

## CARGOES

We had a plane to meet; some friends arriving from overseas. It was a beautiful sunny day as we stood on the observation area, and watched the big 747 taxi along the appointed yellow line and park unaided at 'Gateway 2'. The whine of the huge jet engines had barely died before a gaggle of specialised unloading vehicles arranged themselves below the luggage and cargo doors. Inclined roller conveyors and an attendant train of tractor-towed trailers at the luggage compartment: a Lego-like bundle of rollers atop a tractor at each cargo door; and a scissor-action hydraulic-hoisted room at the food bay! We couldn't see the other side of course; but two extendible tunnels were already in place and the passengers about to leave. The cargo doors swung up; the weird bundle of rollers rose to door height, and a huge shrink-wrapped pallet emerged. It was easily pushed from rollers inside the plane to those of the loading machine; hydraulic power lowered it to trailer level, and a transverse set of rollers moved it into the trailer. Aluminium containers, shaped to fit the sides of the 747, emerged next; easily pushed along roller tracks. A stream of suitcases were lowered down to waiting trailers, and headed for the passenger terminal to ride the carousel until claimed.

A re-fuelling crew began their task, all within minutes of arrival! Soon the re-loading process would begin; cargo, luggage, and food. Seven-four-seven? I guess it was the '47' that took my mind back forty years to my association with the C47; a military version of the Douglas DC3; and arguably the greatest aircraft yet to be built!

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I recall, forty years ago - it was early 1943 - we sat in a grassy valley not far from the end of Ward's airstrip in Port Moresby; land-legs not reliable and stomachs queasy after a rough crossing from Townsville stowed deep in the bowels of a Liberty ship.

It was hot and humid, but our Commanding Officer was not impressed with our slothful attitude. The punch-line of his fighting-speech "Don't let the tropics get you", would in future get almost as much air-play as Malcolm Fraser's oft quoted "Life wasn't meant to be easy."

Driven by a zealous 'Sar-major' we hacked grass with bayonet and machete; and by nightfall we had a camp-layout planned and a few tarpaulins erected. Daily U.S Liberator bombers droned overhead; literally clawing their way into the air: full tanks and full bomb-load, on their way to bomb Japanese bases in the north of New Guinea.

First the 'Passion Wagon'. a large as life busty nude on the fuselage; then the aptly named 'Pregnant Whale': both with bomb-insignias denoting missions flown. Claimed 'kills' of boats and planes.

A sign-writer was obviously a key man in the U.S. Air Force! Some did not make the take-off and made a watery landing in near-by Bootless Bay. Later one was to crash with disastrous result in the marshalling yard sited crazily at the end of the strip.

One day we thought we had a real job; a group was selected to rebuild a bridge high in the hills above Rouna Falls.

It promised a challenge: but there wasn't a flat piece of land to work on at the bridge site. After reconnaissance and planning we decided to erect a flying fox and lower pre-fabricated sections into place: working around the clock if need be.

We moved up early one morning and for once the sappers toiled with a will to set up our Utopian camp. Set on a high spur and looking down a valley with Tourist Brochure beauty; it boasted electric light to each tent, hot showers and a cool-room.

My platoon officer and I sat late into the night discussing plans and arranging working parties for the morrow and about eleven, I turned off the power generator.

Half an hour later a pair of 'brown-out' jeep lights swung into our camp site.

With a sheepish grin on his face the young lieutenant from Moresby announced an order to return immediately to base camp.

"Be back by 0600" was the edict: "we are on a 'loading ship troops' [LST] for Buna at 0830."

Accustomed as they were to the Army's remarkable ability to change it's mind, this one had the troops utterly incredulous! When it finally sunk into sleepy heads and tired bodies, the unprintable comments would have been audible back in Moresby!

So with brown-out head-lamps and tired drivers we broke camp loaded trucks and started down the mountain.

Back at Headquarters they were ready to roll; so we sat and waited and waited! After three days we put up tarpaulins: after three weeks we set up the complete camp: tents, cookhouse, mess hut and showers.

Then one day a group of country boys who said they could drive a tractor went off to a mechanical equipment park. They returned driving clapped out wheezing Fordson and McCormack Deering tractors; clattering D4 'dozers; and towing spindly pension-able graders.

We were to take part in an air-borne operation; and thus began my association with the C47 aircraft!

Down at Ward's strip we practised loading the jeep; the work-horse of all such operations; drive it up a set of ramps and then ease it through the plane-door by manpower. One of our drivers. with more brawn than brains took the jeep all the way up; got it into the plane but took the hinge fittings off the door-opening!

Relations between the U.S Airforce and the Australian Army were more than a little strained; and we knew some new American 'cusswords' after the officer justifiably berated our stupidity.

After that we got an old fuselage on which to practise.

Getting the antique 'civilian impressed' equipment into working condition; transportable size and weight now occupied our working days; and frequently nights!

Maker's handbooks were non-existent; spare part's lists unknown, and requisitioning for spare parts a waste of time and paper.

It was a case of make; improvise; and even cannibalise two machines to make one good one.

Half a mile down the road was a U.S Engineer Company with 'pint-sized' tractors, 'dozers' and graders; all scaled to fit in one drivable piece the interior of a C47 aircraft.

After we got our 'masterpieces' operating, we pulled them to pieces again very carefully and; and bolted sections to wooden skids.

Then I had the job of weighing them! We bored a hole one quarter distant from one end of a rolled steel joist; suspended it by a chain from a reinforced branch of a large tree; hitched a steel wire rope sling to the short end; and had a rough seat suspended from the long end.

"Sit in here Charlie; what do you weigh?" Well I used to be eleven stone, but I reckon that I've lost a stone on Army tucker; could be about ten stone now!" Charlie plus two coils of barbed wire - each twenty eight pounds - gives us a total of 196 pounds.

Now multiply by three for the mechanical advantage of the three to one beam, and we have a skid weighing 588 pound.

Write on the skid its weight and number; and make sure that essential bolts and nuts are included. Now practise down at the 'strip'; loading, tying down, and unloading!

Came the day when one hundred C 47's circled above Moresby, and headed for a pass through the mountains; their complement of troops a mixture of United States and Australian artillery-volunteers; who that day, would make their first parachute jump along with their guns.

The weather was favourable and they got through; their destination Nadzab, about fifteen miles from Lae; it's capture the end aim of the operation.

Our first group went with them; landed and went to work grading, extending and creating new airstrips.

Weather permitting we took off from Moresby, twenty-one men and personal equipment to each plane; hopefully watching the peaks of the mountains slide by

on each side of the pass.

If lucky, we got through; but frequently the cloud turned the plane back; in fact, one of our groups took off five times before reaching Nadzab.

Lae fell to the Seventh and Ninth Divisions, then the Seventh moved up the valleys of the Markham and Ramu rivers; the Markham flowing Northwest to lose itself in swamps and marshes.

We pulled down the tractors and 'dozers, and in the C47's took them to Dumpu in the wide river-silt valley of the Ramu.

To the coast, rose the Finistere Ranges; in places reaching five thousand feet. In the foothills and ultimately to the pinnacle of Shaggy Ridge, our troops fought the Japanese.

A fearsome switch-back jeep track clawed its way up slippery slopes until even low gear and chained four-wheel drive wheels spun uselessly in black mud.

Manpower then saddled up to lift ammunition and food to the troops.

Literally everything came into the valley and went out in the magnificent C47.

All day a stream of planes flew in from Lae and Nadzab bringing men, weapons, Jeeps, ammunition, and food.

They returned with men, the wounded the 'troops'; [ones the tropics had 'got'], the under-arm and crutch-rotting, the malarial and dengue fevered. the scrub typhus victims; and the occasional 'compassionate-leaver. Lucky fellow!

In lighter vein one of my friends hitched a ride in a C47 to Mount Hagen, towering away south across the Ramu.

The pilot made a small error; they left part of a wing in the Mission building; and the plane ended up in a strawberry patch.

A diet of strawberries and cream perhaps helped to build up his resistance to a less than enthusiastic welcome-home from our Commanding Officer.

I flew back and forth to Lae and Nadzab with stores and equipment; the plane usually at no more than grass-height: the man-high Kunai grass billowing away in great waves behind the aircraft; and the reliable beat of the engines so well ingrained that even now I don't need to look up to know a DC3.

When Shaggy Ridge fell to our troops the Ramu operation was finished for the Seventh Division; and when we pulled out we had ninety-six plane loads of equipment and stores for return to Lae.

Like a woman's pantry we had acquired many things we would never use; and we ran out of planes before we ran out of freight.

The last of it; in particular barbed wire was reverently interred in slit trenches and the like.

Most American pilots were happy with my estimates of weight, but one came back and said I had grossly overloaded his 'goddam ship'. I still claim I was innocent!

Landing at Wau in the central highlands, was then a case of flying up the ten-degree slope of a hill, touching down and then gunning the motors to reach the top.

Infantry landing there had tumbled out of DC3's while running the gauntlet of small-arms fire; and then into action against Japanese troops less than half a mile from the strip.

My last encounter with a C47 was one hot steamy night on Bouganville; when, with six others and as many milk-cans we took off for Townsville.

The American pilots were coming to buy fresh milk and vegetables for the Officers Mess.

Clad only in shirt and trousers; singlets, pullovers all thrown away; we cuddled up to each other as much as a Mae West jacket permits; and wrapped ourselves in our section of a two-man tent.

Townsville in the dawn light was a most welcome sight.

Subsequent flights in the comparative comfort of the civilian DC3 have never failed to evoke, [as did the unloading of the 747], memories of a safe and trusting love affair with the old C47.

## **EXPLANATIONS**

1. 'C47' aircraft was the military version of the Douglas DC3. For more information, go to: <http://www.boeing.com/boeing/history/mdc/skytrain.page>

2. 'Liberty ships': after America entered the war, ships were pre-fabricated in two sections and welded together.
3. 'LST for Buna'. LST - 'Landing ship tanks'. Buna: our anticipated landing area on north coast of New Guinea.
- 4 'Ward's Strip': one of two airstrips about 10 K from Port Moresby.
5. Nadzab, Lae: Americans built about 13 airstrips at Nadzab. Lae: a town - and port - on the north coast.
6. Wau: gold producing area in central highlands of New Guinea.
7. Townsville: US Airforce built 13 airstrips as a base for bombing south coast of New Guinea.