

THE FRENCH CONNECTION

In mid June 1970 I had a quite extraordinary charter. Earlier in the week there was a charter booked to take a French Journalist and cameraman from the magazine Paris Match, accompanied by a member of the Aust Diplomatic Service, on a three day tour to Normanton, Weipa, Thursday Island and Cooktown, finishing in Cairns. Mike Barker met the flight that they were supposed to be on, but no one showed up, and we didn't hear any more of them---until midday Sunday . I was pottering about when the phone rang and a very French voice said-- “ver e iss my aeroplane”-- and I realised that they had arrived, I was the duty pilot.and I was stuck with it.

I threw a few clothes into my O/nite bag, headed out to the Airport, threw in a quick flight plan, put the Cerssna 310 on line and got the passengers on board. At this point, the Journo announced that “on zee way to Normanton vee would like to stop off at Springvale and Dagworth” ---I realised that this was not to be any or dinary trip. Journo couln't believe that I was going to have to change my flight plan despite Springvale being in almost exactly the opposite direction and about the same distance.

I got out and called flight service on the phone and said to the fellow in charge—Ron Keen, he had a good sense of humour -- “hey Ron, on zee way to Normanton vee are going to stop off at Springvale and Dagworth”, to which he replied “OK, if that’s how you feel you do that”. I bolted back to the air craft and called the Tower-- “ Isa Tower, Bravo November Lima taxiing for Springvale”-- there was a very pregnant silence and eventually the question was-- “Bravo November Lima er , er er confirm Springvale?-- My reply -“confirmed”-- I gave him a track and cruising level and we were off. We arrived at Springvale Station about mid afternoon to find that the owner, Colin Milson, was visiting the next door station—Cluny-- which he also owned and wasn't expected to return until last li ght. Colin had been a wartime pilot and had his own Cessna 182 which he used extensively around the properties.

Journo---extremely arrogant-- had decided that he would wait it out and would have to stay o/nite., much to the discomfort of the Diplomat and myself. Right on last light Colin came puttering along in his Cessna to be confronted by our gaggle; I approached him and told him that I would be quite happy to remove the lot of us to Winton (I would get the runway lights switched on) however he said that they would wear it. Firstly he lined the Journo up and gave him a right royal dressing down, then told them that—now that was out of the way—we would enjoy the rest of the evening—we did.

Mrs Milson has arrived home, the fire is out and has to be lit and dinner produced for “the mob” as well as cranking up beds for us all . I advised the French contingent---much to their astonishment-- that the Milsons would “dress” for dinner and they had better- at least- wear a tie; we managed to scrounge up ties for them, I always kept one in my nav bag.

The meal, although somewhat spartan ,was quite filling and much better than could be expected under the circumstances. The Milsons were very well travelled people---- as of course were the French – great conversation ensued , and turned into a very enjoyable night, they were very gracious hosts. -----we are supposed to be in Weipa, some 600 nm to the north!!

The next day Colin loaded the French into his Cessna and—much to their delight—took them out to a mustering camp to see cattle being worked and they come back after lunch as happy as pigs in poo. Colin had given them a good run down on working cattle, and given them a biily-tea and damper smoko topped off with steak cooked on a makeshift barbie. There were also some big sand hills for background. The next move was to to Dagworth, only to discover that the station had been de-stocked and the only sheep to be seen were about fifty and as wild as march hares. This left them in a dilemma as they wanted to see sheep being shorn etc.. Bush Pilots are a resourceful breed and I suggested that we pop up to Julia Creek, I knew a Stock & Station fella there and he may offer some advice.

On “zee” way, they naturally wanted to have a look at the Combo water holes. Now, having been up and down the road many times, I knew that there was a big sign at the turn off, so it was just a matter of cruising up the road at about fifty feet and throwing a leftie at the sign. They were able to get lots of good photos and were pleased. On arrival at Julia Creek my mate from Primaries was able to tell us that the only sheep being worked were at “Toorak”, a govt research station about fifty miles south of “The Creek”, so he got in touch with them and arranged for us to visit next day. At this point I deemed it wise to ring Mike Barker and put him in the picture---“ Julia Creek what the bloody hell are you doing there”!! I explained the situation and advised that the present rate of progress wasn't good.

Arriving around 9.00am we were in time to see a mob of a couple of hundred sheep being yarded by men on motor bikes and dogs---doing what sheep dogs do--- jumping up and down from the bikes and running along the sheeps backs . This was just what the Journo and his mate the photographer wanted to see. Photo-man managed to annoy the hell out of the shearers, getting under their feet and generally disrupting the operation. They finally had their fill and we were ready to head back in the direction that we were supposed to be going---much to the relief of everyone at Toorak. By now, two and a half days late , we were finally on our way to Normanton, arriving there early afternoon and visited the Railway Station where they talked the driver of the “Gulflander”into cranking it up and driving it out of its shed for a photo shoot. Karumba was also on the visiting list but interest had waned they decided to give it a miss. At this point, the Aust Diplomat fella decided to abandon ship and jump on a Bushies flight to Cairns to try to get the trip back on course---much to my disgust-- as I was left to handle the pair on my own. We headed off to Weipa where we were scheduled to stay the night. The Mineral Company had been holding accommodation for us and were not impressed, we were now some five days late all over—it gets worse.

An inspection of the bauxite loading facilities was arranged and suddenly it was found that photo-man was missing—big drama as safety was very tight. He was suddenly spotted, he had climbed one of the conveyor belt towers and was happily snapping away oblivious to the frantic efforts of company staff to convey to him that what he was doing was a very serious health hazard. Personally I would have loved to have pressed the big red button and loaded him onto a ship. After causing as much disruption as possible , they decided that they would not stay overnight at Weipa, further upsetting the Company staff and we headed off to Thursday Island---anything that happened prior to our arrival at TI was just a walk in the park. The Airport for TI is on neighboring Horn Island and after refuelling the aircraft and parking it we were ferried across on a launch---the airport is unattended at night.

The Torres Strait Pilot Service had been required by the Australian Government to hold a launch in readiness for these people to visit Possession Island --where Cook took possession of the whole of the Eastern Coastline of Australia on behalf of the British Govt—plus various other places of interest. Now, keeping a launch on standby is somewhat difficult as ships come and go through the straits regularly and the pilot has to be on the ball and ready to go and we are now five days late. You will have noted in an earlier chapter that Bushies uniforms are well known in that part of the country; as I walked into the Australia Hotel, a huge voice boomed out---BU SHY! WHERE THE HELL HAVE YOU BEEN?-- it was the Chief Pilot and he was spitting chips as he has had to work minor miracles to keep a launch available and no one had bothered to tell him that we had been delayed. Actually, Russ Keanalley was also over - nighting there and he inadvertently became the object of the Chiefs ire. The Hotel, likewise, had not received any change of plans and we were lucky that rooms could be found for us---i think that I ended up sharing a room with Russ.

I calmed the Chief down and explained that I was in the same boat as him and not particularly happy. Next day we embarked on his main launch ,crewed by a couple of Islanders ,with strict instructions to be back by a certain time as there was a ship coming through that had to be met. The possibility of me ever setting foot on Possession Island was about as likely as being invited to beat up an ocean liner---that happened -- and so did Possession Island. There is a monument to Captain---Lieutenant actually—Cook on the island and if I could dig far enough into my archives I would find a photo-- but that is unlikely . We were somewhat taken aback to find the Monument draped with an enormous Indonesian flag, an Indo training sailing ship had visited and paid homage to one of the worlds greatest navigators What happened next fairly blew me away; the Frenchys tore off their clothes and raced around on the beach like little kids. Meanwhile the time for the launch to return came and went with the Chief Pilot bellowing over the radio to his crew to get the launch back ASAP. All this had not the slightest effect on our French “cousins” who continued to --like the Unicorns -- just play silly games. They finally decided to get dr essed and come back to r eality and insisted on continuing their sightseeing regardless of the fury of the Chief Pilot.

This was the last day of a five day trip with two r eporters from ‘Paris Match’

I must plead guilty to having enjoyed the tour of TI and Possession Island that I would otherwise have never had, but I was finally glad to get the hell out of there before we got lynched. We headed south ,next stop Cooktown, but enjoying a good look at Cape York—I even got some good shots myself in passing. If I thought that their behaviour in TI was extraordinary, I had seen nothing yet !Their first stop was at the Cooktown Museum, which I had been through several times before, but it is the sort of place that one can visit many times and still enjoy. Now, not long before our visit, Princess Anne had visited on the occasion of the bi-centenary of Cooks careening of the Endeavour on the bank of the Endeavour River . She had gifted to the people of Cooktown, a pristine Union Jack for the occasion, it had been held in the museum and was not let out of sight of a responsible member of the staff.

They hadn't allowed for the charm of a couple of Frenchmen and the flag was soon in their hands for the purpose of a photo shoot--- would they handle it with great care? Of course they would---like hell. What happened next was pure pantomime. We made our way down to the river and examined the Cook Memorial, the tree that the Endeavour had been "tethered" to and various other points of interest.

Then—joy of all joys—they discovered a dinghy complete with oars pulled up on the bank, this was too good to miss, it was quickly launched and they were off across the river. There was an extensive area of sand on that side where they landed and promptly tied THE flag to an oar, stuck it in the sand, and, with clothes once more removed, proceeded to carry on like proverbial "pork chops". In the midst of all this, a squall blew up with lots of rain and wind, however, our likely lads being equal to the challenge promptly turned the dinghy over and sheltered under it.

The squall was over in about five minutes and they emerged to find that the oar -- with flag attached--- had blown into the river and was floating away at a rapid pace. Hastily getting their gear back on, they launched the dinghy and set off in pursuit---with only one oar. They finally prevailed, hauled a very soggy flag on board and with two oars headed back to the town side of the river where Pat Hegarty—Bushies Agent—was waiting. They handed Pat the sorry looking flag and politely requested that he return it to the museum after he had taken us to the airport!.

At the airport a local man rucked up and asked if we could possibly give him a lift to Cairns as his father was seriously ill, we put it to the French but they refused.

Retribution is pure joy. They also—quite naturally-- wanted to see Endeavour Reef—it is quite identifiable and I could quite easily have remained visual for them but somehow I had managed to get myself into cloud and I explained to them that it would be too dangerous to try to get visual in that area due to the high mountains along the coast. So ended the French connection, and, heaving a great sigh of relief, I dumped them in Cairns--- and went home. I seem to recall that they caused some havoc in both Cairns and Townsville.

To leap forward many years, Jean and I did a trip around far Nth Qld in 2011, including Cooktown, and I enquired re that flag—no one knew anything about it and no mention of it could be found.