

A History of TAA Bristol Freighters Flown in New Guinea

The TAA Bristol Freighters flown in New Guinea.

By Ron Austin (Bristol Captain 1963-1966)

This is a story to tell you why we TAA pilots in NG, were flying 2nd hand freighter aircraft bought in Pakistan.

Some background.

The introduction of Bristol Freighters into Pakistan was a political decision of the British Government.

In 1948 the Pakistan Air Force had ordered a batch of Bristol Brigand fighters from England and then cancelled the order. The British demanded compensation and substituted the order with Bristol Freighters. These strange aircraft were unwanted but the contract was completed. The Freighter aircraft apparently did provide satisfactory service for their Air Force.

A total of 71 Freighters, Mark 21's and 31.s were ferried from England, to the Pakistan Air Force.



Bristol VH-TBA

The majority were used for general Air Force operational flying but many were converted for special projects. Some were modified for VIP travel, five of them were fitted with spray equipment to spray plagues of

Locusts and several aircraft were modified, in 1953, to carry a 4000 lb. bomb.

With this background, in 1961 Trans Australian Airline joins the story as part of the B170 history.

Early in 1959 the Australian Federal Government had made a decision to replace the Qantas Airline, who operated within New Guinea, with the domestic airline Trans Australian Airlines; they were to be the “carrier” responsible for all passenger and freight flights. At that time, 1959, the largest aircraft Qantas were using in NG was the Douglas DC3’s. TAA soon realised that an aircraft larger than a DC3 was needed to move the heavy cargo expected to be delivered to NG in the near future.

Ansett Airlines (operating as Mandated Airlines) were also flying in NG in opposition to Qantas. It was decided that TAA and Mandated Airlines, as potential competing freight carriers in NG, would make a joint purchase, from Pakistan, of surplus Bristol Freighter aircraft. Australian crews flew these to Australia in 1961. There were three aircraft for MAL and 4 for TAA. After arrival, selected aircraft were serviced by their respective Airlines and then flown to NG. The aircraft for TAA were registered in Australia as VH-TBA, VH-TBB, VH- TBC and VH-TBD. TAA planned to use the first two in NG and to retain C and D in Australia for replacement parts.

The two TAA operational aircraft commenced their flights in NG, VH-TBB in June 1961, and VH- TBA in September 1961.

The Bristol’s large load capacity was required because the NG Administration intended constructing a road suitable for trucks, from Lae Township to Goroka and Mt Hagen located in the centre of the Whagi valley in the Highlands. This was a very major undertaking. For the project they needed trucks, bridge girders, bulldozers, tractors, graders and similar gear which could only reach the Highlands of NG in an aircraft as large as the Bristol.

Other non-government contracts were also planned, one being to move the components of a complete new tea factory from the Madang wharf to the town of Mt Hagen, located in the Highlands at an elevation of 5500 We discovered the order for the tea factory, to the manufacturers in England, included the specification that every component must be designed to fit inside a Bristol Freighter. When loading this factory we

found the large round condensers fitted into the hull almost like a cork in a bottle.

Other heavy freight items I have flown into the Highlands include complete D4 Caterpillar tractors, a road grader, stripped of its engine, but complete with the blade still attached, to enable the unit to be unloaded with our portable ramps at destination. When carrying trucks as cargo, the wheels were often removed and they were rolled in on their brake drums. This reduced the height of truck to enable it to be moved far enough into the hull, below the wing structure, to be able to shut the door. Our cargo staff became quite versatile at finding solutions to loading difficulties. A Caterpillar D8 had to be dismantled and made into three loads for its Highland destination.

The two Bristol's were based in Madang as this town was the centre of the freight transfer into the interior of NG. The advantage of the airport at Madang was being adjacent to a cargo wharf and closest to the airstrips in the Highlands. The airport had a single runway used for all departures and arrivals, and was sealed with bitumen. Most of the other landing strips used by us in the Highlands were either loose dirt or grass which was very slippery when wet. Many strips were one way operations; you land uphill and then take off in the reverse direction, downhill.

The TAA pilots required to fly the Bristol in NG usually completed a ground theory course in Australia before their posting. The in-flight training for the endorsement was conducted in Madang. Those pilots converted to fly the Bristol soon appreciated the suitability of this aircraft to carry freight, it was easy to load and unload, and the power /weight ratio was superior to the DC3's making it much safer to fly in marginal conditions.

A History of TAA Bristol Freighters Flown in New Guinea



LOADING AVIATION FUEL DRUMS



ON FINAL APPROACH, MADANG

The large Bristol Hercules sleeve valve engines were powerful and rather more complex to handle than the DC3 Pratt and Whitney engines. First flight of the day required a very long idling period to raise the temperature of the thick engine oil to a satisfactory viscosity. To start the engines at the high altitude strips, the priming of the fuel system was radically different to the procedure used to start at sea level. We could not rely on the petrol gauges fitted in the aircraft because, after refuelling, the small quantity of fuel we carried could only be reliably guaranteed if the total in each tank was measured by hand with a wooden dip stick. This task usually fell to our young First Officers.

After each refuelling at Madang the F/O's would climb past the radio rack behind the crew seats, open a hatch and climb out on top of the fuselage, from here it was a dangerous walk along the top of the wings to reach the fuel caps and check the quantity of petrol with the dip stick. When looking into the large wing tanks the amount of fuel in the bottom always seemed tiny. For the First Officers there was a very real danger of slipping off the wing or the fuselage top. This was in 1963 and would not be allowed in today's Health and Safety requirements.

Our Engineers coped very well with their job of keeping the Bristol's flying. They had absolutely minimum equipment. Most daily maintenance was done in the heat of the sun, without any cover for shade. A partial solution to this was to keep their spanners cool in a bucket of water while working in the open.

We experienced many serviceability problems not expected by the designers. For example, the tail wheel had an electric solenoid lock that could be released for taxiing and then before take-off it was locked to

A History of TAA Bristol Freighters Flown in New Guinea

help keep the a/c straight on the runway. When landing and taking off on wet grass strips in the Highlands, the mud would cover the solenoid. During the flight back to Madang the mud would solidify and after landing, on some occasions, the electric solenoid was not strong enough to withdraw the lock and enable us to swing the tail to taxi. This fault required the aircraft to remain on the runway while the First Officer exited by the top hatch, walked down the fuselage and jumped off at the tail, He then lay on the ground with the aircraft fire axe and hammered the locking pin to loosen the mud. This problem was probably unknown to the Bristol designers.



Pushing the aircraft up to the ramp to unload motor vehicles.

Completion of the road to Mt.Hagen did reduce the quantity of air freight required to be carried from Madang into Goroka, Mt Hagen, Minj, Banz, Baiyer River and the other major towns. We seem to have created a rod for our own backs by lifting all that heavy gear into the highlands. The transport system could now run without the assistance of the Bristol Freighters.

To conclude, in 1967, after 5 years of intensive work in NG. TAA decided to remove the Bristol aircraft from New Guinea and sell them in Australia, to Air Express. Of our two Madang based aircraft, VH-TBB continued flying with Air Express and VH-TBA was stripped for spares in Brisbane.

TAA Engineers and crews involved in the operation of the Bristols.

A History of TAA Bristol Freighters Flown in New Guinea

Our research was assisted by the joint memories of those persons still surviving after 56 years. Names may be missed. Perhaps we have an excuse.

Ground Engineers

Graeme Buntrock
Bob Harvey-Hall
Hans Helberg
Jim Lattimore
Ron Mathews
Ian Johnson
Bruce Satchell,
Alec Topp ,
Alan Thompson
Fred Nott

First Officers

Fred Fethers
Darrell Mitchell
Peter Brown
Lance Grant
Eric Wiltshire
Barry Adamson

Captains

Ivan Neal
Bob Slater
Jack Curtis
Peter Worley
Frank Savage
John Guggenheimer
Ron Austin
Aart Hofman
Barry Stewart
John Herrick
Tony Armstrong
Bob Frazer
Daryl Mc Kenzie

