



*Background History
of the First RAAF Operational Unit
Deployment to Vietnam
8th August 1964*

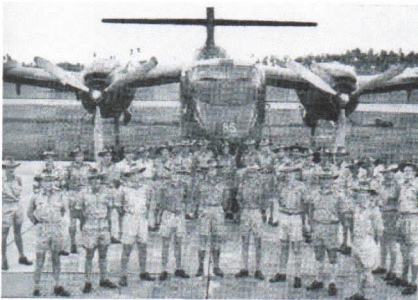


50th Anniversary
8 August 2014



Background

On 20 July 1964, RAAF Transport Flight Vietnam (RTFV) was formed with members drawn mainly from No 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 their three new Caribous to its operational base at Vung Tau in the Republic of South Vietnam. The weather on that day *50 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!

This event marked the first deployment of an RAAF Unit on operations since the Korean War. By the end of 1964, the unit strength had grown to 76 members and six aircraft. The RTFV, later becoming No 35 Squadron (35SQN), was also the last RAAF Unit to leave the Vietnam War in 1972.



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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.

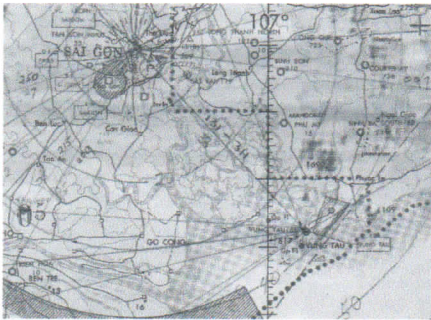


At the time the RAAF was in the early stages of a program to replace its Dakota aircraft at 38 Squadron with the De Havilland Canada Caribou and was unable to meet this request from the US. In May 1964, under continuing pressure to provide tactical air transport support, and although the new Caribou 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)



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Departure from Australia and Arrival in Vung Tau

Late July the initial 33 members of RTFV quietly and inconspicuously in civvy clothes left Australia on a British BOAC flight to Singapore, to proceed to 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.



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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 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. These new arrangements allowed the Australians to be together and 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 callsign “*Wallaby*”.



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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 it into these makeshift airstrips. This resulted in a high demand for the *"Wallabies"*. Cargo loads often consisted of - troops (often with their families) - bales 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.

With their very low and slow flying characteristics the Caribou 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 forest on top of a hill at a 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.



By the end of 1964 RTFV crews were taught by the USAF the skills of conducting night support missions by illuminating 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 vintage "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 missions were quite dangerous, as the enemy would deliberately target the flare dropping Caribou with anti-aircraft artillery throughout its mission lasting up to 4 hours. These missions were later phased out.



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The 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. Then it was the turn of the maintenance crews who worked on the aircraft for as long as necessary throughout the night (and it was frequently all night) to have them ready to go next morning.

It was normal to fly at least 5 of the six aircraft everyday. This 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.

It is interesting to note that 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 up 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.

US Air Medal Awards to the Aircrew

The United States government through the USAF command in South Vietnam nominated the aircrew of RTFV, and later No 35 Squadron, for the prestigious award of the *Air Medal* given that all operations were under their operational control.

The Australian Government refused acceptance of the bestowal of this award to the pilots and crewmen of RTFV and 35 Squadron.

The US Air Medal awards were approved by the US Government in 2007 after 8 years of liaison and support from the USAF Air Commando Veterans' Association. The first of the Air Medals were bestowed by the US Ambassador to Australia at a Ceremony in Canberra on the 4th of April 2008.





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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, Canberra bombers, and a Support Unit. Additionally, a team of Forward Air Controllers drawn from RAAF Fighter squadrons were embedded in the USAF and US Army units for the coordination and conduct of high risk ground attack missions. 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. Well might one popular air journal have 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 operation since the Second World War. (*Flight International* 24 October 1968, pp680-1)

The last Caribou flew out of Vietnam with No 35 SQN in early 1972.

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 and C130 Hercules evacuation flights from Saigon by No 36 and 37 Squadrons normally based at the RAAF Airbase at Richmond, NSW.