting more impatient and more irritated by some of the people with whom I was continually working and living. They probably felt the same way about me. A few beers under the belt sometimes brought out normally suppressed aggression.

Perhaps it was fortunate that, due to some officers moving into other accommodation there was now more room in the Villa. There were now only five instead of seven in our room. As it was a big room this gave everyone quite a bit of extra space.

Some funny things happened in this period too. One night, I woke to the sound of voices in time to see a 9 Squadron pilot climbing into bed with one of our pilots. Aha, I thought, so this is what happens when you've been up here for a while. But the incumbent sleeper's vehement protestations and the other's mumbled apologies told me it was a case of disorientation after a late night binge session in the bar.

Another well-known character, this time one of my room-mates, had the disconcerting habit of sleep walking, and was liable to end up anywhere. We found him one morning sound asleep in the bottom of his wardrobe. On another occasion, he stumbled into the CO's room. Now I happen to know the CO kept his .45 handy. Our nocturnal prowler might have been shot as a VC intruder had he not woken himself and everyone else up crashing into a metal wardrobe door.

Another story is about an unfortunate 35 Squadron pilot who suffered badly from what was colloquially called 'the trots' (dysentery). This pilot wore a new type of flying suit, which included a hood. One day he was taxiing along what was known as the high-speed taxiway at Tan Son Nhut, with other aircraft in front of, and behind him, all waiting to take off. This taxiway is designed to speed up the departure of aircraft that are ready to roll without delay.

At this point the pilot in question suffered an urgent call of nature which he could not ignore. Closing the cockpit door he unzipped his flying suit, the new design which included a hood. Dropping it around his ankles, he resourcefully positioned an air sickness bag and did what he had to.

Suddenly the tower called, 'Wallaby Zero One, clear for immediate take-off'.

Witnesses say that there was a blur of green, blue and grey as our intrepid friend whipped up his flying suit, buckled his seat belt, and slammed open the cockpit door. Unfortunately he did not realise the sick bag and its contents had lodged in the hood of his flying suit. I am told it was a pretty 'shitty' take-off.

There were also some unusual flying incidents. One of these occurred when I was sent to a place called Go Cong, just across the river mouth from Vung Tau, for the first time. The so-called airfield at Go Cong was actually a widened section of bituminised highway. As at Camau in the early days, 'White Mice' (Vietnamese policemen) were on duty and held back pedestrians and bullock carts for our arrival.

After an uneventful landing, I attempted to turn around. The runway, more accurately roadway, was so narrow that a forward-reverse-forward procedure

was necessary. Poking the nose of the aircraft almost into a clump of bamboo at the runway edge I attempted to reverse, but with no result. A second attempt was equally unsuccessful.

'Let me take a look', called Dick De Friskbom, the crew chief, over the intercom. A quick check of the main wheels told him that they were pushing the soft bitumen back behind them like a fold in a carpet. Once he was back on board I tried a new technique. By allowing as much room as I could and suddenly releasing the brakes with a lot of reverse power on, I managed to jump the fold and complete the turn.

Approaching My Tho on another occasion with more drums of POL, I noticed that the airfield seemed strangely deserted. No one on the ground answered our radio calls. I decided to land anyway, and leave the drums beside the strip, as we had done many times before. Late in the approach, two American GIs with rifles slung over their shoulders ran out onto the runway waving their arms in a 'do not land' sign. We overshot rapidly. When I told Dave Marland this story, he claimed he had nightmares for weeks after, with GIs waving him off wherever he went until he ran out of fuel.

As with other incidents of this kind, I never found out the explanation. My purpose in relating these various stories is to illustrate that Wallaby pilots were wise always to anticipate the unexpected, and be pleasantly surprised by the normal.

For several weeks, I operated only in the Delta, carting POL to just about every MACV outpost in this part of the country. I am sure I knew every canal and rice paddy from Saigon to the south coast. Aside from listening to a fusillade of shots during lunch at An Thoi one day, as trigger-happy guards chased a suspected VC infiltrator past the Officers' Club, nothing out of the ordinary happened.

I still seemed to be jinxed. Walking out of TMC at Tan Son Nhut one day, Mick Lewino and I were just in time to see a forklift stick one of its prongs through the side of our Wallaby while taking a short cut to the next door aeroplane. Two weeks later, after a 406, Ian Baldwin and I arrived back at Saigon only to discover a massive oil leak in the starboard engine. It was too late to get another Wallaby over with a repair team in daylight, so we had to find somewhere to spend the night.

We had never stayed overnight in Saigon before, and had no regular contacts except TMC. I rang RAAF Headquarters only to find that everyone except the Duty Officer had gone home. The best he could do for us was a night sleeping

on an office floor. Instead we accepted a lift on the back of the TMC truck and the offer of the night in borrowed beds (the owners were on R&R leave) in an incredibly scruffy room in a house in a Saigon side street. Since all we had with us was what we were wearing, namely sweaty, grimy flying suits, we were grateful for any small comforts.

Next day it was back to normal. We picked up our repaired Wallaby at Tan Son Nhut and headed back to home base.

There must have been some letter writing to-and-fro prior to Christmas. One I sent home said:

> *Concerning Christmas, I really need nothing up here—and I mean it. The only possible exception would be one or two cheap (the girls scrub things and wear them out in no time) short-sleeved shirts, either cotton or golf type, colour anything except blue. I have plenty blue.*

As it turned out I got my request, and quite a few surprise gifts as well.

With 1966 drawing to a close, I finally cracked another Nha Trang detachment. But it was over all too soon. I arrived back to find I was programmed to fly Christmas Eve, Boxing Day and the next three days after that.

But I had a day off for Christmas.

On Christmas Day, we had a ceremonial opening of Christmas hampers, which had been sent to us by various kindly people and organisations. These well-meaning folk were not to know it, but between us, we had about a month's supply of fruitcake, canned peaches, nuts and sweets. We probably introduced tooth decay into Camau, since the kids there got most of the lollies.

One lot of hampers had cards in them, wishing the recipient a Happy Christmas from Fred or Bill or whoever had packed them. My card said:

> *Wishing you a very Happy Christmas, with love from Christine. XXX.*

Whoever, or wherever, you are Christine, God bless you. But you cannot imagine the explaining I had to do when my wife eventually found your card at the bottom of my cabin trunk.

The catering staff excelled themselves. We feasted on roast turkey with cranberry sauce and baked vegetables, just like home, followed by plum pudding and

brandy sauce. There was lots of champagne, as if there really were something to celebrate. The passage of time, perhaps?

Everyone ate and drank to excess.

Christmas was soon forgotten in the hassle of a New Year. It was back to flying six days a week. Those back at Vung Tau found time to accept an invitation to a New Year's Day cocktail party at a nearby American unit. John Steinbeck, the author, was a special guest. He was doing a tour of South-East Asia and Australia, perhaps doing research for a new book. He looked very old and tired.

In no time at all, I was off to Nha Trang again with Stu Spinks, glad of a change of scenery. We had now moved onto the base for security reasons. Since we no longer needed transport, we had given up our faithful Ford 'rust bucket'.

With Tet approaching, there were nightly bunker drills (which we mostly ignored, since we needed the sleep more than the practice), and so-called Dragonships (from 'Puff the Magic Dragon'—DC-3s with infra-red sensors and Gatling guns) nightly scoured the hills to the north of the base.

We watched them one night, beers in hand, the tracer from the Gatling making it look more like some kind of Flash Gordon ray gun. When the Gatling guns opened up at their shadowy targets, even trees in their path were chopped to matchwood. Dragons indeed, roaming the night, raining a hot breath of terror and destruction on their hapless victims.

It was a good time for my Rest and Recuperation (R&R) leave. I was also due for another Butterworth trip. I elected to go to Singapore for the R&R, where my wife Robyn would join me. I was very pleased when the CO agreed to give me a Butterworth trip as close as possible to the R&R. No less a person than the Officer Commanding RAAF Vung Tau, Group Captain Peter Raw, was to be my copilot.

I relayed the good news to Robyn who bought a ticket from Qantas and flew up to Penang via Singapore. She was waiting for me on the tarmac at Butterworth when we arrived. I could not get over how thin she looked but it was great to be together again, if only for a short time.

As before we had to do a compass swing on the aircraft. Although technically the captain, I readied myself to man the compass outside. I was astounded when the group captain said: 'Jump into the aircraft Pedrina. Robyn can keep you company in the right-hand seat. I'll man the compass.' For the next hour and a

half he stood in the hot sun, lining up and reading the compass and recording the results. Robyn and I agreed he was one of life's true gentlemen.

We were grateful too to our friends Craig and Margaret Cousens, who put us up in their house for my four nights at Butterworth, and Robyn for another week.

It was strange returning to Vietnam knowing I would be flying back to Singapore in a week's time, even stranger facing the hazards of the Delta knowing Robyn was waiting for me to return.

But I finished the week in one piece, boarding the R&R special flight to join her in Singapore.

We booked into the Cathay, then Singapore's plushest hotel, and lost ourselves in each other, and the market places and nightclubs of this intriguing city.

For seven whole days, we pretended that Vietnam did not exist.

Chapter 12

BOMBS AND BULLETS
JANUARY – FEBRUARY 1967

My return from Malaysia and Singapore was harder this time than after the last trip to Butterworth. Being reunited with Robyn, even for a short time, made coming back almost worse than coming here in the first place. Leaving Robyn in Singapore was just like a re-run of the previous July. It was a gut-wrenching experience. Our wonderful ten days were more like a second honeymoon than a holiday. I found it hard to settle down again to the daily grind of Vietnam without the love and companionship I had rediscovered, even so briefly.

I struggled to get into the routine of things again, but of course I soon did.

In no time at all I was back on detachment with my old partner of many adventures, John Harris. We were given a special assignment. Saigon TMC tasked us to carry out photographic surveys of a number of airstrips in the I Corps and northern II Corps Military Regions. Two photographers and their equipment, both from a USAF unit based in Saigon, were assigned to accompany us. TMC organised a briefing to familiarise us with the task so we could map out some sort of itinerary.

Our plan was to overnight in Danang and Pleiku, hopping from strip to strip in between.

I won the toss for the first day's flying. We set off for Danang along the coast, planning to look at Duc My, Dong Tre, Tra Bong and Tien Phuoc along the way. Our brief was to fly low along each strip, then climb out to 2000 feet, make a 'half dumbbell' (90°–270°) turn, and descend back towards the runway on a dummy approach. The photographer, strapped in securely near the open cargo door, took his pictures directly behind us. This procedure, while very effective for photography, maximised our exposure to sniper fire. We kept our fingers crossed.

Duc My, a sleepy little town a bit like Camau in the Delta, slumbered on during our manoeuvres. But at Dong Tre, there was a skirmish going on. Vietnamese Skyraiders were bombing and strafing a VC stronghold on the side of a nearby hill. Keeping well clear of the action, but with one eye on the Skyraiders, which were causing little incandescent puffs on the jungle-covered hillside

as their phosphorus-tipped rockets thudded home, I set the aircraft up in the photographic pattern.

The easterly approach was over a clear part of the valley, but climbing out to the west, we passed over a patch of thick jungle. As we turned to descend back towards the strip, we heard several loud reports. Our USAF cameraman yelled through the intercom: 'Some sonofabitch just shot at us!'

After landing, we checked the aircraft thoroughly, but found nothing. I was still a 'virgin'.

Having been there in the right-hand seat with Dick Brice I was looking forward to my first landing at Tra Bong. Its 1000 feet looked incredibly short, but I managed quite a good approach. I had just lowered the nose wheel onto the runway, congratulating myself on a good landing, when a large black dog ran straight across our path. My heart nearly stopped in surprise. Somehow we missed it. I remember the incident in particular, as this was one of the very few dogs I ever saw in Vietnam. (According to squadron gossip, all Vietnamese dogs had long ago been killed and eaten.)

The airstrip was wedged in by hills and had a road running parallel to it.

After a look at Tien Phuoc, a fairly challenging, rough-and-ready strip in the foothills, we headed for our overnight stop at Danang. The base had become much busier since our last visit, more like Tan Son Nhut. There was a new parallel 10,000-foot runway, and many more aircraft.

We were told to orbit over the bay while gaggles of jets arrived and departed. When we found a gap in the traffic, I set the aircraft up for a high-speed penetration into the traffic pattern to avoid any further delays, decelerating and extending the undercarriage at the last possible moment.

Taxiing in to the ramp, we noticed groups of aircraft parked inside lines painted on the tarmac. They were the latest fighter-types in photo-reconnaissance configuration, and the new 'hush-hush' C-130s, a couple of which I had seen at Nha Trang. The latter were painted in black and green camouflage, instead of the usual brown and green, and had a strange contraption on the nose, which gave them the appearance of huge praying mantises. We found out later that these highly secret aircraft were used to snatch people or objects from the ground in rescue or covert operations. The gadget on the nose of the aircraft concealed pulleys, a cable and a hook. The cable could be played out to allow the hook to engage another cable strung between two poles on

the ground. A person or a package could be snatched and reeled in to the low flying C-130.

I had no idea what the painted lines on the tarmac meant, so I headed for our old parking spot. A myopic-looking military policeman in a hard hat appeared from nowhere, pointing his M16 directly at us. Dubious about his intentions, I stopped the aircraft and opened the side window.

'I'll shoot you dead if you cross that line', he yelled. Had he not heard of the famous Wallaby Airlines?

His attitude seemed rather extreme, but his eyes looked very close together, so I decided to park somewhere else.

Next day, John climbed into the left-hand seat, and we headed north. I had not been north of Danang before so the day held a lot of interest. Our first photographic sortie was at the airfield known as Hue Citadel to distinguish it from the military base at Hue Phu Bai.

Situated on the Perfume River, the city of Hue is 45 miles north-west of Danang, and from the early 19th century until 1945 was the capital of the whole of Vietnam under the Nguyen emperors.

The 'new' city of Hue was built across the river from the old moated citadel, whose high walls contained the Imperial Enclosure. The Imperial Enclosure was a citadel-within-a-citadel, built as a final barrier to the Forbidden Purple City, the private residence of the emperor. Fortified gates and bridges across the moat allowed access to the citadel from the outside world.[32]

Under other circumstances, we could have spent hours exploring this fascinating place. At this time, the citadel's timeless beauty was still intact, its delicate roofs and gargoyle-encrusted walls reflected in the calm waters of the ornamental moat.

We were lucky to see it as it was. On 31 January 1968, during the Tet Offensive, Communist forces overran the citadel city. Twenty-five days of vicious hand-to-hand fighting took place with heavy casualties on both sides before air, naval and ground bombardment finally drove the NVA out. In the process, over 50 per cent of this priceless ancient city was reduced to rubble and many of the civilian population massacred.[33] Much later, in the final assault on the South, street fighting would destroy the remainder.

We went on to Ba Long, 10 miles from the Laotian border and 15 from the DMZ. When we landed, there was not a soul in sight. The area was dead flat and treeless, being on a wide coastal plain bounded by distant hills and the South China Sea. All around us, long grasses rippled in a light breeze. It was so quiet and deserted it was eerie. Although the airfield was supposed to be secure, I felt uneasy. Still no one appeared, so we wasted no time starting up and getting away.

From Ba Long, we went to An Hoa, on the Thu Bon river 20 miles south of Danang, then on to Ha Thanh, short with a hump in the middle, inland from Quang Ngai. Each time, we flew our 'dumbbell' pattern, the photographer clicking away out the back of the aircraft.

Our final stop for the morning was Ly Son on an island called Cu Lao Re, 15 miles off the coast from Quang Ngai. The island, only a couple of miles long and a mile wide, looked more like a South Pacific hideaway than a government outpost. The only hazard here would be sunburn, I thought. It seemed like a good place to spend the war if you had a choice, until we found out it was also a leper colony.

After lunch, John and I swapped seats again for the flight to Pleiku via Dak Pek, Dak Seang and Plei Me, all familiar ports. Late in the afternoon, the weather began to catch up with us. Heavy cloud build-ups covered the area around Pleiku, making a GCA necessary.

On finals, the GCA controller prattled on reassuringly: 'Wallaby Zero One, you are number one in the pattern, on glide path, a few feet right of centre line, change heading five degrees left to two six zero'. And so on.

Suddenly we entered a momentary break in the cloud, and I was conscious of a large shadow blotting out the patch of sunlight. Looking up, I saw an Air America C-46 pass directly in front of us about a hundred yards away, without any warning. My blood ran cold, then hot with anger. I had a fleeting mental picture of 50,000 pounds of tangled metal falling out of the sky had we been a few seconds earlier. This outrageous incident was not the controller's fault, but poor airmanship of the part of the C-46 pilot barging through instrument approach airspace on a so-called 'special VFR' departure. This was the first time I had been at risk of a collision on a GCA, which was supposed to be a controlled precision approach separated from all other traffic.

This incident, and a few other experiences, added strength to my belief that flying in visual conditions, at low level if necessary, was always safer than 'going Popeye' in this crazy environment.

Next day we headed back towards Nha Trang. Buon Blech and Buon Ea Yang were our first two stops. The disturbed earth around the new membrane airstrips was the familiar deep ochre colour of the western highlands, and turned into a sticky quagmire when wet.

Further on was Lac Thien, only 980 feet long, taking its name from a nearby lake. We later heard that the two GIs who met us here had been ambushed and killed on their way back to the camp.

En route to Saigon again, our two intrepid photographers presented us with a record of flying hours for the trip which they wanted us to certify, since the flying counted towards the award of a US Air Medal. Each 100 hours flying meant another medal. They already had two or three each, and confided that they felt much better about accepting them after a trip like this rather than by logging passenger time on courier flights. Perhaps the two medals we got for our whole 12 months tour here were worth something after all.

After the culinary delicacies I had enjoyed on my R&R, it was especially hard to stomach the food back at home base again. On detachment, the menu was much better as the Americans at Danang and Nha Trang seemed to be able to wangle fresh meat out of the system. But back at Vung Tau, the return to etherised (preserved) eggs, American frozen ham steaks and the never ending supply of lima beans was more than my system could endure. I could no longer raise any interest in breakfast, and dinner was fast losing its attraction.

John and I decided to do something about it. When we returned from Danang, we organised a squadron 'dine out' downtown. We chose the Neptune, where I had been earlier with Dick Brice. It was a presentable-looking upstairs open-air restaurant with a view of the lights of the town, such as they were. We had no idea what the kitchen was like, nor did we care. The visible part was satisfactory. The menu was in French and very comprehensive. The waiters ponced around in white jackets and bow ties, and the wine list was long and not too expensive. We luxuriated.

The evening was a great success—even the CO agreed. (He came with us, as Stu Spinks the squadron wag said, 'to keep us on the straight and narrow'. It was true that we all walked back to the Villa together like a Boy Scout troupe.) After this we decided to make dine outs a regular event. The funny part was that

each restaurant we patronised seemed to be the subject of a military health and hygiene check the following week, and placed out of bounds by our medical officer. Even so, no one seemed to mind, and there were no outbreaks of terrible diseases.

It was not only the food that was making me sick. One night in the bar, I found myself drinking with a group which included a visiting pilot from 'Guns a Go-Go', the cowboy euphemism for a US Army Chinook gunship squadron that operated in cooperation with our own No 9 Squadron. He was revealing the VC's latest ruse for infiltration into the Delta:

> *Man, you wouldn't believe what those sons of bitches are up to. They come sailing up the rivers from the open sea in sampans, with women and kids on the upper decks just to confuse us. Course, we've got to shoot hell out of 'em. Far as we're concerned, they're all VC, and the only good VC's a dead 'un.*

Was he for real, or just shooting off his mouth?

Of course, I had heard similar stories from the fighter pilots at Danang and I suppose that by carting bombs and bullets around the country, I was doing as much as anyone else here to bring death and destruction on the Vietnamese people. But somehow, my role did not seem so bad, and I was not conscious of any civilians dying due to anything I did.

Sometimes I got the feeling we were on the outer fringe of things up there. We were like general rouseabouts who, in the course of getting supplies into out-of-the-way strips in bad weather sometimes got shot at and hit. Chopper pilots flew lower and more often into insecure areas, usually with armed back-up. But our blokes on the average seemed more 'normal', for want of a better word. They did their job without fuss or bullshit. OK, it was not as dangerous, though statistically there was always that chance that a stray round might hit flesh and bone rather than metal.

It was becoming harder to maintain enthusiasm about this war, and with the cause, especially since it was obviously 'business as usual' back home. I felt very sorry for the Nashos (National Servicemen), dying by the dozen, and for the American draftees. How many promising lives would be ended prematurely?

As if to resolve my conflict, the VC intervened in my life in a very personal way.

On 23 January I was flying down the Delta with Stu Spinks on a 406 mission. The weather was foul. A line of thunderstorms stretched right across the Delta, as it often did in the wet season, just the other side of Long Xuyen. Finding no gaps in the wall of cloud, we climbed to 16,000 feet and finally got through a relatively clear patch. Toward An Thoi, however, another wall crossed our path. There was no way around or over it this time, and no guarantee we would find An Thoi, which was out of range of all navigation aids, even if we got through. Furthermore, we had barely enough fuel after all our diversions to make the round trip to Camau, our fuel stop. I decided to head straight for Camau now and, therefore, back towards the storms.

As luck would have it, Camau was sitting right underneath a large rain shower. Since Camau had no navigation aids, the only way in was to make a low-level run from about 15 miles out, during which the bulky Caribou would be an easy target.

As a longstanding member of the 'Chicken Club', I decided to make it hard for any unfriendlies who might be waiting for us. I set climb power, and pushed the aircraft down to just a few feet above the terrain. As we flashed across the rice paddies 40 knots faster than usual, we heard a volley of automatic rifle fire followed by a 'thunk' from the rear of the aircraft. Stu shouted: 'The bastards are shooting at us!', almost in surprise.

I felt no emotion at all, concentrating as I was on avoiding obstacles. Barry Ingate, our crew chief, however, was quite outraged. A week away from completing his tour and only now taking his first hit, he clearly resented this violation of his 'virginity'. Grabbing his rifle, he threw himself flat on the cargo ramp and emptied his magazine at the retreating, black pyjama-clad figures. Whether any of his rounds found their mark is doubtful. But I guess he felt better.

On the ground at Camau, we found a neat, round hole through the rudder, about two inches in front of the trailing edge. Forty knots slower and the hole might have been in the cabin. Our Vietnamese passengers, forgotten in the drama, stared wide-eyed at the hole, drawing their own conclusions. We pacified them as well as the language barrier would allow, and continued on our way.

Now that the spell had been broken, I half expected disaster on every mission, and flew everywhere at either several thousand feet, or treetop height, depending on circumstances. Even though I felt better down low, I am not sure the passengers did. I remember looks of alarm on several military faces when, due to low cloud one morning, I flew the courier low level from Vung Tau to Luscombe. I

descended over the bay towards the marshy flats aiming for the tea plantations behind the Task Force airfield, mixing it with the choppers and Bird Dogs which normally scuttled around at this level. As I did not hear anything back at the squadron, I assume no one complained.

When snipers caught up with me again, I did not even realise what had happened until afterwards.

On the first occasion, I was inbound to Dak Seang from Pleiku, again with Stu Spinks. After landing, we noticed a hole clean through the starboard aileron. It was obvious from the shape and size of upper and lower holes that the round had been fired from the ridge line above the camp, probably as we turned onto finals. The *Aerodrome Directory* warning, 'occasional sniper fire from hills', meant something after all.

The other time, after a trip to Butterworth in Malaysia of all places, I found a neat hole in one blade of the left-hand propeller. Since we had made only one take-off and one landing in Vietnam on the trip, we knew the bullet came from Vung Tau. I no longer rubbished those pilots who circulated stories about a sniper who sat all day in the swamp near the base waiting to take a pot shot at aircraft in the GCA pattern.

Chapter 13

WINNING THE HEARTS AND MINDS
MARCH – JUNE 1967

Once again, someone tried to kill me. This time, it was an ally.

Ian (Billy) Baldwin and I were tasked to take a load of civil aid cargo from Luscombe to a place called Xuyen Moc, also in Phuoc Tuy Province. The load consisted of clothing, toys, canned food and medical supplies donated by Australian charitable organisations and shipped to Vietnam on a RAAF C-130 courier. They were all packed in dozens of different sized cartons.

When I saw the loose jumble of packages arrive on a large army truck I thought of a close call I had had a few years previously. I was flying as a brand new copilot with an experienced captain on a RAAF Dakota. We had been woken up in the middle of the night for an emergency trip from Sydney Airport to Laverton in Victoria. The purpose of the trip was to take some Navy divers and their equipment to check out the wreckage of a USAF B-57 reconnaissance aircraft, which had earlier crashed into Corio Bay after taking off from Laverton. I never found out what the urgency was all about. Whoever loaded the gear onto our aircraft did not know much about weight and balance. There was a pile of stuff all over the cargo compartment floor, crudely secured with straps. The captain accepted it with some misgivings. On departure, after an abnormally long take-off run, it took the two of us to haul the DC-3 off the runway, making the captain wish he had been more vigilant about checking the loading documentation.

With this in mind I asked the major in charge of the project for the weight and balance documents. He brandished a sheaf of papers at me almost contemptuously. It was very sparse. I went into a huddle with Billy and Bugs Rose. I always seemed to be with Bugs or Stew Bonett when there was trouble.

'How can we work out an accurate weight and balance summary for take-off with this lot?' I asked him. Our crew chiefs always supervised loading, and used a special slide rule to calculate centre of gravity. Even so, the validity of their calculations depended on accurate knowledge of pallet, or in this case, individual item weights.

'I doubt if they've weighed everything', replied Bugs, looking at the hundred and one boxes. We did not even know if they had scales out here at this rough-and-ready strip. 'We'll just have to estimate it as it comes off the truck', said Bugs.

We stood in the hot sun while the load was transferred from truck to aircraft.

Caribou pilots had a lot of experience working with the Army, both in Vietnam and back home. Army support was our main role. We often felt that many well-meaning Army officers saw a transport aeroplane as a truck with wings whose volume could be filled with cargo. However for every aircraft there is a maximum permissible all up weight for take-off and maximum compartment loads for different sections of the aircraft. As well as this, the load must be arranged so that the centre of gravity or balance is within certain limits. Out of limits conditions could cause potentially dangerous take-off and landing characteristics and in-flight instability.

Bugs did his best with the available information, lifting the heavier boxes himself to try to confirm the weights. Loading complete, we prepared to depart and were surprised to find that the Major and four other officers intended coming too. This made us 1000 pounds heavier, but on paper, within limits.

I taxied out to the first few feet of the runway.

Now I haven't told you about Luscombe. At 2900 feet it was a reasonably long dirt runway with a considerable slope, which made one-way operation necessary for the Caribou. One landed uphill towards a tea plantation, and took off downhill towards a 1700-foot hill. From the downhill end, the thickly treed terrain sloped gradually uphill over about three miles towards the mountaintop.

On impulse I ran the engines up to almost full power before releasing the brakes. The Wallaby lurched forward, accelerating quickly down the slope. Around 75 knots, about halfway down the runway, I pulled back on the control column to get us off the ground. Nothing happened. With this downhill slope, it was too late to stop.

'Give me a hand!' I yelled to Ian.

We both strained at the control column, the trees at the end looming dangerously close.

The aircraft staggered off the ground. I whipped the gear and flaps up, but now we seemed barely able to outclimb the terrain. I gingerly turned away from the

high ground. It was a mile before we reached normal climb speed and relative safety. I exhaled in a long breath. There was no need to say anything to Ian. His grim expression reflected my thoughts.

Our troubles were not yet over; we still had to land. We were definitely out of balance, our centre of gravity being too far forward, and were probably overweight. There was no hope of rearranging the load in the air, and no point in diverting, since Xuyen Moc was quite a good strip. So we continued.

Adding an extra ten knots to our normal approach speed, just in case we were grossly overweight, I set us up on a long flat approach. All was normal until, at roundout, I closed the throttles. Then, to coin a well-known flying expression, 'the arse fell out of the approach', and the Wallaby thudded onto the runway. In spite of this ungainly arrival, the ordeal was over with no damage to the aircraft. All that remained was to chastise the major (in spite of his seniority) for putting us into this situation, and hope he had learned something from it about aircraft weight and balance.

After this experience, I wondered what would happen next. But the next couple of weeks passed quietly enough. There was one entry recorded in my diary. I had recently been appointed officer-in-charge of the Sergeants Mess, and was often there for stocktakes, or to have a drink with the blokes.

One night, a recently arrived sergeant who was a bit under the weather approached me in the bar.

'How long have you been here sir?' he asked.

'Eight months', I told him, wondering where the conversation was heading.

'I've heard all sorts of stories', he said. 'How safe do you feel walking around the town?'

I could see from this and further urgent questioning that the poor bloke was scared out of his wits. I relate this not to make light of his problem, but because at the time it seemed unusual.

Looking back, I remembered feeling quite uneasy about coming to Vietnam. But my apprehension was more of how I would react to potentially dangerous situations than of danger itself. Once in the country, caught up in the busy day-to-day routine and feeling reasonably capable of assessing and avoiding danger, this uneasiness had left me. Even so, I occasionally contemplated the chances of

a stray round finding its mark, or of someone tossing a grenade in my direction. After eight months here, I felt almost indestructible, and sorry for this poor bloke who feared death simply walking down a Vung Tau street.

His concern highlighted a funny thing about this war. Often no one seemed to know exactly who or where the enemy were. Fishing boats could turn out to be troop transports. Peasant farmers in a rice paddy could suddenly turn into militiamen if an aeroplane flew carelessly low. A dead soldier's body could be a booby trap. There were even stories bandied about that some downtown prostitutes enticed servicemen into their premises so that local VC sympathisers could slit their throats.

While few people I knew believed the more extreme stories, particularly concerning the townspeople, there was nevertheless an atmosphere of credulity and apprehension about, however well disguised. This state of mind perhaps explained some of the well-documented overreactions of the war, where a VC sighting might lead to B-52 saturation bombing, or an atrocity to a government official result in destruction of a village. So I could hardly blame the sergeant for his neurosis.

Having accumulated some experience here, I was elevated to check captaincy, which meant that I spent a lot of time in the right-hand seat, acting as captain, but allowing copilots who had not received their captaincy to fly the aircraft and gain experience.

We had quite a few 'young' (20–21 to my 26) copilots at this stage. We called them 'bog rats'. It was hard to sit there watching them make the same old mistakes without being unduly critical or dampening their enthusiasm. There were so many lessons to be learnt here. For example how to climb out avoiding the cumulus cloud, which built up so fast you could actually see it boiling and bubbling upward. Or how to plan a descent both to remain clear of cloud and allow least exposure to possible ground fire. Or how to land a heavy Caribou in a roaring cross-wind on a short, narrow strip. Even which way to taxi at Tan Son Nhut to get the quickest departure. I was rather glad to get away from this and back to Nha Trang with Ian Baldwin.

Our run up to Nha Trang now took us through Phan Rang, a large base with 10,000-foot parallel runways in the valley south-west of Cam Ranh Bay. No 2 Squadron RAAF, operating Canberra bombers, had recently been allocated to the war effort and commenced operations in April from here. The RAAF Airfield Construction Squadron had been working here for months preparing

facilities for the squadron's arrival. Regular 405 missions also included a routine stop at Phan Rang due to the RAAF presence.

On this detachment, we did not go near Pleiku or the northern camps. We flew mainly west to Gia Nghia, Dalat and Duc Xuyen. On the second day, we arrived at Dalat to find 24 cows tethered to a large crate. A Special Forces NCO ambled over and informed us we were to shuttle the cows to Duc Xuyen. He had correctly calculated that we could do it in three sorties.

Can you imagine a Caribou with eight baulky cows tethered inside, mooing furiously after being cajoled, shouted at and finally pushed up the cargo ramp? They wore a look of bovine determination to turn on a performance for the very next person who tried to move them. After three cattle-shuttles to Duc Xuyen, we felt more like cowpokes then aircrew.

Stew McAlister, admiring my M1 rifle, had asked me to get him one. I had heard Duc Xuyen was a good place to do this. On our second run, the Special Forces crew who came for the cows handed over a brand new M1, still packed

Duc Xuyen Village

Suspension Bridge at Duc Xuyen

in grease, for a carton of one dozen cans of Australian fruit juice, evidently a prized item out here in the hills. I could not help wondering what the exchange rate was on a jeep, or an artillery piece.

The Montagnards of Duc Xuyen lived in their original village, not in a fortified camp, as was usually the case. In between cows, we wandered over for a look.

A deep, river ravine separated the airstrip and the village. A clever but somewhat rickety wood and rope suspension bridge had been built across the river with the help of the Special Forces advisers. We all walked across without thinking twice and were met on the other side with amazed looks from the local people. Evidently many intending visitors refused to cross in case the bridge collapsed.

The village houses were New Guinea style, round thatched grass and twig structures set among bougainvilleas. Naked children played in the dirt while their elders watched from the shadows. We tried talking to the adults but they were either too shy or had no English.

After carrying 24 cows, one had to pick one's way through the cargo compartment with the delicacy of a barefoot lady crossing a farmer's paddock. The stench was unbelievable. At Nha Trang, before putting the aircraft 'to bed', Stew Bonett asked us to call for a water tender. The fire crew looked on incredulously as Stew opened the top hatch of the cockpit, poked the hose nozzle through, and sprayed water down the cargo compartment floor, sluicing out all evidence of the cows.

One morning, we arrived at the Special Forces ramp to find two Vietnamese passengers sitting patiently on a crate. One was a white-haired old man with a wispy beard and the brown, wrinkled skin and stoop of one who had spent many years planting and picking rice. He looked like a relative of Ho Chi Minh. The other was a young boy with a patch over one eye, who grinned cheerfully at us.

Vietnamese Boy with Grandfather

The Special Forces lieutenant, whom we knew quite well, told us a moving story. The old man was the boy's grandfather. The boy's parents had been killed in a VC reprisal raid on their village. An American doctor in the village advisory team, after examining his blind eye, had sent the boy to Nha Trang to an American military hospital. The resident neurosurgeon, diagnosing a brain tumour, had removed the tumour and the boy's eye, but it was too late to save his life.

His grandfather was taking him home, on our aircraft, to die.

Back at Vung Tau, I was once more faced with unpleasant reminders of death. I was again rostered to bring back caskets from Saigon. This time, fortunately, there were only two Army NCOs who had died heroes' deaths and now awaited their final trip home. Tragically, the wife of one man had committed suicide after hearing of her husband's fate. Burdened with this macabre story, we set out for Vung Tau, where the caskets would be transferred to a RAAF C-130.

Halfway there, Dick De Friskbom the crew chief, ashen-faced, reported a terrible smell in the cargo compartment. Going back to inspect, I noticed fluid leaking from one casket. I remembered a phrase I had once heard: 'the sickly sweet smell of death'. It was overpowering. Whatever the cause, the casket could not travel thousands of miles like this, and should be checked back at the military mortuary. I decided to return to Saigon. We brought Dick and his assistant onto the small flight deck and, for the first time ever, shut the sliding cabin door.

In line with our increased Task Force support role, most of my time at Vung Tau now seemed to be spent shuttling Army men and equipment into or out of Luscombe, or running POL to various ports in the Delta. Vinh Long, Binh Thuy, Soc Trang, Tra Vinh and, lately, Ben Tre to name a few. Some places had so many barrels of POL stacked beside their strips they must have had a month's supply or more. These places were used as forward bases for periodic helicopter-borne operations.

Another such place was Bac Lieu, our 406 stop. Arriving there one day, there were so many choppers parked close to the already narrow runway's edge that we could not land. Bac Lieu missed out on its mail that day.

American involvement was now near its peak, and military activity seemed to be increasing every day. So did the numbers of Vietnamese who surged forward in a human wave wherever we stopped. It did not matter where we were going, they wanted to go too, civilians and soldiers alike. Many, aware that they required papers to travel arrived with pathetic dog-eared scraps of paper, which they

had obviously written themselves, claiming official permission. Many simply begged. We had to literally push them off the aircraft. How could we take them, and where did they really want to go?

On detachment again, with Stew McAlister, we were sent to Pleiku. After a long and hard day's work, we had time for one more short run. The TMC controller had half a load for Plei Me.

'Is that all?' I asked.

'Yes, unless you want to take her', he replied, gesturing towards a Montagnard woman sitting among the boxes and oil drums beside a crude plywood box.

We were told that the box was a coffin containing the body of the woman's husband. They had lived all their lives in Plei Me village until his unit was sent here to Pleiku to fight. For the first time in her life she had had to leave Plei Me too to bring her husband home. Evidently, she had waited here pathetically for three days lost among the forklifts and the crates, the trucks and the aeroplanes of this strange and frightening place, waiting for someone to help her. No one had. It was a sad case. We put them on the aircraft.

Next day, we did several runs to a place called Mang Buk, another Special Forces mountain camp. Making the usual pleasantries with the Americans who met us, I noticed something unusual. There were no blacks here. Since about 20 per cent of the US armed forces in Vietnam were blacks, this was hard to understand, until the captain who met us spoke, his accent revealing he was born and raised in the Deep South:

> *Howdy, Aussies. Osstralia sure sounds like a great place. Ah'd sure like to come down there some time. Ah understand you don't have no nigger problem like we do.*

An energetic tribal chief led the Montagnard loading party here, in contrast to other camps. As a symbol of his authority, the US advisers had given him a discarded oversize sports jacket and a baby's bonnet, both of which he wore with visible pride. The Americans derived great amusement from his ridiculous appearance, but of course he did not know what they were laughing about, and waved and smiled back at them.

'These Goddamn 'Yards [Montagnards] are no better than niggers and slopeheads [Vietnamese], you know. Keep 'em in their place, and they're OK', the captain confided. I was glad to get out of there.

Team Leader, Mang Buk

Dak To, 30 miles north of Pleiku, was bustling with choppers. They went out in waves heading west. Flying out of Pleiku, we were given artillery warnings, and took a zigzag course along the valley to the north. Our efforts were concentrated on Plei Me, Mang Buk, Dak Pek, Dak To and Dak Seang.

Since taking over the US Army's Caribou fleet, the USAF had modified their initial bans on operations into these places, and an American Caribou was also shuttling out of Pleiku. The USAF machine was on the ground when we arrived at Dak Pek. The pilot of this one was a lanky and laconic captain with a weather beaten face. He looked like an airborne version of Gary Cooper. His copilot by contrast was short and stocky, like James Cagney.

During unloading, the captain asked us to help carry a company of Montagnard troops to Plei Me. There were 75 men. The captain had conveniently divided

this number into three sorties of 25 pax, two for him and one for us. I was glad to help, but he was a little sour when I offered to take twenty. This would mean an extra sortie for him. However, while Montagnards are small people and each fully equipped soldier would probably weigh no more than 150 pounds, I was not prepared to lift any more out of this short, hot, high strip. Perhaps hoping I had changed my mind, the captain took 25 anyway and started up.

Montagnard Platoon

VC Prisoners

He took off uphill, the more favourable direction. Normally we departed Dak Pek almost empty. Under these conditions the Caribou lifted off before the cutting near the other end of the strip. However, our USAF friend continued on past the cutting onto the last third of the strip, which was downhill, finally disappearing from view. We stopped everything and waited for the crash. Miraculously, we could still hear the engines roaring at take-off power. After an age, the Caribou reappeared off the other end of the strip still barely climbing, having obviously followed the river valley, which fortuitously formed a semicircle around the camp and strip, until he had sufficient height to clear the terrain.

We put on our 20 troops and left.

That night, back at Pleiku, we were briefed about bunker procedure in the event of an alert. This was something new. Next day, at the TMC ramp, our first load arrived. It was a truckload of VC prisoners bound for Tuy Hoa. Another first.

They looked rather bedraggled sitting in the back of the truck in the pouring rain. They behaved themselves during the flight. When I looked around once or twice they were sitting stoically on the canvas seats, roped together, probably wondering what was going to happen to them at the other end.

Tuy Hoa South was now a big fighter base. Parallel 10,000-foot solid steel plate runways had been laid out on the barren, sandy landscape where a few months before there had been only a tiny gravel strip. Jets roared off at irregular intervals, disturbing the calm of the glassy sea.

We left our passengers to an uncertain future, and continued to Nha Trang.

Nha Trang TMC had a load for our return flight. The load was for a place known as An Khe Golf Course to distinguish it from another airfield of the same name. The significance of the name escaped me. My guess was that to the builders of the airfield the lush green flats, punctuated by small swampy ponds and an odd little rocky outcrop, must have looked like a stateside country club. Golf Course was now a VNAF base, operating choppers and light aircraft. The control tower, more like a command post, dominated its rocky hilltop setting.

Back at Pleiku a flat tyre held us up only a few minutes, thanks to Bugs Rose and Blue Campbell. We had time for one more run to Plei Me before dark. It was here that I made one of those errors which one sometimes makes due to the pace of events and, probably, a certain amount of overconfidence. At least, that is my story.

We had been into Plei Me first thing in the morning. The smoke flare put out by the Special Forces favoured a landing to the west. Conditions back at Pleiku had not changed all day so, without paying too much attention to available wind indications, I joined the Plei Me circuit for the westerly strip.

As I said before, Plei Me was a minimal Caribou strip. I touched down about 100 feet into its 1200-foot length, and selected reverse. Looking ahead, the other end, over a hump and slightly downhill, seemed to be coming up abnormally fast. I instinctively tramped hard on the brakes and selected full reverse. We finally stopped, only a few feet from the end. I sat there for a moment breathing hard, oblivious to the swirling clouds of dust kicked up by the propellers, which were still in full reverse.

When I taxied into the parking area, the flags in the compound confirmed what I had just found out by bitter experience. We had landed with a ten knot tailwind. It was a lesson for both of us.

The detachment was over all too soon, and I was back in the Delta, watching the 'bog rats' practise their landings. On a previous 406, Stew Mac and I had chatted to the doctor in charge of the Australian medical team at Long Xuyen. Accepting his invitation we hitched a ride down to stay the night, intending to return on the next day's mail run.

The doctor and his team of nurses were all volunteers on sabbatical leave from the Royal Melbourne Hospital. He showed us around the hospital whose three wards were crammed. The beds were little more than a foot apart, and there were often two or three patients to a bed. The families of many of the sick also 'camped' here, mostly on the wide hospital verandah, but sometimes on or under the beds of their sick relatives. Pleasant aromas wafted in from the verandah as family members outside cooked meals on small braziers. Curious faces peered in through the windows, perhaps wondering if we were new doctors whose favours needed to be cultivated. Not exactly like your typical Australian hospital.

The ailments and injuries we saw were terrible, like nothing you would see in Australia. Many people had shocking shrapnel injuries, with grotesquely disfigured limbs or faces. We were introduced to an ambulatory patient known as Sam, who helped around the wards. Sam had a huge chunk out of the back of his neck. While we were speaking to him I heard a noise behind me, and looked around to see Stew lying on the floor. Sam, or the humidity, had apparently been too much for him. I did not blame him. I felt revolted too. But growing up in the country and hanging around farms had prepared me for such gruesome sights.

Our doctor host told us that serious complications of routine ailments, such as appendicitis, were commonplace due to lack of early treatment. Such was the pressure on bed space and the medical ignorance of these simple people that many who had had surgery left hospital after a day and never returned for post-operative care, even to have stitches removed. The hardworking and compassionate team treated all comers, asking no questions, doing their best under primitive conditions, and hoping those patients who disappeared recovered on their own.

After the hospital tour the doctor told us a little about the Australian medical aid program, and health matters generally. Evidently diseases such as TB, internal parasites, malaria, plague, cholera and leprosy were major problems in different parts of the country.

Part of the aid program had focused on malaria eradication, but collapsed due to the military insecurity of swampy areas. Attention was then directed to increasing medical care for the rural population as city facilities improved, and Vietnamese were trained in health care. This project too was doomed to failure due to escalation in the numbers of war casualties requiring treatment.

The end result was military medical aid in the regions, and placement of civilian surgical teams at selected provincial hospitals. Long Xuyen was one such hospital.

The medical team turned on a simple but enjoyable meal. Then we sat around and talked and listened to some music. I am sure these selfless civilian volunteers enjoyed our Aussie conversation devoid of the usual military or medical matters. After a pleasant evening we retired to spartan rooms in the whitewashed building dubbed the 'White House' by the team.

The almost monastic austerity of Long Xuyen contrasted with improving comforts at American messes. The new Special Forces Mess where we stayed at Nha Trang now had draught beer and Coke, as well as a popcorn machine. The temporary look of eight months ago was giving way to a settled, more permanent appearance at the large bases, with long runways, better buildings and more comfortable facilities. The frontier society was slowly giving way to the popcorn and Coca-Cola culture. Pity about the 'grunts' out in the boondocks.

Another new development described to us by our TMC colleagues was the PSYWAR (Psychological Warfare) aircraft, examples of which were now often seen at Nha Trang. The name had a somewhat Orwellian sound to it, even down to the stated objective of the Psychological Warfare Program: 'To win the hearts

and minds of the people'. To achieve this end, specially equipped Cessna aircraft with downward-pointing speakers blared metallic gibberish at whoever might inhabit the towns or jungles below, a sort of airborne 'Big Brother'.

Alternatively, the same C-47 Dragonships, which carried the fearsome target-chopping Gatling guns, could be used to rain thousands of messages on the jungle offering clemency to deserters of the VC cause. Having experienced the hot breath of the Gatling guns, I was not at all sure anybody would stick around to read a leaflet telling them how their life would change for the better if they betrayed their political masters.

I am sure other aspects of the program would have been more successful, such as the many civil aid programs sponsored and carried out by Americans, and in Phuoc Tuy Province by the Australian Task Force.

I was never quite comfortable with our American allies. Their attitude was rather patronising, perhaps unwittingly, since they were always courteous and hospitable, but they often acted as though they were bestowing a favour on a poor relation. I felt considerable pride in the effort our shoestring operation was putting up, in comparison with their well-equipped squadrons. When we crashed an aircraft, we scoured the country for spare parts to patch it up and put it back into service. Pranged American aircraft were generally left where they came to a stop. I gritted my teeth at the frequent question: 'Say Aussie. When are they going to open up Australia for R&R?', as though this single act was vital to the economy and wellbeing of the Australian people.

The period November 1966 to March 1967 was definitely the busiest of my whole 12-month tour, maybe even my whole life. But March could only be described as frantic. At the end of that month I discovered I had flown 145 hours, at that stage a squadron and RAAF record. No wonder I felt totally stuffed. There was a small write-up about the record in the *RAAF News*. Later a tongue-in-cheek article appeared in Australian newspapers, during an airline pilots' arbitration hearing for more pay, comparing our workload with that of the 'greedy' pilots.

Maybe it was a coincidence, but the RAAF sent up a psychiatrist to speak to many people up here. He was a squadron leader in the Active Reserve. Maybe the RAAF hierarchy felt people here were getting stressed out. Rumour had it that they were thinking of shortening the tour again. It was originally eight months. If I had been interviewed I would have certainly recommended it. A letter from home said the psychiatrist was later interviewed on TV. Nothing came of it though.

Towards the middle of June, physically and mentally weary and knowing I was becoming grumpy and irritable, I was glad to head off again for a few days in Butterworth.

Looking back, I realise I was at a stage where I had seen it all and done everything there was to do. Where a month or so earlier I had enjoyed helping new arrivals learn, now it was more of an irritation watching them make mistakes.

Nevertheless, I was consoled by the fact that the next time I left the country, it would be for good.

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Chapter 14

SHORT-TIME JITTERS
JUNE – JULY 1967

One morning in June I woke up and realised I had only six weeks to go.

It was the first time I had counted in weeks instead of days. The interval seemed tangible. I realised that only one more group of people would depart before I too would be leaving. For the first time since the early days I felt nervous. What if something happened to me with such a short time left?

In late June I wrote home:

> *I might be leaving Vietnam at a good time. In the last month or so things have been hotting up considerably, especially up north. There was plenty evidence of this on the last detachment. Several places we regularly go into while on detachment have been mortared in the last 3–4 weeks. One American Caribou pilot was telling me he was halfway through unloading at one place when the mortar shells started arriving. He quickly started up and departed post haste while he still had a whole aeroplane. So far nothing like that has happened to me, thank Goodness.*

I started thinking past Vietnam. When my tour finished, how would I feel out of this Asian-American military environment which had become a way of life? Would I settle down to a normal existence again away from the Villa, Vung Tau, Nha Trang and 100 plus action-packed flying hours a month?

There were other indications that my tour was drawing to a close. One example was the tone of Robyn's letters. I could tell that she felt some sort of a landmark had been passed. We began to talk more about what we were going to do when I came home, making plans that we had not had time to think about in our short time together before I left.

Another was when an Air America pilot took a few of us quietly aside one day out at the base.

Air America was, to the casual observer, an airline that operated around Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. It consisted of a mixed fleet of C- 46s, Caribous and Pilatus

Porters and many other types, including helicopters with no markings other than an aircraft tail number, a rather strange mixture for any airline but evidently suitable for its purposes. It was said to be financed and operated by the CIA.

Our pilot friend pointedly mentioned very generous terms of employment should any of us decide to return to Vietnam and work for his outfit. Fat chance he had. It was bad enough operating our Caribous into minimal strips by day in Vietnam. We had heard theirs went into the same sort of strips in Laos and Cambodia by night, using truck headlights as runway markers, on clandestine missions without even the 'protection' of military markings.

The job specification also included a requirement for pilots to be proficient at handling firearms.

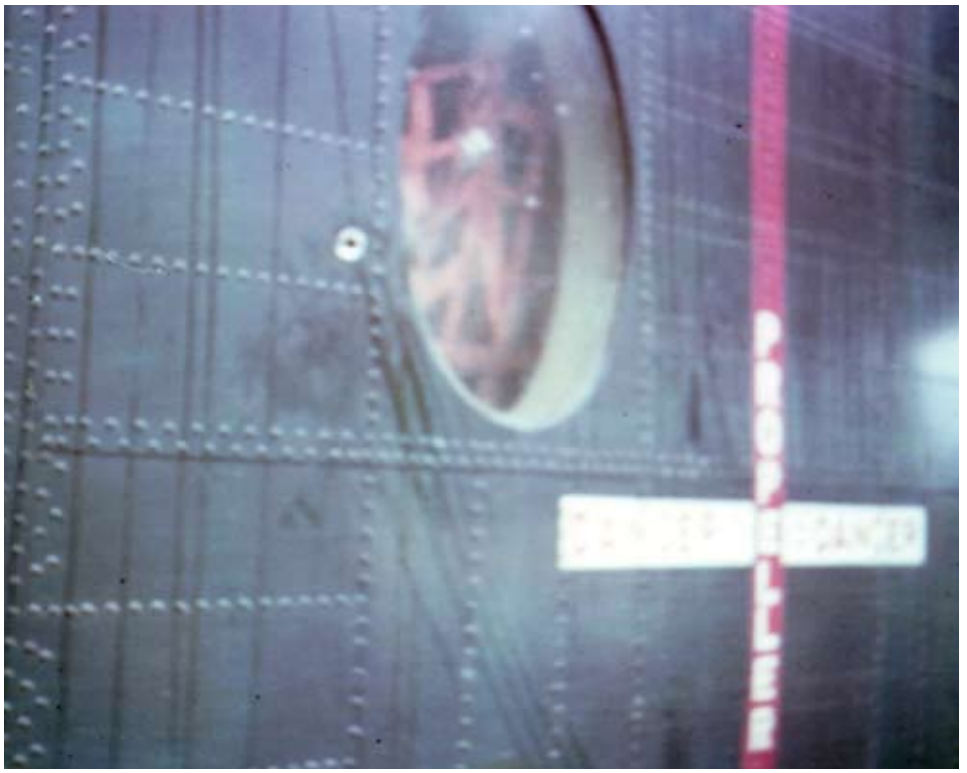
'Thanks, but no thanks', was my response.

Although I was alert for trouble, a few incidents in these last few weeks seemed to be testing my resolve to stay out of it. One day, Stew Mac and I were lined up for take-off on the east-west runway at Vung Tau. This runway, being only 2000-foot long and of substandard PSP construction, was rarely used. But at this time of year, strong easterlies were common as the afternoon sea breeze came in. Fortunately on this occasion, I ran the engines up to almost full power on the brakes as the Tower Controller cleared us for take-off. Just as I rotated for lift-off, a US Army 'Huey' darted across the runway directly in our path. I yanked savagely on the control column. The chopper disappeared under our nose, and we did not stall. Hearts pounding, we continued on our way.

Many of our flying habits in Vietnam were conditioned by the environment we found ourselves in, and were quite different to those we adopted back home. One example of this was the preference of most pilots for visual flying whenever possible rather than flying in cloud. I mentioned this to a recently arrived pilot, explaining that the flight follow agencies provided only an advisory service, and many pilots flew around without reference to the flight follow agency in very marginal weather conditions. This particular pilot, who had flown in the US and Britain under radar control, found this hard to accept. His attitude changed one day however, when we popped out of cloud in the middle of a handover between Paris and Paddy Controls on a collision course with an Otter.

With the monsoon back in the Delta, I was talking to another new pilot about flying techniques when forced to fly low due to weather. I mentioned the 'ultra-low and fast' technique which everybody used (there was no official squadron technique) and my own experiences. Some time later, this same pilot was caught

out in bad weather and flew into an airfield in the Delta at the 'regulation' 200 feet above ground level. The aircraft was raked by ground fire, with eight hits from nose to tail. One passenger was killed, and one seriously wounded. It was not entirely the pilot's fault. He was only following normal procedure. In this environment, however, one sometimes had to ignore the rules and rely on one's own judgment. As I looked at the bullet-scarred Wallaby, I felt a slight twinge in my stomach, and sorry for the unfortunate passenger who did not make it that day.



Result of Ground Fire

Back on detachment in late June with Alan Aiken, we found there was an apparently unlimited supply of cows for Duc Xuyen, and ammo, POL and rice for Dak Pek, Plei Me, Dak To and some new places like Ban Me Thuot.

The city of Ban Me Thuot was a crossroads town in the central highlands, and its largest city. When it was overrun in 1975 its strategic position[34] threatened the larger centres of Pleiku and Kontum further north. Its capture effectively split

Danang in the north from Saigon, leading to the eventual overrunning of those cities and hastening the downfall of the regime in the South.

Back then, Ban Me Thuot was a poor-looking town from the air, and sat in the middle of a windswept plateau surrounded by distant hills. There were two airfields here, Ban Me Thuot City and Ban Me Thuot East.

Coming into Ban Me Thuot City, we had a funny experience. From about five miles out, a thin belt of cloud covered the airfield and the surrounding area. There were no other aircraft in the vicinity and we could see the city. We decided to descend under the cloud to make a visual approach.

We advised our intentions to the Tower, which said, in a Vietnamese voice: 'Wallaby Zero One, make ADF approach,[35] report visual'.

For the next five minutes, we tried to get across the idea that we were already visual, and could remain visual under the cloud. Each time, the voice replied: 'Make ADF approach, report visual'.

Finally, in desperation and since we were the only aircraft in the area, we ignored the voice and made a visual approach. Over the airfield, and in clear view of the control tower, we reported: 'Wallaby Zero One, visual, joining the circuit'.

We were amazed to hear: 'Wallaby Zero One, make ADF approach, report visual'.

To this day, I am not sure whether on that day we heard a continuous tape playing only one message or a harassed Vietnamese learning English air traffic control (ATC) phrases one by one out of a manual.

Late on the third day we were sent up to Plei Me with pallets of ammunition. The place seemed deserted except for a handful of bleary-eyed individuals who came out to meet us. In their words, there had been a tremendous 'drunk' the night before—maybe they were practising for Independence Day—and they told us that everyone else was 'bombed out' in their 'hooches'. There had also been a huge shoot-out using just about every weapon they had in the place, and they were almost cleaned out of ammunition. Piles of beer cans were arranged in rows at the side of the strip.

'C'mon Aussie', drawled the sergeant who was telling me all about it, 'What you wanna try—M16, grease gun,[36] bazooka?'

One of his friends was busy loading an anti-tank gun. It went off with an ear-shattering roar, pulverising a pile of beer cans.

'No thanks, we've got to get back', I lied, anxious to fire up the Caribou and get the hell out of this madhouse.

Back at Vung Tau there were some Australian newspapers waiting for me with the mail. I had told my family several times not to believe any forecast on the length of the war or the morale or success of either side that they read in the papers. It was pretty obvious to us that some newspaper reporting in Vietnam was a sham. Many correspondents wrote their stories in the bar, rarely getting out of Saigon, relying on hearsay and knowing little of the true state of affairs. There were some genuine correspondents, usually with military connections. One came with us on a couple of trips.

Another thing that indicated my time here was running out was my attitude to food. While I could never enjoy ham steaks and lima beans, I had grown to like the mess' sickly, gooey chocolate-flavoured homogenised milk, which had seemed revolting when I first arrived. I became so used to it that when one of our C-130 pilot friends from Richmond brought us up several gallons of fresh milk, I thought it tasted peculiar. He also brought a carton of meat pies, which tasted marvellous, even when we could not resist eating the first few pies cold down at the squadron crew room.

We received all sorts of goodies via the C-130 courier. Robyn, who lived at Richmond township near the base, even baked me an apple pie and sent it up. It was baked Friday and arrived Monday. Unfortunately, due to the humidity it was covered in green mould by the time it got to me. But I appreciated the thought. Next time she sent cakes and biscuits.

I was now well used to the delicious local bread. The art of baking French bread sticks was one positive contribution to Vietnamese culture made by the former colonial masters. These days, though, the flour was weevilly. At first, I used to pick out the cooked weevils before eating the bread. But after a while, I did not bother. If you slathered butter on the hot bread, you could not taste them anyway, especially when the bread was accompanied by a meal of mud crabs broiled in a spicy but evil-smelling fish sauce called *nuoc mam*. We ate these delicacies at a little back beach restaurant built out of flattened kerosene tins and run by a shifty-looking Vietnamese and his wife.

With such a short time to go, I did decide it was smart to check health and hygiene reports before patronising the local restaurants. Apart from a dose of the 'trots'

in my first few weeks here, I had been relatively immune from gastro upsets. Some people suffered more than others did. One poor bloke got dysentery every time he ate or drank anything. I mentioned previously his problem on the high-speed taxiway at Tan Son Nhut. On another occasion he scared me half to death when I came in late at night, opened the toilet door and found him sitting there stark naked, fast asleep.

By way of contrast, one of the other pilots must have had a stomach made of cast iron. Legend had it that he had been to the Sergeants Mess for a few convivial drinks after dinner, and on his way back to the Villa felt rather ill. Fortunately, a storm drain was nearby, and he walked over and spent a few minutes contemplating its construction. Back at the Villa, he discovered that his dental plate was missing. With a flash of inspiration, he retraced his steps to the very spot where he had stopped at the drain, found his teeth, dusted them off and popped them back into his mouth!

Even the squalor surrounding the Villa became almost second nature. The kids who hung around outside the Villa all looked healthy and well fed, and all Vietnamese, including our servants, seemed to have a fetish on personal cleanliness. But their habits with food, garbage and sanitation were not so hygienic. As a result, rats roamed around unchecked. Amazing as it seems, you could even get used to rats. During another routine game of mah-jong in the Villa, a huge rat appeared and ran along the ledge on the wall. Once, revolted to the point of nausea, I would have rushed at it with whatever heavy object came to hand. This time, neither I nor anyone in the group even looked up.

Early in July, the squadron suffered another misfortune. The 405 mission Wallaby, captained by my friend Ian Baldwin, came to grief at Dalat. The taxiway from the runway to the parking area was very narrow and crossed a deep drain. Taxiing near its edge to avoid parked aircraft, the right main wheels had caused the shoulder of the culvert to collapse. The Caribou slewed around, the right main gear folding back under the wing, and came to rest on the wingtip. The result was almost as bad as the Ba To prang, but the repair operation was a little easier, since Dalat was secure and accessible. Special air bags were also now available to raise the aircraft for temporary repairs. I flew up to Cam Ranh Bay next day to get the bags.

The Wallaby looked rather sad with one wing up in the air and one in the mud. But only a few days after the incident it was ready to be flown back to Vung Tau, undercarriage chained down as at Ba To, for permanent repairs. The maintenance team had triumphed again. And of course they had to. We had a total of seven

aircraft in the squadron, and invariably had five serviceable and available for our various tasks, sufficient to allow a flying rate of some 12,000 hours per year for the fleet. We were proud of the fact that none of the USAF squadrons matched this performance. And while we patched up our battered Wallabies, the total of around 70 American Caribous was being depleted by accidents since the damaged aircraft were rarely recovered.

During the various shuttles into Dalat with bits for the aircraft, I had an opportunity to look around this beautiful mountain-top city. Evergreen shrubs and attractive gardens flourished in this temperate environment. In some ways the city was more like a park. Vegetables grew well here, and found their way to our local market. Dalat had a quiet, non-military appearance quite unlike that of any other Vietnamese city, with fine public buildings and well-designed private houses. There were no shanties here. The plaza, monuments and courtyards were more Europe than Asia. For many years well-to-do French, and later Vietnamese, had come here to escape the sticky Saigon summers.

Dalat

Even the market had an air of sophistication lacking in other cities. Montagnard women in traditional dress plied their wares. A brilliant multi-coloured woven cotton mat caught my eye. I pictured it hanging on a wall at home, like a tapestry. When I found out the price, my decision to buy was easy.

This was my last downtown adventure in Vietnam, except for the occasional dining out at Vung Tau. There had been several terrorist incidents in the cities recently, and bombings had occurred in Saigon. Having only a few weeks to go, I was not about to expose myself to unnecessary risks.

With this new-found survival instinct, I looked forward with some trepidation to my final Nha Trang detachment. I even thought of taking my flak jacket, which had lain unused in the bottom of my wardrobe since my first week here, but decided it would look too ridiculous after all this time. Besides, it weighed a ton. Anyhow, the pilots' seats in the Caribou were armour-plated.

The north-east monsoon was long over. Nha Trang was as beautiful as ever, basking in the sun, the bay gleaming sapphire blue and the Buddha presiding serenely over the landscape. I could not imagine it any other way.

Stew McAlister was with me again and we had brought our padre, Norm Lawless, along as supernumerary. We had come coastal, direct from Vung Tau, leaving late in the afternoon due to engine trouble. Vung Tau south of the ranges was again in the grip of the south-east monsoon. Torrential evening rains, lashing the exposed aircraft, had saturated the engine electrical system, causing backfiring at high power. After a frustrating day, we had finally got away.

Our frustration was not over. The next day, after one run to Ban Me Thuot, we taxied out with a full load again, but had to abort the take-off when the left engine started backfiring. Stew Bonett was again the crew chief, as he had been when I last had engine problems, but this time we were more fortunate. After changing the high-tension leads, the Wallaby ran normally again.

Next day we were given two loads for Duc Lap. I was not enthusiastic about revisiting this camp, as I had no desire to go anywhere near the border at this stage. However, Duc Lap had changed from the barely inhabited overgrown strip I had seen back in October to a busy-looking outpost, with POL and other supplies at hand to mount helicopter operations. The strip was cleared of lantana, and vehicles moved along the roads outside the camp. We had no trouble finding it this time, and got in and out without any fuss.

Next morning we set off for Plei Djerang, the artillery base 20 miles west of Pleiku, with a load of mortar bombs and artillery shells. It was Stew's leg, and he looked across quizzically as I unfolded a set of army grid maps.

For the last month or so I had been twitchy about artillery. The *Aerodrome Directory* contained the following general warning about artillery:

> *PILOTS FLYING OVER SOUTH VIETNAM ARE ADVISED THAT ARTILLERY FIRE should be expected. The majority of light and medium artillery fire is below 7,000 ft AGL (above ground level). When possible in accordance with tactical mission, aircraft should operate above 7,000 ft AGL to reduce hazard. Air traffic will be furnished warning information regarding preplanned heavy artillery fire by air traffic control and flight follow facilities. Advisories concerning no notice heavy artillery fires will be furnished as available on enroute and guard frequencies. (May 1967).*

One might ask what was the difference between light, medium and heavy artillery. For example, was a battleship off the coast firing at inland targets heavy artillery and, if so, was it required to notify flight follow agencies? Was light and medium artillery fire below 7000 feet AGL ever notified?

I got some of the answers after talking to a 9 Squadron colleague during a visit to Task Force Headquarters at Nui Dat. Speaking to the Ops Officer, I found that flight follow agencies like Paris were only notified of Task Force artillery fire above 7000 feet. Since we rarely flew above 7000 feet anyway, this meant we were flying over Phuoc Thuy Province completely unaware of low-level artillery fire, most of which was below that level. Further inquires about other artillery units revealed that the choice of 7000 feet was by no means typical. Some units chose 3000 feet, some 6000. There was no standard. This explained how we had often seen artillery fire in progress but having no information from the flight follow agency had assumed that it did not affect us.

I told a few people at the squadron about my discovery, but got blank stares. I do not think they comprehended its significance, so nothing was done. I decided to take my own precautions, and acquired a set of army grid maps, and a list of artillery control frequencies to take on each trip. From then on I made sure I at least knew what was going on and, if possible, stayed out of the way.

In this case we had been given a local artillery control frequency. I fished out the correct map for the Plei Djerang area to match coordinates. Stew was quite

interested, and the padre leaned over our shoulders in anticipation. The air-ground agency was called 'Coyote'. I pressed the transmit button.

'Coyote, this is Wallaby Zero One. We have a load of ammo for you.'

We did not need coordinates. In the distance we could see the flash of artillery fire. A 175mm piece was in position on the eastern side of the strip, firing right across it to the west. The question in my mind was, would the firing stop for our arrival?

'Come on in, Wallaby', drawled an American voice. 'We'll hold fire for your landing'.

That sounded comforting, but the firing went on at intervals of about 30 seconds. Each time there was a tremendous flash and roar. The ballistic shell sped on its way; up to 25 miles we had been told. Smoke drifted in the light breeze. About a mile from the strip, after yet another round, I sought assurances. The voice sounded convincing, and there was a pause in the firing.

We were a few feet off the ground, about to touch down, when there was a deafening explosion. The Caribou seemed to leap into the air, whether due to an instinctive twitch on the controls by Stew or because of a shock wave from the shell I was not sure.

'Jesus Christ!' exclaimed the padre spontaneously. Stew's red face showed he was as mad as hell. I was not too impressed either. The artillery had fired off a round directly behind us.

How well controlled this all was I could never be sure, especially after the recent antics at Plei Me. I might be accused of dramatising a fairly routine situation. Routine or not, I did not enjoy the experience.

About a month after I returned to Australia I had a fleeting nightmare vision. As I opened the newspaper one morning I saw a photo of two halves of a USAF Caribou falling out of the sky after taking a direct hit from American artillery. The front half was falling vertically, propellers still turning. The last thing the crew would have seen was a windscreen full of the terrain they were about to smash into.

At the ramp, the artillery officer explained that his crew had a contact and were reluctant to stop firing for too long. But we were not sure how good his judgment was as he was sitting in a jeep with a radio at some distance from the artillery,

and nowhere near the strip. He could see we were unhappy, so he agreed to give us more time to get on the ground in future. Thanks a lot, I thought.

We did two more runs to Plei Djerang that day and another to nearby Chu Dron. Both were in full swing, pounding away at targets to the west. But we received more consideration now as we joined the circuit. After all, we were bringing in their ammunition.

On our last run we were asked to stop by Pleiku to pick up some passengers for An Khe. As we taxied out at Pleiku, a VNAF Skyraider joined the circuit with a 'hang up' (unreleased bomb). We were taxiing east along the parallel taxiway as the Skyraider landed towards us on runway 27 (to the west). Suddenly the 'hang up', a 250-pound iron bomb, shook loose from the wing and bounced in our direction like a rubber ball. My frozen fascination lasted only a second. We were soon taxiing at near flying speed out of harm's way. The wayward weapon evidently stopped somewhere behind us, intact, and we were happy to leave Pleiku in one piece before the last act of this minor drama.

Thirty minutes out of An Khe, more trouble. Our port engine fire warning lights began faintly glowing. Now according to the aircraft flight manual, the engine should be shut down. But I had had an engine fire before, and had seen the lights. They do not faintly glow. They come hard on, bright red. I had also had several instances of faulty fire warnings on start up back at Vung Tau, after heavy overnight rains. It was a moisture problem again. In spite of what the aircraft manual said, Stew Mac and I agreed it was appropriate to continue to An Khe with the engine running.

On the ground we confirmed there had been no fire, and decided it was safe to return to Nha Trang for repairs. It was dark by the time we got there. I was so tired I did not even wake up during a bunker alert in the middle of the night.

We spent the next two days grounded with the aircraft unserviceable. It was a dreadful detachment, the upside being we were not exposed to any danger. Stew Bonett never said so but I am sure he thought I really was jinxed. Whenever a detachment aircraft had engine trouble, he and I seemed to be on it.

On the morning of the third day, with his usual enthusiasm and professionalism, he had the fire warning system in bits. He again enlisted our help as apprentice mechanics. We fixed the problem, and by ten o'clock were ready for a couple of shuttles to finish the detachment.

That night out of my window I could see flares being shot off towards the nearby hills. This had been a nightly occurrence since, about two months ago, some VC crept onto the airfield and blew up half a dozen helicopters. The flares made it bright as day, so if they let them off every now and then I presumed it would be hard for anyone to sneak down onto the airfield. I hoped so anyway.

In spite of our troubles and my intention to take it easy on my last detachment, we had still logged a respectable total of over 35 hours in the six days.

Stew Mac and I changed seats at Gia Nghia on the way back to Vung Tau. As we sat there, motors running, waiting for the signal that passengers and mail were unloaded, I stared blankly at the scene outside.

For some reason, I can still remember my last look at this windswept excuse for a runway, its dumbbell strip a red scar among the green hills, its camp clinging to the mountainside a couple of hundred feet below. On a ridgeline beside the strip, a platoon of Montagnard soldiers, rifles slung carelessly over their shoulders strode along in single file. They picked their way down the side of the hill, going I know not where. This seemed so characteristic of my time in Vietnam. Everyone was busy at something but no one was really sure what the others were doing, and why.

No doubt some general had the big picture.

Four days later I was checking out a new 'bog rat' on the 406, but my heart was not in it.

A week later, I barely glanced out the window as the Boeing climbed out over the Delta. I settled back in the comfortable airline seat, sipping scotch and soda, and thought about absolutely nothing. The last 12 months was already turning into a strange dream.

EPILOGUE

XINH LOI, VIETNAM

After 12 long months flying Caribous with Wallaby Airlines in Vietnam, I was on my way home.

When I left Australia, I felt apprehensive about my reactions to war. Now, as our Qantas jet whispered on over the gigantic landmass of Australia, I wondered how I would handle peace.

My wife and I had lived apart after a very short time together, she in normal circumstances and I in a totally military environment where everything, even one's free time, revolved around the flying program. Where dress was either a flying suit or second-best casuals. Where there were few rules except the requirement to get the job done. Where money had no value except for buying beer and toothpaste. Where Australia was as far away as Brazil. I realised we would have to get to know one another again. I would have to learn to live like an ordinary person again.

I felt like an impostor in the freshly dry-cleaned suit that I had not worn for 12 months, my suntan incongruous in the cold winter weather. Looking over the heads of the milling crowd, I saw Robyn waiting for me, fashionably elegant in a purple overcoat with a close-fitting muffler collar. The white poodle I had given her to keep her company while I was away lay contentedly and possessively across her crooked arm. What would I say to her that would truly show her how glad I was to be back, even though the turmoil of the last 12 months was still very much in my mind?

We embraced, awkwardly at first, then more passionately. It was good to feel the security of belonging to a person instead of an organisation.

After customs and immigration formalities, we drove home saying little, she trying to read my thoughts, me looking for things to tell her outside the all-consuming topic of life in Vietnam.

Vietnam was thousands of miles distant, but in my mind it was only hours away, as it is even now.

For a long time, I tried not to think about Vietnam. It was an experience shared with a group of colleagues—a few close friends, the rest merely working acquaintances—which bore absolutely no relationship to my real world. The trouble with Vietnam was that only a handful of people wanted to talk about it. None of my Air Force colleagues who had not been there were particularly interested. To civilian friends and acquaintances, Vietnam was an aberration, which had no importance in their lives at all. They just did not want to know. Somehow we expected more from our neighbours.

After the indifference came outright opposition to any military involvement, especially the use of conscripts. There were street marches and anti-Vietnam rallies led by politicians. Even for permanent servicemen like me, expected to go anywhere at any time for any reason, the controversy was unsettling and demoralising. It must have been even more so for the conscripts.

Vietnam would not go away. The daily news, at first a trickle of reports on the Tet Offensive and its aftermath, broadened to a stream of garbage about the peace accords and the phoney politics of 'Vietnamisation'. It finally became a flood of gut-wrenching accounts of the collapse of the South and the ignominious departure of the last guarantors of so-called anti-Communist freedom.

Then came the pitiful flight of the boat people, who braved cyclones, pirates and disease to deliver themselves to the countries that had promised them such freedom.

By 1976, the year after the end of the war, I was no longer in the Air Force. My family and I were living in the affluent eastern suburbs of Melbourne when the first waves of boat people reached Australia. Refugees were once again filling the migrant reception centres around the country, except now they were from Asia, not Europe.

The churches began to encourage their congregations to help resettle refugee families. I broached the subject with Robyn and then persuaded our local church community to sponsor a family. Our parish priest was a humane and kindly man, and he and an embarrassingly small number of people offered tangible support to the project.

Since it was my idea, I had to do all the legwork which, of course, I did not mind. The archdiocese supplied me with a contact number at the migrant hostel at Maribyrnong, and I was soon discussing with the management there how to go about helping a Vietnamese family.

A disarmingly simple process was used to select our family, as I found when I met them. Huyen Nha, the husband, had responded to a notice placed on a noticeboard, since he was one of the few residents of the hostel able to read English.

In spite of a little apprehension about how we would relate to them, our family turned out to be easy people to like, though the introductions were a little awkward. Nha spoke halting English, his wife Hoa spoke none. They had three small daughters. I later met Nha's younger brother Huyen Ho, single and already settled in a flat and a good job with a computer company. He spoke excellent English, having served as a radar mechanic with a USAF unit at Tan Son Nhut.

Ho helped out when communication became a little difficult, and told me the family story. Nha had been a PT boat captain in the Vietnamese Navy, and would not have lasted long under the Communists. The Huyens were living in Saigon when the North Vietnamese tanks smashed down the gates of the Presidential Palace. Nha knew that they had to get out.

Over the next few months, though everyone with connections to the previous regime was under suspicion, he managed to accumulate funds by quietly selling family possessions. When the time was right, he moved his family down to Tra Vinh in the Delta. In this out-of-the-way place he could pay people to look the other way, buy a boat, and escape with Ho and the family. Good plan.

I made other visits to the hostel while we got the parish program organised. Nha told me they were well treated at the hostel, but found the food very hard to take. Shepherd's pie and Irish stew were obviously not on the regular Vietnamese menu. They were not complaining but it was obvious that, for once, they would dearly love to cook their own food.

At Robyn's suggestion we brought them over to our house for a visit. Ho came along too to help with the conversation. Hoa was thrilled when Robyn, who had judiciously purchased some ingredients from an Asian supermarket, let her cook a Vietnamese-style meal in our kitchen.

We eventually settled the Huyen family into a humble but habitable house in an industrial suburb, paying the bond and the first month's rent, as recommended by the church, from parish funds. We also put together a houseful of furniture donated by parishioners willing to help. The school ran a program for the children to bring food items to make up a hamper, since Christmas was coming.

When I visited the Huyens to drop in the hamper, Nha invited Robyn and me to their house for, as he put it, 'Christmas Dinner'. Of course I accepted, realising they wanted to repay us for their visit to our house and the actions of the parish. The dinner date was set a few days before Christmas.

When we arrived I noticed for the first time a crucifix on the wall of their family room. Since I knew they were Buddhists, I was touched by this gesture of friendship. Hoa excelled herself with the cooking, refusing to sit down until everyone else had eaten—the Vietnamese way.

When Robyn asked what a family in Vietnam would eat on a special occasion such as this, thinking, no doubt, of our tradition of turkey and ham, Ho replied simply: 'This is it'.

The Huyens were ecstatically happy in their rented house, except for one thing. Nha was a proud man and was unhappy about not having a job.

Although our congregation probably contained more corporate executives than many parishes, appeals from our church pulpit failed to find a job for Huyen Nha. He finally gave up on us. After doorknocking businesses in nearby suburbs he got a job for himself servicing machinery in a rope factory. This reinforced my opinion of the pride and resourcefulness of the Vietnamese people. He even enrolled in an evening Italian course so he could communicate better with his fellow workers. (He was then the only Vietnamese among a workforce of Italians and Yugoslavs in the factory.)

We saw the Huyens regularly for several years, finally losing touch when we moved from Melbourne and they moved house.

I have since tried to analyse my motives for this project at a time when most of my friends and neighbours did not want to know about Vietnam, and many people were spreading stories about refugees disguising their wealth and smuggling in gold. My feeling is that we somehow let these people down after promising them freedom, then abandoning their cause. I am not talking about corrupt politicians, but people like the Huyens.

What happened to you, Vietnam? Are your rice paddies and green hills peaceful now, or do men still ravage your timeless beauty and disturb your serenity? What happened to your cities and buildings—beautiful Dalat, fragile Hue, Nha Trang and its Buddha? And where are your people?

I left no loved ones in Vietnam, but I did care about the local people around us—Missy Lanh, Missy Kim and the other girls from the Villa, Xuan, our smiling self-conscious typist, Charlie from the hangar, the bargirls, coolies and peasants. Why did they not triumph? Was it our fault or theirs? Was our effort worth anything at all, or was the end inevitable as many people said?

What happened to me, Vietnam? In 12 months, I doubled my flying experience, and flew the most interesting and challenging flights of my career, past and future. My professional competence was enhanced in a way not possible under peacetime conditions. I learnt a little more of life, more of organisations, more about people, more about myself. But I lost something too. I gave you a year of my life. You called and I responded, not because of any moral commitment to your cause, but because a professional military man would never do otherwise.

Even knowing what I know now, I would have gone anyway. And like a jilted lover I still care and wonder what might have been had the end been different.

The Vietnamese expression 'Xinh Loi' translated into English means something like 'sorry about that' or 'that's life'. But the translation is inadequate. The sad but knowing eyes, the half-smile, the slight shrug of the shoulders, the way Lanh would say it in her singsong voice; these are lost in the translation.

'Xinh Loi, Vietnam'.

Wallaby Crew
L-R: Blue Campbell, Ian Baldwin, Stew Bonett, Jeff Pedrina

ENDNOTES

1 Taken from US DOD VFR Aerodrome/Facility Directory Southeast Asia 15 July 1967. (The so-called 'Parrot's Beak Area' west of Saigon has been added.)

2 Starting on 31 January 1968, the Viet Cong, backed by their North Vietnamese allies, used the national holiday period associated with 'Tet' (the lunar New Year) to launch a major offensive across South Vietnam.

3 In mid-1966, Tan Son Nhut (Saigon), Bien Hoa and Danang were the major fighter/bomber bases. The major transport terminals were at Tan Son Nhut, Nha Trang and Danang. Cam Ranh Bay and Tuy Hoa were upgraded into major bases as the military build-up continued.

4 The United States Army Special Forces was a unit of the US Army whose members were trained in unconventional warfare, especially guerrilla and anti-guerrilla fighting. (Definition: 1999 World Book International (Version 3) – from a CDROM published by World Book Inc, 1998.)

5 Buildings were constructed from timber, chicken wire and galvanised iron, and mostly 'dug in' to trenches for protection.

6 Luscombe Field was named after Lieutenant Brian Luscombe, the first Australian Army pilot killed in the Korean War.

7 KIA – Killed in Action.

8 Ramp is a US term for an aircraft parking apron.

9 Scheduled transport services supporting the general transport effort were given a mission number by the USAF. For example, RAAF Caribou Mission 406.

10 The official currency of the Republic of Vietnam was the dong, which was divided into 100 piastres. It was legal tender but merchants preferred MPC or, better still, US dollars.

11 Major bases with transport terminals had a Transport Movement Control (TMC) Centre, which coordinated all loading and unloading operations on the cargo ramp. Parking instructions and loading details were usually given on discrete radio frequencies.

12 The USAF maintained a network of radar control agencies covering most of the country.

13 US DOD VFR Aerodrome/Facility Directory Southeast Asia 15 July 1967.

14 Each squadron had at least one Qualified Flying Instructor on staff to carry out pilot type-qualification training and renew instrument ratings.

15 'Bar me bar', or more correctly 'ba muoi ba'—Vietnamese for '323'—was a local brand of beer.

16 POL, an acronym for Petrol, Oils and Lubricants, was used by TMC to describe drums of these substances.

17 'Slopehead' was a derogatory term for a Vietnamese person.

18 6th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment.

19 Details of the Ba To repair operation courtesy Wally Solomons.

20 Details of Ba To taken from 1967 US DOD VFR Aerodrome/Facility Directory Southeast Asia.

21 An anti-personnel mine set up in defensive positions. When detonated, on command or by trip-wire, a fan-shaped pattern of spherical steel fragments is projected over a wide area.

22 Details of Tra Bong taken from 1967 US DOD VFR Aerodrome/Facility Directory Southeast Asia.

23 James R. Arnold, *The Illustrated History of Artillery – The Vietnam War,* Bantam Books, New York, 1987, pp. 6–7.

24 Details taken from George Odgers, *Mission Vietnam – Royal Australian Air Force Operations 1964–1972*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1974, pp. 34–36.

25 I have been unable to confirm the source of these figures, which were given to me in country. However, the following information is taken from Robert Storey and Daniel Robinson, 'Facts About the Country – History', *Lonely Planet Vietnam*, 4th Edition, Lonely Planet Publications, Hawthorn, Vic, 1997, p. 29: 'Pentagon figures indicate that by 1972, 3869 fixed-wing aircraft and 4857 helicopters had been lost …' My late-1966 figures, therefore, look plausible.

26 Lockheed C-130 Hercules, the largest transport aircraft based in Vietnam and operated by the USAF. Philippines-based USAF C-130s also flew supplies into the country, as did Australian-based RAAF C-130s.

27 Luscombe Field was named after Lieutenant Brian Luscombe, the first Australian Army pilot killed in the Korean War.

28 See map of South Vietnam on p. xix.

29 F. Clifton Berry Jr, *Sky Soldiers – The Illustrated History of the Vietnam War*, Bantam Books, New York, 1987, pp. 65–75.

30 Ngo Dinh Diem, the first President of South Vietnam, was a Catholic, as was a high percentage of the population of the South. Some measures taken during his presidency alienated the large Buddhist segment of the population.

31 George Odgers, *Mission Vietnam – Royal Australian Air Force Operations 1964–1972*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1974, p. 155.

32 Historical information on Hue from Robert Storey and Daniel Robinson, 'Hue – Information', *Lonely Planet Vietnam,* 4th Edition, Lonely Planet Publications, Hawthorn, Vic, 1997, pp. 416–17.

33 ibid., and Keith William Nolan, *Battle For Hue, Tet 1968*, Presidio Press, Novato, CA, 1983, pp. 183–184.

34 The central location of Ban Me Thuot is evident on the map of South Vietnam on p. xiii.

35 An ADF is an instrument approach designed to get aircraft in cloud down to an altitude from which they can make a visual approach.

36 The M3 'Grease Gun' was a submachine gun developed by the US during World War II. It was nicknamed the 'Grease Gun' because of its resemblance to an automotive grease gun.

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