

## The flight of Caribou A-140 from Timor to Darwin on 04 September 1975 The Keirman French story

*This is the story of the tiny island country of Timor, while engrossed in political mayhem in 1975 and the epic refugee flight of RAAF Caribou A-104 transcribed from an interview with Flying Officer Keirman French in 2002*

“I was due to go to New Guinea with Burstell and Dave Henry was the CO up there. He turned around and said I don’t want French in New Guinea, I don’t want Burstell in New Guinea and I definitely don’t want them both here at the same time. So, I didn’t get sent to New Guinea and the Timor relief came up. And what had happened, the Portuguese Colony of Timor was in turmoil because the Portuguese government had problems back home and weren’t administrating the colony so there was an attempted coup.

The students who tried to take control took over the police garrison with all the arms, attempted to take over the Colony of Timor. But when once the soldiers had fled Timor to Atauro which was the neighbouring island, the students were effectively in control. And they were called the Union of Democratic Timor (UDT). But once they’d done that the real rebels, who were the Fretilin, who were communist based, decided to break into the army’s arsenal. They were at war with the UDT and that’s when we were called in to administer International Red Cross aid.

So, we were seconded to the International Red Cross. They painted a red cross where the kangaroo was on the roundels. We wore Red Cross badges, no weapons no insignia apart from the Red Cross badge and every day we were tasked to fly to Timor and supply one side of the fighting force, which was the UDT, half the supplies and then we’d give the other half to the Fretilin and this went on for a couple of weeks.

Each day at the end of the day after getting rid of all the supplies we’d fill the plane with refugees and bring them back to Darwin. This went on as I said for about two weeks.

Then eventually the Fretilin got the upper hand and the UDT who’d fled to Bauca by this stage were in the process of surrendering on the last day we went in. They’d a line of ammunition on the tarmac and a white flag in the tower.



The White Flag of Surrender

And in the background, you could hear the Fretilin forces advancing just by the lobbing of mortars. That particular photo there, which you can't see on this recorder, is of the newsman (The Balibo 5) who were killed. We met them before they went out to Balibo where they were shot. But they were walking around in army fatigues with backpacks on. The Indonesians didn't ask questions, they just shot them and worried about the consequence's later.



The Balibo Five killed in October 1975

At one stage there, we were told not to bring any, or in fact on the day we got highjacked we were told not to bring any refugees back. And what happened in the morning, we left Darwin we went to Dili, gave the first half of the supplies to what was left of the Fretilin there, then we flew up the coast and landed at Baucaua which was headquarters of the UDT and unloaded the supplies there. We noticed they were in the process of surrendering so they were quite unorganised. There were soldiers running around and no one knew what was happening. Once we unloaded the supplies and told the Red Cross doctor there that we couldn't take any people because we weren't allowed to bring any people back. They'd cancelled that, that morning as it turned out and the soldiers there got quite agitated and one of them walked over to the line of ammunition which was laying on the tarmac picked up an M8 and put a full clip in, cocked it, brought it back and put it in my stomach and jibbered away in Portuguese. Although we couldn't understand, the thrust of his argument was that we were to fill the plane with people and take them out, mainly he and his partners and his wife and kids.

So, we didn't do much but at the time. Apart from just trying to explain to him through an interpreter that we weren't allowed to take any people out. This wasn't good enough, so he went across then and sat on the tail of the Caribou and when anyone tried to approach, he just threatened us with the machine gun which was cocked and fully armed. He was frothing at the mouth, he was red in the eyes, he was crying, obviously had a full breakdown. And for about 4 or 5 hours it was a stalemate where we were stuck on the tarmac not allowed to approach the aircraft and all his fellow soldiers were all getting a bit agitated by this stage. They all started picking up the weapons and running around and waving them shouting and carrying on and this went for 4 or 5 hours till close to dark. At which stage we realised we had to resolve it one way or another because there was no electricity on the island, there was no generators anymore. The island was in darkness. And also, the Fretilin forces were getting closer and closer, and we didn't want to be found in the enemy territory having supplied them with supplies.

The situation was getting more and more frantic we also missed our ops-normal calls which we were giving to Sydney every hour, there was no flight planning done as such. Cause it was all restricted airspace you weren't allowed to fly across there but were given special permission so there was no flight plans we just gave an ops-normal call every hour including when we were on the ground. At this stage because we hadn't called for four or five hours the air force had scrambled an Orion and he was on route from Edinburgh to come up and look for the wreckage or whatever. They had no idea, just that we hadn't called for 4 or 5 hours.

Then we pushed his wife over towards the aircraft to try and calm him down, the main soldier, the others were still running around agitated, but for the main soldier who was sitting on the ramp. We pushed his wife over to try to talk some sense into him and he gestured that she gets on board which she did. She climbed up the back ladder and got aboard and a few of her friends followed reluctantly because there was a lot of weapons floating around. And finally, after we got a procession of 10 or 15 people walking over, he then started waving people over including all his friends. Which at this stage we realised the only way were going to get out of there was to actually put people on board and get out before the Fretilin arrived that night and also before total dark.

He wasn't satisfied till we couldn't fit anymore in. Even though we only had 29 seats we ended up with a total of 54 people including three goats, a couple of nuns, villages, soldiers etc etc

I put the co-pilot inside to try and arrange them, the co-pilot and the engineer (the Loadmaster) was inside trying to seat them. The co-pilot and myself were then outside trying to disarm them as they got on. Most of them wouldn't give up their weapons and so we let them go, they had hand grenades machines guns and pistols and that onboard.

In the end then, because we ran out of seats, they sat up in the tail of the Caribou and if I think from memory we had 8 or 9 actually sitting in the tail. *On the door?* Yeah, the Caribou has jettison rods and we were always told if you stand on them the doors would jettison. That didn't matter that we ended up with about 8 of them sitting up there. The doors didn't jettison for some reason.

The weight and balance was just a guess and also the weight for take-off was a bit of a guess and when he (the Loadmaster) finally realised when you couldn't fit no more people in we closed the door. I couldn't get from the back of the aircraft to the front so I had to break the safety seal, the copper wire on the front escape hatch, climb in the escape hatch and up into the cockpit.

No one was strapped in of course they were just jammed in like sardines.

We then realised it was just about dark and we would have to get airborne so we taxied out no fire guard for the start. None of that what you'd normally do, the loadmasters would stand out there with the fire extinguisher in case of a fire. We just started one and taxied on the one while we started the other and then just as we were entering the runway one of the engines died and we put that down to a fuel problem which we'd had that morning out of Darwin. It was intermittent so rather than stop we kept taxing on one

started it on the run and it started again. I don't know what it was, some sort of fuel blockage. Then we lined up, the runway strip is quite long 6 or 7000 feet we used every bit of it to take off.

And the Loadmaster said he got to 34000 which is the weight which was your maximum ferry weight with bladder tank. I think the actual normal maximum weight was 28500 pounds and he said, "I got to 34 and a half," oh Jesus I said that's the ferry weight he said "no, that was halfway down the left-hand side" he hadn't continued counting everyone else on board, he gave up when he estimated the weight at 34000

So, on Thursday we don't know how heavy we were, when we contacted de-Havilland they said the aircraft couldn't get airborne at the weight we calculated.

We did get airborne, used about 5000 foot of runway, got off pretty well in ground effect, got the gear up and on full power we got to 2 and a half thousand feet. At this stage after 5 minutes, there is a 5-minute limit on full power or take-off thrust, the cylinder temps starting to rise and go through the roof, so I came back to METO (max except take off) max continuous, which I think from memory 42 and half inches 2550 rpm. We fell out of the sky and settled at 1500 feet with METO power. We managed to get through a valley, once again probably in ground effect and 91 knots which was your best lift-on-drag. That was the only figure I could think of to pluck out of my bum. It's just after 'blue line' on a GA aircraft. I picked that speed as I had nothing to go by apart from the seat of the pants or a gut feeling. Thought if I sat on, I think was 91 knots which was in the back of my brain as being the best lift-on-drag. I pegged that speed and used METO power as long as I could, which was till the aircraft started picking up speed which was about an hour later and finally by the time we got to Darwin, which was 4 hours later, we managed to get it back to climb thrust and we got into Darwin at 1500 feet still fractionally above best L-on-D (lift on drag) speed, and by this stage managed to bring the power back to climb thrust.

It was about 10 o'clock at night and by then the airport had been closed by 'Crazy-Horse' Hitchens, the base commander *Dave Hitchens*? the OC (Officer Commanding).

What we did when we got airborne once we realised we were going to fly, we radioed straight away and rather than give too much information we just said we were airborne and had been loaded at gunpoint with 54 souls on board. And they said do we envisage any problems with them? And we said "well they still have the packages with them, but they appear calm but they're happy to get out of there. "

Having said that, they (RAAF Darwin) reacted the only way they could, they closed the airport. A few Qantas aircraft were diverted to Tindal or somewhere down the road. They couldn't understand why they were being diverted as the weather was fine and beaut.

However, they lined up the Army Police the Navy Police the Airforce Police and the Northern Territory Police and Commonwealth Police and told us they'd be waiting for us on arrival.

Coming in towards Darwin it had been a fairly long day. We'd been going since about 6:00 that morning it was about 10:00 o'clock that night so I got everyone going on to oxygen. By everyone, Gordon Browne the co-pilot, myself, and Bill (Loadmaster/Flight Engineer), it's amazing how everything lit up with pure oxy, on 100% oxy. Went on that for a little while, just for the landing.

They (RAAF Darwin) still haven't worked out what to do because we had weapons and people and everything else and we had officially been hijacked, I guess so which is an act of war. They had no idea what to do with us. It was a Labour Government; Whitlam's Government and they were flying the Attorney General up to meet us the next day. But in the interim, they refused us landing approval and said you'll have to hold. At this stage I was 30 or 40 miles inbound still at 1500 feet and still at climb power, but I had both yellow lights on. On the Caribou when you get the yellow light on, which you rarely see, means you have 100 gallons left which is 10 minutes. So, I had 10 minutes of fuel on either side and 20 or 30 miles away I came in and told them I was coming in to land no matter what. They said, no we weren't allowed to land the airport was closed. I said, "well I'm downwind now" and then I said "I'm on base" and they still said "the airport was closed". and which case I lined up on finals on 29 (runway) and finally got approval to land during the flare. Which I guess just takes away one or another illegality I guess. And I did one of the best landings I've ever done. Obviously a bit of adrenaline and after we touched down and put the nose down. They told us to go to the BRA (Bomb Replenishment Area).

The news had already intercepted the radio call the news media and they're all waiting down the normal dispatch area. So, they let them stay with all the lights and cameras with everything else and a few marshallers pretending we were going there when in actual fact after we touched down they said turn left and go to the BRA.

Taxing in, one of the engines failed, cause obviously run out of fuel so we taxied in on one engine. That's how close we'd cut it, because the aircraft would not have flown on one engine not when we needed two just to get to 1500 feet.

So, we taxied in on one engine shut down, opened the doors and they all got off and handed up all their weapons.

Once they were all escorted into town, we were given clearance to taxi back on one engine which we did back to the other area and by that stage the media had woken up to the double shuttle. They left there and raced up to the BRA and by this stage we'd got back to the normal area and there was no one there to meet us except a couple of groundies. So, we had a couple of beers and spent the next day answering questions.

*What happened about your logbook the next day?* Ah right, I got wind that the government in their wisdom decided that the flight didn't happen, so they were going to confiscate the AA? EE71, I think it is or the A71 or the EE 500 authorization forms and also the aircraft logs were going to be destroyed. So, I went down early the next morning with the groundies who warned us that what they were told what was going to happen and rescued the pages. Which I have now in my logbook, and I'll show you, because

they were going to be destroyed and all evidence to the flight to be removed. So that was still done because I ripped the pages out anyway. So that aircraft JMV, I think it's number 140, A4-140 or might be A4-235 if it still flying it's flying around with 9 hours more flying than is within the logbook or five hours more because in fact the flight out of which took three hours and the flight back was four because we we're going a hell of a lot slower because those seven hours don't appear on the records of the aircraft."

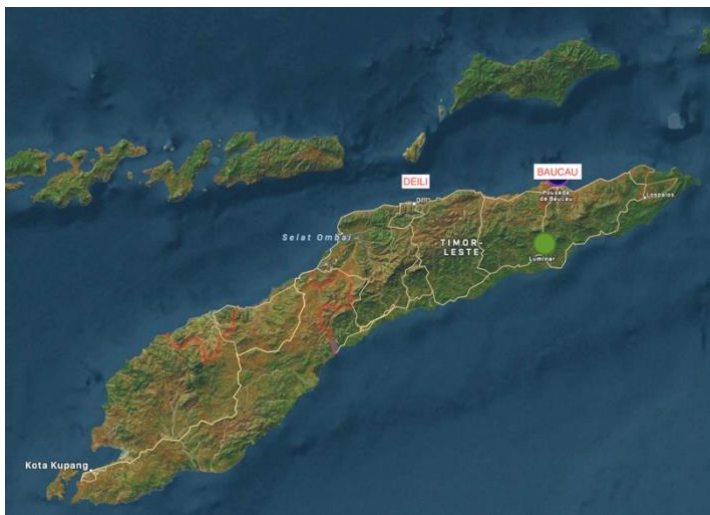
Date: 04 September 1975

Crew: Flying Officer Keirman French

Pilot Officer Gordon Brown

Loadmaster/Engineer Corporal Bill Crouch

*This amazing situation was transcribed from a recorded interview, after the 30-year Secrets Act time limitation had expired, between extraordinary RAAF pilot Keirman (Frenchie) French and a fellow aviator.*



Timor Leste



Baucau Airfield



The iconic Caribou A-140 along with this record is now housed at the Australian War Memorial Canberra



Keirman French 2017

## East Timor-September 1975 Hijack of Caribou A4-140

Article by Sqn Ldr. (Ret'd.) Gordon Browne A.M, February 2017

### 1 References

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- B. "A Dirty Little War", John Martinkus, 2001, Random House Australia.
- C. "East Timor-A Western Made Tragedy" Aarons and Domm, March 1992, The Left Book Club.
- D. Website [www.aph.gov.au/east\\_timor /report](http://www.aph.gov.au/east_timor/report).
- E. Website [www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/past/unmiset/background](http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/past/unmiset/background)

### 2 Introduction

With the expiration of the Australian Government restrictions on the release of detailed information related to the hijack of A4-140 that occurred in East Timor in September 1975, I was asked to write an article on the topic.

I had to cast my mind back some 40 years to that week when we made a small contribution to RAAF history. I have relied heavily on my personal recollections, flight logbook entries and reviewed the NT News and RAAF News newspaper clippings published after the event. I have recently reviewed several excellent books (Ref A thru C) to try and gain further insight into the history and political situation in the small Portuguese colony of East Timor. In these references the short period of intense fighting between Fretilin and UDT forces is only mentioned in passing with most information relating to the Indonesian occupation after December 1975.

My article is limited in scope in an attempt to describe the situation and events that the crew of A4-140 encountered. It does not attempt to discuss the political intrigue and geo-political situation that evolved after March 1975 with Australian discussions with Indonesia who feared the Fretilin were communists. Based on this information and Australian Government's indecision regards the proposed future path of East Timor following the handover by the Portuguese for either incorporation into Indonesia or independence (see Ref D, Chapter 6-Australian Policy: Indonesia's Incorporation of East Timor). Nor does my article venture into the situation that resulted in the ongoing occupation of East Timor by Indonesia that started in October 1975 and continued for the next 27 years until the independence of East Timor (now known as Timor Leste) on 20 May 2002.

As a link to relevant and current East Timor, I have included in Annex A several paragraphs on the UN involvement in East Timor (Ref E) and the establishment of the UN Peacekeeping



force in September 1999 under the leadership of Australian Army General Cosgrove that include involvement of both Australian Army and Air Force personnel and both strategic and tactical transport aircraft.

### 3 Geography

East Timor is located on the eastern portion of the island of Timor with West Timor under the control of Indonesia. The island is a crocodile shaped orientated ENE-WSW and located some 700 km (390 nm) north west of Darwin. It has a heavily forested central mountain spine with savannah grassland and low trees nearer the coast. The hills run to the coast on the northern coast and the coastal road hugging the coast was the only access east from Dili to Baucau.



*Timor Geography*

### 4 Modern History

The Indonesian island making up the present Indonesian Archipelago were colonised by the Europeans in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century as part of the imperialist and missionary quest and importantly to procure the valuable spice trade that had started in Europe. Timor and the neighbouring islands was the scene of European rivalries between the Portuguese, Dutch, English and Spanish with each fighting to gain dominance.

By 1700, the Dutch had succeeded in driving its rivals out of the islands on the eastern end of the archipelago with the exception of the Portuguese who retained the island of Timor. In 1769, the Dutch retained Kupang as its regional capital in West Timor and forced the

Portuguese to move further east to Dili, which then became the Portuguese capital for East Timor.

### ***Chronology of Recent History***

A brief summary of the sequence of events presented in this paragraph (see Ref A) is provided to allow the reader to understand the situation and the various groups involved in the lead-up to the hijack situation.

1913, Portugal and the Netherlands agreed on the division of the island of Timor with Kupang in the west under Dutch control and Dili in the east under Portuguese control.

1945 Indonesia declared independence from the Dutch and so Kupang in West Timor was now under Indonesian control.

1974 The new Portuguese government in Lisbon declared self-determination of its colonies.

The political parties of Timorese Democratic Union (UDT), Association of Timorese Social Democrats (ASDT, known as Fretilin) and Timorese Popular Democratic association (APODETI) are formed within East Timor to represent the various views of the population.

### ***Political Factions in East Timor***

UDT was more representative of property and plantation owners and middle class interests that wanted independence but with a continuing close relationship with Portugal.

Fretilin on the other hand was a broad based nationalist front that wanted independence and full autonomy.

The APODETI wanted integration into Indonesia and was supported by Indonesian leaders but had minimal following in the East Timorese population.

### ***Events Leading Up To Indonesian Occupation in Dec 1975***

The significant events (see Ref A) that led up to the invasion of East Timor by Indonesia on 7<sup>th</sup> December 1975 are summarised below:

June 1974 Indonesia assures it supports Timorese independence.

Sept 1974 Australian PM (Gough Whitlam) meets with President Suharto, and secretly, to give conditional support for the integration of East Timor into Indonesia.

Jan 1975 UDT and Fretilin form a coalition.

May 1975 UDT unexpectedly breaks its coalition with Fretilin under pressure from Jakarta.

Aug 1975 UDT launches a coup in Dili. The Portuguese governor and a small contingency of Portuguese troops move to the nearby Atauro Island (18 nm north of Dili).

- Sept 1975      Fretilin, with the support of East Timorese members of the Portuguese army resist the coup and after three weeks of civil conflict, and some 1500 deaths, gain control of the territory.  
Fretilin respects Portuguese authority and wants negotiations to continue under the UN where it was listed as a non-self-governing territory.
- Oct 1975      Indonesian troops dressed as UDT begins to move land forces into East Timor from the west.  
Five newsmen (Australian, New Zealand and British) killed by Indonesian troops in Balibo.
- Nov 1975      In the presence of UDT and APODETI leaders, the Indonesian Foreign Minister signs a Declaration integrating East Timor into Indonesia.
- Dec 1975      Indonesia invades East Timor with land, sea and airborne forces.  
UN Security Council calls for Indonesia to immediately withdraw its forces from East Timor.

The next 27 years sees UN involvement in East Timor, its violent occupation and atrocities committed by Indonesian forces, the East Timor representatives, notably Hosa Ramos–Horta, seeking world-wide and UN support for the independence of East Timor. The independence which the East Timorese so desired was finally granted on 20 May 2002.

## **5 Operational Events Surrounding the 1975 Hijack**

With the events leading up to, together with those that emerged after Indonesian occupation summarised above, the following section is a chronology of the operational events, together with relevant comments, as experienced by the crew involved in the hijacking of A4-140 on 4 September 1975.

Routine intelligence briefings had been conducted at 38 Sqn crew room each week to bring crews up to date on the political and military situation in our geographic area that could affect our operations in Indonesia, West Irian, the Pacific Islands and general surrounding areas.

(Authors Comment - Reading of Reference D indicates there was considerable Australian government interaction with Jakarta that was not widely known to the general public that tends to go some way to explaining the Australian Government's reluctance in providing timely authorisation for an evacuation on 4 September that subsequently resulted in the hijack.)

Timor's geography and political situation involving the Portuguese and East Timorese had been included in the general briefing, however I don't recall either the potential military situation unfolding being mentioned (as a crew we were not fully prepared for the events of the next two weeks), nor the humanitarian and evacuation tasking being carried out by C130 and C-47 operations staging from Darwin between August 19<sup>th</sup> and September 3<sup>rd</sup> as described in NT and RAAF News newspaper articles. The NT News carried an extensive story

of the hijack on September 5<sup>th</sup> but there were some inaccuracies in the details. Very little more about this event has been published, including in the Reference documents.

### ***Primary Assets/People***

Unit	No 38 Squadron, RAAF Base Richmond, NSW
Aircraft	Caribou A4-140
Crew	Pilot - Flying Officer Kieran (Kim) French Pilot - Pilot Officer Gordon Browne Load Master - Corporal Bill Crouch
Officials	Passengers we transported that played a part in this article included: Sqn Ldr Stan Harding (Darwin Base Intelligence Officer) Mr Andre Pasquier – SE Asia representative to International Red Cross Dr Morris Willis – Medical Advisor to Mr Pasquier Mr Michael Darby – Australian Society for Intercountry Aid-Timor Dr John Whitehall - Australian Society for Intercountry Aid-Timor

### ***Chronology of Operational Events***

- 28 August 1975. As the task was unscheduled, the flight crew were quickly drawn from those not already assigned flying tasks and who could be ready for a swift departure from RAAF Richmond. We were to conduct an undisclosed operation with the Red Cross out of Darwin with tasking to be briefed on our arrival. We were told not to tell our families of the task or to disclose the location of our operation.
- After preparation and flight planning etc, we departed Richmond around midday on a 4:20 hr flight to Charleville, western Queensland where we stayed overnight.
- 29 August 1975. We departed Charleville early for Darwin. At the mind-blowing cruise airspeed of 145 KTAS it took 9:20 hrs with a refuel stop at Mount Isa and we arrived into Darwin in the late afternoon.
- We checked into our accommodation and were then briefed on our impending task by the Base Intelligence Officer, Sqn Ldr Harding. The operational elements had been classified with no press to be involved and details were not to be disclosed outside of those with a need to know. We were to fly under the flag of the International Red Cross, the body designated to co-ordinate the transiting of governing responsibility from Portugal to the peoples of East Timor. The United Nations was not involved at this stage. To maintain neutrality while flying under the Red Cross flag the crew were to be unarmed.

Our task was to carry communications equipment, medical supplies, Portuguese government personnel, representatives of UDT and Fretilin and Red Cross negotiators from Darwin and Dili to Atauro Island where the Timorese Portuguese governor would be co-ordinating the negotiations for the transit of East Timor to independence.

After completing the briefing we made initial planning arrangements and during dinner we were approached by an NCO who had been directed to modify the paint scheme for the aircraft. The green monotone paint of the hull would be retained but the RAAF roundels were to be replaced with a Red Cross symbol. He asked how we wanted the symbol aligned and even though we thought this an odd request we said as would be as normally orientated, ie vertical axis.

30 August 1975.

Next morning we prepared the flight plan, met with Sqn Ldr Harding and then proceeded to the aircraft. We took on a full fuel load (4800 lbs) to ensure we had return fuel because the availability of suitable stocks of 100/130 Avgas fuel in Dili or Baucau could not be confirmed. We also collected rations for the day and as a contingency included additional tinned/package supplies in case we couldn't return to Darwin that evening.

Weather wise we were fortunate as the wet season was a couple of months away and consequently the weather for the trip was planned to be fine with light winds, the standard dry season smoke haze generated by farmers burning the savannah grassland.

The task for the first day of Red Cross support operations was a return flight Darwin-Dili-Atauro-Darwin with a planned total flight time of 6:00 hours. The aim was to carry equipment, supplies and official passengers to Atauro to a neutral camp that was located in a coconut plantation of the SE coast of the island. The camp was set up and guarded by the Portuguese Army contingent assigned to the Regional Governor.

It came as a surprise when we arrived at the aircraft to find the Red Cross was aligned with the sloping empennage structural frames and represented more of a multiplication symbol instead of the normal upright cross - what could we say!



*Caribou A4-140 on the tarmac at Dili airfield.*

We departed for our initial destination, Dili, 390 nm NW of Darwin and this would take about 2:45 flight time. Due to the uncertainty in Timor we maintained hourly scheduled contact with the RAAF using the discrete HF network.

The Dili airfield had an air traffic control tower and terminal facilities. The runway was orientated parallel and slightly inland of the coast and consisted of a hard crushed coral surface and possibly a narrow bitumen centre strip. What we did not know at that time was that there had been a mini war going on and the town and airfield were under the control of Fretilin faction fighters. Judging by the range of uniforms, these fighters appeared to be a mix of regular troops and militia; they were all armed to the teeth and looked very mean. The air traffic personnel were nowhere to be seen and the tower, passenger terminal facilities and nearby government building around the airport showed signs of significant small arms damage and ransacking. Several of our passengers stayed in Dili while we took on others in preparation for the next sector.

The next stage of the flight was from Dili to Atauro Island where the negotiations between the warring parties and the Portuguese were to take place. Atauro was about 18 nm north-east and 8 min flight time and fortunately fighting had not reached this part of the island. The strip was on the SE side of the island and consisted of crushed coral or limestone close to the shore and inside the edge of a coconut plantation.

The airfield we had decided to use as an alternate for flight operations in the Timor area was Baucau, a long concrete runway with modern facilities and a control tower. It was located under the control of the UDT faction, 52 nm east of Dili and several miles inland on the northern coast. At that time the skirmishes between the Fretilin and UDT fighters was occurring in the hills behind Dili and to the west of Baucau.

Although we had been apprehensive as to what we would encounter, the day was uneventful and we arrived back in Darwin, minus the majority of the passengers, at last light having completed 6.0 hours of flying.

31 August 1975. My logbook has no entries for the day so I can only presume we had been placed on Standby in Darwin while the negotiations took place in Atauro Island.

01 September 1975. Our task was now to provide passenger and operational support to the Red Cross by flying personnel and medical supplies between Darwin, Dili and Baucau.

First stop was Dili and the Fretilin troops were again very much on edge. Consequently we stayed close to the aircraft while our passengers went into the hospital.

Next leg was Dili to Baucau. It was our first chance to land at Baucau airfield. With its long concrete runway and tower (relatively new tower construction but without major communications or lighting installed or ATC personnel on site) we were impressed with the facilities when comparing to those rather dilapidated buildings at the Dili airport. The airfield approach from the coast presented a clear flight path however the range of hills to the south with Mt Macebien in the distance indicated rising ground that had to be considered when taking off towards the south.

On arrival we were met by a Red Cross representative and the passengers departed for an inspection of the town and its facilities and for Red Cross discussions. A small section of UDT soldiers under the control of an NCO were at the airfield and we had a casual discussion with him while we waited for our passengers to return. The NCO had previously been a military policeman and we saw him on our subsequent visits to Baucau. The NCO was pleasant enough and contrary to newspaper reports we read, we found him to be level headed and relatively calm considering the situation with reports of the Fretilin forces advancing from the west along the coastal road from Dili.

After unloading medical supplies and the Red Cross team had returned from an inspection of the town, hospital and orphanage, we departed for Darwin.

02 September 1975. As with the previous day, our task continued to be the provision of passenger and operational support to the Red Cross by flying personnel and medical supplies between Darwin, Dili and Baucau.

There were reports that the progress of the transition negotiations was not proceeding well and the Fretilin were steadily advancing both east along the coastal road and the west towards the West Timor border.

On arrival in Baucau, the UDT section platoon leader we had meet the previous day expressed increasing apprehension with the reported rapid rate of movement of Fretilin forces towards the regional town centre at Baucau and the possible destruction of the town, small hospital and convent/orphanage and the reports of possible Fretilin atrocities committed in other towns between Dili and Baucau.

After the Red Cross team returned we departed for Darwin and with a heightened sense of the military situation that was unfolding. On arrival we refuelled and a debriefing was completed covering the days' events and possible implications for the ongoing flying.

03 September 1975. The crew were placed on Standby in Darwin while the negotiations continued in Atauro Island to try and obtain a truce from the fighting so that the transition could occur without further military confrontation.

04 September 1975. We continued the task of providing passenger and operational support to the Red Cross by flying personnel and medical supplies between Darwin, Dili and Baucau. However, there was an increased apprehension as to what we could expect as no new intelligence information has been released by Canberra for us to assess what the latest situation was in Timor or the progress of the negotiations.

The weather was still fine and the flight sectors between Darwin, Dili to Baucau were uneventful. On arrival in Baucau the situation was very tense and unexpected. As we shutdown we saw an array of weapons lying in a neat row on the apron with an Australian and a White Surrender flag flying from atop the control tower. In addition to the section of UDT militia, there was a group of civilians, including women and children, clustered around several trucks at the base of the tower. We reported the situation via RAAF HF and requested that



we be monitored for a scheduled “ops-normal” call no later than 1 hours’ time while we assessed the situation.



*Corporal Bill Crouch with some of the UDT Weapons Surrendered at Baucau Airfield.*

To add to the tension, the UDT NCO advised us that the Fretilin forces were reported to be only 5 miles west of the airfield. When we enquired what had occurred to lead up to the imminent surrender we were told that a possible surrender arrangement had been negotiations between Mr Michael Darby (Australian Society for Intercountry Aid-Timor), the UDT leaders in Baucau and the Fretilin leaders. It was reported that it had been agreed that if the UDT surrendered their weapons then the Fretilin would respect the surrender and the local population would be safe.

(Author Comment - This surrender arrangement and the major players could not be verified and it was only discussion with various officials that indicated the potential arrangement.)

Several Red Cross personnel who had been in Baucau town were present at the airport and were to fly back to Darwin with us but we did not broach the subject with them.

We decided to get the UDT’s permission to enter the ATC tower to get a better view of the surrounding area (which in retrospect probably wasn’t a wise decision because it could have made us targets for any sniper). Entering the tower we found the stairwell leading up to the observation area packed with boxes of explosives. We immediately decided that the safer course of action was to stay on the ground

close to the aircraft. The NCO approached us and requested we seek urgent approval to fly about 20 women and children further east (possibly to a landing area at Fuiloro, a town about 30nm east of Baucau) so that at least they were safe from the imminent battle. He suggested that further evacuation flights would be needed to evacuate the other civilians, especially the children and staff from the Baucau orphanage.

I think it would have been about 4 PM and following this evacuation request we reported the situation to Darwin on the RAAF HF network. We were told our request for further direction was being forwarded to Canberra and we were to standby for a response but it could take some time. Without any external electrical power source, and with the high power draw by the HF, we decided that we should conserve our battery and call back after an agreed short time to ensure we could get an engine started.

After a period of time (I reckon it was about 20-30 minutes) we decided to start an engine and contact Darwin. Prior to this we had told the NCO to let his troops know that one pilot would start an engine and talk to Canberra on the radio while the remainder of the crew would remain outside the aircraft to provide an assurance that we would not be taking off without further discussion. However, the crowd of people probably had not been told this and the tension increased as the people saw the action inside the aircraft and anticipated an evacuation. Bill, the Loadmaster, was on external headset to enable the crew on the ground to know the Canberra decision and keep an eye on a potential rapid departure if needed.

After establishing HF contact with the RAAF we were told that there had been difficulty in finding the military or government persons who could make the decision and at that time we did not have authorisation to evacuate the civilians. We said we would call again in 20 minutes and advised them to communicate to the Canberra officials the increasing urgency and tension on the ground at Baucau.

The next schedule call would have been about 5:30PM and with the end of daylight only about 60 minutes away, and with no operational runway lighting, we knew a decision had to be made during the next HF call. Contact was again established and we were advised that the persons who could make the necessary decision and issue an authorisation were in discussion and would contact us to provide their decision.

Reluctantly we shut down and went to the NCO to advise him that the Canberra authorisation had not been provided and that we would have to leave but would hope to be back first thing in the morning. This was the “straw that broke the camel’s back”. In frustration at the obvious delay in providing the evacuation assistance, the NCO walked over to the row of weapons on the ground, retrieved a pistol and grenade, pointed it at us and demanded we load the aircraft with the women, children and other civilians and take them to Darwin.

(Author Comment - talk about an adrenalin rush.)

The situation was now obviously very unstable and with minimal safe options to defuse it, we decided that the safest course of action was doing as he requested.

We had the Australians and Red Cross people get on board the aircraft and then with the NCO and Bill Crouch directing we loaded the women and children and then various males, (some with briefcases firmly in hand) we filled all the seats and aisle of the cabin. With Bill’s war experience in Vietnam he was very calm and said to the NCO that we would evacuate the people providing no guns or other weapons (including the grenade) were brought on-board. This was agreed and various small handguns were thrown onto the tarmac as the men boarded.

The total number of evacuees was 42 (19 males, 13 women and 10 children) and including the officials and crew we had a total of 49 persons on board. We had all the cabin seat belt positions loaded with an adult and then loaded the children in a position on the seat between each adult to be restrained by the adults. Not a desirable arrangement but better than a cargo strap that couldn’t be unlatched in the event of an emergency. The remaining adults were seated on the floor in the aisle.

The Timorese people were only slight in stature but the aircraft weight was estimated to be in the order of 32,000 lbs meaning we were about 3,500 lbs above maximum take-off weight.

Knowing climb performance would be non-existent if we had an engine failure after take-off in the hot conditions and heavy weight, the wind was blowing from the south and we had to take off towards the rising ground. Luckily the runway was smooth and long and we were airborne with plenty of distance remaining.

Climbing out slowly in the hot tropical air we established a cruise at about 5000 feet altitude and settled down in a Long Range cruise for

the 350nm trip back to Darwin. Speed wasn't essential because with the long heavy climb and an estimated flight time of 2.7 hours to Darwin we estimated we should arrive in Darwin with 600 lbs remaining in the tanks - one hour of fuel.

During the climb we contacted RAAF HF. With a certain degree of irony when considering the frustration and continuing delays we had in getting approval for an evacuation, we had the satisfaction in advising "could you tell Canberra the evacuation situation in Baucau has been resolved as we have been hijacked". We then proceeded to provide our operational situation, arrival time, passenger numbers and condition, etc, and requested that we be met on arrival (guess that was a given).

It was very hot (no cold air conditioning in the Caribou) and with the cabin packed with people, the internal air temperature was stifling. Bill distributed the water and food from the contingency rations we had carried. I recall that the catering staff had given us tins of food, including several tins of beetroot, but not opener. This problem was overcome by Bill using the can opener we had to open the 1 litre oil cans we had on board. Water was rationed and the children given first priority. Overall, the passengers were very subdued and presented no problems as they knew they were going to Darwin and were safe from the Fretilin. As for us, the adrenalin rush took a while to subside.

It was dark when we finally arrived overhead Darwin with 600 lb of fuel remaining. We requested landing approval but were told to remain in the circuit to allow the local and federal police and government officials from various agencies to complete the arrival arrangements. We stayed in the circuit and annoyed the patrons at the local drive-in theatre as we flew downwind over them on each of 4-5 circuits. We asked the Tower each time when we could land as we were getting low on fuel.

Finally when the low level fuel warning lights illuminated at 400 lbs, the crew's unanimous decision was that we would land regardless and advised ATC we had low fuel warning and would be landing. This of course was approved and we were told to land and roll through to the remote Bomb Replenishment Area (BRA) on the eastern end of the runway. The BRA was lit up with flood lights, police and buses to transport the refugees. With the cabin full of people we stayed in the cockpit while Bill co-ordinated with the police to have all the refugees unloaded. They were subsequently unloaded from the aircraft and put onto the buses and we didn't see them again.

As for the crew, we took A4-140 back to our normal parking spot on the RAAF tarmac, shutdown, secured the aircraft for the night and then together went to the bar for a beer and something to eat – what a day.

5-7 September 1975. No flying but spent the next couple of days being debriefed and interviewed by legal people in order to determine the legal situation regards the unauthorised takeover of the aircraft and crew by an armed person and whether it constituted a hijack. This was to determine what charges were to be laid against the UDT NCO who had been on board for the flight.

8-9 September 1975. We heard nothing more of the legal situation or the refugees. News of the event was blacked out for several days with all requests for news information having to be sent to Canberra.

We returned to providing operational support to the Red Cross and flew trips to Dili and Atauro. The situation in Timor had deteriorated and the hope of a truce was diminishing with the UDT forces being swiftly overrun by Fretilin.

10-11 Sept'ber 1975. Following our week of "excitement and drama" we were replaced by a new crew flying A4-199. The replacement aircrafts' distinctive white paint scheme and Red Cross markings were presented in the newspapers as the aircraft providing Red Cross support. The crew of A4-140 and its green paint scheme with off-set Red Cross were never officially photographed nor was there any further news presented apart from a small twenty word post in the next "RAAF News".

The crew of A4-140 returned to Richmond via Alice Springs and Dubbo.

## 6 Post Script

We heard that UDT NCO who had carried out the hijack had been cleared of hijack charges because no weapons had been on the aircraft when it was airborne. He had then chartered a civil light twin aircraft and returned to Baucau within a week of the hijack only to be killed several weeks later in the east of the country.

(Author Comment - An unverified report we heard later said that the Fretilin forces had attacked Baucau and major atrocities had been inflicted on the town and orphanage. We heard later that tragically many people including the children and Sisters from the orphanage had been massacred. Reading of the reference documents indicates that this may not have

been the Fretilin but attributed to the Indonesian forces that invaded from West Timor in October 1975.)

The details of the actual hijack was never released to the public but sadly, research (Ref A and B) seems to indicate that the government had ceased evacuation processing and it was never intended that we would assist in the further evacuation of the refugees from Baucau.

Of passing interest, A4-199 had a white paint scheme because it had returned to Australia in July 1975 following a 6 month rotation in Kashmir providing support for the UN Peacekeeping operating on the demilitarised zone between Pakistan and India. This conflict is still unresolved today.

## **7 Annex A- UN Involvement in East Timor**

### ***UN Participation (UNAMET-INTERFET)***

The following review was summarised from Ref E.

The involvement of the UN started in 1960 when the United Nations General Assembly placed East Timor on the international agenda. It added the territory to the international list of Non-Self-Governing Territories. At that time, East Timor was administered by Portugal. Fourteen years later, in 1974, Portugal sought to establish a provisional government and a popular assembly that would determine the status of East Timor.

Civil war broke out in 1975 between those who favoured independence (Fretilin) and those who advocated integration with Indonesia (UDT). Unable to control the situation, Portugal withdrew initially to Atauro Island. Indonesia intervened militarily and integrated East Timor as its 27th province in 1976. The United Nations never recognized this integration, and both the Security Council and the General Assembly called for Indonesia's withdrawal.

Beginning in 1982, at the request of the General Assembly, successive Secretaries-General held regular talks with Indonesia and Portugal aimed at resolving the status of the territory. In June 1998, Indonesia proposed a limited autonomy for East Timor within Indonesia. In light of this proposal, the talks made rapid progress and resulted in a set of agreements between Indonesia and Portugal, signed in New York on 5 May 1999. The two Governments entrusted the Secretary-General with organizing and conducting a "popular consultation" in order to ascertain whether the East Timorese people accepted or rejected a special autonomy for East Timor within the unitary Republic of Indonesia.

To carry out the consultation, the Security Council authorized the establishment of the United Nations Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) on 11 June 1999. The 5 May agreements stipulated that, after the vote, UNAMET would oversee a transition period pending implementation of the decision of the East Timorese people. On 30 August 1999, some 98 per cent of registered East Timorese voters went to the polls deciding by a margin of 21.5 per cent to 78.5 per cent to reject the proposed autonomy and begin a process of transition towards independence.

Following the announcement of the result, pro-integration militias, at times with the support of elements of the Indonesian security forces, launched a campaign of violence, looting and arson throughout the entire territory. The Secretary-General and the Security Council undertook strenuous diplomatic efforts to halt the violence, pressing Indonesia to meet its responsibility to maintain security and order in the territory. On 12 September 1999, the Government of Indonesia agreed to accept the offer of assistance from the international community. The Security Council then authorized the multinational force (INTERFET) under a unified command structure headed by a Member State (Australia) to restore peace and security in East Timor, to protect and support UNAMET in carrying out its tasks and, within force capabilities, to facilitate humanitarian assistance operations.

Following the outbreak of violence, the Indonesian Armed Forces and police began a drawdown from the territory, eventually leaving completely. Indonesian administrative officials also left. On 28 September, Indonesia and Portugal, at a meeting with the United Nations, reiterated their agreement for the transfer of authority in East Timor to the United Nations. They also agreed that ad hoc measures were required to fill the gap created by the early departure of the Indonesian civil authorities.

### ***UNTAET and Transition to Independence***

On 19 October 1999, the Indonesian People's Consultative Assembly formally recognized the result of the consultation. Shortly thereafter, on 25 October, the United Nations Security Council established the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) as an integrated, multi-dimensional peacekeeping operation fully responsible for the administration of East Timor during its transition to independence. UNTAET was tasked to provide security and maintain law and order throughout the territory of East Timor; to establish an effective administration; to assist in the development of civil and social services; to ensure the coordination and delivery of humanitarian assistance, rehabilitation of humanitarian assistance, rehabilitation and development assistance; to support capacity-building for self-government; and to assist in the establishment of conditions for sustainable development.

In February 2000, marking the complete deployment of UNTAET, command of military operations was transferred from INTERFET to the United Nations Peacekeeping Force. UNTAET also began a process of reorganizing itself to resemble more closely the future government of East Timor and to increase the direct participation of the East Timorese. On 30 August 2001, two years after the Popular Consultation, more than 91 per cent of East Timor's eligible voters went to the polls again; this time to elect an 88-member Constituent Assembly tasked with writing and adopting a new Constitution and establishing the framework for future elections and a transition to full independence. Shortly thereafter, 24 members of the new all-East Timorese Council of Ministers of the Second Transitional Government were sworn into office. The new Council replaced the Transitional Cabinet created in 2000. The Constituent Assembly and a new East Timorese Government were to govern East Timor during the remaining transitional period before its independence as a democratic and sovereign State. East Timor's Constituent Assembly signed into force the Territory's first Constitution on 22 March 2002 and following presidential elections on 14 April, Mr. Xanana Gusmão was appointed president-elect of East Timor (Mr. Gusmão received 82.69 per cent of the vote and Mr. Fancisco Xavier do Amaral 17.31 per cent). With both these preconditions for a hand-over of power met the Constituent Assembly was to transform itself into the country's parliament on 20 May 2002. Newly independent East Timor swore in its first government and held an inaugural session of Parliament on the morning of 20 May 2002.