



My Story

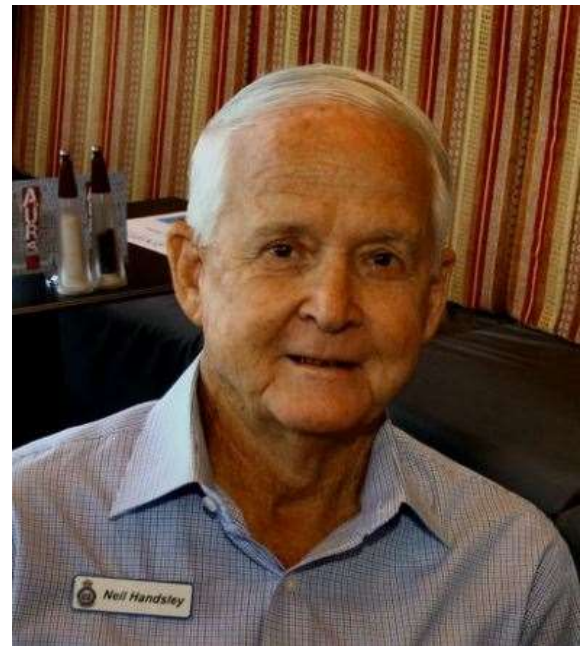
Neil Handsley. Sabre Memories

Way back, in the 1950s, Neil was a sumpie with 3 Squadron, 78 Fighter Wing. He wrote of his experiences with 3 Squadron and the Sabre at the Butterworth RAAF Base in the late 1950s to early 1960s.

He's shared them with us.

Setting the scene.

Australia showed a strong commitment to the security of the SE Asia area from as early as 1948, with No.1 Squadron Lincoln bombers based in Singapore and operational over the Malay peninsula against Chin Peng's CTs ["Communist Terrorists"]. From memory, I believe they served there until 1958 - a fine effort.



At Williamtown, in March 1956, No.78 Fighter Wing which had formed up with Meteor Mk8 twin-jets, was converting to C.A.C. (Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation) built Mk30 Avon-Sabres. The Wing comprised two fighter squadrons, 3 and 77, each with 16 Sabres, plus a maintenance squadron, No. 478(M).

The mighty Sabre was developed to a frontline interceptor at Williamtown over the next three years, with much hard work from both pilots and ground crews. Also playing major roles were the Melbourne-based manufacturer C.A.C. which made both the engine and the airframe, ARDU which designed and tested the major mods/improvements to the ex-USAF F86H design and the unsung heroes, No.2ACS, which laid the huge expanses of concrete tarmac at 'Willytown'. ACS then went on to even greater heights by completely rebuilding the runway at Butterworth - in preparation for the arrival of No.3 Squadron's Sabres in October 1958.

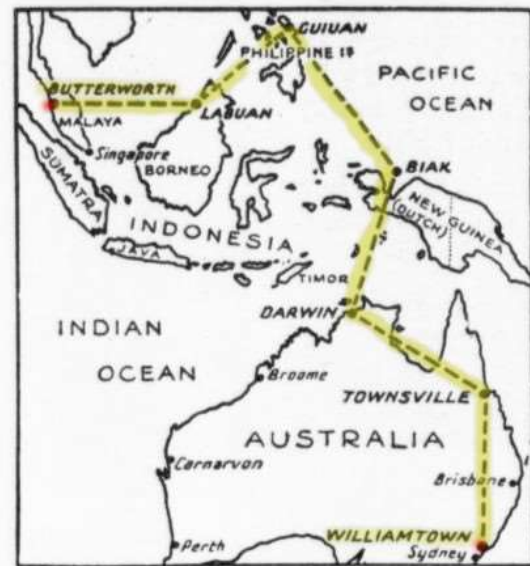


An interesting aspect of 3 Squadron's move to Butterworth was the setting-up of operation 'Sabre Ferry One', where the RAAF stationed small ground-crew teams on airfields about 900 nautical miles apart, all the way from Williamtown to Butterworth. The overseas locations were Biak Is., Guiuan in the Philippines and Labuan, North Borneo. – I had the fortune to be sent to Guiuan.

The route of 'Sabre Ferry One', October 1958, boxing-in Indonesian air-space!

18 RAAF personnel flew there in a Dakota; the USAF flew in 32 airmen from many places around the Western Pacific, their huge Douglas C124 Globemasters flying in the Control Tower, a fire engine, a mobile kitchen and God knows what else.

The Americans are probably still telling enlarged versions of, "How this Aussie kid straightaway fixed their only large power generator, then went up to the bar and chugga-lugged a whole bottle of Manila rum!" (Our detachment leader FLTLT (then) Barry Weymouth could probably tell you that "the kid" was me! By the way, it wasn't really a whole bottle just part of one.)



The Sabres were operating at near maximum range - so much so that Canberras or Neptunes flew the route, prior, to ensure no adverse weather. WgCDR Cedric Thomas led the first Sabre group. The four-Sabre formations flew with each aircraft having a pair of 200 gal. drop tanks under the wings. We had many adventures during that fascinating 21 days. After kissing the last of the 19 Sabres 'goodbye', we piled back into our goony-bird and flew off to 'Butt' - via several fascinating exotic places! (Yes, I was single then!)



Political hanky-panky at the time prevented all three squadrons leaving Australia at the same time, so No.3 Squadron moved first to Butterworth, along with 478 Maintenance Squadron. 77 Squadron made their move northward about 3-4 months later. Dependants arrived at about that time, with most families quartered across the Strait on Penang Is. The Wing "singlies" were housed close to the worksites, on the mainland airfield. A feature of life for the lads from the 'married patch' became the to-and-from ferry ride, daily, across the Strait (the "brown baggers", as we singlies called them).

Although the duty was officially 'war service' - and we certainly flew many rocket, bomb, and strafing raids against the CT's- everyday life on the Base and in married quarters, was close to idyllic (most of the time) for the Wing's airmen. It was a far cry from what our 3 Squadron predecessors had to cope with during their tough times in WW2.



As an example of the difference in the times, I have a photo of a bomb being loaded under a Sabre's wing, with the armourers' chalked message... "Pilot, pilot, don't be slow; take this bomb and GO MAN GO!!"

Such was life.

We exercised against foreign Air Forces in the Philippines and Singapore, and "defended" Butterworth against RAF V-bombers coming in from Thailand. Late in 1961 the Wing positioned a detachment of Sabres at UBON, Thailand. Many of us grew to love the Sabre - both pilots and ground crews - for the brilliant machine that it was. With its big Rolls Royce Avon turbojet engine, a pair of 30 mm Aden cannon, gunsight radar ranging, and self-contained IPN starter, the CAC Sabre was generally regarded as the world's best variant, at that time especially the final Mk32 model with the deadly Sidewinder heat-seeking missile and additional range/duration afforded by the wing leading edge fuel cells. Also, the RR Avon engine had been upgraded to the Mk26 too, mainly to allow an extra engine surge margin whilst firing the guns.



Another improvement was to modify the pilot ejection mechanism to ensure safe operation after problems with low altitude use. Interestingly, we had a superb safety record over our three years at Williamtown, with only one Sabre pilot fatality (see [HERE](#)) albeit there were a few close calls! Unfortunately, there were a few serious accidents at the Base after the squadron departed overseas.

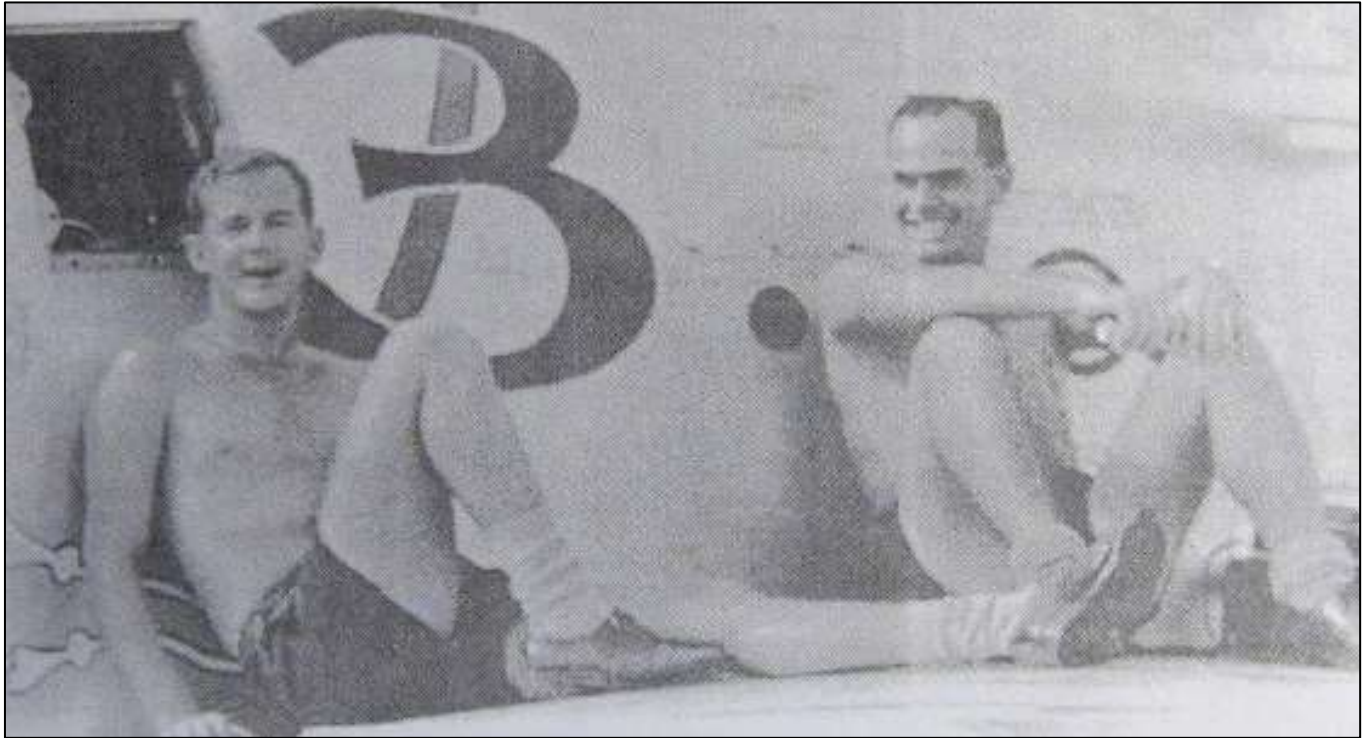
Looking back on these events after all these years, one remembers them with much nostalgia and considerable pleasure at being part of an interesting and important event in the history of that noble institution.... the Royal Australian Air Force!

*Sabre colour-scheme at Butterworth circa 1959.
[The "3" Squadron marking was superimposed
over a large red sabre sword.*

Note "Wing Commander's Pennant" above the 30mm cannon port. From an original colour slide by Pete Scully.



Some photos from the time:



Neil Handsley and Ned Wark catch some rays on the wing of a Sabre while waiting for the jet-fuel tanker to arrive.

The following pics were taken by Denis Wood, who was a Radtech G at Butterworth in 1958.



First Sabre to arrive at Butterworth, 2nd November, 1958

Denis joined the RAAF as a Radio Trade Apprentice in 1953, (on 7 Appy). He was posted to Butterworth in April 1958 and at the time he took these photos he was an LAC - RAD/TECH (Ground) attached to Base Squadron, Butterworth. He was at Butterworth until 1961. He later went to England and trained on the Bristol/Ferranti Bloodhound missile and was then attached



to 30 (SAM) Squadron, Williamtown and 'Detachment 'A' at Darwin. He was later attached to Base Squadron Laverton and then to 1 Control & Reporting Unit, Brookvale NSW. He left the RAAF in January 1975 as a Warrant Officer.

He later joined the Department of Defence (Air Force) and was the Quality Assurance Officer at Philips Electronics when they built the initial radar units for the FA/18 Hornets. He is retired now but is still proud of his RAAF service.



These are the first four Sabres to arrive at Butterworth, the four aircraft in the photographs would be A94-970 (flown by Group Captain COOPER), A94-953 (Flight Lieutenant GREEN), A94-975 (Flight Lieutenant JANSON) and A94-983 (Pilot Officer THOMPSON).

A94-983 now resides at Temora and is regularly flown (See [HERE](#)).

Flt Lt Jake Newman was one of the Sabre Pilots at that time, he says:

First, some background. In mid-1958, Canberras of No.2 Squadron were deployed to Butterworth in (then) Malaya, to be followed by 78 Wing Sabres (3 & 77 Sqns, plus 478 Maintenance Sqn), over the October '58 to February '59 period.

Staging parties were established at Biak, then owned by the Dutch, off the north coast of West Papua; the second at Guiuan on the SE tip of Samar Island, Philippines; and at Labuan, off British North Borneo. A forward maintenance element of 3 Sqn was positioned at Butterworth. Each staging-post was equipped with the usual communications kit, and Guiuan with a transportable Non-Directional Beacon (NDB). Neptunes were to provide mid-track Navigation assistance (via a neat trick of reading our gunsight radar on their ESM gear), Canberras about one hour ahead for enroute and destination weather recce and one USAF Grumman Albatross amphibian



provided Search-and-Rescue cover at Guiuan. The callsign "Duckbutt" was part of the USAF universal convention for this type of SAR aircraft. By arrangement, the Sabre IFF [Radar Identification Transponder] sets were modified to transmit 'Mode 2' pulses continuously, Duckbutt having the capability to read both bearing and distance from them.

For the ferry operation, 1:1million 'topos' [topographic maps] of Samar were not available; we carried 1:3million strip maps, which were fine for long over-water travel and adequate - if the weather was kind at destination...

The longest leg, Townsville to Darwin, was 1010nm; the others just short of 1000nm, which is the very limit of the Sabre's range when carrying two external tanks each of 167 imp. gallons. Importantly, we were well-briefed about the characteristics of tropical weather, especially the Intertropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ). We were told that, on form, we would transit before seasonal activity was expected.

					<u>PROJECTED SABRE</u>	
Ser. No.	Flight No.	A/C No	Pilots		Callsign	
	(a)	(b)	(c)		(d)	
1	A	A94-970	§ Gp Capt	COOPER	VM-NEA	1
		953	Flt Lt	GREEN	"	2
		975	" Flt Lt	JANSON	"	3
		983	Plt Off	THOMPSON	"	4
2	B	987	§ Wg Cdr	THOMAS	VM-JAB	1
		971	Plt Off	CHESTERFIELD	"	2
		986	" Flg Off	WATSON	"	3
		955	Plt Off	DART	"	4
3	C	972	§ Flt Lt	JONES	VM-JAF	1
		951	Flg Off	RICHARDSON	"	2
		962	" Flg Off	CONN	"	3
		957	Plt Off	REESE	"	4
4	D	974	§ Flt Lt	NEWHAM	VM-JAJ	1
		980	Plt Off	MATTERS	"	2
		958	" Flg Off	TREADWELL	"	3
		966	Flg Off	RADFORD	"	4
5	E	956	§ Flg Off	RAFFIN	VM-JAN	1
		954	Plt Off	MITCHELL	"	2
		979	" Plt Off	STENHOUSE	"	3
6	F	963	Flg Off	TUCKWELL	VM-JPD	1
		950	Flg Off	WORTH	"	2

NOTE:
 § Flight Leader
 " Deputy Flight Leader



No.3 Sqn was to deploy first, with 77 following in February 1959. In late October 1958, 3SQN deployed 23 aircraft to Darwin and the ferry started from there early November in sections led by the O.C. 78 Wing, GPCAPT Glen Cooper, followed by CO 3 Sqn, WGCDR Cedric Thomas, FLTLT Reg Jones, me, and lastly a three-aircraft section led by FLGOFF Bennie Raffin. (see above)



1. GPCAPT Glen Cooper, OC Wing. 2. WGCDR Cedric Thomas CO. 3. Ian "Kiwi" Reese. 4. Jake Newham. 5. (squatting) Stu Mitchell. 6. Terry Conn. 7. Peter Dart. 8. Keith Thompson. 9. Benny Raffin. 10. Jim Treadwell. (On secondment from 77SQN). 11. Ken Janson. (Wing Staff). 12. Ted Radford. 13. Stinky Stenhouse. 14. Ron Green (Wing Staff). 15. Hidden Mike Matters. 16. Tex Watson. 17. Reg Jones. 18. Bill Richardson.

My section was made up of PLTOFF Mike Matters, FLTLT Jim Treadwell (on loan from 77SQN) and FLGOFF Ted Radford. We took off for Biak on 7 Nov '58, flying a southern dogleg to avoid Indonesian territory. The trip was straightforward, although there had been heavy rain before we arrived. We concluded the main briefings for the next day, when we were to cover two legs, to Guiuan and thence to Labuan. There were limited tented facilities at Guiuan – an isolated, largely unused airfield activated especially for the ferry of aircraft by the USAF.



L-R: Terry Conn (wearing parachute), Cedric Thomas, Kiwi Reese, Dennis Stenhouse, Jake Newham, and Benny Raffin.

Next morning started better than planned, in that the ever-resourceful Jim Treadwell managed to scrounge a 1:1million topo of Guiuan area from one of his 11 Sqn mates. This he gave to me as I was in front and expected to know how to use it. I laid-off our inbound track to Guiuan and a few distance markers on the chart. Little did we realise what a godsend this map would be!

The Canberra, crewed by WGCDR Jim Grainey and FLTLT Bruce Hunt, took-off on time, the Neptune having long since left. We followed and duly established air-to-air comms. Nearing PSR [Point of Safe Return] the Neptune confirmed our position and passed a special weather report, to wit: it was socked-in back at Biak. WGCDR Grainey, at that stage about 40mins ahead, then advised that he was crossing a line of medium cumulus which he did not expect would be a problem and that Guiuan was reporting local showers but generally clear. - We had no option but to continue.

Later, WGCDR Grainey reported he was over Guiuan, could see the strip, no significant WX [weather], and asked could he continue to Manila, as he and Bruce were freezing. OK by me.

Not long afterwards I could see the line of "no sweat" cloud; it had developed into a wondrous sight; boiling cloud, crisp edges, tops nearing our altitude of around 45,000 feet and the 'Bird Dog' snapping to life as it pointed out centres of lightning, literally awesome. So we climbed higher.



Flying into an Inter Tropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ) is an exclusive experience, the significant factor with the encounter was the sheer size of the phenomenon and the speed of its development. Later, in reading WW2 Pacific War reports, I realised that this was most likely the cause of many (most) mysterious losses. No aircraft of WW2 possessed the performance of jets of our time.

With a touch of basic airmanship, and a ton of luck, we survived!

Now! To consider potential problems: the Sabre's stability was poor at low IAS [Indicated Air Speed] when carrying big jugs; secondly, No.4 Ted Radford had the least fuel; and thirdly, though the RR Avon compressors had been upgraded and given limited trials, the potential for compressor stalls was perfect, super cold air temps, high revs and low IAS3.

As we got closer, the tops had grown to something in excess of 56,000ft and did not look like stopping; the road ahead to Guiuan was blocked. I diverted west 30° to get through a saddle and started a rough plot on the precious 1:1million topo using my 21nm matchbox; Guiuan came on the air with the news that it was bucketing down and maybe we should go some other place. We had passed Davao, which had a dubious strip, and I thought we might - with a lot of luck - find something at Leyte on the west side of the gulf.



Then I peered down a miraculous 47,000' hole and saw three distinctive small islands in the middle of Leyte Gulf, a very comforting pin-point; although we were still up the proverbial creek. We were then able to turn east and on time I caught a glimpse of the neck of the Guiuan peninsula. Then thinner high cloud between the Cu-Nims permitted a right turn onto 165° to run down the peninsula. Our man at Guiuan contributed the encouraging news that heavy rain continued with very low visibility – he could see no sign of relief in any direction. “Duckbutt One”, sensibly still on the ground, called to say he was reading our IFF pulses and we were on track 30nms south. As we were then about 50nms north, I had some doubts about this advice, but did not have the time to mull it over. (Later I realised his readings were indicating in the reverse sense.) Several times I had tried to operate the radio compass in the manual mode, but was too pressed with flying the aircraft and could not discriminate a signal though the bedlam of static. I held on to precious height and avoided penetration of the black stuff for as long as possible.

I had decided that on ETA we would jettison the tanks, then let down individually, normally, we would descend in pairs formation; this was out of question in the extremely turbulent conditions, and the pilots had had more than enough of tiring formation flying outbound to the east and return on 260°, and - if no contact at 1000' - eject. The big decision was whether to go first (as I should) or invite Ted Radford, who was by then very low on fuel, to lead the descent. I decided on the latter course, composed my speech, pressed the mic/tel button, but found myself looking down through another of those magic holes - at the eastern end of a runway! - Instead, I announced this discovery saying (I'm told): “If the strip below is not Guiuan, it will have to do. Don't worry about drop tank limits. Speed Brakes GO!” (All within a few nanoseconds.)



The next few minutes were the hairiest I've flown, a spectacularly steep, tight spiral through 46,000 feet; demisters blowing hot air full-chat; pilots furiously rubbing holes in the canopy ice. I flattened-out in heavy rain at about 800' and saw the most remarkable sight one could ever expect: three Sabres clinging on like limpets! (To this day, I do not know how they did it.) I could see the ground below, but horizontal visibility was only a few yards. The other three had little time to glimpse the disappearing scenery as we entered rain.

All was not over, heavy rain continued and we had to land very quickly. As we slowed pronto, I called for spacing and open canopies and turned onto downwind. No's.2, 3 & 4 were losing sight of the aircraft in front, but the urgency of the situation made them press on. We turned onto a curving base leg/final approach on instinct; we first three landed and managed to pull up without busting anything. Ted Radford's canopy would not open; he went around with near zero fuel remaining and landed in the most terrible conditions. The planned two-hour flight had taken 2hr:30mins; a sort of record for the circumstances. A narrow squeak.

We then had to wait several hours for the deluge to clear before completing the second leg of the day. I snatched an hour's sleep on Barry Weymouth's camp stretcher, to find Ted had to remain behind with an unserviceable canopy actuator. He joined the next (and final) section of three to stage through two days later.



Ground Crew speak to Group Captain Cooper in A94-970 at Labuan (with 2SQN weather-survey Canberra A84-240 visible behind).

The leg to Labuan was comparatively peaceful except for another 'Met' phenomenon: we were cruising at around 45,000' in light cirrus when we found ourselves climbing whilst still holding cruising mach number and engine RPM; this continued, still in cirrus, for some 15 minutes, then the situation reversed and we were forced to descend to maintain mach; we finished somewhere near our start altitude. This event caused another bout of anxiety: what might be lurking within this seemingly innocent cloud? - We'd had sufficient tropical weather experience for one day.



I did not care to relate this tale without members of my flight being present because it seems far-fetched. - One needs to witness this sort of weather first-hand to believe the forces of nature that would cause such an incredibly rapid build-up of powerful Cu-Nims. I retain a clear memory of the event and give assurance that the record is not embellished.



A Labuan fuel truck tops up the starboard "jug" of A94-962

We cruised at "best range" speed, and there was little difference between this and endurance speed; more importantly we needed as high as possible IAS to counter instability excursions peculiar to the Sabre with big tanks, close to the stall boundary. At 48,000ft in the tropics we experienced temps of about -70°C , maybe lower and an IAS less than 200 kts, which is low for a swept-wing aircraft).

Guiuan was completely strange to us. The F86 Sabre windscreen goes opaque in rain and without familiar peripheral cues around a field and near the threshold it is necessary to open the canopy and stick one's head out into the blast to land off a turning approach. In heavy rain the problem is exacerbated.



Pilot Officer Bennie Raffin, in Sabre A94-956, safely on the ground at Labuan.



Two days later, Ted Radford was treated to a repeat ITCZ experience on the leg to Labuan. Bennie Raffin's section topped 50,000', avoiding the darker and more violent Cu-Nims, though the destination was relatively clear.

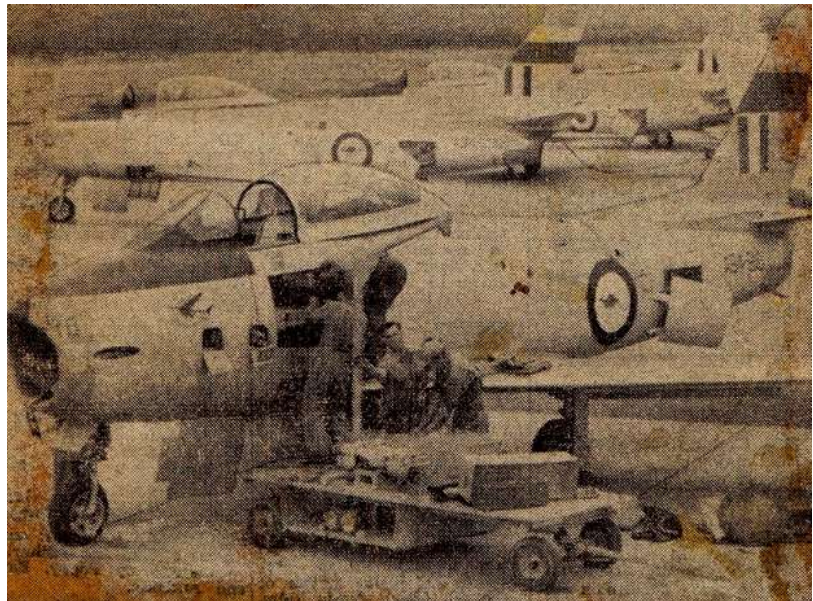
A Boeing 737 Max flight attendant walks into a bar and orders a martini. "You're here later than usual," the bartender comments. "Problems at work?" "Yes, just as our flight was about to take off we had to turn around and wait at the gate for an hour." "What was the problem?" the bartender asks. "The pilot was bothered by a noise in the engine," she replies. "It took us a while to find a new pilot."

Sabres for Butterworth.

(Mike Gayan sent us these articles, they were taken from newspaper clippings.)

Sabre display before Malaya move.

Two Sabre Squadrons will shortly leave for Butterworth (Malaya) having been making their final appearance over Australia for Air Force Week. This view of Sabres undergoing maintenance was seen at Williamstown, near Newcastle. The jets now feature the kangaroo roundel which is such a distinguishing mark for RAAF aircraft operating overseas.



And

Sabre Jets will be equipped with Guided Missiles.

The RAAF's Avon-Sabre jet fighter wing to be based at Butterworth will be equipped with the "Sidewinder" air-to-air guided missile.

This was revealed by AVM Douglas Candy CBE, Air officer Commanding Home Command RAAF when he arrived at RAAF Butterworth from Australia yesterday.

AVM Candy said this modern guided missile would enormously increase the effectiveness of the Australian Sabres and sufficient had been ordered from the United States Navy to equip both RAAF fighter squadrons coming to Malaya. The first four Australian Sabres now on their way to Malaya arrived at Biak, Dutch New Guinea, on Thursday night. They will reach Butterworth on



Sunday, Nov. 2. AVM Candy said that the flight of the Sabres from Australia was the longest and most complex operation attempted by any of the Australian services since the end of World War II. Four nations were co-operating in the mammoth 6,040 mile flight. The route of the Sabres is via Townsville (Queensland), through Darwin, Biak (Dutch New Guinea), Guiuan in the Philippines and Labuan in British North Borneo. This route will be used until a more direct route from Learmonth in West Australia to Malaya via Cocos Island is established.

The move to Butterworth was not a simple flight by the Avon Sabres alone. RAAF. Canberras from Butterworth and Australia are also involved as well as RAAF. Neptune and Dakotas and RAF. Shackletons.

AVM Candy, who is accompanied by staff officers from his command said he was in Malaya to complete arrangements for the operational role of the Sabre Wing.

And

Another Sabre Jet Squadron for Malaya.

Butterworth 11 Nov 1958. All 19 Avon-Sabre jet fighter of No 3 Squadron RAAF, have now arrived safely and on schedule at Butterworth. The last four arrived this morning from Labuan, British North Borneo, escorted by a Canberra jet bomber of No 2 Squadron RAAF. They were flown by FOs Benny Raffin of Monto and Ted Radford of Nelson's Bay and Pos Seward Mitchell of Newcastle and Dennis Stenhouse of Maroubra NSW.

The 19 Australian Sabres of No 3 Squadron, flew via Biak in Dutch New Guinea, Guiuan in the Philippines and Labuan in British North Borneo. They will be followed to Malaya by a second Australian Avon-Sabre squadron, No 77, which is due in February next year.

Both will form a part of Australia's contribution to the British Commonwealth Strategic Reserve in Malaya. The Sabres which will be fitted with "Sidewinder" air-to-air missiles are the first supersonic fighters to be used in the defence of Malaya.

A man walks up to the counter at the airport. "Can I help you?" asks the agent. "I want a roundtrip ticket," says the man. "Where to?" asks the agent. "Right back to here of course." said the man.