

# Air mules bow out

By GERRY CARMAN, our  
Transport Reporter

The RAAF's 'flying mules' are to be pensioned off by the end of 1981.

Some Johnny-come-latelys called Caribous are to replace the remaining 16 aircraft — but it certainly won't mean the end of the trail for them.

Because those aircraft happen to be Dakotas, the military version of the Douglas DC-3.

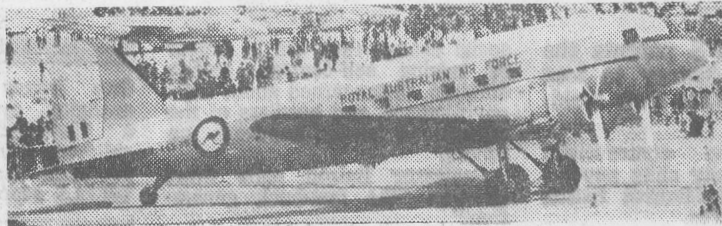
Most old-timers in aviation swear the Dakota-DC-3 was the greatest aircraft ever built. Some romantics have even suggested they would be flying when Concorde became a dinosaur-like oddity in aeronautical museums.

Certainly, no other commercial or military aircraft flying operally today can boast 43 years' service . . . and still going strong.

The first DC-3 flew on December 19, 1935. It entered commercial service with American Airlines six months later.

In all, 803 were built for commercial use and a staggering 10,123 as military aircraft during World War II. They carried troops and cargo in every theatre of war, in all conditions.

The aircraft's reliability, and



One of the 16 Dakotas to be phased out by the RAAF by the end of 1981.

sturdiness became legendary — the only blemish being an apparently untraceable leak in the cockpit which led one pilot to radio: "Light rain outside, heavy rain inside."

But it was the first aircraft to land at both the North and South Poles.

And the stories! One aircraft was dug out of snow after eight months on an Icelandic glacier. It was started up and took off soon after.

Another flew on cooking oil from an air force mess in the Pacific. Then there was the story of the DC-3 which went straight into service after spending 12 years as a "gimmick" on the roof of a South African hamburger shop.

But probably the best story is

that of the DC-2½. This Dakota had most of a wing knocked off by Japanese bombs while it was on the ground in China. It was patched-up with a DC-2 wing — 1.5 metres shorter and differently shaped. It flew more than 1400 kilometres to Hong Kong.

Closer to home, one Dakota landed safely in New Zealand after its port wing sheared off to the engine cowling in a mid-air collision. Another ferried a piano from Australia to New Guinea — lashed to its side!

And one returned to base in India after a mission over Japanese-held territory in Burma with 3000 bullet holes in its wings and fuselage. The stories are endless.

The aircraft, also nicknamed Gooney Birds, have been flying

with the RAAF for 40 years. Four were chartered from Australian National Airways soon after the outbreak of war in September, 1939.

They were transferred back to ANA a few months later, with the RAAF getting its own aircraft in February, 1943.

Most of today's pilots are younger than the aircraft.

Fitted with jet-assisted rockets and skis for research work in the Antarctic, the old mules have come a long way from action in New Guinea, the Pacific, Thailand, Malaysia, Korea and the Berlin airlift.

Four of the 16 aircraft will be saved by the RAAF: one probably will grace the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.

But about 18 DC-3s remain on the Australian civil register, with 12 or so still flying.

Two are sitting on the tarmac at Essendon airport, awaiting new owners, while another aircraft, 'VHMWQ', in new blue livery, continues to fly charter.

VHMWQ started life as an RAAF "mule" in 1947 before crossing to MacRobertson Miller Airlines in WA. Then it went to Setair at Essendon, logging an incredible 60,000 flying hours along the way.

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