

## 3 Telecommunications Unit and its association with Labuan



1951 ~ 1957



### 3 TELECOMMUNICATIONS UNIT AND ITS ASSOCIATION WITH LABUAN

(This history is taken from "A Unit History 1946 – 1986" which was prepared by Peter Andrews, when he was unit historian, and was compiled for the unit's 40<sup>th</sup> birthday)

The Unit's presence in Labuan commenced in February 1951 with the postings of FLTLT Frank (the balls in your court) Doherty, SGT Frank (Bushy) Bolton, LAC's Les McLean, Syd O'Neill, Mike Murphy (operators), LAC Joe White (WOM HF/DF) and LAC Eddie Lockyer (WMM). These men were posted to No. 90 (Composite) Wing, Singapore, for duty with the RAF Detachment Labuan.

The men departed Sydney for Labuan via Darwin on the weekly QANTAS Sydney - Japan flight.

Upon arrival at Labuan, the men were greeted by the entire RAF detachment comprising twentythree men and two dogs. The airfield at Labuan, constructed of crushed coral, was used by British and U.N. Forces as a staging post during the Korean conflict. It also provided radio navigational aids for the, RAF, Malay Airways, Cathay Pacific, QANTAS various charter flights and Air France. The airfield was also home for a detachment of 81 Photo Recce Squadron RAF (flying Mosquitos), and a small party of British Army cartographers.

Accommodation for the RAAF operators comprised a seven-man tent, complete with earthen floor, that had been erected over a hollow in the ground. During the heavy tropical downpours, a frequent occurrence, the hollow would fill with water and all but flood them out.

The waterlogged tent situation was, after six months of continuous representations, resolved. The withdrawal of 81 Squadron Detachment (RAF), left the way open for the RAAF members to occupy one of the vacated tents. The RAF CO, with now no apparent excuse, reluctantly gave his permission for the men to change residence.

This move caused quite a stir at 90 Wing (Singapore) as due to a misunderstanding by the powers to be, they got the impression that the men had had enough and were staging a unilateral withdrawal back to Australia.

The CO showed some dissent to the presence of 'strangers' on his Unit and was out to make it as awkward as possible for them. What he hadn't counted on was the long standing fighting spirit of the 'Digger'.

His persistent attempts to gain entry to the Australian Operations room were constantly repelled by those working there-in. This only provoked the CO to the extent that they became No. 1 enemy on his "hit list".

It is recorded that he (the CO) hated seeing the six members wearing the Hat Fur Felt around the Unit. All this hatred did was to encourage the men to wear the hat where-ever they went.

Then there was a parade to determine who were unfinancial members of the Labuan Recreation Club, followed by a sit-on-beds for a "hand and feet" inspection.

The exact purpose of this inspection is unknown by the author, maybe some member may one day shed some light on this subject.

A matter that caused great concern was the standard of the rations or the lack of them. Dehydrated, tinned, stale or reconstituted, never fresh. The weekly QANTAS flight, which overnighted at Labuan, was one flight the men eagerly awaited. If they were lucky they would score the leftover sandwiches which were then the in-flight meals.

An example of a meal served by the RAF was; two slices of bully beef (at air temperature) and two spoonsful of baked beans. Desert usually consisted of local bananas sliced and topped with Wheatsheaf milk (a la Carnation milk - only yellow in colour).

The bananas and milk desert was usually prepared at around 10AM and come lunch would take on the appearance of the blobs normally found in a cow paddock.

Using typical Aussie survival techniques, the men sometimes treated themselves to eggs on toast - the eggs being those of the smallest bantam known to man - washed down with a large mug of tea. This was sometimes supplemented with fresh fish caught by the fanatical fishermen, Joe White, and Les McLean.

Their survival techniques didn't end there. The ordering of four (4) rabbits from cold storage at JESSELTON (now known as Kota Kinabalu) to feed twentyeight men didn't take much to realize they wouldn't go far. How does one increase the portion of rabbit he would receive? Simply start horror stories a couple of days before the rabbits were due to arrive, that cats were being served in the mess and restaurants. End result - Aussies enjoy rabbit whilst others refuse to eat cat.

There is also the saga of the pots of tea. The Brits would make up a large pot of tea with the milk already added. At one of the evening meals there were many complaints about the quality and taste of the tea. This was repeated again at breakfast the morning, causing one of the RAAF members to be so riled that he stormed down to the CO's quarters with mug of tea in hand. The CO, still in bed and not amused by this intrusion, refused to sample the tea being offered and stated that his cup was okay (freshly made in his own personal tea pot), but he did agree to smell it. Investigations revealed that the local Malay mess boy had added the tea and milk into the old-fashioned copper and brought it to the boil. The following morning, not wanting to waste what was left from the night before, he reheated the tea in the copper and served same up for breakfast. The complainant's reward for bringing about the investigation was to be appointed to the

messing committee and given the stocktaking job. His first task was to despatch two tea chest of sardines, surplus to requirements, back to RASC stores in Singapore.

Relations between the RAAF and the RAF CO were now at an all time low. After working a nightshift and not finishing until 3AM, the CO had the audacity to barge into the men's tent at 8AM, wake the two sleeping nightshift members and ordered them to assist with the unloading of the aircraft. This aircraft was an RAF VALETTA known as the "LAB P". The "P" standing for passenger and not "PIG" as the VALETTA was most commonly referred to.

On future aircraft days the men would check the signals for the aircraft manifest to see if it was carrying more than 40-50lb of freight. If it was then the men would conveniently disappear to the beach or other unknown places. This lasted for some weeks when once again they were caught for the aircraft unloading. During unloading the boys found the crew's inflight rations of chicken and boiled eggs. They scoffed the lot but took great care in replacing the bones and egg shells in the boxes and the replaced the boxes back in their original position. The men often wondered at the reaction of the crew when they discovered the bones and egg shell inflights. Strangely nothing was said about this incident other than the men being told to stay away from all aircraft. As Syd put it - RAAF 1 V RAF nil.

Everything seemed to be progressing steadily without any further intervention by the CO until an aircraft arrived with a load of 2' X 2' concrete slabs. These had been requested by the RAAF to help solve the 'rising damp' problem in original tent. The order had never been rescinded. When the CO discovered the slabs and who they were intended for, he instructed the men to unload the slabs and have them laid by next morning.

With Christmas approaching, the RAF members did their utmost to convince the RAAF members that although the messing did leave something to desired, they (the messing staff) would really turn it on for the Christmas dinner. That they did - vintage sardines and eighteen bottles of beer (empty bottles to be returned) for twentyeight guys. It would have been a very lean Christmas if the airlines hadn't been so generous. Cathay Pacific provided a turkey, Malay Airlines a huge ham and QANTAS crates of tomatoes and lettuce. These were the first lettuce and tomatoes that the men had seen in twelve months. Working conditions at the detachment were less than ideal. The setroom was half the RAF communications but with receivers set on a bench at an awkward height. As there were no typewriters, a small writing table was supplied. Aching fingers and wrists were the order of the day. Transmission speeds were often in the 25-35WPM bracket and with little or no rest between messages. Due to the poor lighting and the use of 2H pencils, it was almost impossible to see the lines or words just made. A request was uttered for permission to use biros in place of the pencils, which brought a reply "you can use a burnt stick so long as we can read it".

The RAAF members were also required to spend time working with the RAF on the CW net comprising Singapore - Car Nicobar - Labuan - Hong Kong - Clark Field.

The HF/DF shack was sited some two miles from the main operations area at the end of the runway. Transport to and from this site was by bicycle. Some ride when one is loaded with details of the nights work etc.. The site was powered by diesel generator located 100 yards from the hut. This had to be refueled and fired up each time the shack was manned. Once running, the voltage regulator had to be adjusted to achieve a reading of about 250-300 volts to provide the minimum current of 190 volts to the equipment. Any less would give inaccurate readings. It was not uncommon for the DF operator to adjust the voltage somewhat above the 300 mark to achieve the minimum 190 volts.

The shack itself proved to be a most unsuitable working environment. The roof, constructed of wooden planks, leaked like a sieve. This problem was usually rectified by using a ground sheet held in place by wedges placed in the cracks. This served the purpose of keeping both equipment and some operators dry - Les McLean being the exception. He forgot about, the build-up of water until the weight became too great and gave way. That was the signal for Les to close down for the night, his sense of humour in tatters.

A return trip from the DF site became a real confidence course. After negotiating the planks, to shut down the power, one then had to make the trip back down the strip dodging grazing buffalo and the various pot holes.

The hours of operations were long and tedious with the dayshift from 6AM through to around 5PM. The evening/night shift ran from 3PM to 2 or 3AM the next morning, an average of approximately 80 hours per week.

Overseas living allowances were another source of complaint. The members of the first detachment were paid the equivalent of the RAF detachment overseas allowances. In today's currency this was 30 cents per day. In comparison, the members at 90 Wing (Singapore) were receiving 75 cents a day. It wasn't until the 90 Wing allowances were raised to \$1.00 a day that the Labuan members were paid the same rate. This may never have eventuated if AVM J.P.J. Cauley hadn't paid the men a visit en-rout Japan to Australia. He left Labuan with his little black book full of submissions and assured the men that he would have the anomaly corrected, but not until after the Christmas/New Year stand-down period. As promised by AVM Cauley, the men received a back payment of the allowance to the tune of \$150.00. Cigars and champagne was the order of the day at the Airport Hotel.

On a more serious note, members of the first detachment were responsible for the first ever post-war ANZAC Day march and service in Labuan. One of the members of the detachment, Eddie Lockyer, a radio technician, had lost a brother in the Islands during the war. The grave site was located at the War Cemetery in Labuan. The NCOIC of the detachment, Frank Bolton, decided as a mark of respect to lay a wreath which was to coincide with ANZAC Day. The body of men marched to the gates of the cemetery where they then formed two ranks in front of the flag pole and Eddie Lockyer laid the wreath.

Subsequent ANZAC Day marches and wreath laying ceremonies gradually grew in numbers, and by 1962, it had become quite an important and, without intending to be disrespectful, popular event. People participating in the 1962 parade included visitors from Butterworth, the ships company from a visiting RAN vessel, the RAF band from Seletar (Singapore), plus RAF and RAAF members based on Labuan.

By 1955 both work and living conditions had improved immensely. The Operations room and power house were now constructed of concrete whilst the living accommodation, although built of timber, had a concrete floor and was quite spacious but more importantly - dry.

The attachment by this stage also boasted its own transport in the form of a Holden utility. It was not without its problems though. A certain member of the detachment managed to 'park' it in a ditch when, he claimed, he had swerved to avoid some dogs. RAF CO's comments - "Pink elephants more like".

Attachments to Labuan continued through until 1957 when it was decided that the detachment would disband. Members present at the time of disbandment were either repatriated back to Australia or moved on to Hong Kong to complete their tour of duty overseas.

LABUAN



Frank Bolton  
1951



Syd O'Neill at door of "Australia House" 1951



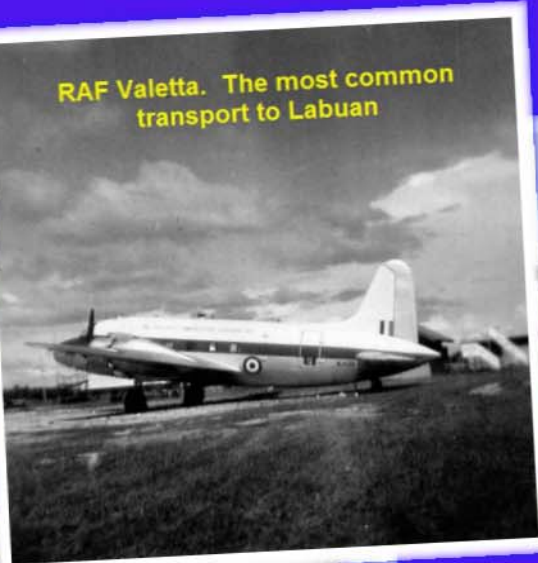
Joe White, Ed Lockyer, Les McLean, Dick Ford  
and Frank Bolton



Joe White, Ed Lockyer, Les McLean



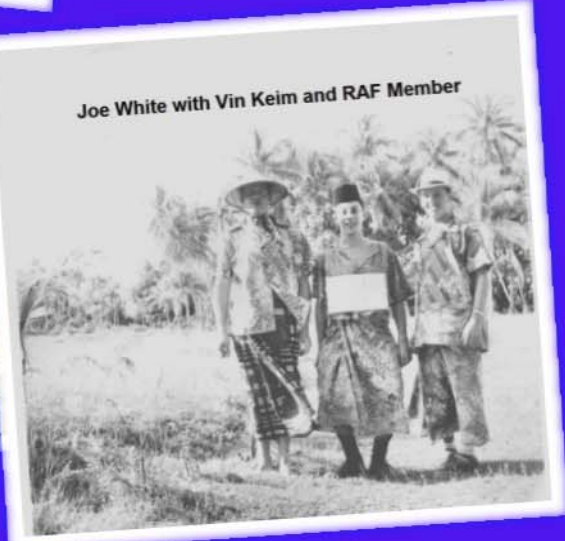
RAF Valetta. The most common  
transport to Labuan



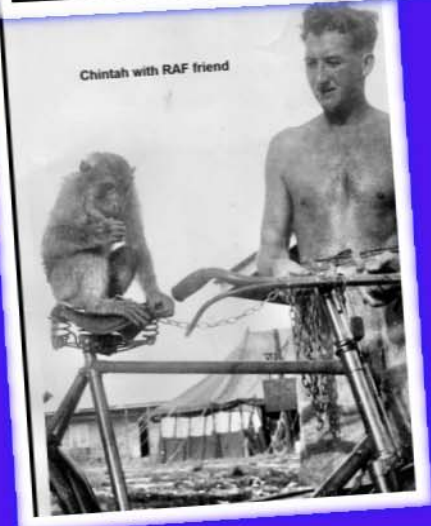
Labuan Recreation Club



Joe White with Vin Keim and RAF Member



Chintah with RAF friend



ANZAC Day Labuan 1956  
Ken Seward, Bob Meechin, Don Sewell, Phil Wiers, Trevor Tipp  
Jeff Hoile, Eric Simms, Bill Pritchard, Barry Butler



RAF Labuan Detachment ...July 1951



