

- For 12 months, a flight of RAAF Caribou transport aircraft has operated in support of the military effort in South Vietnam. Three members of the flight have been decorated. This article describes their work and some of the hazards they face.

# CARIBOU OPERATE UNDER FIRE

**VUNG TAU:** As the RAAF Caribou flew over the South Vietnam airstrip, a Vietnamese soldier fired a smoke flare which showed the wind exactly at right-angles to the strip.

The two RAAF pilots looked at each other as if to say, "Wouldn't you know it — it's all we need, a short strip, maximum load on board, and now a cross-wind."

Then the Caribou started its sharp spiral descent almost directly above the runway, a technique adopted by the RAAF to minimise the danger from enemy ground fire from outside the airfield boundaries.

Touching down almost on the very end of the runway, the Caribou raced along the noisy metal strip until it seemed it would stop right off the end.

Seconds later, the aircraft was braked violently to a stop by the action of the reversible pitch propellers and brakes, and it stopped a few feet short of the far end of the strip.

## ALL HANDS HELP

Eager hands, military and civilian, helped to unload the dozens of bags of rice which formed the main cargo. The airstrip was at Hai Yen, a small settlement 185 miles south-west of Saigon, whose only means of support was by air.

Viet Cong troops had cut all roads leading to the settlement. It was another routine landing for the RAAF men, who fly the Caribou aircraft every day in all parts of South Vietnam.

They are members of the RAAF Transport Flight stationed at this base, 50 miles south-west of Saigon.

The aircraft deliver tons of food, ammunition, men and equipment to airstrips ranging from heavily defended air bases, to dirt strips barely long enough to take the aircraft. Some are safe from the Viet Cong only during daylight hours.

To keep the aircraft serviceable, RAAF ground crews are working 24 hours a day at Vung Tau, under much less than ideal conditions.

With the arrival of the moon-

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soon season, daily storms make servicing doubly difficult.

Very often they carry a load of Vietnamese paratroopers who jump from the Caribou over a training field near the base.

The Caribou picks up the first of its loads and sets out for the long haul around the air bases, either north of Saigon, up to near the border of North Vietnam, or south down to the tip of the Mekong delta.

During a typical day, the crews may land at as many as 10 strips, particularly in the delta. The cargo handled could range from food and arms, to soldiers, civilians and livestock.

Some of the aircraft have been hit by ground fire, despite the flying technique, but none has been seriously damaged.

Aircrews wear flak vests to protect them from light ground fire, and their seats are protected with a new kind of armour plate.

All the original members of the flight, which was formed late last year, have now served their tour and returned to Australia.

Under the command of Sqn Ldr Douglas Harvey, DFC, of Gosford, NSW, present members of the flight are determined to maintain or even better the record established by the first comers.

## Race Against Viet Cong

One of the proudest claims the RAAF men in Vietnam can make is that they have recovered two badly damaged Caribou aircraft from small airfields in the country, under difficult and dangerous conditions.

The first aircraft was damaged recently when taxiing along a dirt strip after heavy monsoonal rains.

Mud had filled a hole in the



Cpl Wark



Flt Lt Raymond



LAC Gwin



A special helping hand for an old Vietnamese couple making their first aircraft flight. LAC Trevor Pratt, loadmaster, fixes the lap straps of this couple being carried by RAAF Caribou between two Mekong delta settlements. Caribou cargoes range from babies and old folk to food, arms and livestock.

runway, and the aircraft, landing at speed, passed over it without incident, but when taxiing back over it, the nosewheel sank into the mud, collapsing the whole wheel assembly.

The strip was not secure from the Viet Cong after dark, and the crew had to be flown by US helicopter back to their base before nightfall.

Next morning, a group of selected ground crew, with some US Army men among them, arrived, and within daylight hours, made temporary repairs to the nosewheel.

The pilots were able to fly the Caribou back to Vung Tau, just before dark, with all wheels down, and at reduced flying speed.

Had the repairs not been completed that day, and the aircraft left there overnight, there was a grave risk that the Viet Cong in the area would have destroyed it on the ground.

☆☆☆

In the other recovery, RAAF men made major repairs to a damaged aircraft at Hai Yen, south of Saigon.

The strip is outside the fortified settlement which protects the people of the village, which at the time was being harassed by Viet Cong.

The work party of RAAF

men and US Army technicians had to confine their activities to daylight hours, and at night retreat into the defended settlement for protection.

During the four days and nights it took to repair the aircraft, the settlement was attacked by Viet Cong forces, and all the men but one, it was their first time under direct fire.

The aircraft had first to be jacked up in the mud where it had slewed off the runway, while the damaged mainplate was removed by muscle power alone.

The damaged starboard undercarriage was removed, and a hole dug and laid with metal strips, so that a new leg could be fitted. The nosewheel was dug out of the mud, and the aircraft was towed by truck back onto the runway. This part of the repair took two days.

A new wing (with US Army markings) was delivered by US helicopter, and fitted, as well as a new propeller.

Instruments were replaced or repaired and new flaps and airbrons fitted.

The engines could now be tested, and the aircraft checked.

A US helicopter returned with the aircrew, on the last day and they eventually flew the Caribou off at reduced speed back to base.

## OUR FIRST VIETNAM AWARDS

Three members of the RAAF have been awarded Mention in Dispatches for operational service in Vietnam.

They are: Flt Lt Ronald George Raymond, pilot, of Maroubra, NSW; Cpl Robert Maxwell Wark, engine fitter, of Budgewoi, NSW; and LAC Daniel Michael Gwin, engine fitter of Wagga, NSW.

All three completed tours of duty with the RAAF Caribou Transport Flight in South Vietnam and were decorated for courage under fire or the threat of fire in operational support of ground forces in Vietnam.

### CITATIONS

The citation for Flt Lt Raymond's award said that "during eight flare dropping missions, his task was to illuminate the target and direct fighters into the attack. He repeatedly remained over the target area even when bad weather forced him to fly low, although this meant that his own aircraft was illuminated and subjected to repeated ground fire."

The citation added that his efforts often resulted in the defeat or withdrawal of the enemy forces, thus saving much loss of life in the friendly forces and hamlets under attack.

Flt Lt Raymond has flown a total of over 4,200 hours including 338 during his recent operational tours.

The citation for Cpl Wark's MID said that "when a member of a party salvaging a crashed Caribou aircraft from a forward landing ground in South Vietnam in November-December, 1964, he continued to work in the open even though enemy mortar fire was constantly expected, and prepared the crashed aircraft for maximum possible recovery."

The citation added: "The courage and devotion to duty displayed by Cpl Wark in the threat of hostile fire set an outstanding example to his fellow workers."

Cpl Wark enlisted in the RAAF in 1954. He completed a tour with RAAF Transport Flight, Vietnam, from July, 1964, to March, 1965.

### LOADMASTER

The citation for LAC Gwin's award said that "while flying as a loadmaster in Caribou aircraft, his action under fire was cool and courageous and his accurate return fire was at all times most effective."

The citation added: "Leading Aircraftman Gwin's courage and skill in the face of hostile fire set an outstanding example to others."

LAC Gwin enlisted in the RAAF in 1953 and completed apprentice training, graduating as an engine fitter. He completed a tour with RAAF Transport Flight Vietnam from July, 1964, to February, 1965.

His total flying experience is 450 hours and, of these 420 hours were on operations during his recent tour.



A RAAF Caribou crew returns to Vung Tau after a 16-hour day. They are: (from left): LAC Trevor Pratt, loadmaster; Flt Off Colin Gentry, pilot; LAC George Harrison, assistant loadmaster; and Plt Off Trevor Eiberidge, pilot.