

## ISLAND INTEL - BLAST FROM THE PAST

Continued from Part 2 in the October Signal: A Pictorial Sequence of the Events as described in the "Bumpy Ballad of the Airstrip"



First Landing on the Island airstrip in an RAAF Caribou piloted by Wing Commander, David Middleton (at right) – 4 August, '74. The aircraft, with a crew of six, arrives in atrocious weather including 40 knot crosswinds.



The aircraft is refueled and injured Islander – Wal Wilson – is placed aboard and it then departs for Brisbane.



Last flying boat flight skims the new strip on the 10/9/74.

The strip is finally completed on the 16/9/74.



Sergeant Ken Blackman coaches soccer at the Island school.

BBQ for Island residents and army personnel.



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*Last troops depart on the 5th & 17th of September, '74*



*First commercial flight on the 18th of September – an Airlines of New South Wales (Ansett) Riley Heron with nine passengers.*



*The airstrip is a commercial success – initially with light aircraft bringing passengers to the island. These were followed by larger Dash 8 100 & 200 series aircraft operated first by Norfolk Airlines in 1989, then Eastern Australia Airlines from June, 1991. By 2024, the 50th anniversary of the airstrip, up to 18,000 passengers per annum were being transported.*



*Army, Navy & Airforce veterans gather for the 50th Anniversary of the airstrip in September, 2024.  
(Photo Courtesy of Peter Phillipps)*

This is where we pick up "**Part 2: Constructing the Airstrip**" from the October Signal:  
Some troops left, and more arrived,  
Once again construction thrived.  
But all that work would soon be tested,  
By a call-out... unexpected!

### **The First Landing**

Wal Wilson had his chainsaw out,  
And felled a tree – 'twas pretty stout!  
But when it fell across his ankle,  
The damage would do more than rankle...  
His injury caused so much strife,  
He needed help to save his life!  
Wing Com., Dave, at Richmond Base,  
Was working at his usual pace,  
When suddenly his phone was ringing.  
Oh no!!! He'd soon be winging,  
Into stormy Tasman gale,  
This operation could not fail!  
(Just as well they had been planning...  
For a mission less demanding!)

Three medicos were soon signed on,  
Seatbelts they would have to don!  
The airstrip wasn't fully tarred,  
Therefore, landing could be hard.  
With crosswind gusts past 40 knots,  
Dave wouldn't get to call the shots!  
But soon the Caribou took flight,  
Everyone was strapped in tight.  
The flight to Lord Howe – extra rough,  
And the landing would be tough.  
As the Island came in sight,  
The weather cast its stormy light...  
The Island people had assembled,  
Along the airstrip – how they trembled!  
First, Dave had to reconnoitre,  
But he knew he could not loiter,  
Four attempts to land were tried,  
The second flipped them on their side!  
Their fuel reserves were getting low,  
Just enough for two more goes!  
Then, at last... dip after dip,  
The plane touched down upon the strip.  
The ambulance soon arrived,  
With Wal Wilson safe inside.  
But soon transferred to Caribou,  
And cared for by her medi-crew.  
Once refuelling was completed,  
And the crew were back and seated,  
Seatbelts fast and buckled tight,  
The Caribou set off in flight.  
When the plane at last touched down,  
Wal was rushed to Brisbane town.  
By ambulance he was taken,  
A lucky man – they'd saved his bacon!  
For all six crew – what a day...  
They'd truly earned a triple A!  
The Lord Howe strip was nearly done,  
So, what about a bit of fun?  
A picnic lunch would be a treat,  
With some salads, fish and meat.

**Troop Rotation - 4/7/74** "A special charter flight by the flying boat on the 4th of July, brought about 35 Army personnel from Sydney to take over from an equal number who returned to Sydney on the same plane after a little more than ten weeks on the Island." (The Signal)

**First Aircraft Lands - 4/8/74** "An RAAF No 38 Squadron Caribou transport aircraft on Sunday, 4 August, became the first aircraft to land on a new airstrip at Lord Howe Island. The Caribou made a very difficult but safe landing after four attempts, during squalls with strong gusty 40 knot crosswinds.

The aircraft Captain, Wing Commander Dave Middleton, Commanding Officer of No 38 Squadron, Richmond, had, on arrival overhead, advised Lord Howe's Air Traffic Control Centre that, due to the prevailing conditions he would be able to make five attempts to land before he would be forced to return to Coffs Harbour because of fuel shortage.

Owing to the blustery conditions on the Island, the aircraft had to be parked into the wind and anchored to an Army multi-roller before it could be refuelled from 44 gallon drums carried on board.

Australian Army Engineers from the First Field Engineer Regiment at Holsworthy, NSW, started building the airstrip in March this year and have almost completed the sealing of the 3,300ft runway.

The aircraft which made the proving flight to Lord Howe returned to Brisbane on a mercy mission carrying an injured workman. The workman, Mr Warwick Wilson a direct descendant of the original settlers on the Island, suffered a compound fracture of his right leg and a nearly severed foot when a log rolled on him whilst wood-cutting the previous day.

An RAAF medical team led by a Doctor, Squadron Leader Phil Brownlie, a Nursing Sister [Flt. Off. Priscilla Wilson] and a Medical Orderly [Cpl. Alan Sutton], tended Mr Wilson on the flight back to Eagle Farm Brisbane." [Editor's note: The Co-Pilot was Flight Lt., Gary Martin, and the load master aboard was Sgt. Barry Sharman] (RAAF News, Thursday 1 August 1974, page 5)

[Editor's note: An RAAF photographer was also aboard the Caribou taking movie footage and 'stills' some of which were reproduced in press articles about the first landing]

"...thunderstorms and strong south-westerly gusts seemed determined that the first landing on the strip would not take place. Almost every vehicle on the Island was parked on the road alongside the airstrip as the arrival time of 11.35 [am] came near... and every eye was on the Caribou as it approached from the south west...there were gasps from onlookers as the plane was buffeted by the squally wind and it rose and fell very noticeably. [After the third attempt] the Caribou cleared the Blinky bank by about 50 ft then hovered (the plane has an incredibly slow stalling speed) along the strip and touched and bounced about the 1100 foot mark and then made a three point touch down. A cheer...rose from all who watched." (The Signal 8/8/74)

**Picnic for Troops - 25/8/74** "This farewell will take the form of a barbecue picnic at North Bay...Boats and towed lighters will leave the jetty for North Bay at regular intervals from 10.30am onwards... The organisers, with the assistance of the Superintendent, will arrange for barbecues, wood, fire-attendants, tables etc..." (The Signal 21/8/74) [Editor's Note: An earlier BBQ for the army had also been held at Ned's Beach]



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The Islanders turned up in ranks,  
So they could express their thanks.  
By boat to North Bay they departed,  
The locals got those "barbies" started.  
Everyone who went there said,  
They loved the outing and the spread!  
A children's day was also slated,  
So the airstrip could be feted.  
For all those kids - a super gift,  
To climb on dozer and fork-lift.  
But on a more important ticket,  
What about a game of cricket?  
The Island and the Army played,  
Would one side be completely slayed?  
The first match was the Island's game,  
On the second, they went down the drain!  
And yet again, in sporting locker,  
The school kids loved that game of soccer.  
Sergeant Ken was the pick,  
To teach those schoolies how to kick.  
Both sides played with heart and soul,  
But the army kicked the final goal!

Then as the airstrip work ran down,  
A final seaplane flight left town,  
Beachcomber on her closing run,  
Skimmed the strip - then all was done!  
One day on, a charter came,  
Government chiefs were in the frame,  
A few days more, the army left,  
Only 6 months work...wow, how deft!  
The first commercial flight was Ansett's  
The strip was tops - or they'd not chance it!  
Years went by...the airstrip hummed,  
Light aircraft on the tarmac drummed.  
Norfolk, Oxley, Advance Air,  
The tourists came without a care!

But there remained one job to do,  
The strip-side surface needed "glue",  
The calcarenite might blow away,  
A grassy top would help it stay.  
The Island people sallied forth,  
With sprigs of grass and garden fork,  
Even students did some digging,  
Followed by a lot of sprigging.  
But the oldest trooper in the mix,  
Was Aunty Hap at ninety-six!  
Soon the verge was looking green,  
And calcarenite could not be seen!

TO ALL INVOLVED, WE HAVE TO HAND IT,  
THE AIRSTRIP NOW - A T L A S T - HAD LANDED!  
THANK YOU ALL!

(Phew...finally this ballad has concluded,  
I hope no detail was excluded!)

**Army Entertains Island Children** - "The army has made special arrangements to entertain children at the Airstrip site between 9.00 and 11.00am. Tony Coyle advises that much of the machinery will be lined up on the strip...and children will be able to climb on and over the vehicles as much as they like....Several members of the Army will be present and arrangements have also been made so that those who would like to will be able to have a ride on some of the vehicles along the airstrip." (The Signal 17/5/74)

**CRICKET:** "Two weeks ago, the Island defeated the Army by 142 runs to 103....An Army team soundly defeated an Island team in a match last Sunday week. The Army batted first and scored 170 runs...and the Island team could only manage 103." (The Signal 18/4/74)

**Soccer:** "The members of the Parents & Citizens Association have asked Sgt. Ken Blackman, one of the Army personnel working on the airstrip, to be a guest at tomorrow night's fish fry at the school. It was decided that.... members should take this opportunity of expressing to Ken their appreciation...for his continued efforts to coach and encourage the school children in the game of soccer. Last Sunday the school team played a second match against the Army and were defeated narrowly by 5 goals to 4." (The Signal 8/8/74)

**5/9/74** - The main body of troops left LHI; a rear party remained until 17/9/74.

**10/9/74** - "The Sandringham flying boat Beachcomber takes off from Sydney Harbour yesterday on its last flight to Lord Howe Island." (Canberra Times 11/9/74)

**11/9/74** - First charter flight landed, with Department of Transport and Government officials aboard.

**16/9/74** - The Army finished work on the airstrip.

**18/9/74** - First commercial air service arrived, Airlines of NSW Riley Heron, VH-CLV (Alice).

"The 60 man sapper party worked six long shifts every seven days for six months to build the airstrip." (The Signal) The army construction crew had worked for exactly 186 days (six months and two days).

**The Airstrip Verge Planted** - "Last Thursday 130 Island residents joined in a voluntary grass 'sprigging' at the aerodrome. More than 8,000 kikuyu grass 'sprigs' were planted in an area of slightly more than 100 feet by 300 feet on the southeastern side of the strip. At the same time children from the Island School 'sprigged' an area adjacent to the strip and north of the terminal building.... ('Spriggers' included Mrs H. Wilson, who is in her 90s)... It was decided to have one more 'sprigging' effort..." (The Signal 19/12/74)

**The Airstrip is a Commercial Success** - 9/1/76 "In their first real test since the airstrip has been built, light aircraft have conclusively shown that they can transport enough tourists to fill accommodation on Lord Howe Island. During December last more than 120 landings were made on the Lord Howe Airstrip and an estimate 700 passengers were brought to the Island." (The Signal 9/1/76)

**The Airstrip Finally Completed** - "...It was 19 years and 12 plans later..." (the Signal 8/3/74)