

Caribous in Vietnam

Introduction

On 20 July 1964, RAAF Transport Flight Vietnam (RTFV) was formed with members drawn mainly from 38 Squadron at RAAF Richmond New South Wales. The new members of RTFV went to Butterworth, Malaysia, and intercepted three brand new Caribou aircraft that were on their planned trip from Canada for normal service in Australia. The new RTFV unit was led by Squadron Leader Chris Sugden DFC, a veteran of both the Second World War and Korean War. During a few weeks at Butterworth the team's pilots honed their flying skills and the engineering team prepared the aircraft for war service as best they could with the minimal support available.

On the 8th of August 1964 RTFV, consisting of 33 members, flew the three new Caribous to its operational base at Vung Tau in the Republic of South Vietnam. The weather on that day 40 years ago was dreadful and the aircraft landed in the pouring rain, skirting low monsoonal clouds for their landing on a rough and slippery World War II steel planked runway.

By the end of 1964, the unit strength had grown to 76 members and six aircraft. With the expanding Australian military and RAAF presence associated with the deployment of the 1st Australian Task Force, RTFV became No 35 Squadron on 1 June 1966.

The Decision to Commit the RAAF to Vietnam

Australia's presence in Vietnam was as a result of pressure from the US Government as early as 1962, under the SEATO Agreement, for Australia to contribute military support to

help combat the deteriorating situation in South Vietnam. Australia's first contribution was a small team of Army advisers in late 1962. In early 1963 Australia was asked to provide a small number of Dakota aircraft and crews for Vietnam.

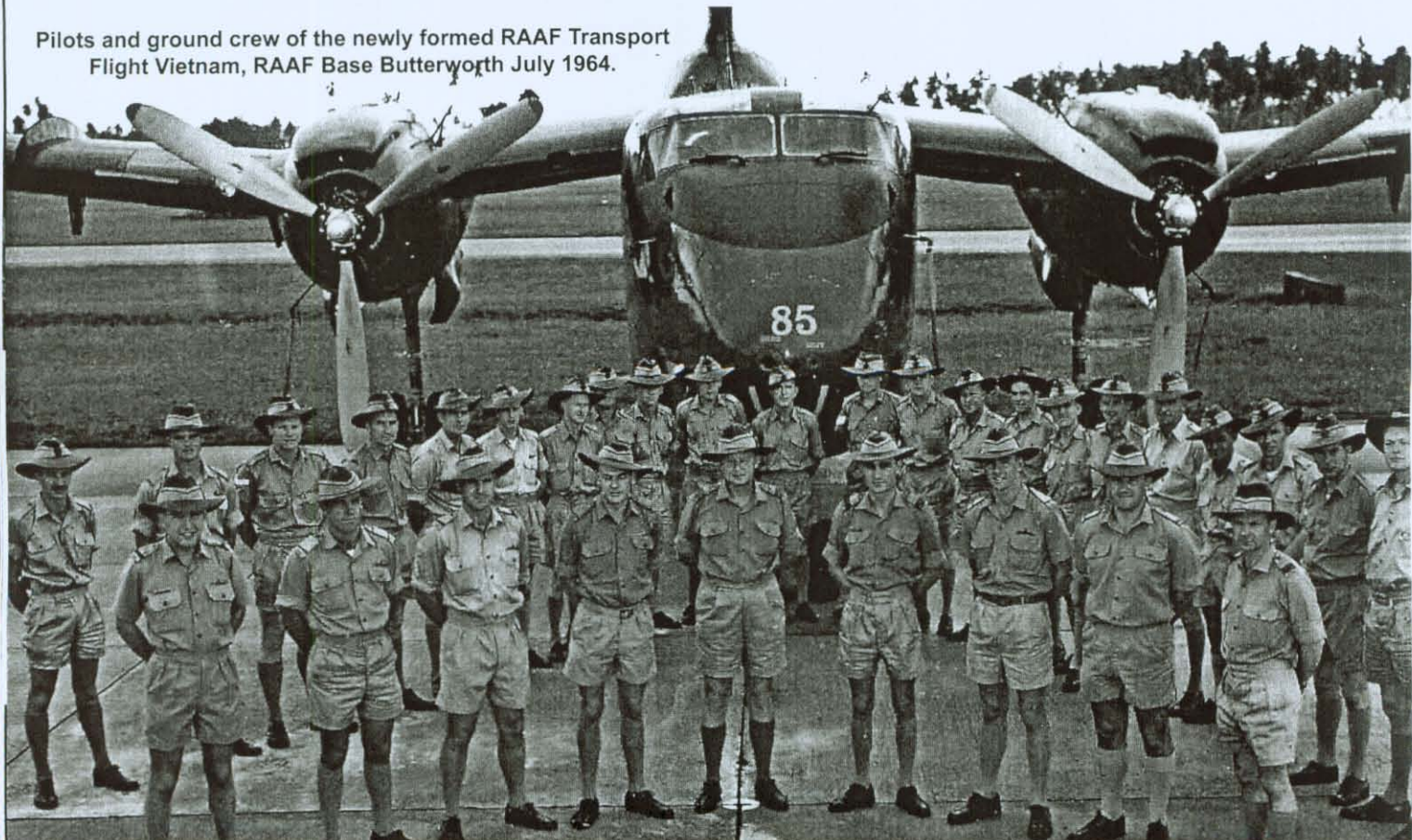
At the time the RAAF was in the early stages of a program to replace its Dakota aircraft at 38 Squadron with the De Havilland Canada Caribou and was unable to meet this request from the US. In May 1964, under continuing pressure to provide tactical air transport support, and although the new Caribou squadron was still in the very early stages of receiving its aircraft from the factory in Canada and was not expected to be fully operational until January 1965, the RAAF agreed to provide a detachment of six Caribou to go to Vietnam by October 1964.

Moreover, if the need was really urgent that a contribution be made earlier, this timing could be improved by providing three Caribou by late June. For an early deployment mid 1964, the aircraft would have to be completely supported by the United States in Vietnam because none of the RAAF support equipment would be available at that early stage of the Caribou re-equipment program in Australia. On 29 May 1964 Cabinet accepted these levels and forms of assistance, deciding, too, that the aircraft to be sent should be deployed at the earliest date possible. (*"The RAAF in Vietnam"* by Chris Coulthard-Clark, p33)

Departure from Australia and Arrival in Vung Tau

Late July 1964, the initial 33 members of RTFV quietly

Pilots and ground crew of the newly formed RAAF Transport Flight Vietnam, RAAF Base Butterworth July 1964.



Cover Story

and inconspicuously in civvy clothes left Australia on a British BOAC flight to Singapore, to proceed to RAAF Base Butterworth in Malaysia to intercept three new Caribou aircraft which were originally destined to be there on their delivery flight route from Canada to Australia. They all had "one way tickets" for the jet flight out of Sydney. No one at that stage had any idea of how long they would be away.

Leaving Sydney most of the group looked more like young surfers going away for a holiday than airmen being deployed to war – although some tears from the wives, sweethearts and mates told a different story.

On the 8th August 1964 the small unit deployed in its three aircraft to Vung Tau on the Cap St Jacques peninsula, South Vietnam. Vung Tau was chosen as the operating base for the unit because it was the home base of the US Army's Caribou force and it was expected to ease access to spares and maintenance support.

Settling in to Vung Tau

The US Government was paid to provide accommodation and support for the RAAF air and ground crews. On arrival the RAAF members soon discovered the accommodation



Caribou aircrew at RAAF Base Butterworth before deployment to Vietnam July 1964

provided by the Americans was less than satisfactory.

The on-base accommodation consisted of open-sided wooden huts next to an open sewer and alongside a generator running continuously day and night. After making the best of it for a couple of weeks, the boss Chris Sugden DFC decided that with undisturbed rest being impossible, they had to move or the unit could not operate effectively.

People from the Unit searched what was available in town and thus the Ngoc Huong Motel was found – luxury at last! - Six people to a room – only cold showers – one room converted to the "Bar" – an outside BBQ constructed – a beer fridge "found" – and a surge in morale – Aussies together! The rental was initially paid for out of the members' own pockets.

As the unit expanded later in 1964 with three more aircraft, the officers moved into the Villa Anna nearby. This new arrangements allowed the Australians to be together and



CO of RTFV, SQN LDR Chris Sugden in his office at Vung Tau, September 1964.

to build up the esprit de corps famous among Australians everywhere, and was one of the major factors behind the unit's ability to generate the extraordinary operational workload which became synonymous with RTFV and its new call sign "*Wallaby*".

Operations in Vietnam

"*Wallaby Airlines*" (coined by the unit's USAF liaison officer) quickly became known as a can-do operation. The Unit was under the Operational Control of the USAF.

The first missions consisted primarily of short-haul resupply tasks from the USAF supply base at Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport and then supporting Special Forces located at camps next to rough and short airstrips requiring the Caribou's unique capability for short take-off and landing (STOL). The demanding short airstrips were often located in hazardous mountainous terrain near the North Vietnamese border area or in the swampy marshes of the Mekong Delta.

Often in terrible weather, the Australian crews were the only operators able to make into these makeshift airstrips. This resulted in a high demand for the "*Wallabies*". Cargo loads often consisted of - troops (often with their families) – bales



On short finals into Nui Dat

Cover Story



Typical landing strip in Vietnam, November 1964.

of barbed wire – lots of “empty” fuel drums – cattle, pigs and ducks – guns and ammunition – evacuation of battle casualties – and, if you were lucky, Bob Hope and the USO entertainment group.



Caribou on end of the strip at A Ro, January 1965.

With their very low and slow flying characteristics the Caribous were ideal for unloading this cargo by parachute (including the cows!) or by very short landings in forward areas, frequently with a fighter escort. Demand for rapid tactical support was so critical in the forward areas near the Ho Chi Minh trails that the RAAF used a unique form of supply delivery called

LAPES (low altitude parachute extraction system) where the Caribou would skim low over a small area in the fort on top of a hill at height of only a couple of feet and drop a 1000 Kg pallet of ammunition using a small drogue parachute deployed from the aircraft into its slipstream.

The following excerpt from the article¹ by Ted Strugnell shows some of the ‘incidents that the Caribous experienced in Vietnam:

“In the first war in history in which the airlift operation was an extension of the battle itself and the aircraft engaged were subject to considerable ground fire; incidents were too numerous to mention. Many caused injury, most caused damage, some were observed and resulted in the award of medals and many passed unnoticed except by the participants themselves and unrecorded except in the memory of those nearby.

By way of example, here are but a few of those incidents.

On January 19, 1969, an aircraft was taxiing on a resupply mission at Katum, a small special forces out post near the Cambodian border when it came under attack from mortar fire. In the words of the Captain, Flt Lt Reg “Tommy” Thompson: “The first one landed about 25 feet in front of the port wing shattering the windscreen. Two more followed in quick succession and then the rest. Most of the hits were in the nose area”. It was later discovered there were over a hundred holes in the forward surfaces of the aircraft. “We were left with two choices, if we stayed we might take a direct hit and if we left the aircraft might not perform correctly due to shrapnel damage. We made a quick decision to fly without being able to assess the full extent of the damage.”

When airborne, it was discovered, as well as two burst tyres, the hydraulics were also ‘out’ and the undercarriage had to be manually retracted. To land at Bien Hoa, the gear was extended by the emergency system.

What Tommy didn’t say was he was bleeding from a shrapnel wound to his leg. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) for his efforts in “preventing further damage to the aircraft and crew.” The Loadmaster, Cpl Barrie Gracie was awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal (DFM) for his assistance to the captain in jettisoning the cargo just prior to take off.



Caribou on a LAPES delivery.

¹ 35 Squadron. RAAF Caribou Operations in South Vietnam 1964-72

Cover Story

On another occasion, on March 29, 1970, Caribou A4-193 was carrying aviation fuel to That Son, 12 kilometres from the Cambodian border. At That Son the aerodrome was on the floor of a valley making it easy for "Charlie" (Viet Cong) to rain down rockets and mortars from the surrounding hills and then escape to his sanctuaries in nearby Cambodia.

Artillery frequently pounded the hills during an aircraft's approach and it was always a "hot" turn around, (engines never stopped). As soon as the aircraft landed and stopped rolling, the load (usually rations, fuel and/or ammunition) was pushed out the back of the aircraft and it took off again.

The crew on this occasion was Pilot Officer Bert Milne (Captain), Pilot Officer Mick Calvert, Corporal Melville Church and LAC Robert Laing.

The first mortar round hit a wing disabling the aircraft and starting a fire in one of the fuel cells. The crew left the aircraft "post-haste" and "assembled" in a ditch at the side of the airfield then moved to slightly safer ground in a bunker about 30 metres away.

More mortar rounds rained on and around the aircraft as "Charlie" saw the prize of a large aircraft destroyed. A few minutes after, the crew were transferred by jeep to the base command post bunker and remained there for several hours while the base continued under attack.

It was discovered later that during the attack, "Charlie" had penetrated the perimeter and suffered 34 confirmed (probably more unconfirmed) killed in action.

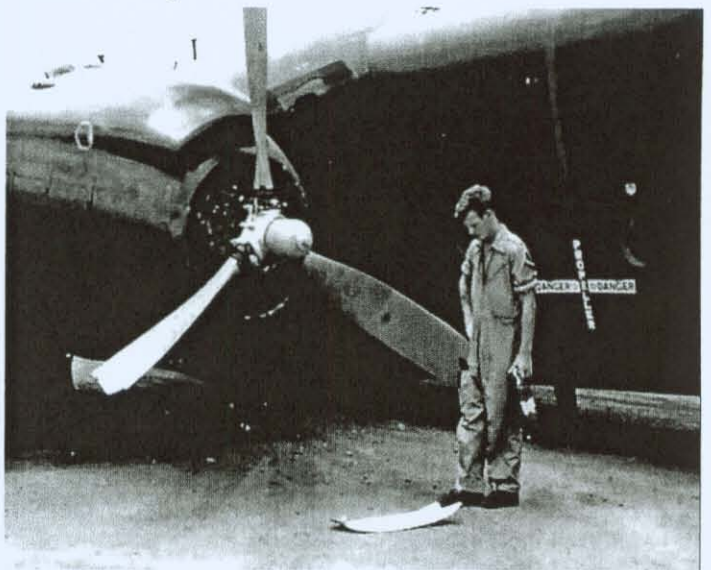
On one of the many occasions when bullets flew around the flight deck and cabin of aircraft, one of the loadmasters, Cpl Bob St John, had a lucky escape when a round passed through the "Esky" on which he was sitting. The round came up through the belly of the aircraft, penetrated the cockpit floor, passed through the bottom of the Esky, continued on through the ice inside and stopped when it lodged in the Esky lid, a hair's breadth from the Bob's "important bits".

Bob extricated the bullet and kept it as a particularly personal souvenir.

"The night belonged to Charlie" and large aircraft always made a good target. During the 8 years 35 Sqn operated in Vietnam, one aircraft was destroyed and numerous damaged at outlying airfields and fire support bases. The RAAF had a policy of trying to get an unserviceable aircraft back to base or at least to a secure area by nightfall. I can remember working on cylinder replacements, carburettor changes and the like at some obscure airfield in order to the aircraft out by nightfall.

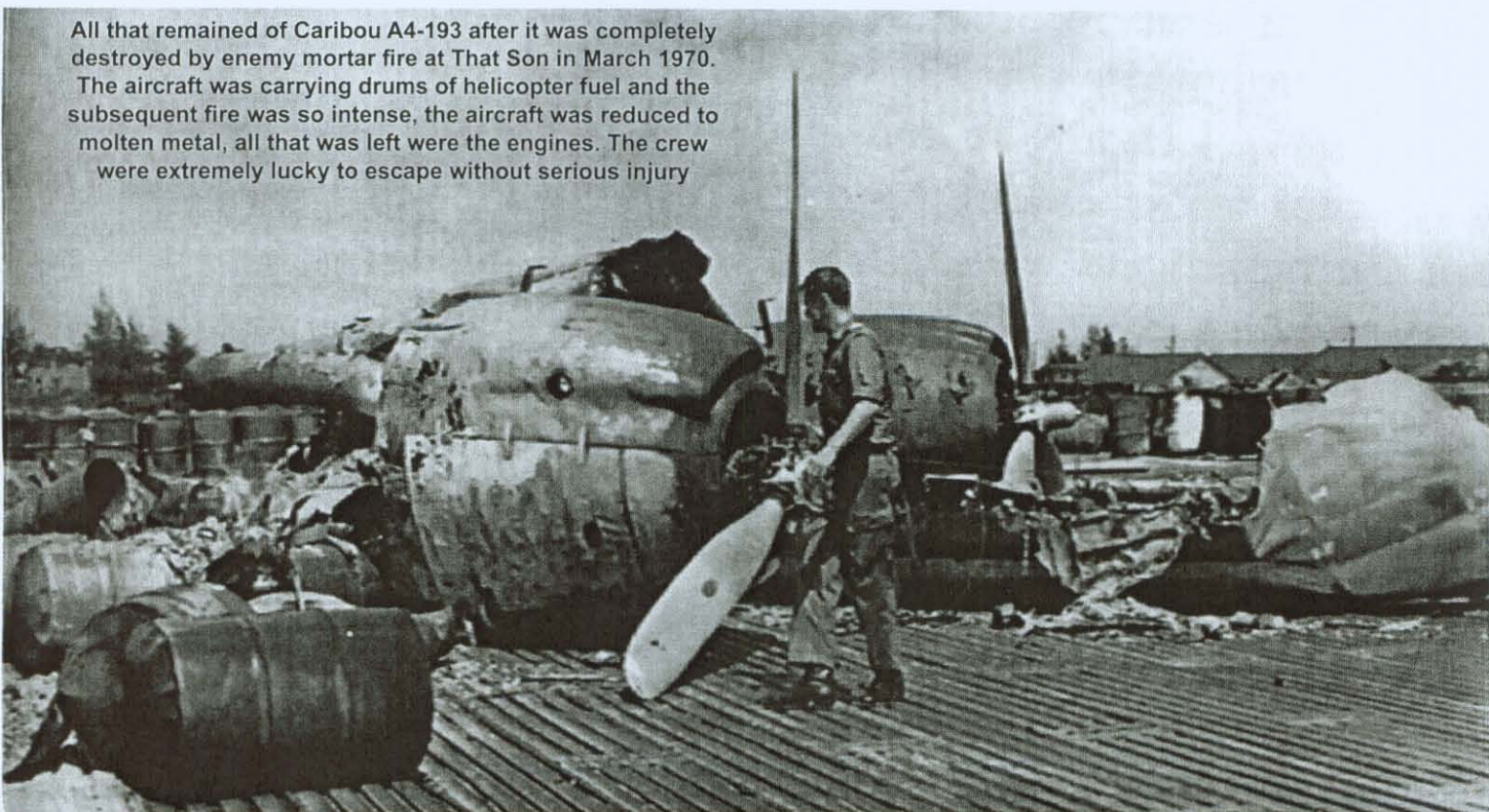
On the 6th October 1968, near DaLat, aircraft A4-210 was extensively damaged when it was taxiing near a ditch and the ditch edge collapsed.

The aircraft was originally repaired in-country, however, it did not fly correctly and flew under its own power to Australia for more extensive repairs."



Geoff Hall beside A4-210.

All that remained of Caribou A4-193 after it was completely destroyed by enemy mortar fire at That Son in March 1970. The aircraft was carrying drums of helicopter fuel and the subsequent fire was so intense, the aircraft was reduced to molten metal, all that was left were the engines. The crew were extremely lucky to escape without serious injury



By the end of 1964, RTFV crews were taught by the USAF the skills of conducting night support missions when they illuminated the night sky with 3 million candlepower flares during attacks by the Vietcong and North Vietnamese regulars on friendly towns and villages. The USAF would often provide up to 4 x A-1E Skyraider ground attack planes to help break up the enemy ground attacks. The "**Wallaby**" crew would coordinate the fire support through communication with the forces under attack on the ground and the Skyraider aircraft assigned in support. The Viet Cong often targeted the flare dropping Caribou with anti-aircraft artillery throughout its mission, which often lasted up to 4 hours. These missions were later phased out.

Rates of Effort

Flying days were generally 12-14 hours, taking off before dawn from Vung Tau, Nha Trang or Danang. The aircraft normally returned after dark. Maintenance crews worked on the aircraft for as long as necessary throughout the night (and it was frequently all night) to ready the aircraft the aircraft for the next morning.

It was normal to fly at least 5 of the six aircraft everyday. The rate of effort saw extraordinary statistics set for hours flown, and volume of cargo hauled or dropped. Each pilot was flying 80-90 hours per month, more than double the normal peacetime average. The initial authorised rate of effort was 50 hours per aircraft per month, and there was considerable concern in the early months back in Australia whether RTFV could keep the highflying rate.

Throughout the first year the unit consistently achieved an average of about 450-500 flying hours per month (about two and a half times the initial expected rate), and this rate of effort continued throughout the life of the deployment of the unit in Vietnam. In June 1965, after a particularly busy

month, the unit Commanding Officer reported, "many people were under the impression that the Australians were operating about 25 aircraft". No less important is the fact that this effort was not achieved at the cost of poor aircraft maintenance. Indeed a USAF senior officer at the time noted in writing that the Australian Caribous were "the best maintained machines in Vietnam". The rate of effort and sustained serviceability amazed the Americans.

The United States government through the USAF command in South Vietnam nominated the aircrew of RTFV, and later 35 Squadron, for the prestigious award of the **Air Medal** given that all operations were under their operational control. The Australian Defence Department refused acceptance of the bestowal of this award to the pilots and crewman of RTFV and 35 Squadron.

After more than 15 years of lobbying the United States Government, through the support of personnel in the USAF's veterans' association, the bestowals were approved by US Presidential Order in August 2007.

RAAF in Vietnam post 1964

The RAAF presence in Vietnam eventually grew from this small beginning of a flight of six Caribou and 76 men in 1964 to a force at its peak of nearly 750 men in three operational squadrons, flying Caribou transports, Iroquois helicopters and Canberra bombers, and a Support Unit. As noted by Chris Coulthard-Clark in his official history of the RAAF in Vietnam (p372): With a presence spanning seven and a half years, from August 1964 to February 1972, and a role which lasted until December 1972, the duration of its direct involvement in this conflict was exceeded only by the Army's training team. As one popular air journal noted in 1968:

"RAAF support of Australian operations in Vietnam, and those of her allies, has been largely overshadowed by the flying operations of the USAF; but the fact remains that, not only in South Vietnam, but in long-range transport flights between Vietnam and Australia, these operations greatly exceeded in extent and significance RAAF action in any operations since the Second World War." (*Flight International* 24 October 1968, pp680-1)

Some aircraft were withdrawn in June 1971 as part of the government's decision to wind down Australia's involvement in the war. Four No 35 Squadron caribous remained in Vietnam, but servicing requirements meant that there were usually only two aircraft on operational duties at any time.

From October 1971 the squadron began to transport Australian troops, including 3RAR and No 2 Squadron SAS, from Nui Dat to Vung Tau, from where these men returned to Australia. On 13





Caribous of 35SQN flyover Sydney on their return from Vietnam February 1972.

February 1972 operational flying ceased as squadron personnel prepared for their own return to Australia. The four Caribous left six days later.

The squadron was thus the last RAAF unit to leave Vietnam. In its seven and a half years in Vietnam, Wallaby Airlines had flown nearly 80,000 missions and carried 677,000 passengers, 36 million kilograms of freight and 5 million kilograms of mail. The last RAAF regular flights into South Vietnam, right up to the end of the collapse of South Vietnam, were Dakota aircraft from the RAAF's Transport Support Flight based in Butterworth, Malaysia.

Four years after its arrival back in Australia, No 35 Squadron moved to Townsville, where Iroquois helicopters joined the Caribous. It continued its mixed rotary/fixed wing operations until December 1989, when the Iroquois were transferred to army control. In 2000 Caribou operations were rationalised and the squadron's operations were amalgamated into No 38 Squadron RAAF.

Article provided by Kev Henderson and 35 SQN Association

Commanding Officers of 35 Squadron

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------|
| • Sugden, Christopher John | (July 1964 – Apr 1965) |
| • Harvey, Douglas Clifford | (Mar 1965 – Nov 1965) |
| • Guthrie, Victor Douglas | (Nov 1965 – Jul 1966) |
| • Melchert, Charles James | (Jun 1966 – Jun 1967) |
| • Fookes, Anthony John | (Feb 1967 – Feb 1968) |
| • Espie, Jack Darby | (Feb 1968 – Dec 1968) |
| • Seedsman, Barry William | (Nov 1968 – Nov 1969) |
| • Mitchell, Stewart Cosmann Kostlin | (Nov 1969 – Nov 1970) |
| • Clark, Stanley | (Nov 1970 – Nov 1971) |
| • Smithies, Charles David Frederick | (Nov 1971 – Feb 1972) |

