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Air transport operations – past, present and future

an address¹ to the Institute on 25 March 2008 by
Air Commodore B. G. Plenty, AM, RAAF²
Commander, Air Lift Group



Air transport, both strategic and tactical, is an integral component of contemporary military operations across the broad spectrum from warfighting to humanitarian relief. In the Royal Australian Air Force, this capability is provided by the Air Lift Group. Here, the Group's commander, "Jack" Plenty, provides an overview of the Air Lift Group, its genesis in World War II, its current capability and the personnel, equipment and infrastructure challenges that it is now facing.

In the Royal Australian Air Force today, the air transport capability is provided by the Air Lift Group whose mission is to conduct and sustain combat airlift operations. The Air lift Group seeks to be a combat-focused airlift force, which is structured for war and trained to win. It has eight specific roles:

- air logistic support;
- airborne operations (air drop, air land, paratrooping);
- special operations;
- joint personnel rescue;
- special purpose transport (VIP);
- air-to-air refuelling;
- aero-medical evacuation; and
- national support commitments.

Over the last two to three decades, the Air Lift Group has supported Defence Force operations in Rwanda, Somalia, Iraq, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Cambodia, Indonesia, East Timor, Irian Jaya, Papua New Guinea, Bougainville and the Solomon Islands.

Organisation

The Air Lift Group is one of six groups commanded directly by the Air Commander Australia, the other five groups being: air combat, surveillance and response, combat support, aerospace operational support, and air force training.

The Air Lift Group, itself, consists of five operational squadrons, which operate 48 aircraft of seven different types plus five leased VIP aircraft; and it has 1316 personnel, including 116 reservists. The squadrons are grouped in two wings and are deployed as follows:

- No. 33 Squadron (6 x Boeing 707 long-haul and air-to-air refuelling aircraft), Richmond;

- No. 34 Squadron (2 x BBJ and 3 x CL604 Challenger VIP transport aircraft), Fairbairn;
- No. 36 Squadron (4 x C-17A Globemaster strategic transport aircraft), Amberley;
- No. 37 Squadron (12 x C-130H and 12 x C-130J-30 Hercules strategic transport aircraft), Richmond; and
- No. 38 Squadron (14 x DHC-4A Caribou tactical air transport aircraft), Townsville.

Within the Group providing operational and training support to these squadrons is: an air movements control centre; an Army air despatch company; a simulator squadron (No. 285 Squadron); an air movements training and development unit; and a project team managing the introduction to service of the KC-30B aircraft which will shortly begin replacing the Boeing 707s in the long-haul and air-to-air refuelling roles.

No. 33 Squadron, Richmond

No. 33 Squadron was formed at Townsville on 16 February 1942 and operated seven aircraft types in its first year: Short Empire Flying Boats, Avro Ansons, DH-82 Tiger Moths, DH-84 Dragons, Vultee Vigilants and Junkers. On 14 September 1942, the Gurney strip at Milne Bay was named after the squadron's first commanding officer, Squadron Leader Raymond (Bob) Gurney, who was killed-in-action on 2 May 1942 while acting as second pilot in a United States Army Air Force B-26 Marauder. Subsequently, the squadron was relocated to Port Moresby on 25 December 1942; converted to C-47A Dakotas³ in September 1943; and relocated successively to Milne Bay on 1 January 1944, Lae on 15 January 1945 and finally Townsville on 11 March 1946, where it was disbanded on 13 May 1946.

¹Attended by 86 members and guests
²E-mail: brian.plenty@defence.gov.au

³The C-47A was the first military version of the DC-2 and DC-3 Dakota civilian general-purpose (passengers and/or cargo) transport aircraft which had been developed and introduced into commercial service during the 1930s.

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