



A fast caravan indeed

The Mirage goes to Butterworth

In October 1958 and February 1959, Nos 3 and 77 Squadrons ferried their Sabre fighters to Malaya to join No 2 Squadron's Canberra bombers at RAAF Butterworth. For the short-range Sabres this was a demanding exercise as the pilots had to circumnavigate a hostile Indonesia. Once at Darwin the squadrons flew to Biak in Dutch New Guinea, and then to Labuan in British North Borneo refuelling en route at Guiuan, on the south-eastern tip of Samar in the Philippines, before completing the final leg to Butterworth.

These deployments were exciting affairs, with the alien topography and rapidly changing tropical weather generating moments of intense anxiety in many cockpits. When the Mirage IIIO replaced the Sabre in RAAF service (AA, March 2017), 3 Squadron returned to Australia in 1967 and was replaced by 75 Squadron, the first RAAF squadron to convert to the Mirage.

Any long-range deployment of short-range jet fighters, with minimal navigation aids and few suitable diversion airfields through potentially dangerous and unpredictable tropical weather, is no milk run. Indeed, these early fighter deployments were so demanding that they rank as significant operations which contributed much to the development and maturing of the RAAF as a modern fighting service. With this year marking the 50th anniversary of 75 Squadron's deployment from Williamtown to Butterworth, it is appropriate to recall the circumstances of Operation 'Fast Caravan' conducted over May 15-18 1967.

Given that the Mirage was officially described as an "all-weather fighter", why was the deployment so challenging, especially as it had a range advantage of about 20 per cent over the Sabre? The reality was that even with its two 374-gallon external fuel tanks, all bar 130 gallons of the total of 1,420 gallons on board was needed to travel

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some 1,200nm. Holding fuel was just as non-existent in a Mirage as it was in a Sabre.

Nav aids and radios? A single TACAN and two UHF radios were not much help in a region where TACAN beacons and UHF radios were almost unknown. Furthermore, the first 50 Mirage IIIO(F) aircraft lacked the ground-mapping radar and Doppler navigation set that were installed in the subsequent upgrade to the IIIO(FA) standard. The routing was also complicated by Dutch New Guinea having been ceded to Indonesia in 1962, and with Nadzab airfield in Papua New Guinea being overgrown with Kunai grass, combined with security concerns in the Philippines, a similar routing to the Sabre ferry of 1958 was ruled out. Fortunately, Australia's relations with Indonesia thawed somewhat in mid-1966 and a more direct routing from Darwin to Butterworth was negotiated.

A visit to Djuanda, near Surabaya in East Java, revealed an excellent runway, but the airfield had no facilities, no communications, and was littered with derelict MiG fighters. Tactful diplomacy secured approval to deploy through Djuanda although continuing sensitivity dictated the refuelling location was never publicly identified – it became known as "that place".

Wing Commander 'Jim' Flemming assumed command of 75 Squadron – Australia's first Mach 2 fighter squadron – in April 1966. It was not Flemming's first stint as CO of 75 Squadron, the Korean War veteran having commanded the squadron in its

Meteor days. He was also a Sabre fighter combat instructor, having graduated from No 2 FCI Course in 1955, and had served on exchange with the USAF flying the Lockheed F-104C Starfighter.

The RAAF could have picked no better man to take its new supersonic but short-range fighters from Williamtown to Butterworth. Flemming had one year to work up the squadron and what a busy year that was. Not one to tolerate bureaucracy or officious staff officers, Flemming stepped up to the plate, winning a battle to remove his jets from the impersonal (some would say inefficient) centralised maintenance 'garage' at Williamtown, while simultaneously working his unit into its new all-weather fighter role. He was also central to planning the coming deployment, including the administrative and logistics aspects.

All this paid off when on May 15 1967, 75 Squadron ferried 23 Mirages – three aircraft were spares – to Darwin via Townsville. On May 18, 20 Mirages flew on from Darwin to Butterworth without incident, refuelling en route from rudimentary facilities at Djuanda. On arrival at Butterworth, Flemming immediately embarked on another fight to prevent his Mirages disappearing into another centralised maintenance 'garage'. Several months later the unit's disassembled two-seat Mirage IIID trainer arrived by sea, bringing the squadron up to its establishment strength of 21 Mirages and 21 pilots, and elevating the combat capability of the Far East Air Force to a new level.

 75 Squadron Mirages and their supporting C-130E Hercules en route to Butterworth in May 1967. DEFENCE VIA BRIAN WESTON



Air-Vice Marshal Brian Weston (Ret'd) ferried a Sabre and a Mirage to Butterworth, and led the first Mirage deployment to Exercise Cope Thunder, from Butterworth to Clark AFB in the Philippines in 1981.