



RAAF
HISTORY AND HERITAGE

Final RAAF evacuation of Australians from Iran

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In late 1978, the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) maintained a contingent of Iroquois helicopters at Ismailia near the Suez Canal in Egypt as part of the United Nations Emergency Force monitoring the peace between Egypt and Israel. Regular C-130 Hercules flights were conducted between Australia and Ismailia to resupply the detachment and changeover personnel. On 28 December 1978, a C-130E from No 37 Squadron departed RAAF Richmond on one of the Ismailia resupply flights, transiting to the Middle East via Darwin, Butterworth, Bombay, Abu Dhabi and Bahrain.



The Shah and Empress of Iran. Credit: Department of Defence

By 1978, the 37-year reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, was coming to an end. The 'White Revolution' he had been pursuing since 1963, involving land reform, the sale of state-owned enterprises to private interests, extending voting rights to women, and the elimination of illiteracy, had alienated traditionalists – especially powerful and privileged Shiite religious leaders – who viewed such initiatives as part of a dangerous trend towards Westernisation. The Shah's violent suppression of political opponents and religious leaders led to increasing civil unrest which would eventually result in revolution. In late 1978, the country was in turmoil and the lives of westerners, including embassy staff and their families, were in great danger.

When the RAAF C-130E, under the command of Flight Lieutenant John Gosper and co-piloted by Flight Lieutenant Dennis Green, landed at Bahrain on 3 January 1979 on its way from Ismailia back to Australia, it was met by staff from the Australian Consulate. The crew were briefed on the deteriorating situation in Tehran and were requested to remain on standby in their hotel, awaiting further instructions. With the possibility that they may be required to evacuate a large number of people, the crew unloaded the aircraft and prepared it for an evacuation flight. On the morning of 6 January, the crew were briefed on the conditions at Tehran and the need to evacuate Australian citizens. The

briefing was short on facts regarding the actual conditions at Tehran, but included an assessment that it was safe enough for the evacuation to be attempted. A RAAF nurse, Squadron Leader Rita Blackstock, who was a passenger on the Ismailia-to-Australia flight, was included in the crew to go to Tehran so that she could deal with any medical needs that the evacuees may have.

The aircraft departed Bahrain and headed north towards Iran. Entering Iranian airspace, the crew noticed the complete lack of air-traffic control and reverted to visual flying procedures, remaining clear of cloud and keeping a lookout for any other aircraft. Landing at Tehran's Mehrabad airport, the crew saw that a number of Iranian army tanks were on the airfield and were tracking the aircraft with their guns as it taxied in. After shutting down, one crewmember exited the aircraft but was stopped by soldiers with rifles and ordered back on the aircraft at gunpoint. Eventually, some Australian Embassy staff arrived and assured the soldiers that the crew were peaceful and were only there to evacuate foreigners. The soldiers then searched the aircraft, apparently looking for weapons or other signs of hostile intent. Finding none, they allowed the loading of 33 passengers to proceed. The passengers were Australian, New Zealand and Canadian citizens, mostly embassy staff and their families. The small amount of luggage they carried showed the haste with which they had departed their homes. The passengers reported that the atmosphere in Tehran was chaotic and dangerous, with many people running around with guns but not adhering to any recognisable authority. After about two hours on the ground, the crew prepared to depart for Bahrain.



*Wreckage of a helicopter at the Desert One base in Iran.
Credit: Department of Defence*

Several chartered civilian airliners up to Boeing 747 size had arrived at Tehran airport and parked wherever they could find space, often blocking taxiways. Taxiing around these aircraft and avoiding tanks and other army vehicles, the C-130E finally reached the runway and took off. When the crew radioed Bahrain air-traffic control, they were asked for their aircraft call sign and registration. The Bahraini controller then replied that the registration they had given did not appear on the list of international aircraft registrations and therefore the identity of the aircraft was in doubt. In the Middle East during a time of revolution, an unidentified aircraft could be shot down without warning. The Iranian Air Force had been supplied with a large number of F-14 Tomcat fighters and was probably capable at that time of intercepting any aircraft that they considered hostile. The RAAF crew were understandably alarmed but, after some further discussions, convinced the controller that the aircraft should be cleared to fly to Bahrain. After landing, the crew and their aircraft were carefully checked by the Bahrain police before the passengers were allowed to disembark.

The next day, most of the passengers returned to their home countries via commercial airlines. The RAAF C-130 and its crew resumed their Ismailia resupply mission, returning to Australia via Abu Dhabi, Madras

and Butterworth. For completing this humanitarian task under dangerous conditions, each C-130 crewmember was awarded an Australian Service Medal with Special Operations clasp.

In Iran, the Shah was forced to leave the country on 16 January 1979 and go into exile. The religious leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, returned to Tehran from exile two weeks later, on 1 February, spreading his anti-western and pro-Islamic politics, and causing further civil unrest. Within days, the Australian Government decided that the situation had deteriorated to the point where its remaining embassy staff at Tehran could no longer stay there. On 7 February, another RAAF C-130E, flown by Flight Lieutenant Frank Martin and Flying Officer Barry Eddington, left Richmond on another Ismailia resupply flight, during which it was also tasked to fly from Bahrain to Tehran and bring out the last of the staff from Australia's embassy.



*Militants burning the US flag outside the US embassy in Iran.
Credit: Department of Defence*

The degree of turmoil in Iran was illustrated in November 1979 when a group of militant university students, supported by the new

Islamic regime, seized the United States (US) embassy in Tehran and held 66 American citizens hostage in a drama which lasted 444 days. A US attempt at rescuing the hostages on 25 April 1980 foundered, with an accident to several aircraft at a refuelling base 200 miles southeast of Tehran resulting in eight men killed, and aircraft and equipment worth nearly \$200 million being left behind. The safe evacuations which the RAAF had carried out had potentially spared Australia the agonies of a similar hostage situation.

This episode clearly demonstrates the flexibility, adaptability and responsiveness of air power in containing provocative and deteriorating situations. It is also illustrative that these core characteristics of air power are resident in all the capabilities within an air force that may be used when a national response to an emerging crisis is required. Underlying this extraordinary flexibility is the professional mastery of the personnel involved. This mastery, applied in a complex and potentially dangerous scenario, was essential to the successful conduct of the evacuation from Iran.

- *Flexibility and responsiveness of air power can avert dangerous situations.*
- *Professional mastery of air force personnel is the foundation from which air power competencies can be optimally employed in support of national security requirements.*

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