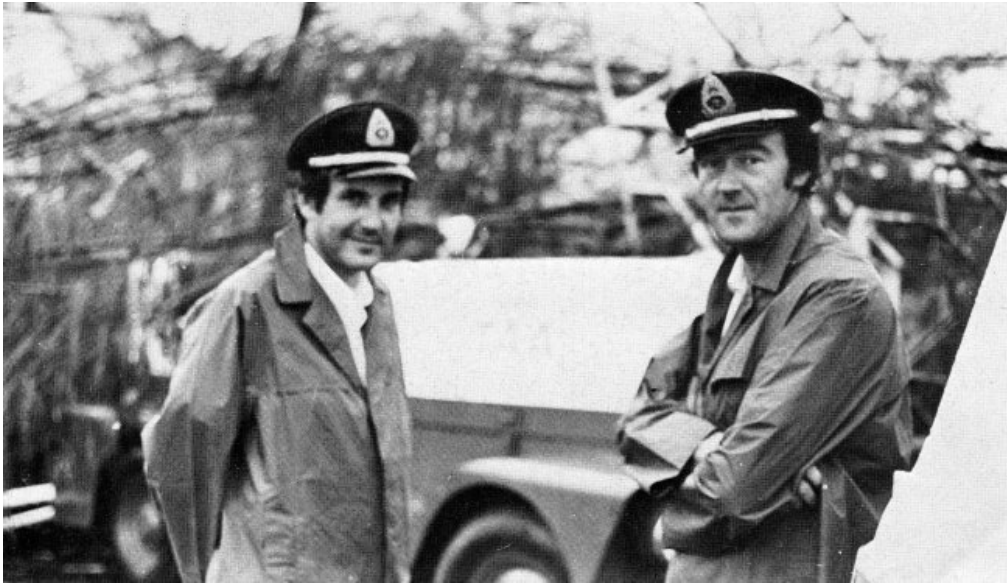


FIRST IN

by Ray Vuillermin

When Ray Vuillermin went to work on Christmas Day 1974 he had no idea that his work day would end in a cyclone disaster zone. Other locally-based aircraft may have got in before him but Ray's Fokker Friendship was the first aircraft from the "outside world" to arrive in a Darwin devastated by Cyclone Tracy. This is his story.



First Officer Tony Burgess (left) and Captain Ray Vuillermin at Darwin Airport

Preamble

I should say at the outset that it is my regret that throughout my career I have not kept diaries, therefore there is a lack of small details in my recollections, although I generally have a reasonable recall of the 'big picture'.

My flight to Darwin on December 25th, 1974 started as a totally normal TAA scheduled service. There was no knowledge of what had happened in Darwin prior to our departure.

The crew pattern, or pairing as TAA called it, was for us to depart from Melbourne in the early morning as passengers on the jet service to Alice Springs via Adelaide. We were to then crew the F27 from Alice to Darwin via Tennant Creek and Katherine (Tindal).

The crew of four was First Officer Tony Burgess, Flight Attendants Debbie Marker and Marie Willis, with myself as captain.

Upon arrival in Alice we were alerted that there was 'something unusual' going on in Darwin. There was nothing specific but a severe weather event was mentioned as a possibility. The flight proceeded normally to Tennant Creek (about an hour) and then on to Tindal (another hour or so). At Tindal we were advised that Darwin was likely to have been very severely affected by a cyclone and that we should not take passengers on to there. Someone suggested the city was 80% destroyed. That sounded unbelievable.

We were requested to carry medical staff and equipment. I do not know who gave or authorised this instruction. There were no TAA personnel in Tindal, just an agent. However, it all seemed the sensible thing to do.

My mother-in-law was living in Darwin and I had taken my nine year old daughter, Nicole, with me to spend Christmas with her Grandmother. Clearly I could not leave a young girl abandoned in the NT, especially in the confusion of the time, so Nikki continued on with me.

We left Tindal with plenty of fuel and flew on to Darwin in good weather. We were unable to make contact with Air Traffic Control (ATC) in Darwin so made our descent using 'all station' radio broadcasts.

On arrival in the Darwin area in good visibility conditions, we were staggered to find a city in ruins: far worse than anything we could have imagined. 80% was not an exaggeration! The runways were covered in debris of all kinds and there were severely damaged aircraft everywhere, including one light twin plastered sideways up against the wall of a hangar, and large boats stranded on dry land.

As we could not contact anyone on the radio and could not land amongst the debris we circled around whilst deciding what to do. Tony had a very good camera with him so we depressurised the aircraft so Tony could open the window and get decent photographs. Using the High frequency (HF) radio set we were able to advise air service stations in the south of what we were observing.

My daughter was looking forward to staying with me at the Travelodge where TAA normally put us up. I had promised her we would be spending some time in the pool at the hotel. Nikki was disgusted to note as we flew around that there was a car in the pool.

Shortly, the radio burst into life and the caller identified himself as a RAAF airfield safety officer and advised he was transmitting from the radio in his vehicle. He asked what minimum length of runway we needed to land safely and we told him 3000ft. The main runway (11/29) was about 10,000 ft long.

He advised he would ensure and mark a clear 3400ft on the eastern end and would wait there to act as a 'follow me' to guide us through the debris on the long taxi to the old terminal area. The landing and taxi was uneventful except for our amazement at the damage we were taxiing past.

It was also amazing to find that the RAAF officer, Squadron Leader Sandy Grant, and I had gone to school together. We had both attended Macleod High School in Melbourne. I was not aware that he was in Darwin or what his career had been since schooldays.

There was general confusion and no apparent organisation so our medical staff unloaded their gear and were taken from the airport. No one quite knew what to do, it was still very early days and people were in a state of shock and disbelief. A TAA staff member offered to drive me into town to see if I could locate my M-I-L., Alice Carter. We found her at the Travelodge. Alice was a most sensible and resourceful person and had decided she would head off south in her VW bug. I left Nikki with her. The story of the support system set up by the Darwin locals to help car evacuees is an amazing and almost untold story of the cyclone.

Whilst driving into and out of the city I saw TAA pilot Rex Booth, a pilot based in Darwin on secondment to the Northern Territory Air Medical Service, washing his kids nappies in a geyser of water from a broken water main.

I returned to the airport and we rechecked the security of the aircraft, then hung around the airport.

About an hour later the Ansett F27 arrived. These were the days of the two airline system and there were always parallel services. Ron Neve was the Ansett captain. In the evening, during which it was raining and windy with the usual wet season storms and lightning flashing all around, Sandy advised us that the RAAF were arriving in C-130 Hercules and he had prepared a landing area for them. As I recall the RAAF Hercules captain's name was Fewster.

The Hercules arrived with General Stretton on Board. I advised him we were there and with a serviceable aircraft with sufficient fuel to go somewhere. He instructed Tony and I to get some rest and to be available and await his instructions. He suggested going around the RAAF quarters looking for an undamaged room to get some sleep, and also suggested, due to the amount of debris still falling from rooves etc, to find some protective clothing. RAAF Darwin was quite an active air force base at the time as there was usually a detachment of four jet fighters based there, plus support equipment and aircraft, accordingly they had quite a large stores holding. The RAAF simply opened up the stores, putting all sorts of useful gear into a heap in the middle of a large hall, and invited people to help themselves. It was usual to see both men and woman walking around in flying suits and uniforms. Tony and I borrowed pilot helmets (bone domes!) for the evening, as protective headgear.

The RAAF Hercules also brought some press reporters and photographers. They knew Tony had taken aerial photos and asked to be able to use them. To my knowledge Tony never received them back, or credit for their use. I am sure some of the photos I saw in the press and in later publications were his.

I don't know when the Ansett F27 or the RAAF C-130 departed.

We did not want to get too much sleep or be out of contact as there was a strong rumor floating around that the cyclone was doubling back and we therefore thought we may have to move the Fokker to save it from damage. The cyclone did not come back.

In the early morning we were told the General required us to take the women and their new born babes from the Darwin hospital to Brisbane.

The efforts of Qantas deserve a mention. As we were preparing for our departure a Qantas Boeing 707 arrived, unannounced, over the top. It was carrying equipment, supplies and relief

personnel to allow the evacuation of Qantas local staff. Also, we were faced with passengers needing support and food and water, but with no way of arranging in-flight supplies. Qantas simply opened the catering section, damaged so it that could not prepare meals etc, and told our Hosties to help themselves to whatever they wanted. Marie and Debbie loaded up with what they could including things like biscuits and drinks, and as much in the way of towels , pads etc that they could find.

We were able to take one doctor (RAAF I believe) with us, who would be assisted by our TAA girls, whose training in first aid etc would be called upon.

We loaded 32 traumatized women and 27 new borns and set off on the two hour flight to Mt Isa, where we would need to stop and refuel. From the cockpit the flight was uneventful but the cabin was like a war hospital and the girls were flat out the whole time offering succour and medical and hygiene assistance.

There was still almost no news of Darwin to the outside world so when we called our company representative prior to descending into Mt Isa, and asked for catering to be made available, he was disbelieving. However sandwiches and more drinks were ready. The doctor agreed that the best course was to continue onto Brisbane and get the women and babies into the best possible care as quickly as possible. We made a quick turnaround and set off for another two hours or so to Brisbane arriving in the afternoon.

After our passengers were taken care of we all collapsed into Lennons Hotel in the city and had only enough energy for quick beer , before heading off for sleep.

Also I was told later that someone had, on Boxing Day, picked up what appeared to be a broken telephone in the airfield terminal area, and found it to be to be working perfectly and able to make clear STD calls!

I did no further flights to Darwin during the evacuation.

© 2012 Ray Vuillermin