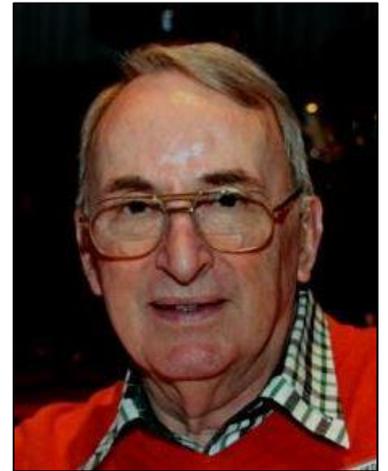




Pedro's Patter.

Excerpt from Jeff's book – [Wallaby Airlines](#).

A hand roughly shaking my shoulder woke me from a death-like 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 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), 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.



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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 takeoff ruway tree six Pan Am Boeing on final ruway too fie go roun GO ROUN

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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

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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, 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 Directory¹³ 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

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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, 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 crosswind. 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 water-table 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.

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A woman went to the doctor's office where she was seen by one of the younger doctors. After about four minutes in the examination room, she burst out screaming as she ran down the hall. An older doctor stopped her and asked what the problem was, and she told him her story. After listening, he had her sit down and relax in another room. The older doctor marched down the hallway back to where the young doctor was writing on his clipboard. "What's the matter with you?" the older doctor demanded. "Mrs. Terry is 71 years old, has four grown children and seven grandchildren, and you told her she was pregnant?" The younger doctor continued writing and without looking up asked,

"Does she still have the hiccups?"