



RAAF
HISTORY AND HERITAGE

The DHC-4 Caribou's 45 years of service

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On 27 November 2009, Caribou A4-140 flew into Canberra from RAAF Base Richmond on the last flight before this aircraft type ceased operations with the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF). In a small ceremony which followed, A4-140 was handed over to the Australian War Memorial. The transfer marked the end of the DHC-4 Caribou's remarkable 45-year career with the RAAF, encompassing service during the Vietnam War, several peacekeeping and peace-enforcement operations, and multiple disaster relief and humanitarian missions across Australia and the world. A total of only 29 airframes served with the RAAF, in Nos 35 and 38 Squadrons, and this aircraft holds the unique distinction of being the one type with the longest record of constant operational service in the RAAF.

The Canadian-built Caribou has made a major contribution to Australia's ability to project air power since 1964. The aircraft's robust construction and exceptional Short Take-Off and Landing (STOL) capability enabled it to operate from the most rudimentary of airstrips. The aircraft gave the RAAF considerable flexibility in the conduct of air mobility operations, enabling the tactical airlift of personnel and cargo across a wide variety of environments and conditions.



*Formal arrival of RTFV at Saigon, 10 August 1964.
Credit: Department of Defence*

The ability of the Caribou to sustain a high operational tempo in arduous conditions was quickly demonstrated at the very outset of the aircraft's service life. In May 1964, just five weeks after the first three aircraft (including A4-140) were delivered to Australia, the Australian Government announced its decision to deploy the Caribou to Vietnam. Such was the urgency in getting the Caribous into theatre that the third and fourth delivery ferry flights from Canada to Australia were redirected to South Vietnam, both arriving at Vung Tau during August to form the RAAF Transport Flight Vietnam (RTFV). The deployment of additional aircraft the following year brought the number of aircraft on strength to a maximum of seven. (Note: technically there were eight aircraft, with A4-210 replacing the destroyed A4-208.)

On 1 June 1966, the RTFV was redesignated No 35 Squadron. The Caribous supported allied military operations throughout Australia's commitment to the war in Vietnam, until their final withdrawal on 19 February 1972.

During its service in Vietnam, the Caribou quickly demonstrated the air power capabilities and operational versatility that were to characterise the aircraft's service with the RAAF over the next 45 years. The design of the Caribou enabled the rapid loading and unloading of passengers and cargo from short, rough semi-prepared airfields inaccessible to most other aircraft. Range and payload considerations made the Caribou a better option than the rotary wing assets available. While the Caribou was primarily engaged in short-haul airlift operations, it also performed airborne paratroops, aeromedical evacuations and tactical troop insertions and extractions. The Caribou's ability to use rudimentary airstrips meant the aircraft and crews were often operating at the forward edge of the battlespace and under enemy ground fire. The cost to the Caribou fleet was high, with two aircraft lost to accidents and a third to enemy mortar fire. During its deployment to Vietnam, the Caribou transported 41,300 tonnes of freight and 700,000 passengers in 79,739 operational sorties, using 115 airfields across South Vietnam.

Within three years of withdrawing from Vietnam, the Caribous were involved in the first of many international deployments. During a brief civil war in the former Portuguese colony of East Timor in 1975, a Caribou (A4-140 from August to October, and later A4-199) was deployed to support Red Cross relief operations by ferrying supplies around the country. During that deployment, armed East Timorese soldiers forced the crew of A4-140 at gun point to take off with 54 people on board and fly them and other

refugees to Australia. A4-140 has the dubious distinction of being the only RAAF aircraft ever hijacked.

In the same year, No 38 Squadron also contributed an aircraft to the United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP). This commitment lasted until late 1978, but in later years the Caribous continued to be used on similar humanitarian tasks, providing support for peacekeeping, nation building (such as survey mapping) and disaster relief efforts throughout the South Pacific region. The demanding flying environments of these remote localities often tested the ruggedness of the Caribou. In total, a further four RAAF Caribous were written off as a result of accidents overseas: on one occasion, with the tragic loss of 25 people when a Caribou crashed in the mountainous terrain of Papua New Guinea.

The Caribou continued to work hard to the very end of its career. In 1999, the Caribou was at the forefront of the ADF's peace enforcement mission to East Timor. No 86 Wing Detachment 'C', composed of aircraft and personnel from Nos 35 and 38 Squadrons, operated two aircraft out of Baucau and later Dili. They remained in East Timor from October 1999 until February 2001, conducting airlift sorties, aeromedical evacuations, information operations and surveillance missions. Not long after returning to Australia from East Timor, the Caribous were once again involved in the ADF's response to an international crisis. Two Caribous formed part of Operation *Anode*, the peacekeeping mission to restore civil order to the Solomon Islands. The aircraft returned to Australia a year later, in July 2004, after completing its last international deployment on active service.

The service of the Caribou to Australia has not been confined only to international missions.

For almost half a century, the Caribou's capability has been on hand to serve Australia in both military and non-military applications. The aircraft has been one of the RAAF's leading assets in response to natural disasters, search and rescue, aeromedical evacuations, and even security patrols over Bass Strait oil rigs. It has transported state police, fire fighters and visiting royalty. Throughout its entire service life, the Caribou has provided extensive support to the entire ADF, particularly airborne and tactical transport support to Army and Special Air Service training exercises.



*Caribou A4-195 in East Timor, November 2000.
Credit: Department of Defence*

The Caribou's service to Australia is significant beyond the airlift roles that characterised its main employment. The effects generated in its deployments have underscored domestic security and safety, and provided strategic reach into the wider international region, enabling Australia to demonstrate its commitment to supporting peace and stability

throughout Southeast Asia and the South Pacific.

In the carriage of hundreds of thousands of people and tens of thousands of tonnes of humanitarian aid, from its first flight till its last, the Caribou provided Australia with a tactical airlift capability which was second to none.

- *The Caribou was the RAAF's longest-serving operational airframe.*
- *The Caribou's versatility in airlift and tactical transport made a major contribution to RAAF ability to project air power.*
- *For 45 years, Caribous served the RAAF and the Australian people in war, peacekeeping and peace-enforcement missions, and disaster relief and humanitarian missions across Australia and the globe.*

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