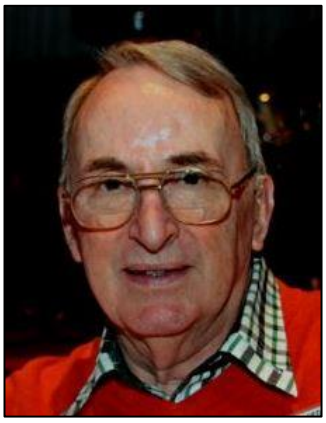
Pedro's Patter.



Excerpt from Jeff's book – Wallaby Airlines.

Tuesday, 9th 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 (Saigon), 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.

Villa Anna.

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 (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) 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), 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, 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.

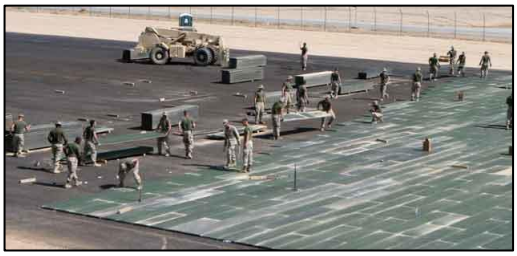
The aircraft was now under my control. After the drab Delta, the north was like a Garden of Eden. The terrain changed from browns to greens, from alluvial plains to purple highlands. Along the coast, the azure sea sparkled as it can do only under a tropical sky. Everything looked clean, at least from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

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.

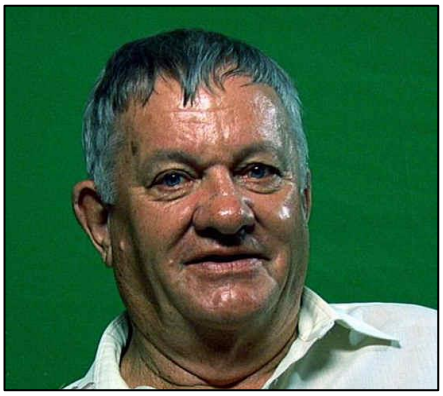
Crossing the first mountain range, we saw Cam Ranh Bay glistening in the hot sun. The bay and the surrounding countryside looked particularly beautiful from the air. No doubt if we descended from cruising altitude to fly low level over the small, close-packed towns which dot the way, their shanties elbowing 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

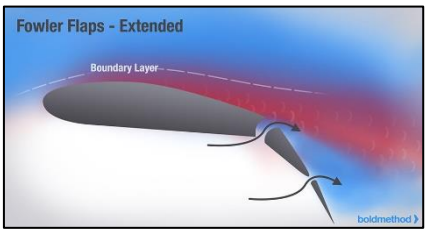
reduced. Pilots had to be aware of this and compensate by restricting the available outbound payload.

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. They 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.

> 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 – a bit like an FJ Holden, definitely no power steering there. 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. (Click HERE to see the aircraft tin action)

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.

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?".....

The F-35.

Australia has committed to 72 F-35A aircraft for three operational squadrons to be based, two at Williamtown and one at Tindal. The second one at Willytown will be a training squadron.

Sometime in the future, a fourth operational squadron will be considered and would be based at Amberley, making a total of 100 F-35As.

The first F-35A aircraft will arrive in Australia sometime in 2018 and the first squadron, 3 Squadron, which currently operates the F18 Hornets, will be operational in 2021.

All 72 aircraft are expected to be fully operational by 2023.

The F-35A will provide Australia with a fifth generation aircraft at the forefront of air combat technology, to provide a networked force-multiplier effect in terms of situational awareness and combat effectiveness. Capable of supersonic flight whilst retaining stealth, the F-35A has extraordinary acceleration, agility and 9G manoeuvrability. It is characterised by a low profile design; internal weapons and fuel carriage; advanced radar; electro-optical and infrared sensors with advanced voice and data link communications; and the ability to employ a wide range of air-to-surface and air-to-air weapons.

The F-35A is the most suitable aircraft to replace the aging F/A-18A/B Hornets and is being purchased AIR 6000.

At a wedding ceremony, the pastor asked if anyone had anything to say concerning the union of the bride and groom. It was their time to stand up and talk, or forever hold their peace. The moment of utter silence was broken by a young beautiful woman carrying a child. She started walking toward the pastor slowly. Everything quickly turned to chaos. The bride slapped the groom. The groom's mother fainted. The groomsmen started giving each other looks and wondering how best to help save the situation. The pastor asked the woman, "Can you tell us why you came forward? What do you have to say?"

The woman replied, "We can't hear in the back."