
TACTICAL AIRLIFT - CARIBOU OPERATIONS: THE END OF AN ERA

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Good morning all. What I thought I'd do today is give a condensed version of the burst on Vietnam that we gave to the Joint Staff College a week ago, and a condensed version of the Kashmir presentation which we also give out there, and then talk about some of the other Caribou operations of which very few people are aware unless they've actually been involved in those activities. I'll try and cover as quickly as I can the span of the 45 years of Caribou operations.

Following a request from South Vietnamese and American governments, Cabinet resolved on 29 May 1964 to send a flight of six Caribou aircraft to South Vietnam in support of Vietnamese and American forces fighting against the Viet Cong. At this time the RAAF was accepting the delivery of the De Havilland DHC-4 Caribou aircraft and only three had arrived in Australia so far. The next ferry flight was to be terminated in Butterworth, Malaysia, and a newly formed RAAF Transport Flight Vietnam (RTFV) would deploy from there to Vung Tau, which was on the coast south-east of Saigon. Vung Tau would be home for the Caribous for the next seven and a half years.

The unit was formed on 21 July 1964, and the first couple of weeks involved crew familiarization in tactical operations in Malaysia—mainly just the style and configuration of the aircraft. The second ferry flight deployed to Vietnam with three aircraft on 8 August, under the command of Squadron Leader Chris Sugden. A second batch of three aircraft ferried directly from Canada on 29 August, and a further single aircraft in May the following year. That brought up the total complement to seven aircraft and that number was maintained for the duration of the deployment to Vietnam. After a brief settling in period and country

familiarization, the first operational missions were flown on 14 August. Two aircraft, one flown by the CO and the other by Flight Lieutenant Lancaster, went from Vung Tau to Tan Son Nhut in Saigon, then flew on to Pleiku in the north and returned. These missions were without incident.



Map of Vietnam.

The unit was initially billeted on the airfield at Vung Tau, but the conditions there were considered so poor, with noisy equipment operating 24 hours a day, an open sewage ditch running through the middle of camp, and the troops were being quartered in buildings without walls. The entire unit picked up and moved into town, selecting a villa which they rented. As the unit grew in size, other villas were taken over for accommodation. The initial villa that was used by 35 Squadron (at first still known as RTFV), was 'Villa Anna' and that became quite notorious, particularly with the rumours that came back to 38 Squadron at Richmond. The villas were nothing special. Some of them were rat infested and some needed a fair bit of work to get up and running, but at least the unit's members had a roof over their heads, they had walls around, there was no open sewage ditch—and the unit was together.

At first the unit was placed under the command of the senior US officer in Vietnam and this was delegated to the 315th Air Commando Wing. Later, command arrangements changed, so that RTFV came under the 834th Air Division of the US 7th Air Force. Even using the word 'command' here is a little bit confusing, because it was really operational control. We were tasked through the American Air Transport tasking agencies, but Australian officers maintained command of the unit in the true sense throughout its time in Vietnam.

The call sign adopted was 'Wallaby', followed by a mission number. That led to the RTFV being referred to as "Wallaby Airlines" and it quickly established an excellent reputation. It had to develop tactics to minimize the danger from small arms and ground fire. There were quite serious dangers, particularly in the northern regions up in I Corps (said as 'Eye Core') and the northern part of II Corps. The tactics involved transiting at above 3500 feet wherever possible, and remaining at that height until very close to the destination airfield. Only at that stage would the pilot initiate a steep spiral descent and fly a short, fairly steep, final approach to land. The aim of the game was, of course, to avoid providing a no-deflection shot to someone sitting on the ground who wanted to have a go at you.

The aircraft were also most vulnerable on the ground, and so, quick offload tactics were developed to minimize spending time where we were exposed like that. Many of the little airfields into which we operated did not have any gear for loading and unloading

aeroplanes. If we were carrying ammunition, food or fuel, or anything else that was palletized, we had the option of breaking the pallet down and unloading it or else speed offloading it. Breaking the pallet down would take considerable time on the ground, making aircraft very vulnerable.

The fellows developed the technique where they would undo all the straps, put the ramp level, back the aeroplane up at a reasonable pace (with the load master calling the distance to go), then drop it out of reverse into forward thrust and put a bit of power on, and virtually drive the aeroplane out from under the pallet. It sounds a bit tricky and a bit dangerous, but really it was the safest way to do it. The pallets stayed fairly horizontal all the way to the ground and fell flat. The Americans didn't adopt this, but used to just push the pallet over the ramp. It invariably landed on an edge and rolled back, damaging the ramp. And if it didn't damage the ramp, it damaged the load that was attached to the pallet, because it was not being supported by the honeycomb structures that were under the load.

With fuel drums it was a simple case of using a similar technique, but with the ramp down at about 45 degrees. With a bit of practice we could neatly stack 13 fuel drums in a nice line right in the middle of the fuel farm and save any ground handling as well. So these were the techniques that were developed, and they were maintained throughout the whole of the deployment. As a result of that, we suffered very little damage compared to some of the other tactical transport units.

The operations soon settled into a fairly routine basis. Two aircraft operated from Vung Tau into the Delta and Saigon area. One aircraft was deployed to Nha Trang in the lower half of II Corps area, from where it fed the Central Highlands, and the other aircraft deployed to Da Nang, in about the middle on the coast of I Corps. Da Nang essentially serviced I Corps and the aircraft met all the requirements of the airfields in that area, and more in II Corps. In the early days some air delivery activities carried out by RTFV were to areas that were possibly the most demanding and dangerous imaginable, especially up towards the Demilitarized Zone that separated North and South Vietnam—places like Dong Ha, Khe Sanh, Quang Tri and the ancient capital of Hue. In II Corps we operated into all the airfields in the most contested area, from Dak Pek, Dak Seang, Ben Het, Dak To, Kontum, Pleiku, Phu My, Phu Cat, etc.

The detachments at Nha Trang and Da Nang operated on a weekly basis, with a change over from Monday to Saturday. Later in the unit's operations these northern detachments stopped and by 1969 all aircraft operated out of Vung Tau. Four aircraft were tasked Monday to Saturday inclusive, and one aircraft was tasked on Sunday. A standard week for the air crew would be five days of flying, one day of operations officer, and one day off. That rotated, so that there were always crews and aircraft available should a last minute task develop. By 1969 the longest missions that we flew were into the Delta region. These would begin with a 0630 take off and often we wouldn't get back to Vung Tau until after dark, so they were long busy days.

The average sortie length in the Delta (once you got there) could range anything from ten minutes up to about 30 minutes. The transit time was typically about an hour to an hour 20, depending on where you were operating. One particular mission was always most enjoyable as far as we were concerned, and that was the 05 Mission. The reason for that was because we would leave Vung Tau for the Australian Task Force base at Nui Dat and then head across to Saigon. From Saigon it was back to Nui Dat, and then to a place called Ham Tan before proceeding up north to support the RAAF's No 2 Squadron, which was based at Phan Rang. The airfield at Ham Tan was next door to an American fire support base where they had 175mm howitzers. The American Army Major who ran the fire support base would meet us with freshly brewed coffee and freshly cooked doughnuts when we took in his mail and passengers each morning. It would have been churlish not to stop for morning tea, so of course we did.



Wallaby Airlines Caribou preparing for take-off past 9 Squadron Iroquois, Nui Dat.

We then proceeded on further north past Cam Ranh Bay and then across from Nha Trang to Dalat, another little airfield in between Dalat and Bao Loc, and then Bao Loc back to Saigon, back to Nui Dat and then home to Vung Tau. In that trip of a morning and evening, from Saigon to Nui Dat and vice versa, we were carrying Australian Army personnel either leaving the country or arriving in. Every afternoon we'd also pick up a bunch of fresh vegetables and things to take to the task force strip which was called Luscombe Field. That was about the only support that we provided to the Australian Task Force while we were there, as we were tactically and operationally part of the US 7th Air Force and not part of the Task Force as were the choppers at 9 Squadron.

Early on in the peace, only two operations were conducted in support of the Australian forces at Nui Dat—Operation Kingston involving 5RAR, and then shortly afterwards Operation Kings Cross. Very few operations were done in support of our own Army. As I said, we did fly the 03 Mission, which was the one that went twice a day from Vung Tau to Nui Dat to Saigon, then back to Vung Tau. There was also the 07 mission, which went directly from Vung Tau to Saigon and back at midday, filling in before the 03 mission flew again in the afternoon. The 02 mission and the 01 mission were flown into the Delta and the 01 was a special that was flown if they needed some extra shuttling done.

We carried everything from fuel to ammo, ice cream and vegetables, and people. A lot of the people we carried were, in fact, Vietnamese, and as the authorization for them to travel on the aircraft was approved at the local level, we really didn't know whether or not any of those on board could have been Viet Cong—we just carried the passengers. Luckily, no-one we carried had suicidal tendencies, so we survived. The unit kept going along this way until in June 1966 its name was changed from RAAF Transport Flight Vietnam to 35 Squadron. That number in the RAAF originally belonged to a transport squadron which flew C47s during the Second World War.

At least twice in the history of RTFV and 35 Squadron, we were visited by USAF efficiency experts who wanted to observe our maintenance and operational procedures. This came about because although we were flying only 1.7 per cent of the tactical transport missions, while having only 1.4 per cent of the tactical transport aircraft, we were carrying something like 7 per cent of the total passengers and freight being lifted by air within South Vietnam. So we became of considerable interest,

particularly the way we operated. In fact, General Westmoreland at one stage asked Australia for another squadron of 12 Caribous, but of course we didn't have them. We only had 38 Squadron in Australia and 35 Squadron in Vietnam, and the role of 38 Squadron was to feed 35 as well as do all the tactical operations within Australia and New Guinea.

To us, the answers to the questions the Americans posed were fairly obvious. First of all, a squadron's ground crew formed the heart of the unit. They did a fantastic job to provide five aircraft per day, four needed for tasking and one spare should the need arise. Many a time they would start work on a damaged aircraft as soon as we got back and they'd work all night to make sure that it was serviceable the next day. Only then would they go back to their quarters and get a well deserved rest. As I said, it was those troops who were the heart of the squadron. The aircrew looked for work. Whenever we'd finish the normal 'frag' (the tasking order), we would call up the tasking agency, callsign Hilda in Saigon, and ask if there were any additional tasks on the way home. We rarely flew anywhere empty. We would only refuel to the minimum required to do the mission, plus reserves, which meant that we could maximize our payload for every mission. Teamwork within the unit was what I would consider to be exceptional, and that was from the CO all the way down to the most junior airman working on the hangar floor. Everyone helped out everybody else. Everyone looked after each other and everyone contributed as best they could to the unit effort.

The other thing that worked in our favour was that our air crew were much more experienced than most American Caribou air crew in country. All of us there in 1969-70 would have had at least a year or 18 months experience on the Caribou. We were all C Category Captains and we all had flying experience in tactical operations gained in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. That experience accounted for a hell of a lot when it came to operating the aircraft efficiently, knowing the aircraft's capabilities, and how to get the job done. The other thing was that everyone in the squadron *was* focused on simply getting the job done.

One of the smallest strips was Ha Tien South, right down at the bottom tip of the country, just west of Hai Yen. It was a Special Forces camp and the strip there was less than a thousand feet long and had a 50 foot hill on the threshold. On landing, you had about 50 feet clearance from the jungle on each wingtip. At

the end of the strip you had to do a three point turn to get around and backtrack. It was strictly one-way operations only, because of the narrowness of the strip at the slow end. Again, we'd carry anything into there, from ammo to ice cream.

In the period that the Wallabies spent in Vietnam, three aircraft were lost and several were damaged through accidents, ground or mortar fire, but were repaired. Only one aircraft was lost totally to enemy action, at a place called That Son up the back of the Delta and only about six or seven kilometers from the Cambodian border. As A4-193 went to land there, the airfield came under mortar fire. As they approached the fuel farm one mortar round went through the left wing, slightly injuring the pilot with a small bit of shrapnel in the cheek. The crew quickly abandoned the aircraft, and the fuel farm and aircraft were destroyed totally. The pilots on that one were choppered out, and Joe Wilson and myself went down the next day and picked them up and bought them home.

One aircraft was lost on approach to An Thoi, which is the airfield on Phu Quoc island just off the South coast, close to Cambodia. The crew was trying to get down in exceptionally bad weather, misjudged their approach and hit the water. The aircraft had to be later destroyed with charges to get rid of it, so that it was no longer a hazard. The only injury in that case was the loadmaster, when the crash axe dislodged and hit him in the shoulder. There was another aircraft, A4-185, that was lost when it struck a ditch on what was a DZ (drop zone) at a place called A Ro in I Corps. Although it was a DZ, a lot of the airfields we went into were not much better than that. In actual fact, a lot of that aircraft was salvaged and the forward part of the fuselage ended up being used as a bunker by the Americans in the area.

Also, on 19 January 1969 A4-208 came under mortar fire while on the ground at Katum, which was a US Special Forces camp near the Cambodian border in III Corps, just above Saigon. One mortar round landed about 25 feet in front of the aircraft, taking out the main tyres and hydraulics, and peppering the aircraft in over a hundred places. The pilots quickly offloaded the aircraft, along with the loadmaster, and although both pilots had been slightly wounded they managed to limp into the air on flat tyres. Despite having no hydraulics and a few other things, they got the aircraft back to Bien Hoa, which was a major US base just to the east-north-east of Saigon. The aircraft was eventually repaired and returned to the unit.

All the aircraft lost during Vietnam were in fact replaced from 38 Squadron. In that time we lost none of our personnel, although some of them had minor wounds from shrapnel. One of them was down in the Delta where a bullet penetrated the aircraft, shattered on the nosewheel steering wheel on the left hand side, and peppered the aircraft Captain with small shrapnel to the face. He was replaced by the co-pilot and the aircraft flown back to Vung Tau where he received attention.

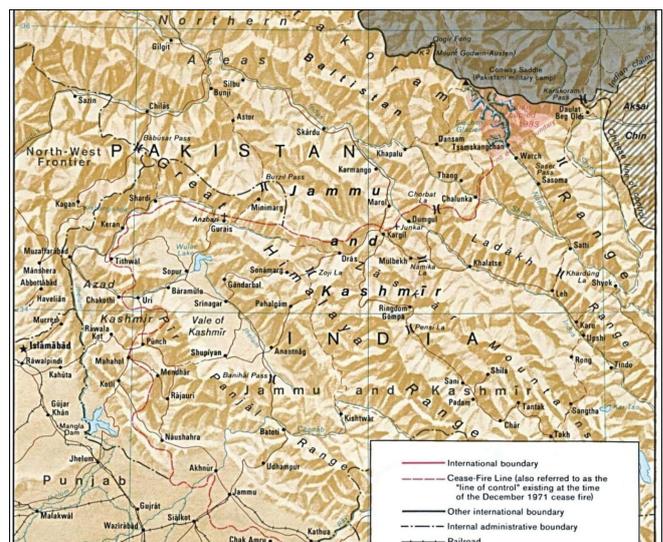
Initially the tour in Vietnam was for six months but it quickly settled down to a tour length of 12 months in duration, and very few personnel did not serve out the full time. Typically during 12 months each of the air crew would fly approximately 1200 hours. They would complete approximately 2000 operational sorties, with the maximum being 1400 hours and 2500 operational sorties. That's a fairly heavy workload when you look at peacetime workloads back in Australia. From 1971 there was a progressive scaling down of operations in line with the staged withdrawal of American and Australian forces. In June 1971, 44 personnel and three Caribous of 35 Squadron left Vung Tau for Australia. Flying ceased on 13 February 1972 and on 19 February, under the command of Squadron Leader Smithies, the last Wallabies left Vung Tau for Australia after seven and a half years of active service in country. The Caribous were the first in, and they were the last out except for the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV) people who were scattered around with the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) forces before that.

Some of the statistics from the period are of interest. A total of 790 personnel served in the unit; 586 of them ground crew and 204 air crew. During that time the Wallabies flew 81 500 operational sorties, carried 42 000 tons of freight and 679 000 passengers—which is not bad going for the Caribou when you consider its normal load was 30 passengers or 28 paratroopers. That covers the burst on Vietnam.

I now look at some of the other Caribou operations that were carried out. The one in particular that I served on was with the United Nations Military Observer Group India Pakistan (UNMOGIP). Shortly after partition the Kashmiris decided that, due to political and religious reasons, they were going to come in on the side of the Pakistanis and take back Kashmir,

which the British had allocated under the Indian side of the partition—or that's how it eventually turned out. They managed to push back a fair way until there was a new line of control formed, and UNMOGIP's mission was to patrol the line of control and to observe on that for cease fire violations etc.

The mission started in 1948 and was still going in 1978 when I was up there. Australians were serving on this mission right from the beginning, with Australian Regular Army observers being involved, and then—during Vietnam and other conflicts—the regulars were replaced with reservists. Air support was provided by the Canadians, but in 1974 they were trying to extricate themselves and in 1975 the role of providing air support to the UN mission fell to the RAAF. The first detachment commander, Squadron Leader Baillie McKenny, was effectively given a bucket of money as an impress and told to go and set it up. Luckily we got a fair bit of information out of liaising with the Canadians, and from that we ended up with three houses in Islamabad, which is the capital of Pakistan, and four houseboats on Nagin Lake just north of Srinagar in Kashmir. There are actually two main lakes at Srinagar, Dal and Nagin. Dal is actually closer, but Nagin was chosen because it was much cleaner. It was fed by a spring, and although the water around the edges was too polluted to use for drinking or bathing purposes, the water out in the centre was quite suitable for swimming and provided a bit of a distraction during summer.



Map of Kashmir.

Let me give you an idea of the area in which we operated. The map of the Kashmir region shows the original border of Kashmir in red. The dotted line which runs around inside the red line marks the line of control, or the ceasefire line. The area north and west of the dotted line was known by the Pakistanis as Azad Kashmir, which means 'Free Kashmir'. To the north was a disputed area with China. The triangle represents a disputed borderless area, while out to the right (between the red and the dotted line) is another area which was at that stage under dispute with the Chinese. A more detailed map shows the sort of areas we operated into. Srinagar is located in the centre of the map horizontally, but about a third of the way from the left-hand edge. That's where we were based in summer. During winter we were based at Chaklala airfield at Rawalpindi, just south of the Pakistani capital. To the north of both of these places is Abbottabad, which was in the news not long ago under circumstances which caused a bit of a stir.

Essentially we would fly a milk run each day. If we were operating from the Pakistani side, we would go from Rawalpindi to Kotli, and then across to Punch, down to Rajauri and occasionally down to Sialkot, recover to Srinagar, and then back to Islamabad. If we were operating from Srinagar, it meant going west through the Haji Pir Pass across to Rawalpindi, fly the milk run, back to Rawalpindi and then back to Srinagar. There were two stations. Right up in the Northern Areas is a place called Gilgit, and south-east of there, well down the Indus River valley is a place called Skardu. Still further down the Indus valley is a place called Leh, which we reached by passing over high country around Ladakh and Kargil. The density of the altitude in those areas is extremely high, up around 8500 feet altitude density in summer and the Caribou didn't perform that well in takeoff mode at those density altitudes. We generally reserved those airfields for when an observer up there got sick and we had to go and get them out in a hurry, or there was some other emergency that meant we had to go and support the observers on the ground. We did, however, go into Gilgit and Skardu in the summer months, and I've got some shots later on that will show what it was like flying up through there. Going back to the map for a moment, shown just to the right of centre at the top is K2—the second highest mountain in the world. This gives an idea of what the terrain is like.

While in Srinagar we stayed in houseboats on Nagin Lake. It was very pleasant sitting on the balcony

there of an afternoon, Gin and Tonic in hand, looking across the lake to the mountains beyond. On the first range of hills was a fort straight out of the area's rich past. History in this part of the world goes way back to Humayun, Babur and Akbar, the Mughal emperors who claimed descent from the Mongols, and who came into what was then India down through Afghanistan. They were Muslim and they brought with them their Islamic faith, but they were also very tolerant rulers for their times. As a result there was a blending of Hindu and Islam that can be seen, even now, in the fantastic architecture of old buildings, primarily the shapes and size of pillars, arches and other features.

The main reason we didn't stay and operate from the airfield at Srinagar all year round was because that place could get up to two or three metres of snow in winter. Everyone, including the Indian Air Force's Gnats that were based there, used to pull out during the cold months and head south. We used to winter in Rawalpindi, and quite often we could not get in to Srinagar because of the weather. It meant we had to be fairly careful about the met briefs and what we did of a morning. There was nowhere to hangar our Caribou on the airfield, so we were just parked out in the open and the troops worked there to try to clean it up and get it ready.



Haji Pir Pass from the air.

I mentioned going through Haji Pir Pass from Srinagar across to Rawalpindi. The photograph above provides an indication of the terrain as seen from the aircraft. We used to sneak through here just above the tree tops at about 11 500 feet. The mountain on the right hand side went up to over 18 000 feet and the safety height going through there in bad weather is 21 500. Now, the Caribou didn't like that altitude very

much, and because we were carrying passengers the aircraft had to be specially fitted out with passenger oxygen. We used to test fly them back to make sure they were all okay to handle the job.

Just to the north of Haji Pir we would be looking down towards a place called Gulmarg, and a little further on was a place called Badamore. Whenever we were flying in this area we were under the eyes of Northern Radar, which was an air defence radar based up in the hills. The controllers there often called us up and asked us what we were doing, and we would tell them we were diverting due to weather etc. We'd fly across and come out over a place called Baramulla, which was interesting because when we broke out of the weather we'd see surface-to-air missiles tracking us, just ... keeping in practice. The controllers at Srinagar Metal were fantastic to us, in fact, because if the weather was bad we'd call them up and ask them for a radar fix as we went across Haji Pir and across the border into Pakistan, and vice versa coming back. We'd tune one radio onto them and we could call them up before we got there and ask for a fix. If we followed the direct route and the weather was socked in so that we had to come through at height, 21 500 feet, then we'd call up Srinagar and get them to give us a radar descent down to the airfield. The elevation of Srinagar airfield is about 6500 feet.



Overnight snow falls had the potential to disrupt flight operations.

Rajauri was one of the airfields we used to go into along the line of control. One of the problems with flying into these little strips was that, at low level and low speed, we could get some pretty nasty standing wave effects as a result of the strength of the wind and the height of the hills. We had one aircraft go into Rajauri flown by Grahame Carroll and Johnnie

Benjamin, who were the two other pilots up there with me. The Caribou was hit by a standing wave and the G meter went off the clock, causing the skin of the aircraft to go all wrinkly down around the tail. They aborted the mission, went straight back to Rawalpindi and had the aircraft thoroughly checked out. It proved to be okay, but the loadmaster on board wasn't. Because he was getting ready for the landing he wasn't strapped in, and he got bounced around the cargo compartment quite heavily and was severely bruised. That was one of the problems we had. Another interesting place we went to was called Kotli. If you overshot the runway, even just by a little bit, you ended up in a buffalo pond that was situated right at the end of it. In fact, there was an interesting photograph the Canadians had of one of their aircraft sitting in the pond and in need of a gentle tow out.

The missions going up to Gilgit and Skardu flew due north out of Islamabad to pick up the Indus River and follow its easterly course past Sazin, Chilas, Bunji and Silbu, and then on to Gilgit. The ridge lines up there are typically 18 000 feet high and we would be flying at 8500, so weather was a major concern and we had to be very cautious about what we were doing. Just near Bunji is a mountain called Nanga Parbat, which rises 14 000 feet—virtually sheer—out of the valley floor, then tapers off to just short of 27 000 feet. We would fly past that a couple of miles off, sticking to the centre of the valley. We would fly up the valley, with Nanga Parbat virtually in front of us; we would turn left just in front of that to go to Gilgit.

Kargil was another place we used to go to further up the Indus valley, although I didn't fly any missions into there. I did, however, decide to go there by road one day, during the regular changeover of observers at the UN compound there, simply to have a look around. We drove up from Srinagar through a place called Sonamarg, which would have to be one of the most picturesque little spots imaginable. You felt that you could be anywhere in the world—Scandinavia perhaps, or Central Europe. There were beautiful glacial valleys, pine trees, and lovely green grass everywhere. It was a holiday spot for a lot of people coming from southern parts of India during the summer. Going further up towards Kargil we had to pass through a thing called the Zoji La Glacier and the photo below shows the beginnings of it. Each year a bulldozer would be put through to cut a hole across the middle of it and travelers drove on the gravel and the dirt, with water flowing below their vehicle the whole time.



The author standing within the bulldozed section of the glacier.

While we were there, we also used to go down to Lahore once a month, to top up with dry breathing oxygen which we needed for our sojourns across Haji Pir and other places. We also used to go down to Delhi once a month, to talk to the High Commission there, and also for message and signal traffic. The only contact we really had with our squadron back at Richmond, on a regular basis, was a phone patch which we used to conduct on the High Frequency radio on the milk run each week. We would get a phone patch from our HF link in Perth, and they'd patch us through to the CO's office so we could have a chat with him. We could let him know how things were going and chase up any extra spares and stuff we needed.

All the logistics were done through Rawalpindi and we had a pretty good working relationship with the Customs there. One of the things I would like to emphasise is that at the working level we had a fantastic relationship with both the Pakistanis and the Indians. We never wanted for support. If I needed anything at all out of Kashmir, I just contacted the base commander at Srinagar and he would make it available, and we had the same co-operation on the Pakistani side of the fence. Politically there was a little bit of a difference, but at the working level (which was all that interested me) it was fine. That concludes the Kashmir bit, but it is only part of the Caribou story.

From 1965 to 1975 No 38 Squadron also had a Detachment A of three aircraft based at Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea. The crews used to rotate

through for a two or three month period, depending on how it went, and some of the crews actually stayed there for a lot longer. One individual stayed for seven months. Eventually, there was a permanent detachment commander, a bloke called Ron Raymond, who was there for several years. The detachment finally finished in 1975, when an Air Transport Squadron was formed within the PNG Defence Force on the granting of independence in that year. The first Commanding Officer of that unit was Stewart McAlister who retired as a Group Captain.

Air Transport Squadron was originally based at Moresby and then moved across to Lae at a later date. In the final years of my stay up there, the squadron was being prepared to move back to Moresby because the airfield at Lae was closed, and they wanted us to operate from Nadzab, which was up the Markham Valley. To operate there would have been horrendously expensive, particularly as they had to build complete facilities on the airfield for us, including refrigerated stores for perishables and all sorts of things.

The detachment in Port Moresby flew all over Papua New Guinea. We had a lot of experience going into some very tight, tricky little airfields, in particular one called Tarpini. There was a col, which you'd descend into, do all your checks and drop the undercarriage gear down, set your flap at 15, then you would come out of the col and fly up the valley. On your right-hand side there was a goat track—it was actually a track that people used to have to use, but it looked like a goat track to us. So you followed the goat track until it turned right. At that point you turned left, and there in front of you was the strip.



Checking an engine of a Caribou during a humanitarian mission in the highlands of Irian Jaya.

At Tarpini you came in over a cliff and actually landed on the down slope. It was one or two per cent away from you, which made it a bit tricky, particularly if you had a bit too much speed onboard. You had to make sure your speed was spot on. You then didn't use reverse but went back to climb power (which was about a bit over half of the maximum power available on the Caribou), because if you didn't you couldn't get up the 14 per cent hill in the middle of the runway. Then you'd get to the top and park across the strip so that the aircraft wouldn't roll back down if the brake slipped. There were many other little airfields that had their own challenges all over PNG, and also in the surrounding islands. The rule was that you had to be up there for at least one detachment before you could operate as an aircraft Captain. There was a particular book we used to carry with us on the aircraft which specified every airfield that we were going into, the technique of getting in, the dangers, the hazards and the technique for getting out.

There were also several survey missions run up there where 38 Squadron's Caribous supported Army Survey while they were doing a lot of remapping of the Papua New Guinean mainland. The maps up there were notoriously bad and even when we were up there in 68-69 we used to have maps which we would amend by hand. As well as PNG, we had another aircraft providing support for a survey mission remapping of West Irian and Sumatra. The aircraft actually operated out of West Irian, and later out of Palembang close to the southern coast of Sumatra. There were other missions flown in PNG to provide relief after drought, famine, floods, tsunamis, etc. It was invariably 38 Squadron deployed there, and it was invariably the Caribou that provided the tactical transport support.

As well as that we supported every Army battalion during its workup period before going across to Vietnam, and that took up a fair bit of time. The deployment rates were quite horrendous. In my own particular case, out of the first 18 months I was on Caribous I spent just under 14 months deployed in Papua New Guinea, at Rockhampton supporting battalion workups, or at Leigh Creek supporting other exercises or with Army survey of the Northern Territory. We had an aircraft based at a place called Daly River Mission and previously across in Arnhem Land and we were providing tactical transport support to the Army survey who were remapping those areas.

So, all in all, the Caribous had a rather fantastic history. The technology they represented was

essentially not much more than Second World War, and their engines became very hard to maintain in the end, because of the lack of availability of spares. Yet when you look at the range of operations that were conducted with this aircraft type over its 45 year life with the RAAF, the Caribou really did a fantastic job. We gave it a good send off up at Townsville when it was finally retired in 2009. That concludes what I have to say this morning. I haven't covered every aspect of Caribou operations, but I've tried to give you a broad brush picture of probably two of our most demanding deployments, plus another which was probably equally as demanding so far as the dangers of flying were concerned. So, thank you all very much.



End of an era. The Caribou served the RAAF for 45 years.

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