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THE MERAUKE INCIDENT

It happened in March, 1945; at Merauke in Dutch New Guinea (nowadays it is Indonesia) in one of those buildings we used to call a mess; you know the sort of place it was; typical of many of the messes which fringed Pacific Island airstrips; most of us have been in one or two. Oppressively hot, humid and primitive. A young Aussie Flight Lieutenant wearing those distinctive, charismatic RAAF pilots' wings strode in with jaw set and eyes quickly scanning the usual assortment of sweat soaked Allied servicemen in tropic dress. Young Aussies were pretty aggressive types in those days. In addition to any culturally induced national characteristics, training for war fostered assertiveness.

The Aussie spotted his target. The target was also a pilot but not in RAAF uniform; he was Dutch. What happened next had nothing at all to do with his being Dutch, at least I assume it didn't. The pilots exchanged a few words. According to C.B.I.C.A. member Lou Harris, who was thereabouts at the time, "there was no unanimity of thought and it is alleged a flurry of punches was thrown by a certain Flight Lieutenant ." The RAAF engineer, in partnership with his skipper, "took care" of the Dutch co-pilot.

Lest you hasten to decry Aussie aggression there were mitigating circumstances which should be revealed. You will not, however, find any mitigation in the Department of Defence record of the "Merauke Incident."

This is the official record.

"The Dakota in question was A65-60 (VH-CUS) which blew its starboard tyre on takeoff from Merauke on 31 March 1945. The aircraft groundlooped, just missing a tractor which was parked 25 feet off the edge of the airstrip. The aircraft was being flown by Flight Lieutenant R.J.Graves and was operated by 38 Squadron. RAAF Historical Section does not hold further detail of the incident."

RAAF Historical Section might not hold any further details but our members Keith Carolan and Lou Harris do. They were on board VH-CUS on 31 March 1945. Keith and Lou were RAAF Wireless Unit people on their way to join LST 696 to participate in the landing at Labuan Island, Borneo. They boarded the aircraft in Townsville en route to Morotai. VH-CUS was the usual aerial workhorse with a mixture of human and other cargo; in this case diesel generators chained to the floor behind a steel mesh bulkhead. We have Lou Harris' first person account of what took place.

"We left Townsville in bad weather and had to return. When we resumed the journey, the weather seemed to be worse but after a rough trip, we managed to land at Merauke to re-fuel for the trip over the mountains.

At take-off we noticed the usual DC3 situation — engines full throttle, wings flexing, fuel running down the wings due to full tanks, vibration etc. The metal strip was of reasonable length, with heavy timber jungle on our left, swampy/marshy areas and a lagoon on our right and jungle at the end of the strip. There was a tractor well down the strip; it was used to pull out bogged aircraft; if you went off the strip the aircraft bogged immediately. Everything seemed to be normal —lots of noise, a shaking aircraft, tail up in the take-off position, plenty of speed. We flashed past the tractor—and then, to our dismay, things started to happen. There was a loud bang, a grinding sound, a brief excursion in the air thanks to a ground loop, a thud or two—and so on. Fortunately the chains on the generators held and the bulkhead served its purpose. The passengers? They had cuts, bruises damaged backs and knees and a stunned look or two. Perhaps there was some swearing.”

Lou confirmed that the Dakota blew the starboard tyre and sustained other consequent damage. High octane fuel leaked at an “alarming rate”. The passengers evacuated that plane quick smart. They were careful to avoid the “medics” who wanted to see them. No way were they going to be held in swampy Merauke or sent back to Moresby or Townsville. A day or so later they did get to Morotai.

But before that there was more action on the airstrip. Lou continues his first person account. “(i) a Dutch pilot, flying a Mitchell bomber (B25) had taken off ahead of our DC3.

(ii) the nose wheel of the B25 failed to retract, it seemed to be faulty and the Dutchman decided to land at Merauke and take his chances.

(iii) our crashed DC3, badly leaking fuel was clearly visible, located towards one end of the strip.

(iv) the Dutchman did not follow the established procedure of flying around to use up most of his fuel before attempting a landing [apparently fuel couldn't be dumped from a B25].

(v) nor did he land on the part of the strip away from our crashed aircraft, knowing that the strip was metal, that his aircraft would not be under control on landing and that sparks were inevitable.

(vi) by a stroke of luck the B25 missed the DC3 by approx. 20 metres, slewing, as it happened, to “our” side of the strip area rather than the other, jungle side of the strip area.”

Bob Graves and his engineer, as their duty demanded, were standing by their crashed aircraft to supervise fuel removal. They were somewhat irate as they watched the antics of the B.25. They reckoned that they had already used up their share of the day's luck. The thought of being incinerated in a petrol fire ignited by sparks from the out of control B25 did not appeal. By the time they reached the mess they had built up a fair pressure of suppressed anger.

Ultimately Bob spent 10 days in the brig for clocking the Dutchman.

EPILOGUE.

As the years passed Lou and Keith often thought about that Dakota pilot; they realised that his skill under crash conditions gave them the future they both enjoyed. In 1991 Lou wrote to the Dept. of Defence and discovered his name, but no more.

Then, out of the blue last year, press stories about mustard gas in Australia detailed the experiences of former RAAF pilot Robert Graves: yes, it was the same bloke! Last year, in September, Keith Carolan, Lou Harris and Bob Graves lunched at Bob's place. “It proved to be both a nostalgic and enjoyable day”, says Keith.

There were other Wireless Unit people on VH-CUS. If you were there, or if you know of anyone on their way to Labuan via Merauke and Morotai fifty years ago this month Keith and Lou would like to hear from you. They are contactable through ‘Newsletter’.

On 7 September the “Gosford Express” carried some words and pictures of the characters of this yarn as did the country edition of the “Sun-Herald” of 25 September. The pilot had become a journalist in civvy street.