

A RAAF CAREER On CARIBOU 1973-2005+

A46707/8133381 – CHAS VAN HULSENTOP

In 1960 I flew from Sydney to Adelaide as an un accompanied child. This is probably where my fascination with aircraft started. I was 8 years old and placed under the personal charge of a Stewardess and wonderfully treated including a visit to the cockpit. During the following years before we moved to Elizabeth, my mother who loved airports and harbours, would take us to West Beach Airport just to watch the tarmac activities and the aircraft taking off and landing. In those days' security was not an issue and we could watch from the departure lounge. Adelaide Airport had the Vickers Vimy on display and it fascinated me. We eventually moved to Elizabeth Fields (now Davoren Park) and being very close to RAAF Base Edinburgh, there always was a lot of aircraft activity overhead. I soon learned to identify the aircraft. At one time there was an airshow at RAAF Edinburgh and naturally we went. I loved it. I got close to all the aircraft. It was a coldish day but when the flying display started, we were positioned near a taxiway and we got a double bonus. The jet exhausts were warm and there was the sweet smell of burnt fuel.

When I turned fourteen, I joined the Air Training Corps and became part of the SA Squadron Flight based at Gawler. I loved everything about it. The uniform, the drill – it was fun, the weapon handling, the lectures on flight, aircraft construction, engines, aircraft recognition and more. My time with the Air Training Corps was relatively short but only because I joined the RAAF as an Engineering Apprentice when I was 16.



The Gawler Flight is in the same location today

On the 14th January 1969 after several months of going through the recruiting processes, I walked into recruiting in Adelaide and 1 hour later walked out as A46707, Junior Apprentice, with a Rail Warrant to get me to Wagga. . I don't remember much about the train journey but I sure remember arriving at Wagga – it was hot. The Duty Driver picked me up and it was a hot drive in a dry country side to Forest Hill – RAAF Base Wagga Wagga.



Entrance to RAAF Base Wagga circa 1969



The administration at Wagga was very efficient and in no time I was processed and taken to my quarters. Block 405, ground floor. I was told I was part of the 23rd Apprentice Intake and in 7 Flight. Why 7 Flight ?– there were only 7 Flights and we were the end of the alphabet – typical military administration.



Every year the RAAF did one intake of Engineering Apprentices of around 140 young lads. The standards were high and every one of us knew we were fortunate to get a position. But at this point we were at the very bottom of the food chain. We stood to attention for our Corporal Drill Instructors (DI's). One of our DI's - CPL Nott also did a good trade selling Irons and Life Insurance to Apprentices.



February 1969 – 23 Intake – 7 Flight. I am seated on right of picture.

The first few weeks there was a lot of Drill and I remind you this was in January and it was hot. I can still feel the sweat running down my legs as we stood for extended periods on that oppressive Wagga parade ground. The breaks under the trees were enjoyed and sometime the DI, who needed cooling himself would let us go to the Asco Canteen which was right next to the parade ground. When we got our RAAF ID Cards – we felt like we were real RAAFies then. The first six months was basically what

most would know as “rookie” training. Towards the end of the six months we were taken on a trade trip to RAAF Williamtown to see an operational Squadron at work. The purpose of the visit was to help us select one of the six trades available to us. Engine, Airframe, Electrical, Instrument, Armament and Motor Transport. Just as well as originally I was thinking about being an Engine Fitter, but that trip very firmly switched me to Airframe Fitter – and an excellent decision it was.

In the middle of June No 21 Intake graduated. The junior intake – us- participate in several ways. For the Graduation Parade we became “fence posts” – that is we stood to attention surrounding the parade ground while the ceremony took place. And then in the evening we were “hired” to be waiters at the Graduation Ball. Some of our intake had the policy of drinks for the table and one for me. I didn’t get to wait – I was washing dishes.

In June we were given our first formal leave but before that the trade positions were allocated and I became an Airframe Apprentice and was allocated to 23 B Airframe Flight (there were two Airframe Flights, the other was 23 A – yes alphabet again.).



23 B Airframe Flight – July 1969. I am top row, 2nd from right of picture

On July 19 we arrived back at Wagga. On July 20 1969 two things happened. I started Airframe Trade Training and Neil Armstrong walked on the moon. This will amuse some. The first thing I learned at the Airframe Hangar was being taught by FSGT “Darkie” Smart, the RAAF technical publication system and how to amend technical publications. Little did I know that I was still amending RAAF publications in 2016. That first day finished early in the afternoon so all could watch the moon landing. I never saw it. There were two Apprentice intakes at Wagga (22 and 23) and one TV at the Apprentice Club. And there was no way a Senior Apprentice was going to make room for all of us.

The two and a half years went quite quickly – we were busy and learning. The trade requirements were changing and we were almost the last of an era. We were the last Airframe course to do Wire and Rope Splicing and Airframe Fabric Repairs and indeed I never had to use those skills. In June 1971 I graduated as an Aircraft Airframe Fitter and was ready to be a working member of the RAAF.



We were able to put in our preferences for posting location but realistically for that first posting the RAAF just filled vacancies with a loose look at preferences I dare say. I went to RAAF Base Richmond to work at No 2 Aircraft Depot (2AD). At one time all ex apprentices went to an Aircraft Depot as these were good places to develop trade skills. 2AD was not a popular posting – it was not an operational squadron and therefore less interesting and lacking spirit – just a place to work. Some areas of 2AD were good but where I went was pretty dull. I was on the C130A Hercules wing replank program – the wings were disassembled and the skins replaced. All I did for 5 months was scrape sealant and grind corrosion off A97-012.

Luckily fate jumped in. An Airframe Fitter recently back from Vietnam came from the Richmond area but had been posted to Point Cook. The RAAF has an exchange posting system where given the correct circumstances, people can swap postings. Well this guy had been all over the good units at Richmond and no one wanted to go to Point Cook. Eventually it filtered to me and I thought I like the idea of having a bit of say and Point Cook was closer to Adelaide and I would be on staff at No 1 Flying School looking after Winjeel trainers. In January 1972 I went to Point Cook.



Point Cook was a great posting. This is where the RAAF pilots first learnt to fly so that's where all the attention on the base was – being staff was a good place to be. 1FTS was a bit like being on an operational squadron – we had to have aircraft online and did regular duty crews. We also did major maintenance and because the Winjeel was old school, I really learnt my trade and developed good hand skills. I enjoyed being at Point Cook but it did not last. The bean counters came through and determined 1FTS was over staffed. The people that were there the longest and shortest were posted out, including me. But this was the real start of my RAAF career. I went back to Richmond. Not just Richmond – I went to No 35 Squadron.



35 Squadron Flight Line at Richmond circa 1975

In January 1973 I reported to No 35 Squadron. Wow, a full-blown operational squadron only recently back from Vietnam. And operating a transport aircraft – the Caribou. My working preference had always been transport or helicopter – I was never interested in fast jet.



35 Squadron ID Photo 1973

35 Squadron was a very well-run Squadron and clearing in at the Squadron was quick. When I arrived, they already had my courses planned and by the end of the year I had completed a Caribou Familiarisation Course, Caribou Airframe Course and Caribou Engine Course. The Squadron was a mix of people who had been in Vietnam and newer people and was a very tight unit with great morale and doing good work. At that time, we had nine Caribou aircraft and there was no shortage of funding so we flew everywhere around Australia. The CO was very good in ensuring Groundies got plenty of trips and in particular if a trip went to where someone came from – they went on the trip as crew. I had a nice trip to Adelaide. We also had a fantastic Social Club – the Wallaby Social Club and it was a real wheeler dealer club. Every morning three people spent the first hour making salad rolls. This was a

“rostered duty”. Someone had to go to the North Richmond bakery to buy the rolls, pies pasties and sausage rolls. These were all sold for smoko and lunch and was very profitable. Someone had a relative who was worked at Coca Cola so we had our own Coke machine. We sold alcohol. We even sold color TV’s because someone else had a relative at a factory and we could get seconds. That Social Club made a lot of money.

In October 1973 I had my first major deployment and spent six weeks at Goroka in Papua New Guinea (PNG). It was a small detachment – one Caribou (A4-285), three aircrew and four Groundies. We were there to support the Army doing survey and mapping work. I enjoyed the work and it was nice to have our” own” aircraft to keep in top condition. I also got on well with our Detachment Commander, FLTLT Mac Cottrell (Mac the FAC from his days in Vietnam flying as a Forward Air Controller) and he gave me a few opportunities to fly the aircraft with some tuition from him. He had me fly from Daru to Horn Island, only kicking me out of the seat just before landing.



35 Squadron - LAC Van Hulsentop -1973 - About to launch to PNG

FLTLT Cottrell eventually became a Group Captain and was the Officer Commanding Richmond. I was a SNCO by then and he was always cordial to me. My wife used to work in the Richmond Mall Toy Shop and one day Mac came in. My wife recognised him and when he said he was after some dope (for a model aircraft) my wife immediately told him to be careful as he could be kicked out of the RAAF for taking dope. He took it in good humour.

When 38 Squadron Detachment A at Port Moresby ceased in 1975, due to PNG independence, the Caribou fleet was evenly split and 35 Squadron had eleven aircraft. 159, 164, 173, 179, 199, 195, 204, 208, 234, 236, 285

35 Squadron was at Richmond post-Vietnam on a temporary basis and in 1975 it was announced that it would transfer to Townsville in 1976. I did not give this much thought. From 1973 to 1976 I was gaining solid experience on maintaining the Caribou in an operational squadron and thoroughly enjoying my career. I was at the best unit at RAAF Richmond and life was good. I lived in on Base accommodation from 1973 till November 1975, when I was married. Living in was good as 35 Squadron had its own block quite close to the Airmen’s Mess, Airmen’s Club and Carpark and us single guys got on quite well. Block parties were great. Also, our block was next to the Airman’s Laundry and if you were a gambler, this was good. If not, it was always noisy on pay night because people ran an organised Sly Gambling setup in the Laundry. You could always drop in and get a free drink, but you had to throw some money on a table (eg Crown and Anchor).

On 01 July 1976, 35 Squadron officially was based at Townsville in new facilities. During June 1976 the Wallaby Social Club put on a number of functions. For technical/legal reasons the club had to cease existence at Richmond on 30 June 1976. As I previously said, the club was very financial so we had to spend. Our big function was at the Penrith Leagues Club and wow, what a flash no expenses spared affair. Then the next day it was announced we still had a lot in the kitty so everybody, lets head over to Ma’s Pub (The Clarendon – now gone) So we had a great afternoon and evening there. I found out what truly legless means. The next day we could sleep in and report at ten but at nine a RAAF Ambulance turned up for me. The SENGU was having a joke with me as he saw me legless. I did not take the Ambulance to work. But we still had funds left so the CO raffled it off using our tool tag numbers. That was a Wednesday and the last day 35 Squadron was at Richmond. On Thursday

morning I walked across to the other side of the hangar and was a member of 38 Squadron, still working on Caribou.

On 01 July 1976, 35 Squadron Detachment A at Townsville became 35 Squadron with four Caribou aircraft (164,159,173,234) Not a lot of the Squadron members who were at Richmond were posted to Townsville. Some people from 10 Squadron at Townsville went across and some new personnel were posted to 35 Squadron. In 1977 35 Squadron became a fixed wing/rotary composite unit when four Iroquois (278, 279, 295 and 296) were allocated to 35 Squadron. It remained this way until 1987, when 35 Squadron assumed the Iroquois Gunship role and more Iroquois were allocated.



On 01 July 1976 I was posted to 38 Squadron and as stated earlier, I simply walked across to the other side of the hangar figuratively speaking. In fact, 38 Squadron took over the whole hangar which had been shared with 35 Squadron. During my time with 35 Squadron at Richmond I enjoyed my work and was a good worker. However, I did have problems with one of my SGTs as we appeared to have a personality clash. This did have an effect on my overall attitude and I was counselled by the Warrant Officer Engineer (WOE) on a few occasions. My annual evaluation reports also reflected this. The WOE did acknowledge I was sound in most respects and the other SNCO's were happy with me but it was up to me to not let the personality issues drag me down.

When I went across to 38 Squadron, the SGT I was having problems with also came across. However, I had made the decision to try and be a top performer at 38 Squadron and do the best I could. Most fortunately I went onto the major servicings and the SGT in question was assigned to Flightline and within a relatively short time, he was posted, taking his one bottle of Scotch a day with him.

38 Squadron did major servicings on the Caribou and I loved the work. I learnt a lot and for the next two years did nearly every possible maintenance job on the aircraft. I also learnt associated trades such as painting and metalwork. Both those workshops allowed one to use their facilities for personal jobs but only after you had proved to them you could properly use their tools. If you were serious the SGT running the Metal Shop gave you a set of drawings for a cantilever toolbox and said if you can do a good job making that, it's yours to keep and I will let you use my workshop. Much the same happened in the Paint Shop – he got you to test spray a few things but was interested in how you prepared and then cleaned up afterwards. Squadron management was good with this as it gave the Groundies additional skills.

From 1976 to 1978 I really became a very experienced tradesman and my annual evaluation reports were very good. Early in May 1978 the SENGCO called me to his office and told me next week you are going to 5 Squadron. This caught me out a bit and then he said, you know there are four Iroquois at 35 Squadron. Then the penny dropped – I was going to 35 Squadron at Townsville because 5 Squadron is where the Iroquois courses were held. And then the icing on the cake was he told me I was promoted to Corporal. Happy days. So as previously stated, my work preferences were transport and rotary wing – bingo, both in the one Unit.

5 Squadron was at Canberra and I can tell you, it's bloody cold in May. Field Training Flight at 5 Squadron had a good setup using two adjacent huts. One hut was the classroom and associated facilities including a small kitchen, and the other was our accommodation. Very cosy as we had access to the kitchen after hours to get a snack, tea coffee, etc. The only down side was the ablutions were 100 metres away so it was always a cold dash to go for a shower or the loo in the middle of the night. The course was two weeks long and it was good to learn about another aircraft, quite a different one. I was then super keen to get up Townsville back to 35 Squadron.

There were also two Flight Engineers posted from 38 Squadron to 35 Squadron at the same time as me so they organised a Caribou task to take us up there, take a few things up and check out some Married Quarters. Very handy being on transport Squadrons in those days. Also, I had a galah at the time and I was able to put him on a Caribou to Townsville as well.

Late in May we hooked up the trailer, loaded up the Torana and off we went on our long journey to Townsville. Our first stop was at Glen Innes – it was freezing. But then every day we got closer to Townsville and it got warmer. We arrived in Townsville on a Sunday afternoon. Back in the late 70's Townsville was still a large sleepy country town. After we settled in our motel we thought let's go and celebrate being here and go to a nice restaurant – yeah right. 1978. Sunday night in Townsville. Only one place was open – a little daggy pizza restaurant in Flinders Street. To be fair they did real pizzas, even throwing the dough into the air Italian style. The only modern fast food outlet in Townsville at that time was Kentucky Fried Chicken – I don't think there was a Pizza Hut yet. And TV – there were two stations ABC and TNQ-7. They didn't come on air till 2pm and went off air around 11pm. Yes, a big sleepy country town.



35 Squadron was in new facilities across the other side of the runway well away from the rest of the Base. They were good facilities and everything was well set up. The hangar was easy to get the Caribou into and all four Iroquois could be parked inside if required. The Hangar had an excellent overhead gantry so Caribou engine changes and Iroquois rotor head changes were a breeze. Most of the tooling was familiar to me – it had come from Richmond. That tooling was used for many years to come – until my third posting to 35 Squadron.



I very happily reported to work on the Monday and was warmly welcomed by those who knew me from Richmond. Some of these men I would share a lot of my working life with such as Patrick O'Reilly, Patrick McGee and Lindsay Gordon. They are all good friends who now live here in Townsville. So, Pat and Pat were here to greet me and Lindsay would be posted in eighteen months later. There were a lot of faces I didn't know. These were the Huey guys who came from 5 and 9 Squadrons. It was clear to me even this early that I was the most Caribou experienced Airframe Fitter at the Unit, thanks to the two years I did at 38 Squadron doing major maintenance. One might assume that the people in Canberra had sort of planned this – I don't really know. So, very quickly I was at work on the Caribou and more slowly getting to know the Iroquois. Through necessity to get the work done we tended to work more based on our background so I didn't get up to speed on the Iroquois for a long time. Indeed, it wasn't till I went to the Sinai and was doing nothing but Iroquois maintenance that I got really proficient.

One of the good things going to a tropical posting in those days was the furniture was provided by the ADF. We had been married at the end of 1975 and had lived in a nice little furnished flat in Richmond. We had very little furniture of our own and it remained that way till we went back to Richmond in 1984. The RAAF had an old warehouse on the Base called "Browns Warehouse" and this was where Housing Section was. 5 Aviation Regiment still uses this building which can be seen from Ingham

Road. Housing was run by the Housing Warrant Officer and a small staff. It was amusing the nomenclatures that some furniture items were called. Chair one arm LH, chair no arm, chair one arm RH– these put together were a couch. One of the things the Housing WOFF did was do a regular inspection of the married quarter yards by driving around the suburbs – making sure we kept our yards tidy and grass mown. This practice ceased by 1980. This ADF married quarters were sort of clumped together in various suburbs and our part of Garbutt was primarily RAAF so it was pretty good living there as we had a common bond. We had RAAF on one side and civilians on the other. We became good friends with both and this has continued through to now.



35 Squadron during the 1976 till 1989. Browns Warehouse is behind the hangar

When I got to Townsville the SENG was SQNLDR Kevin Foley. He was a little quiet and his nickname was Creeping Jesus. I found out why. We were doing some fiberglass repair work in Airframe Section and accidentally mixed a batch with too much catalyst and it caught fire. Oh, this looks like fun so we did a few more – until a quiet voice from behind asked what the hell we were doing. Creeping Jesus had struck again – sniffed out the wrong doing. We learnt to be wary of him.

The first 35 WOE at Townsville was Bill (Wackie) Stuart. He was a FSGT at 35 Squadron Richmond and was posted to Townsville at the time of the move. Bill was a bit rotund, wore thick glasses and was balding. The guys used to make a bit of fun of him behind his back. He had cataracts but these were fixed just before I got posted to Townsville. They tell me before the operation if you stood still in the hangar he couldn't see you.

Wackie is a nickname he picked up before he came to us at Richmond. Years later when I was WOE and we had our Standard Presentation Parade, I made sure the Wackie was invited and we helped him come down from Mission Beach. He was an invalid then and we looked after him. He died shortly after.

Wackie was replaced by Les Walsh. Les was a very good WOE and his background on Caribou was a tour in Vietnam. I got on well with him and I think he respected my experience on Caribou. Les used to do a bit of screen printing and did a number of banners for 35 Squadron – I still have one. These were used as flags on exercises and on tables at dining in nights.



WOFF Les Walsh Screen Print

During a Greenex (Ground Defence Training) I was sitting with Les chomping on our Ration Packs and I said Sir – I want your job – 35 Squadron WOE. He just gave me a wry smile and said keep your nose clean and work hard. Many years later.....

35 Squadron's "backyard" was Papua New Guinea and a lot of training was conducted there for aircrew. It was very challenging to operate the aircraft there – both types. In October one of our Caribous – A4-164, ran off the airstrip at Eliptamin and was damaged. We also had some Iroquois operating there so had sufficient maintenance personnel available in country to support recovering the aircraft. The FSGT Engine Fitter up there quickly realised that the maintainers he had, lacked the experience he needed for the job so he specifically requested that I be sent up to provide expertise. So up I went and, yes I was the only one who had removed wings and empennage before. So nine days later the aircraft was fully dismantled and flown out under a Chinook. We had a very good team of people on this job. The SENGO, SQNLDR Tsicalas fantastic. He worked hard getting his hands dirty, he listened to advice, he organised well and made sure we were safe. We were also supported by six Air Field Defence Guards (ADG) and their Officer. They did most of the camp work and built our scaffolds. The SENGO and ADG Officer "designed" the scaffolding. Local natives went out and got the timber for the scaffolding as they knew what was the best to select. The ADG's and natives also helped the heavy lifting and moving equipment. This left the maintainers relatively free to do the technical work. At the airfield, quite close to the aircraft, was a single room school and this was where we slept. There was a hut at the top of the strip and this was used at the end of the day for our main meal and end of day briefing. When this was over it was usually dark and we carefully trudged back to the school building to get some sleep. The SENGO deliberately had us do it this way just to get us away from the work area for a couple of hours each day. We did eat well as we had a cook and the Iroquois were able to supply us with fresh rations every day. Next to the strip was a drain – about 50 cm wide and deep – this is what collapsed the Caribou nose undercarriage. When returning to the school building at night we had to carefully cross this drain in the dark. One night when it was time to cross, I very carefully felt the edge of the drain and then took a long step across. Good plan poorly executed. I had found the only spot where there was a feeder drain at right angles. Yep, there I was laying lengthways in the mud, very smelly mud. At night it was cold and I had to shower with a bucket of cold water and clean up. Very embarrassed. We all had a good laugh though. By the way we only had two beers a night.



Wayne Sanderson doing his ablutions.



Note Scaffolding



Native Assistance



The Maintenance Team

L to R. FSGT ENGFITT, SQNLDR Tsicalas, LAC Sanderson, SGT Hender, Myself.

On the second last day a team from Aircraft Movements Training Development (AMTDU) unit arrived and rigged the fuselage for the Chinook lift. This took place during the morning of the next day after a few teething problems – the Chinook and load was initially too heavy and could only hover in ground effect. The Chinook went away and burnt off some fuel and then was able to successfully lift and fly away with the help of a sloping valley. Immediately afterward we hopped into our Iroquois and flew to nearby Telefomin, jumped on a Caribou and flew onto Wewak. At Wewak we got a night in a hotel and before dinner we sat on the beach having a few drinks. As we sat there the Chinook flew past with Caribou underneath. It was dusk and they had been through a very long slow day.



A4-164 under Chinook at Wewak

At the end of October 1979 when I went back to 5 Squadron at Canberra to do an Iroquois Flight Fitter Course. This was basically cross training to engines so we could go away with the Iroquois as crew and look after it. As it turned out I did very few Flight Fitter trips - I tended to get Caribou trips. My first Flight Fitter trip was to Dunk Island. The Navy was doing survey work and had some navigational

equipment. at the top of a hill. Our task was to take up some gas bottles which powered the equipment so we flew up to a pad on the hill. This was an eye opener as it was not a pad - it was some cut down trees and the pilot had to balance the helicopter on some stumps. He could only do it with one skid and that was on my side so I had to guide him in. Good test for first trip.

I did a nice trip to Tasmania with a Caribou. The Army were testing sports parachutes and had done some tropical trials with 35 Squadron using both Iroquois and Caribou. When time came for cold weather trials, they used us again but only for Caribou as an Iroquois from 5 Sqn was sent to Tasmania. Unfortunately for the 5 Squadron team, they did the lions share of the work as we had a mechanical breakdown and also one of the crew got a cold. Being an unpressurised aircraft meant he couldn't do the task with blocked tubes. Bonus we had time off. We were staying at Wrest Point Casino - that was pretty cool, and we had a hire car. We did a bit of touring of Tasmania while we waited for parts and then while the pilot recovered well enough to fly. In the end out of ten days we only flew two on task.

35 Squadron at Richmond had a great social club and high morale. It was the same at Townsville. The Wallaby Social Club was active in that we had plenty of get together BBQ'S at work, we quite a number of family functions and we had some great mixed functions. We also had more Squadron identification via T Shirts, Caps and Badges. I think we also thought we were a bit special - the only RAAF unit operating two types of aircraft and the Groundies qualified and current on both. Except for the CO, aircrew were only qualified on one type - for good reason. We once had a fabulous function at what was the RAAF Base Cinema. Food was via a Hungi which we put in between the Cinema and the SGT Mess building. Where the screen used to be was a stage. Some SNCO'S thought about some entertainment for the night and Kiss was touring Australia at the time so Kiss came to our function. No-one knew. These guys and their wives got all the make up on and did a Kiss act - it really made the night. As I said, great morale at 35 Squadron.



Tee Shirt



Uniform Badge



Shoulder Patch(I helped design)



Approved Cap



Stubby Cooler (made by Huey Loady – Slim Reeves)

We did some fun things as well. Being over the other side of the Base gave us some isolation and space which allowed us to do a bicycle race using the land between us and Browns Warehouse. There was a creek running through there so our bike "track" meandered in and out of the creek and we also put in some jumps. The creek somehow got a very deep hole full of water at one of the crossings. It was also an Aussie affair as meat pies and a beer had to be consumed after a couple of hard laps. We called it the Wallaby 1000. It was great fun although had great risks attached to it. I don't think anyone got hurt but as we all know, this activity would not be tolerated now.



The Airframe Team for the Wallaby 1000

Being a “green” Squadron we did a lot of work with the Army and deployed on many Exercises with names such as Kangaroo 82, Swift Eagle, Diamond Dollar. We had major Exercises at Shoalwater Bay, Macrossan, Weipa, Cloncurry, High Range, and I went on all of them over the years. As a Groundie these Exercises were not particularly difficult. Our job was to maintain the aircraft and we had some annoying ground defence tasks in our “spare” time. Yes we lived in tents and got a bit dirty but, big deal. Paid camping.



Typica Exercise Accommodation in the 1980's



Flight Line Tent



Ablution Setup



This was at Marlborough. Note the cricket being played

I did have an interesting experience at a Swift Eagle Exercise. I was the Guard Commander one night to keep watch on our aircraft. We had been told that the enemy had been seen in the area at night in darkened vehicles and they may try to get to the aircraft. Well at about 2am we heard a very quiet vehicle put putting through our aircraft lines. We were in a position to challenge and I did using the normal procedure – we were ignored. I upped the anti and put a blank round up the spout, with the SLR making that distinctive sound. They stopped and told us to piss off. I just said we have you cold so the jig is up. By this stage we had walked up to them. One of them clearly was annoyed and came

up to me and slammed me across the bonnet. But, then the LAC with me, without any hesitation worked out this was getting out of control and simply reached in, grabbed the keys and threw them into the night. These two guys realised this was not good, and bolted. Well, we had the vehicle so it was going to be easy to track down who it belonged to. Being an incident, we had to call the CO and he sorted it out. He was not happy I had been manhandled. As it turned out, they were friendly force but had no business being in our aircraft lines. I never heard more except the respective CO's had a good discussion.

Other things that happened on that Exercise. Our toilet was a deep hole in the ground. Pilots don't have rifles; they have pistols secured in a holster. It is important that the holster flap is secured, especially when dropping your pants for a number two. Yep, a pilot did not have it secured and his pistol did the long drop – literally in the shit. The pistol could not stay in that hole so the pilot spent some hours using all sorts of techniques and receiving lots of advice trying to recover that pistol. Eventually the Groundies took pity and within a very short time recovered the pistol and gave it to him to clean up. On this Exercise I was the Maintenance Controller and ensured the technical administration was correct and had to collect the daily flying hours and other statistics. I didn't sign out a rifle – I had a pistol – a plastic one. It looked very real and was much easier to live with- and it wasn't going to fall down the long drop.

For this Exercise we did not operate our Iroquois as part of 35 Squadron. The 5 ,9 and 35 Squadron Iroquois were combined and 5 Squadron looked after them. I still was responsible for the Maintenance Control as the four Iroquois were our aircraft. I was allocated a vehicle and had to go to where they were located well away from the airstrip and collect paperwork and statistics. It was an easy Exercise for me as I was a bit of a free agent.

Airframe Section at Townsville had a nice setup although not airconditioned like the Avionic Workshops. We didn't really need it as the Section was well positioned to get cool breezes. It was probably good that it was not air conditioned because a lot of our work was in the hangar – not air conditioned, or on the Flightline outside. So it didn't bother you to leave the Section to do work. When we did Duty Crew it was two weeks – late shift and then early shift. The Flightline building was air conditioned and it caused me problems one time as I had a cold. Going in and out of the air conditioning made the cold quite bad and my Duty Crew leave was spent in bed.

Duty Crew was a good duty and most of us enjoyed it. We were busy and in the thick of what was happening at the Squadron. As well as looking after the 35 Squadron flying aircraft, we were also Townsville Base Duty Crew so that added an extra dimension as we handled all visiting military aircraft at all hours. I quite enjoyed marshalling USAF C5 Galaxy and B52 aircraft. USAF pilots were good to marshal provided you moved your arms quickly as the Americans did. They reacted quickly to changes and when you slowed your action – so they slowed the aircraft. Very precise. Too many of our marshallers used the lazy slow method and it didn't help the pilots much.

One of the downsides to handling the B707 was the toilet waste cart and yes, we did have some accidents. No-one wanted that job. As first the pit for the waste was over at the civvy terminal and there were a few spills on the way over. We got our own pit eventually.

The 35 Squadron tarmac was very close to the Town Common which was basically a nature reserve. Snakes lived there. In the winter at night our tarmac was nice and warm however they didn't always go back to the Common in the morning. The aircraft provided handy places to crawl so occasionally we would come across one when doing a Before Flight Servicing. They weren't fussy – Caribou or Iroquois. They could only get to limited places on the Caribou and weren't too hard to see. The Iroquois was different – they had places they could hide and could even appear between the pilot's pedals. On a BF the Avionic guys are required to check the HF Antenna Coupler in the tailboom. They normally open the hatch and do it by feel. On one occasion the Avionic guy did that and just after the Framie opened the hatch to check the tailboom bolts using a torch. There was a snake wrapped around the HF Coupler. Keep in mind the most common snake we saw was a Brown. The Security Guard Dog Handlers took over the tarmac after we went home and over the years, they lost a few dogs to snake bite.

One morning I was opening up at about five thirty. As I came around the corner to Flightline I stopped dead in my tracks. There outside the Flight Line front door was the Security Guard Mini-Moke with one very asleep Doggie. Problem was his arm was flopped down and his dog was not attached to him. The dog's ears were standing proud and his beady eyes were locked on mine. I had a dog

handler living next door to me so I knew some of them. I recognised this one and shouted “Darrel effing wake up and grab your dog’s lead before he comes at me.” Luckily, he was only dozing and when things settled, he was a bit sheepish.

At the end of 1981 I was moved from Airframe Section to Maintenance Control Section (MCS). MCS works directly for the SENG and the staff was an Avionic SGT, myself and a Clerk. We looked after all the aircraft documentation and programmed the aircraft on a daily basis. There were a number of critical things we were responsible for. Having aircraft available for tasks. Ensuring aircraft and components were not over flown past a due maintenance task. Ensuring that we flew an aircraft to use its hours up by a set date, leaving enough to fly south for a major servicing. We had eight aircraft so we had to be on our toes. My particular job was monitoring individual components making sure that due dates were not overflowed and components were pulled at an appropriate servicing. This was all before computer-based maintenance control. All I had was a basic calculator – one of the very early handheld electronic ones. There was a lot more we did and I also had to be able to do the SGT’s job. I had 18 months there and it gave me more experience in aircraft maintenance management. As I left MCS the RAAF introduced the Computer Aircraft Maintenance Management system – CAMM. In theory it automated much of what we had been doing and would be more accurate. Eventually it would but it took several iterations of CAMM and then CAMM2.

In 1982 the Base did a time capsule and all personnel on the Base were photographed at their respective sections.



ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE BASE TOWNSVILLE

Name of Squadron: No 35 SQUADRON

Name of Flight / Section: AIRFRAME SECTION, AIRCRAFT MAINTENANCE FLIGHT

Function of Flight / Section: AIRFRAME SECTION IS RESPONSIBLE THROUGH THE WARRANT OFFICER ENGINEERING TO THE SENIOR ENGINEERING OFFICER FOR THE MAINTENANCE OF IROQUOIS AND CARIBOU AIRCRAFT AT 35 SQUADRON. AIRFRAME SECTION CONSISTS OF A SERGEANT IN CHARGE 3 CORPORALS AND 7 AIRCRAFTMEN. AIRFRAME FITTERS SERVICE BOTH AIRCRAFT TYPES FROM FLIGHT SERVICING TO INTERMEDIATE SERVICING LEVEL, AS WELL AS HELPING SERVICE OTHER UNIT AIRCRAFT TRANSITING THROUGH TOWNSVILLE. BAY SERVICING IS ALSO CARRIED OUT WITHIN THE SECTION ON SUCH COMPONENTS AS CARIBOU WHEELS AND BRAKES AND IROQUOIS MAIN ROTOR COMPONENTS.

Personnel: (Left to Right - Back Row to Front Row).

As of 1 September 1982.

Refers to Negative Number 7

Rank	First Name	SURNAME	Number	Mustering	Birth Date	Date Enlisted	Spouse's Name	Name (age) of Children
LAL	MIKE	ALLEN	A123824	AFFITT	7 JAN 60	7 JAN 75	LINDA	—
PC	JIM	BELLAMY	A127201	AFFITT	23 JAN 64	18 FEB 81	—	—
CPL	CHAS	VAN HULSENTOF	A46707	AFFITT	21 JAN 52	14 JAN 69	LEONIE	—
LAC	COLL	RAMSAY	A125621	AFFITT	17 APR 60	5 DEC 77	—	—
LAC	BRAD	PLEWES	A126432	AFFITT	18 AUG 63	24 JAN 79	—	—
LAC	GLEN	MAYES	A121403	AFFITT	7 JAN 53	14 MAY 71	—	—
SGT	BILL	M'GUFFIE	A113113	AFFITT	24 JAN 50	7 JAN 66	—	—
CPL	AL	SPILLER	A121257	AFFITT	5 JUL 53	10 OCT 70	LINDA	—
LAL	LES	SALLAWAY	A124144	AFFITT	6 FEB 58	11 MAR 75	TERRIE	ROBERT (3YRS) SANDIE (6mths)
CPL	DAVE	KEDZIE	A123595	AFFITT	24 MAY 56	11 MAR 74	SUE	—
LAL	TONY	WHITTEN	A322961	AFFITT	12 SEP 61	3 JUL 79	—	—
LAL	MIKE	DUCKWORTH	A125182	AFFITT	9 JUN 58	1 DEC 76	DEBORAH ANN	ANGELA (3YRS)
WOFF	LES	WALSH	A17605	WOENG	31 MAY 46	26 JAN 62	ESTELLE	NICOLE (10YRS) PETER (8YRS)

So it was now 1983 and I was back into Airframe Section and happy to getting my hands dirty again. Shortly after I was promoted to SGT and therefore was managing Airframe section. It was hardly a challenge. I had been at the Unit for 5 years, was very experienced on the Caribou, reasonably experienced on the Iroquois and MCS had taught me a lot more about management.

When I was at Point Cook one of the Framie CPL's there was an artist. When he discharged, he settled in Townsville so I chased him up because I wanted to have a personal memorabilia item. I asked Peter (Pedro) to do a painting for me.



35 Squadron Flight Line – Before Flight A4-195- 1983

What you can see here is a Before Flight being carried out on Caribou 195 and I am standing in the foreground. At the nose of the aircraft is Phil Perry, Bung Bingham is at the Pt Engine and pumping up the Mainwheel is Michael Duckworth.



In 1982 the Government agreed to support a peacekeeping force in the Sinai to ensure the Egyptians and Israelis didn't secretly build up a force and do a surprise attack. It was not a UN force. It was American backed with the help of some 15 nations and was called the Multinational Force of Observers - the MFO. Australia's role, in conjunction with New Zealand was to provide rotary wing support via 10 Iroquois helicopters and was given the designation of the Australian Contingent Multinational Force of Observers - ACMFO. Late in 1983 I got posted to the ACMFO for 5 months.

35 Squadron was great to us guys that went away. They kept in touch with my wife and mowed the lawns and offered to help in any way. A good Squadron. Also, my next door neighbors wife really looked after my wife and helped her get through my absence. I had a few weeks off and then went back to work but actually felt I wasn't needed. With the posting back to Townsville post Sinai I also got a posting back to Richmond – to 486 Maintenance Squadron – C130 heavy maintenance. I was back at work at 35 Squadron for a short while but I was not really needed and was just filling in time till the

baby was born. On the ninth of April I was working and I got a call that my wife's water had broken and I better get home. So it was off to the hospital to have a baby. Sadly, while we were there, two Mirage aircraft collided near Townsville and the pilots were killed. Now on my daughter's birthday I always have a quiet thought about these two fellow RAAFies who died the day she was born.

I took some more leave and six weeks after Candace was born we were on our way back to Richmond, our Hatchback Torana towing the same trailer. It was a sad day when we left Townsville and my wife and I agreed that we should come back one day to settle here.

I had already organised a married quarter before I left Townsville – an ex 35 Squadron SGT who had been at Richmond for awhile was posted out and we took his place. It was a nice but small place in Richmond town and just right for our growing family.



I did not particularly like the idea of going to 486 Maintenance Squadron. My career up till then had been mostly operational- this certainly wasn't – it was a bit factory like. When I arrived at the Squadron and met the CO I was in for a shock. All that I had done before meant nothing. I was an experienced SNCO, a qualified and current Independent Inspector on two types of aircraft, Engine and Airframe, had been in charge major servicing and run a Section. But this was a different aircraft and a different operation. Yes I had to do courses but it rankled me that I was no more than an LAC on the hangar floor. It would take time to get the courses under the belt and there was no moving forward till then. So what did they have me do – look after the big Servicing Status Board. Yeah right.



Now with 38 Squadron just two hundred metres up the road, naturally I visited there quite often to see my mates. Fate. One of my mates was a SGT Framie and he had been at 38 Squadron quite a long time. He did not want to leave Richmond and was worried about a posting. Can you see where this is going? Yes, we started talking exchange posting and we applied. 38 Squadron was happy – they were exchanging like for like. 486 Squadron didn't care – we both needed full training. Thankfully it was approved and we were both very happy. I was back on Caribou and straight into work. Only this time at 38 I was more on the management side running major servicing and I was able to make some impact. I knew more and was able to change some things for the better. I believe I ran a very good servicing.

This was short lived as 38 Squadron was unable to keep up the number of servicing required so during 1985, it was decided the Contractor – Hawker de Havilland at Bankstown Airport would start doing them for a time. The RAAF office located at HdeH was not manned to oversight this so they requested support from 38 Squadron. Yes I got the job- the most experienced Caribou tradesman by that time so I was attached to the Resident Engineer Office at Bankstown. My job was to assist HdeH and also make sure they complied with the contract. It was good easy work and I made some good contributions to what was going on. The only down to it was I lived at Richmond and had to commute to Bankstown every day. There were no allowances associated with this attachment because I was already living in the Sydney area. Just ignore the 50k a day I was travelling. This was meant to be a

three month attachment but I got wind that the RAAF Office at HdeH was trying to extend. I went and saw my boss at 38 Squadron and we stopped that. He wanted his man back as well and I was back on the job at 38 Squadron.

So I was back on the hangar floor for about eight months and then the SENG0 called me in and told me next week you are going to Wagga for six weeks and you will be doing an Instructional Techniques Course. The Monday you come back you will be instructing on a Caribou Airframe Course. My jaw dropped – this was never in my plan – I was a shy, quiet guy - I couldn't get in front of a classroom. It was a rush because there were three people in 38 Squadron Field Training Flight and two were having a personality clash. The Airframe Instructor and the FSGT in charge. I was replacing the Airframe Instructor.

Off to Wagga I went with great in trepidation. The course turned me from someone shy in front of others to a confident speaker able to present information in a structured style. It was very effective and most days you were presenting something and under pressure. There was a lot of after hours work on presentations. We learned various techniques. We learnt a bit of psychology and classroom behavior. All in all a very comprehensive course. When I left the RAAF in 1996 the IT Course had been reduced to two weeks. I don't know how – I would suggest the quality of the course had to be compromised. Much the same as many competency-based courses.

We completed the course on a Friday and on the Monday, I was in the classroom using someone else's presentation. It went very well but then I was a very experienced subject matter expert on Caribou Airframes – that's why I got the gig. I was in Field Training Flight (FTF) and loved it. The other SGT in there and I were very enthusiastic and we put a lot of work in overhauling the slides, the training aids, the training packages and anything we thought could be better. We also put an effort into making the Caribou classroom trainer fully serviceable. It was a fantastic tool and well used. After we had been in FTF for about a year we started doing presentations on each other courses. He taught Avionics and I was able to do his presentations where they controlled Airframe systems and vice versa. One of the perks of being there was we were sent to Darwin and Townsville to run Caribou Familiarisation Courses. These were easy to do and, on both occasions, I took my wife to Townsville and we treated it like a little holiday. 38 Squadron C Squadron provided training for all Caribou pilots and at this time SQNLD Roger Harrison was C Flight Commander. I used to go and see him about flying the aircraft and the way flight control worked. I incorporated his information into my lessons on Caribou Flight Controls and I think this helped the guys understand what the 27 individual moveable surfaces did.



38 FTF very well laid out classroom



38 FTF first class Caribou Systems Trainer

Under our supervision at FTF was the Technical Publications Officer. It was an LACW and she was terrific. She was an artist and was being mentored by an artist who lived in the Blue Mountains. I met him several times and thought I might get another painting done. I commissioned him and he did a very fine job of Caribou A4-234 flying over Richmond. The painting was based on some photographs I provided. Unfortunately, the painter reneged on the deal and I never received the painting I had commissioned. I saw it and it was excellent and he told me he wanted keep it. I heard sometime after it had been sold to a RAAF Officer. But it doesn't end there. I was reading an Australian Aerospace magazine some years later and I saw the painting in an add for prints. I found out that the painter had got the painting back so he could arrange a run of prints. Naturally I ordered one and therefore eventually got the painting I commissioned.



I had some interesting jobs during my time at 38 Squadron. One day we got word a Caribou- A4-208- had clipped a tree on landing at a place called Backmead, near Casino, NSW. A section of wing had been cleanly torn off. It was decided to change the wing. I had a servicing just being completed so the wing was removed and with a crew sent to Backmead. They did the job successfully but when the aircraft was test flown to Casino the aircrew did not like the way the aircraft handled. It was felt the rigging was out so I was sent up to specifically re-rig the flight controls. I had a reputation of doing good rigging. Yes it was out – not by much but adjustments are small and can have a significant affect. We got the aircraft back to Richmond and then had to remove the wing and get it back onto my aircraft which I was servicing. This was to keep all the maintenance lives together on that airframe. By this time a spare wing had arrived but it had been removed from the very first RAAF Caribou – A4-134 which had a heavy landing at Nowra only three months after delivery. The wing was serviceable but over time had missed a number of modifications. So I was tasked with sorting this out and then putting the wing back on A4-208.



We had the section of 208's wing hanging in our Brewroom for a short time

I only did one Exercise while at 38 Squadron this time and it was not with 38 Squadron. I was sent to Townsville to join 35 Squadron on an Exercise based at Cloncurry Airport. There was nothing notable about this Exercise except the number of snakes. 35 Squadron was now using two man tents for each person and when I packed mine up, I has been sleeping on a snake under the tent. Not impressed.

After all this time on Caribou I had taken a pretty serious interest in the aircraft and had collected a lot of images and memorabilia. A writer by the name of Stewart Wilson had written a series of book on RAAF aircraft and approached 38 Squadron for assistance. He was directed to me and I was able to assist him.



Stewart Wilson presenting me with a copy of the book at 38 Squadron Headquarters.

In April of 1989 I was promoted to FSGT and with that came a posting to 2AD – back where I was first posted in 1971 out of Wagga. Still at Richmond. I was going to the 2AD Hydraulic Section Management Office. This was straight across the road from 38 Squadron so I didn't go far.

It was a pure logistic management job and I shared the office with my Warrant Officer. I had had a very good run till now, spending most of my career working directly on aircraft and in operational units. Hanging over every Groundie from Corporal up was a non-operational posting either in a workshop or behind a desk in logistics. Most feared was a posting to Support Command in Melbourne. It was usually a four-year dull job pushing a pen. Yes, it was associated with aircraft maintenance and parts procurement and management but very few liked the work. My job at 2AD was associated with this but at the coal face where the work was done. Our office controlled the activities of a Hydraulic Workshop, Mechanical Component Workshop, Propellor Overhaul Bay, Machine Shop, Welding Shop, Electroplating Workshop and Blacksmith Shop. So I learned a lot there about logistic management and engineering processes. I also had my first exposure to Quality Management.

In October of 1991 I received the excellent news that I was posted back to 35 Squadron. Furthermore I was promoted to Warrant Officer and therefore was going to become the 35 Squadron Warrant Officer Engineer(WOE). I had achieved my dream job.

We left Richmond again heading for Townsville with the same trailer behind our Commodore this time and, with three children. We took our time and gave the kids a treat at Seaworld and Movie World theme parks. At Townsville we were in a great motel for three weeks and the kids loved it – a big adventure.



35 Squadron had moved into the old 10 Squadron and adjacent hangar and was back to Caribou only with six aircraft. The previous 35 Squadron facility now belonged to the Army and housed the Iroquois and Blackhawks of 5 Aviation Regiment. This was probably what the RAAF originally intended for 9 Squadron but the transfer of the RAAF rotary wing assets to Army changed this and indeed 5 and 9 Squadrons were no more.

Even though 35 Squadron had moved facilities, it was still a homecoming of sorts for me. I knew many of the people there and as before Pat O'Reilly, Pat McGee and Lindsay Gorden were there, having also been posted back over the past twelve months. This was the third Caribou posting we had shared. Both Pats were now FSGTs and therefore my right hand men. Their experience was equal to mine so our management team was very strong and these two men made my job very easy.

Pat O'Reilly, even though he was Avionics, had filled in the WOE position for several months and had done a fine job. Everything was ship shape and just as well because we immediately had to prepare to Exercise K92. We were required to move the whole Squadron to Tindal for the duration of the exercise. During my seven-year absence 35 Squadron had become more green and had its own 110 Landrovers and Mercedes Mogs. This started when they assumed the Iroquois Gunship role. Other

changes made were 11 x 11 tents were not used for accommodation. Each man now had his own two man tent. The Squadron had become very well setup for field deployments.

We did a lot of planning to work out how to get the Squadron to Tindal using six Caribou, six Mog trucks and four Landrovers. The men who had been in the Squadron awhile had a good idea of how to set up the loads but we also had some additional exercise requirements which did cause us some problems. To get over to Tindal we had to move within the Army convoy system. There were a lot of convoys on the move during the exercise period and the Army was responsible for coordination and controlling road movement. The Army determined timings and where we stopped and were quite rigid about it. The trip to Tindal took four days.

I was appointed as Convoy Commander and shared a 110 Landrover with Pat O'Reilly. We were responsible for complying with the Army instructions and the safety of our men. The Army Military Police kept a close eye on RAAF convoys due to their convoy inexperience and let's say, a sometime lighthearted approach to situations. The exercise was held in March and Northern Australia was quite hot. Some of these factors created problems for me and the MP's. The first day on the road we had issues. After several hours a Mog carrying water jerrycans called me on the radio and said they were uncomfortable with the handling of the vehicle. We stopped, I had a look and told them to dump half the load. Our next scheduled stop was at a designated refuel point but before this I had called the vehicles several times to check on fuel consumption. Some of the heavily loaded Mogs were marginal so we stopped at an alternate stop designated as an emergency stop. That night we stopped at Richmond at the race track stables. The Army had messing there but the flies were horrendous.

One of the light hearted things the guys did was have water pistols and spray each other on the road and at stops. It was hot and a bit of fun. To keep the guys comfortable, I allowed them to take their shirts off while on the road but put them on at stops noting that we all had tan 35 Squadron T shirts on.

The next day at a fuel stop one of my SGTS was noticed by an MP putting his shirt on while walking to get some snacks. He was challenged by an MP, who severely berated him. The MP was a Corporal and the SGT took exception at this public dressing down. They had words. The MP stormed off.

We overnighted at Mt Isa. During this leg we had noticed the MPs had passed us a couple of times in their sedans. We envied their air conditioning and speed – the Mogs could only do 80kph flat out due to the load.

Now, we were not strictly complying to regulations. All the vehicles had Eskys and some had Engel Fridges for soft drinks. At the bottom of each we also had some beers – these were not permitted. At each overnight stop, after we had eaten the guys would inspect their vehicles. I was allowing the guys to have two cans each at this time and then to make sure the empties could not be found. The empties were rolled into the scrim (netting) we had for camouflaging the vehicles during the exercise.

From Mt Isa we headed off to Tennant Creek however we did have a short detour and did a quick sight-seeing trip at Mary Kathleen – it cost us all of 20 minutes. Then on to the long drive to Tennant Creek. Tennant Creek was well set up for the night inside a warehouse – quite comfortable. However upon arrival, I was summoned to a headquarters area to take a phone call. The phone call was from the Duty Officer at Support Command in Melbourne. He said, you have upset the Army with the antics of your convoy and then proceeded to tell me a list of breaches.

Left Townsville without properly fueling the vehicles. They deduced this from my decision to take the alternate early fuel stop.

Made an unscheduled stop for 20 minutes. This was when we dumped water to reduce the load on the vehicle.

Improperly dressed – not wearing shirts.

Childish games – the water pistols

Speeding- we could only go as quick as the slowest vehicle which was 80kph.

I made explanations and he was ok but then said there is an Army Major MP about to dress you down – be careful.

So the Major and I had a discussion – he was quite aggressive and reluctant to accept what I said. I had him on safety in regard to dumping water. He told me that if I was concerned about fuel consumption I should have used the emergency Gerry cans of fuel we carried. I told him that is not what they are for – they are for an emergency and why would you use it if there was an alternate fuel stop available. Army logic is different to RAAF logic. The water pistols – I just said it was light hearted fun on a boring trip. And then we got onto speeding. He said they had followed us at different times and his MPs thought we were speeding – the nice air conditioned sedans we had seen. Then he dropped a bombshell. We had been tracked during the day by an Army aircraft. He said you seemed to behave yourselves on that last leg. I was getting cranky because there was a lot of assuming going on. I offered him to drive our slowest Mog and see how fast he could go. He didn't like it but took it no further. Finally he started to give me a serve about our dress and bearing and the removal of our shirts. I simply said it was a safety matter. I was doing everything possible to keep the guys comfortable and shirts off was a simple but welcome thing, and sir, this is a bit rich coming from your MPs travelling in air conditioned sedans. We came to an agreement – we could drive up toward Tindal with shirts off but when we entered the Area of Operations shirts must be on.

They never cottoned on that we were having beers every night.

The next day we got to Tindal. The aircraft were already there and our area worked out. There was a funny moment when the scrim was dropped from the vehicles and a bunch of beer cans fell on the ground. I had a word to the CO about the Army Major and the accusations and he was not concerned. As far as the beers we had each night he was happy with our self imposed limit of two cans and not bothered.

The exercise conditions for us at Tindal were harsh. Squadron management took the option to do it hard and our camp was in the long grass scrub between two taxiways. It was very hot and humid. There were no breezes. As the exercise progressed jet aircraft were taxiing at all hours. So when you are running three shifts it becomes difficult for the men to get any sort of decent rest. Errors started happening for both the maintenance crews and the aircrews. After two and a half weeks aircrew started having days off in air-conditioned huts. These air-conditioned huts were made available to us from day one but we took the hard option. After three weeks the maintenance crews were also getting days off in the air-conditioned huts. We all became tired and I crawled under a Mog one day and slept for four hours. This featured as a cartoon in our Wallaby Airline magazine.



The WOE at Tindal – K92

In the exercise washup the RAAF took notice of our issues and it started the ball rolling on how to manage a working regime in adverse conditions.

After four weeks we got back in our vehicles and convoyed home. I was not Convoy Commander however – the Equipment Officer got the job. We had pre planned this so it had nothing to do with my run ins with the Army. And we still had our shirts off and had beers at night. Ohh, we also stopped at a pub and had a counter lunch.

In November 1992 the first official retirement of a Caribou took place. I mention this because it was Caribou A4-164, the aircraft I had assisted to dismantle in PNG in 1978. We had a flypast with it and our other six aircraft and when it landed it was retired. When it was determined what was to be done with it, was flown again to Amberley and then eventually to Richmond.

In 1993 it was the 51st Birthday for 35 Squadron so the PR people did a spread and we had a cake and some pictures with a Wallaby.



For the next few years things rolled along for me quite nicely. I had been well prepared to be WOE of 35 Squadron and had a good bunch of blokes working for me. There were some substantial changes coming to the way maintenance was being managed and how the maintenance workforce was organised.

When I arrived at 35 Squadron in 1992 the SENG was SQNLDR "Crud" Crowley. I think he was there for about eighteen months and then posted out. I got on ok with Crud and many years later I saw him at Wagga where he was a Group Captain and Officer Commanding the Base. When I went to visit him at his headquarters the Admino would not let me see him without an appointment. Crud must have heard something because he stuck his head out of the office. When he saw me it was like old mates and he called me straight in for a chinwag.

Remember I had earlier mentioned that in the 70's and 80's we were still using the tooling from Vietnam. It had not changed when I got back in 1992. I made it my business to get our tooling up to date and eventually convinced all the necessary people to make this happen. I had worked with the Defence Snap On Tools representative at 2AD and had him come to Townsville to show us what he could do. It was a worthwhile exercise because we finished up with much better tooling in an excellent mobile toolboard made to our specifications. I was very satisfied with my efforts.

Crud was replaced by SQNLDR Tom Grieves. Tom was an ex Instrument Fitter. There was trepidation when we heard he was coming because he had just completed an F18 posting with the US Marines. We thought we were going to get a gung ho go get em tough SENG. No, we got a fine man who was an excellent man manager and understood his troops well. He also bought a new level of professionalism and introduced me to Configuration Control – something that the old Caribou sort of didn't have applied at times. It was exercises that we dreaded with him, expecting that we would do it the Marine way – tough. Well, we did do it the Marine way – Tom said they don't do it hard unless they have to. I still chat to Tom occasionally and he has very fond memories of 35 Squadron and he is very proud of the blokes who worked for him.



35 Squadron WOE and 35 Squadron SENGO(SQNLDR Tom Grieves)

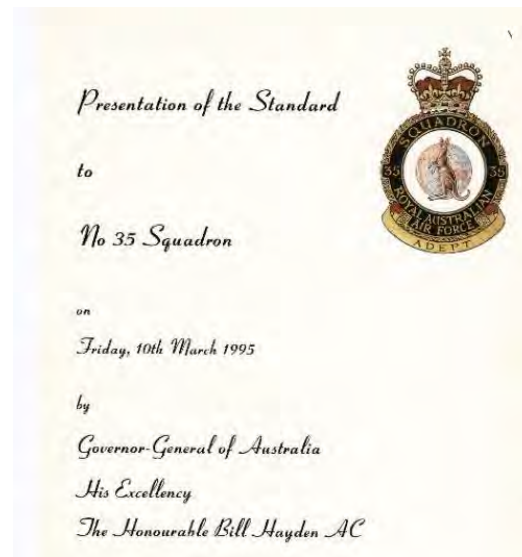
I did two more major exercises with 35 Squadron. We did a full Squadron Swift Eagle exercise at Lakeland Downs. When the recce was done a month before the exercise it looked like it would be a good set up being located on the short grass next to the airstrip. When we flew in, the grass had just been burnt off and there was just black stubble. Not very nice and with the wind a lot of guys got burnt grass in their eyes. As exercises go it was pretty easy but we had some incidents. One of our troops had some personal issues and had to be sent home. An Airframe SGT got a serious injury jumping out of a Mog and smashed his heel. We were "attacked" one night and a flare was fired. The burning flare settled on a tent attached to the flight line tent so there was a mad scramble to put out the fire. Two reasons – the 11 x 11 tents burn very quickly and, this was our first exercise with NVG gear and it was stored in that tent. A more serious incident occurred when a Kiwi Loadmaster (we were operating with a Kiwi Squadron) in the middle of the night challenged a SAS Soldier who was putting a bomb at the nose of a Caribou. There was a scuffle and the Kiwi who has his pistol in hand, was shot in his own thigh with a blank. It was actually a serious injury as the gunpowder and plastic fragments where in his thigh. And one more. In the middle of the exercise one of the aircraft developed an undercarriage problem so I went back to Townsville with it to supervise our skeleton crew in affecting repairs. Our hangar was being used by other Squadrons during the exercise and when I went into MY office, there was an LAC with his feet on my desk reading a magazine out of one of my drawers. We had words and then I had words with his WOE.

We had a first class semi professional artist in the Squadron at this time. He was an Airframe Fitter and did pencil drawings. For the Presentation of the Standard to 35 Squadron he did a series of drawings and one depicted the Swift Eagle exercise at Lakeland Downs.



The person with the Fire Extinguisher is John Cowie, a Safety Equipment Worker.

In March 1995, 35 Squadron was presented with the Squadron standard. I felt honored to be in the Squadron at this time as a big part of my RAAF career was with 35 Squadron. I was given an additional honour when the CO asked me to go to Melbourne to view the Standard and if acceptable, take charge of it and escort it to Townville. This meant I was the very first Squadron member to view the Standard.



I was the Parade Warrant Officer

Although the parade was small – we were not a big Squadron, it went well. The only nerve wracking part for me was to march out first and get the ball rolling. After that I just kept following the CO.



WOE WW2 Squadron member R Masson CO WGCDR Terry Connolly

At the time of the presentation of the Squadron Standard

In 1996 there was another Kangaroo exercise and this time the Squadron was split in two. The majority went to Tindal again. A small detachment of two aircraft went to Weipa. I went to Weipa. A first it was thought we got the raw end of the stick. It was the opposite. The guys at Tindal this time were in good accommodation but were well a long way from the aircraft, had transportation problems, had a lot of extra duties and the Base ran a serious operation. It was not fun. At Weipa it was different. Sure we were in our little two man tents and had to dig pits but overall it was pretty tame and easy going. The junior Engineering Officer who was inexperienced was in charge of us but after a few days it was clear he was floundering a bit so I had a word with the SENG0 at Tindal. The guy was moved to Tindal and I was in charge of the Maintenance crew. We didn't do a lot of flying but this didn't really reduce our maintenance requirement – we still had to have the aircraft on line. At one stage one of the aircraft went to Tindal for a few days so that did reduce our workload. We didn't have to much Ground defence work except for one night when we were attacked by SAS in vehicles. This was nearly a real disaster. The SAS had done a recce during the day and noted where the aircraft and equipment was. When they came in that night, they charged in between the two aircraft. What they didn't realise was one had gone out late in the afternoon for a short task and when it came back we parked it on the other side of the aircraft from where it had left. This changed everything. Our Oxygen Trolley was now between the aircraft. SAS nearly collided with this trolley which they did not expect. They were at speed and after avoiding the trolley had to swing around and went through where our tents were. By luck they didn't hit any people or tents. I ordered lights on and this stopped anymore activity.

This exercise was the first where I was involved in managing a Charge. At Stand To one morning one of my men had challenged a person walking in to our lines. The guy didn't respond and kept coming so my man "shot" him. Turns out he was the cook who had gone for a smoke. So the cook was shot by his own side and there was much laughter. The Ground Defence guys took a dim view and my man was charged with an Unauthorised Discharge. A bit messy but it came to nothing in the end.

With the easy pace of this exercise I was able to release two men everyday and they were able to take a vehicle into town to enjoy a "porcelain crapper", a real shower, grab some snacks and use a telephone to call home. They were also able to go to the swimming pool. As the SENG0 had told me,

don't do it hard if you don't have to. This was my last exercise with 35 Squadron and it was quite enjoyable.

During this posting I became involved with the RAAF Base Townsville Museum – now the RAAF Townsville Aviation Heritage Centre (RTAHC) and indeed so did the SENGO, Tom Grieves. The Museum was loosely connected to the Base and was an unofficial Museum. Tom and I provided RAAF oversight. The Mustang was the centerpiece of the Museum and every week my job was to tow the aircraft from the 35 Squadron Hangar(H75) to the Museum on Sunday morning and then back in the afternoon. The Mustang was about 90% complete. It had been assembled properly and the work was documented. We had aimed to make it suitable for a complete restoration to enable it to fly knowing that it probably would never fly.

Not long after the Weipa exercise I was informed of a posting to Wagga. This was not welcome as obviously I wanted to stay a bit longer. The RAAF does have protocols about posting people to ensure everybody is treated fairly. When my posting out was issued, at the same time Pat McGee was promoted into my WOE position. Why was he not posted out as we had arrived at 35 Squadron at about the same time. Because he arrived a few days after I did and that made me longer serving at Townsville than him and I was classified as Least Claim To Area – LCA – so I had to go.

But then it was a posting to my wife's hometown. We thought about it but there was no strong pull to go to dreary Wagga. We were at the location we had intended to settle so that was a strong factor.

As we all did when posted somewhere. I called the section at Wagga where I was posted to. The FSGT who I spoke to was ex 35 Squadron and he was in the WOFF role at the time. He couldn't understand why I was posted there because the cell they were in was due to close in six months. I called Postings and we discussed this. He asked where I got the information and simply said you know everybody calls about where they are posted to. I asked what was going to happen after the cell was closed down and he had no answer. I suggested this was unsatisfactory.

It was not looking promising. I had always had at the back of my mind that I could get a job with the Contractor looking after Black Hawk and Chinook so I made some enquiries with some mates working at Hunter Aerospace. Before I knew it I had an interview with the Program Manager. He was an ex RAAF WOE so the interview was straight forward. The only problem was although I was rotary wing experienced I was not trained on Black Hawk or Chinook. I had an idea and told him I would see what I could do.

Defence have what they call Resettlement Training and will pay to give you additional training to get a job. I made the unusual request to do a Blackhawk course via the Army Aviation Training Centre at Oakey. It needed both RAAF and Army approval and it was indicated that it could happen. I then called postings and told them I would not take the posting and was discharging instead. Their only comment was fair enough, you are the third Warrant Officer to discharge as a result of this posting.

There was a fair bit of administration involved but I got the ball rolling and was guaranteed a job with Hunter Aerospace when I had completed the course. However, the Army course was not required as Hunter Aerospace needed about 10 people trained and arranged to have Sikorsky to run a course at Townsville. I jumped on this course.

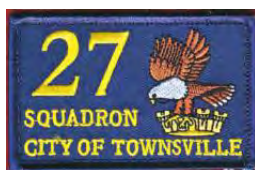
The big decision had been made and I was going to leave the RAAF. We immediately started looking for a house and this turned out to be relatively easy so in April we moved into our first home. At the Squadron things were already bypassing me such as planning activities – Pat was incoming WOE and became more involved. It was a very good transition for the Squadron. 35 Squadron never needed to much of an excuse to have a function and my posting did result in a mixed hangar function. It was a wonderful send off with speeches and a bit of a roasting for me. I gave a speech on my career and I based it on hats I used as props. An Apprentice hat, a 35 Sqn cap, a 38 Sqn cap, An MFO Beret, A WOFF hat and it seemed to work in telling the story.

Seven days before discharge I had my last Caribou trip and went on a New Guinea trainer. This was something 35 squadron was able to do for all members posted out. I had done this trip one year earlier but this was special – it was my last trip with the RAAF and indeed on my second last day in the RAAF I would be flying back from Pt Moresby. But.....the aircraft became unserviceable and I was going to miss my discharge date, which was a Friday. The CO was on my trip so after a few calls it was arranged that the Base would open on Saturday morning to administer my discharge.

The last hour of the flight into Townsville was a bit sad. When we landed the aircraft taxied very slowly into the lines and when I jumped off the ramp - I was blasted by a fire hose. Thanks guys. The whole Squadron was there, late on a Friday afternoon – wonderful. The CO then shared a bottle of champagne with me. And that was the end of my Permanent Air Force Career. However I was not finished with the RAAF.

So on Saturday morning I fronted up to the Base Squadron Orderly Room and 20 minutes I was out. Most discharging people will tell you it is a real anticlimax and this was no different. There is no thanks, no pat on the back, not acknowledgement of serving. It was simply an LACW taking your ID Card and having you sign some documents and then - That's it Sir, you may go. Well, I wasn't even Sir anymore. On Monday morning I reported for work at Hunter Aerospace.

I am not going to go in detail my work at Hunter Aerospace. But there is relevance to my RAAF career because I was working for a Contractor maintaining ADF Aircraft. As all ADF aircraft are managed by the RAAF, our contract was a RAAF contract and all maintenance was managed in accordance with RAAF Regulations and Publications. The bottom line was I was wearing civilian clothes but was working no different to what I was in the RAAF. I initially was working as a tradesman but after completing one full Blackhawk servicing (it took three months) I was pulled off the hangar floor and into management. This was why the Program Manager took me on. Over the next few years I wore many hats – Resource Coordinator, Quality Manager, MCS Coordinator, Workplace health and Safety Officer, GSE Controller. I had most of these jobs at the same time but as we grew I was able to shed them and when BAE Systems took over I only had Quality and Safety. Further down the track I also dropped Safety. We were doing a lot more work and regularly had eight aircraft in the facility and at one stage had twelve. To illustrate how close to the RAAF we were, every year I attended the RAAF Senior Maintenance Managers Conference at RAAF Williams. I remained with BAE Systems until they ceased operating at Townsville in 2017 and I fully retired at age sixty five.



My RAAF career did not really end after discharge because I became a member of 27 Squadron in the RAAF Active Reserve (RAAFAR). 27 Squadron had a Maintenance Flight which worked directly with 35 Squadron on weekends. I became 27 squadron WOE and was back looking after Caribou Maintenance at 35 Squadron on weekends.. Until I became part of 27 Squadron, the support to 35 Sqn was OK but not dependable at times. I made it my business to make 27 Squadron Maintenance Flight an invaluable resource for 35 Squadron and largely succeeded. Within a few years we picked a few more people discharged from 35 Squadron and I had some of my team back with me – including Pat McGee. We got to a point where on paper, 27 Squadron had more experience on Caribou than 35 Squadron and this was backed up by how efficiently we could carry out major tasks. We could do an Engine change in two days where as 35 Squadron was taking three or four. Where we really were able to backup 35 Squadron was over Christmas standown. 35 Squadron was able to allow all members to go on leave knowing that we would keep things ticking over and when they were back from leave the aircraft were ready to go.



Apart from the men in the white shirt and blue shirt, all 27 Squadron RAAFAR who were working at Hunter Aerospace



27 Squadron Maintenance Flight

Being in the RAAF Reserve allowed me to continue working with the Museum and the Mustang however ill winds were blowing. The RAAF Museum at Point Cook had other ideas and came to Townsville to discuss the future of the Mustang. It was no discussion. Vic Perry no longer had an interest in the Aircraft and the Curator at Point Cook decided that the aircraft had to go back to Point Cook. They had two reasons. Because Point Cook was flying a Mustang, they were required to have an attrition aircraft available and, we at Townsville were not capable of looking after the aircraft. I had a heated discussion with the Curator. I suggested the cost of flying a C130 up to Townsville with a crew, dismantle and box the aircraft and then take it to Point Cook would cover the cost of ongoing maintenance at Townsville for many years. The decision had already been made and I was wasting my breath. The Mustang is still at Point Cook in its boxes.

Around 2000 the RAAF completely changed the way it managed aircraft maintenance and created the Technical Airworthiness Management Manual (TAAM). This became my bible at both BAE and 27 Squadron. I had to know it backwards as I was responsible for compliance. Most RAAFAR units had difficulty complying to requirements due to their maintenance personnel at all levels falling behind and not remaining current because they were not working in ADF aircraft maintenance. At 27 Squadron apart from myself, about half of 27 Squadron Maintenance Flight was working on Blackhawk and Chinook either at BAE Systems or directly with the Army at 5 Avn Regt. The upshot is many RAAFAR units could no longer support aircraft maintenance while we powered on. I was in the fortunate position that I was knowledgeable and current and able to argue for us to continue to support Caribou maintenance.



27 SQN Senior Maintenance Manager – 2004 -Caribou 285

My Caribou career was bookended with this aircraft

I was also very busy at BAE Systems maintaining ADF aircraft and had another 13 years ahead of me. During these 13 years I did not have a lot to do with RAAF Base Townsville but was closely associated with 5 Avn Regt. We had work taking place at the Regiment so I often had to go over to carry out quality inspections and sort out any issues. Over this time 35 Squadron disappeared – absorbed into the Wing to support the Timor action and never to come back as it was. 35 Squadron remained as a Squadron on paper and for a time only had several personnel but little else. The Squadron Standard was not laid up and was kept with the 38 Squadron Standard. 38 Squadron moved to Townsville and effectively replaced 35 Squadron.



In 2009 the Caribou was retired from the RAAF. The end came a little earlier than expected due to an apparent structural failure of a wing centre section when Caribou A4-285 did a landing at PNG. Yes, this was A4-285, the first Caribou I had my major trip in - to PNG. The structural failure was not a normal fatigue failure as there were other factors involved. The aircraft was dismantled in situ and some of it came back to Australia.

To farewell the aircraft, a big function was held at Townsville. It included a get together during the day with a flying demonstration and in the evening, a hangar function. The function was very well attended by people including a lot of Vietnam veterans. I certainly met a lot of old workmates. One of the problems I do have is I had five postings in my Caribou life and I get people mixed up as to when I served with them.

Some who knew me back at Richmond were amazed at my number of postings on the Caribou Squadrons. There is little doubt that I have more time on Caribou than anyone else.

January 1973 – May 1984

July 1984 – March 1989

January 1992 – August 2005.

Since 2018 I have been involved with RTAHC A4-199.

I also probably have more time in 35 Squadron than anyone else. Very fortunate.

Jan 1973 – Jun 1976.

May 1978 – May 1984

Jan 1992 – Aug 1996

I served under a lot of CO's in both 35 and 38 Squadrons and all bar one were good men and respected. With three postings at 35 Squadron it is very likely I served under more 35 Squadron CO's than any other person.

SQNLD Smithies, WGCDR Belford, WGCDR Melvin, WGCDR Egle, WGCDR Staal, WGCDR Foster, WGCDR White, WGCDR Connolly WGCDR Tasker

I also served under a number of 38 Squadron CO's but will make mention of WGCDR Weekes. He was a terrific CO and treated everybody very well.

It is quite obvious that my working life centered around the Caribou. Even though I have tried to balance my writing its also clear that I have a strong connection to 35 Squadron. I had three very different eras with Wallaby Airlines and they were all very happy times for me. 35 Squadron has an Association and I did join it during the 1990's. Unfortunately, at that time it was very Vietnam focused and had no interest in the post-Vietnam people or activities. Some ten years ago the Association realised that their members were getting on and if they were going to survive, they needed to think beyond Vietnam. They have done this and with 35 Squadron back as a full Squadron, operating the Spartan, the Association has connected with the Squadron There have been some activities with the Squadron and the Association now welcomes all. However I felt there was still a gap and several years ago I created and administer the Wallaby Airlines Townsville Facebook page. It is for members who have served with Wallaby Airlines at Townsville as that is where 35 Squadron has been lodged the longest. However, I would never reject any 35 Squadron person who has not served at Townsville. We are not an Association and I encourage all on the Wallaby Airlines Townsville page to join the official 35 Squadron Association. The Facebook page has been very successful and the members post lots of photos and tell outrageous stories, some true.



35 SQN Parade as a CPL – late 1970's



35 SQN Parade Mid as SQN WOFF1990's

In 2017 BAE Systems ceased operating at Townsville and I retired from full time work. As it turned out I was the longest serving employee at Hunter Aerospace/BAE Systems. Our Blackhawk work had ceased about 18 months earlier as the Blackhawks moved out of Townsville and were replaced with the MRH90. We continued on with supporting Chinook until that contract was up. The Army then changed the way they wanted major maintenance done on Chinook by bringing the work in house using contract labour. BAE Systems did not do labour only work and did not bid for the contract. I was then made redundant with perfect timing as I was not quite 65 and was able to take full advantage of the redundancy. This effectively finished my aircraft maintenance career with the ADF. From the age of 16 to 65 I had been fully employed in ADF aircraft maintenance without a break.



From 2005 after I discharged from the RAAFAR, until retirement in 2017, I did not have anything to do with the RAAF Townsville Museum but it was always something I was going to go back to. In 2017 I approached the Curator and indicated that I wanted to be involved. I was welcomed back. Not long before I came back RAAF History and Heritage took over control of a number of RAAF Museums, including Townsville and it became the RAAF Townsville Aviation Heritage Centre – RTAHC. This resulted in the Museum being managed by three RAAFAR members and being part of the RAAF organisation. This was a much better and totally professional way to operate and I was very pleased to come into such an organisation. Although I have Volunteer status now, I feel very much that I am back with the RAAF and enjoying an opportunity to contribute to RAAF History and Heritage. I hope this will continue for many years.

Chas Van Hulsentop

May 2020

