

## ***My time at TSF***

### *Memories of Transport Support Flight, Butterworth, 1968-69*

These memories are from an era long gone, of the time 45 years ago when some 40% of the RAAF's operational capability was in South East Asia, mostly in Malaysia and Vietnam.

The RAAF was in Butterworth, Malaysia, as part of FEAF, the Far East Air Force. It included RNZAF aircraft and a significant RAF presence, with Lightning fighters in Singapore, and various transports and SAR helicopters in Singapore, Butterworth and the Malay peninsular. RAAF C-130s were frequent visitors, along with RAF Vulcans and other combat aircraft.

TSF was part of this large and busy air force world - albeit a small part that seldom rates more than a brief mention in official histories and is all but forgotten by most Butterworth veterans. My own TSF memories are patchy, so what follows is not a history. It is simply an account of some things I still remember about those times.

The unusual has tended to stick more than the mundane. One persistent memory is of a barman in Brunei who strangled a python and had taken heads in his youth. I met him when we flew the Butterworth cricket team to Brunei on the invitation of the Shell company running an off-shore oil field.

The trip was a bit unusual for us, even in those times. Our main roles were to provide VIP services to Australian Diplomats and visiting firemen, and the more mundane RAAF support tasks that took up most of our time. We had six C-47 Dakota aircraft and four crews. An aircraft fitted out with airline seats was used for VIPs – the others were basic transports.

So as the name suggests, we flew transport support to Australian military and government units in the region. Most of the RAAF tasking was within the Malay Peninsula and to and from Singapore and Vietnam. Only occasionally did the odd and unusual, like the trip to Shell in Brunei, come up - and when it did in could widen horizons more than a bit.

In Brunei, each Butterworth visitor was hosted by a Shell employee. My host was an English seismologist who had discovered the Nigerian oil fields and now spent weeks working in the Borneo jungle with natives whose language he had learned. He loved cricket and wanted to talk about nothing else - I only found out about his impressive achievements from his wife when he wasn't there.

He took me to the Shell Club for a drink and dinner. It was here I meet the barman in question. He was a broad shouldered, muscular man of medium height and a cheery disposition. It was only when my host pointed out a framed newspaper article in the bar did realize there was more to him than first appeared.

The article was headlined: *Man Strangles Python* and included a photo of the barman in the middle of a row of men holding a dead python at least three metres long. There was also an account of how the snake had dropped down on him in his boat while he was checking his fish traps, only to find it had bitten off more than it could chew when he strangled it.

The python strangler also had a row of blue tattoo marks around his neck. I asked my host what these meant and he casually replied: 'Oh, they're for the Japanese heads he took during the war.' Needless to say, he had no problems keeping order in the bar.

TSF started life as C Flight, No 2 Squadron, following the basing of its Canberra bombers in Butterworth in 1958. When 2 Squadron Canberras went to Vietnam in 1967, C Flight was made into a separate unit and renamed Transport Support Flight.

By the time I arrived in early 1968, the Dakotas were getting old but they were well maintained and still a useful asset. Indeed, apart from the fact that they cruised at a maximum of 150 knots (at the best of times) they had only two problems - no air-conditioning and no weather radar.

The first was a problem because parked aircraft could get very hot during the day, and by the time we had loaded up and taken off we were often dripping with sweat. To cope, we carried iced drinks and drank heartily during the climb. If we carried important passengers we took a RAAF steward along who dispensed drinks asap after take-off. It was all a bit uncomfortable, but manageable.

The same could not be said for the lack of weather radar. The area is justly famous for some very nasty weather - especially in the wet season when massive cumulus clouds build rapidly on the hills and blow in from over the sea. We could usually fly during the day, when we could see the clouds, but avoided flying at night, except in special circumstances. But even in the daytime, we couldn't see into clouds like radar can.

I recall one time heading north along the west coast of peninsular Malaysia when we faced a wall of cloud ahead near the tin mining town of Ipoh. Seeing no option but to fly through it, we picked what looked to be the best course and flew on.

When in cloud we hit severe turbulence and a massive updraft that put the vertical speed indicator up against the stops and sent the altimeter winding rapidly through thousands of feet. I watched as we went through 18 000 feet. We then reached the other side of the cloud and entered a down draft equally as strong as the updraft.

We descended quickly down to about 8 000 feet then suddenly burst out into clear air to see the tin mines around Ipoh, with their pools of green and blue water, spread out below. To say this was a welcome sight is to seriously understate the case. Very relieved, and thinking our ordeal was over, the captain tried to increase power - only to find there wasn't any to be had.

The propellers were turning in the slip-stream but the engines were not working. We were effectively a heavy glider, descending down to who knows where, when the starboard engine roared into life with a loud bang and a flash of flame from the exhaust. The port engine soon did the same and our ordeal was over.

When back home we checked the flight manual and figured out what had happened. To try and limit our rapid climb rate the captain had throttled back, but had overdone it. With too little airflow to keep them clear the carburetors had iced up. When out of the cloud, the drier air melted the ice enough for it to be sucked into the engines, causing the noise and the flash.

Happily, such events were rare. However, weather is always a factor with flying. It was just that this was more so in tropical places like

Malaysia - especially if big hills are also involved, as they were with the supply drops we did to police forces hunting communist terrorists in the mountains that form the spine of Peninsular Malaysia.

The CTs (as they were invariably called) were a major problem in the 1950s, producing widespread violence and unrest and tying up hundreds of thousands of police and military personnel. They were now largely defeated, confined to an area along the Thai/Malaysia border – where flying was restricted by the threat of ground fire – and driven back into the hills in small groups.

The local police set up camps in the hills to hunt down these small CT groups and we dropped supplies to them. The police camps were usually in jungle covered mountainous terrain that made them hard to find in all but clear weather – a rarity, as there was usually some cloud about, or fog in the valleys.

As a result, we sometimes had to circle around a bit to locate the target police camp. The next step was to plan and do the drop, which was done by British Army specialists who packed and dispatched the load. This was done on a call from the cockpit through the space left by removing the back door before flight. With the door off it was very noisy down the back and head-phones on long leads were used, along with safety straps, by everyone working there.

The altitude, high humidity and heavy load meant that in most cases we could not maintain height on one engine. As a result, the actual drop run was always done within the speed and height limits needed to cope with an engine out, and always down hill towards a river that could be followed down to the coast.

I did a number of supply drops without incident, but just before I arrived an aircraft had lost an engine near the drop zone and followed a river down to the coast where they landed at a nearby airfield. My memories are happier ones – of flying low over the continuous jungle canopy with occasional flowering trees rising up from the sea of green.

It was quite beautiful from above, but it was the original 'tiger country' and not a desirable habitat for humans like us. For most of

us the only tiger we wanted to see at close quarters was the one on cans of the local beer.

I quite liked Tiger Beer, but it didn't like me and I switched to drinking gin and tonic, reasoning that the quinine in the tonic had to be a good thing in a malaria zone. The medics told me this was wishful thinking, but you have to drink something in a hot climate and I stuck with G & T when the beer was disagreeable.

The Mirage squadrons at Butterworth exercised with the RAF in Singapore from time to time and we usually flew their troops and fly-away kits down and back. The relative speed differences always amused me – we took about two hours to fly Butterworth to Singapore, the Mirages did it in well under thirty minutes. They could, and occasionally did, go even faster but only at the risk of shattering a few windows along the way.

As well as Malaysia/Singapore ops, we did fairly frequent flights to Vietnam and back. Most were to fly RAAF personnel to and from leave in Penang, technical people accompanying Canberras ferried over for deeper maintenance at Butterworth, and various folks needing a ride between Butterworth and Vietnam.

My first trip was to Vung Tau where the Caribous and Iroquois helicopters were based. It was a US Army airbase, very crowded but well suited to their operational needs. Domestic accommodation was stretched to the limits when the RAAF arrived and they were initially accommodated in Vung Tau in two old French Villas.

When word of this got back to Australia some suspected that those posted to Vung Tau were living in the lap of luxury. The reality was very different. The villas were crowded, rat infested and a security nightmare. No 5 Airfield Construction Squadron came to the rescue and built on-base work and domestic facilities, which, for a war zone, were very good.

I speak from experience, having spent a few days in Vung Tau with a busted engine during my early days in TSF. It was all very quiet and I was shown the local town, fed and watered at the Hawks Nest (the club of the Mohawk squadron) and introduced to the famous 'back-beach' crabs at a beach-side restaurant.

The engine fixed, we returned to Butterworth where I reported that I had been to the war but not seen any trace of it. I also reported this thought to my father. He received the letter the same day as the Tet offensive broke out, with big initial gains, and wrote back along the lines that he hoped I had no input into Allied intelligence.

The early gains of Tet were eventually repulsed and the whole event became something of a disaster for the VC and regular North Vietnamese forces – although you would never know it from press reports of the day that frequently saw Tet as the beginning of the end for the Allies.

On occasion we also went to Saigon via Tan Son Nhut airfield, reputed to average a movement every minute, day and night. As most flying was day-time, this made it extremely busy, with more than one movement per minute during the day.

Peace-time air traffic separations were abandoned. Take-offs, for instance, often involved a number of aircraft lined up on the runway, with each in turn starting to roll when the one ahead was airborne and cleaning up.

It all worked remarkably well, thanks in no small part to the outstanding team of USAF controllers headed by a very senior master sergeant. They sometimes invited pilots into the tower to watch. A friend, a helicopter pilot, arranged an invitation and was so impressed he asked the senior controller how anyone could control what he was watching.

The controller grinned and replied: 'We don't actually control it, we just sort of referee it.' Well, whatever they did, it worked. Tan Son Nhut had far fewer incidents and accidents than anyone could reasonably expect with the traffic density involved.

Things were even less controlled outside the airfield control zone, where 'flight following' was provided but aircraft were largely responsible for their own control and collision avoidance. This too seems like a recipe for disaster, but it wasn't.

Given the vast amount of traffic, the 'Big Sky principle' – based on the fact that there's a lot of sky out there and the chances of two aircraft being exactly in the same bit simultaneously are very small – was

largely vindicated. Most, however, have a 'near miss story'. Mine involves a formation of F-100s that flashed past in the opposite direction about 100 feet above us as we approached Phan Rang – so close that I could see the rivets.

I did a number of trips to Phan Rang, mostly flying technical and R&R people to and from Butterworth. We usually stayed overnight, and like Vung Tau this was no hardship as 5 ACS had also done excellent work there to create good facilities and accommodation – including the only flush toilets on the base.

Phan Rang was a very large base and home to F-100s and the USAF version of the Canberra, the B-57 - and, of course, our Canberras. Although the perimeter fence was attacked from time to time, and the enemy liked to sometimes fire rockets in, it was secure in the sense that it was not likely to be overrun at short notice.

Although it is seldom remembered today, RAAF Airfield Defence Guards were part of No 2 Squadron. I saw them in action one night when the base perimeter fence was attacked on the far side of the base from where we were watching. It was quite a show.

USAF transport aircraft circled above the action, dropping parachute flares that turned night into day. Bright flashes and explosions lit the sky as airfield defence guards and the enemy exchanged fire and F-100s from the base strafed and bombed.

The F-100s were flying very short missions, simply taking off, making attack runs and landing again to rearm in a constant stream of aircraft. Things came to a sudden halt when a fully armed F-100 ground to a stop in the middle of the runway with a blown tyre (probably because the pilot also accidentally activated a wheel brake when applying rudder).

Whatever the reason, a fully armed aircraft was now stationary in the middle of the runway and operations had ceased. The pilot quickly opened the canopy and got out. Just as he did so a small rescue helicopter - nicknamed Pedro the Swift because of the way it darted about – hovered over the F-100 and dropped vast amounts of white, fire-retardant foam over it and the pilot.

The pilot staggered off the runway dripping with foam. As he did so, a big machine like a bulldozer arrived and pushed the aircraft off the runway. The whole incident probably took less than two minutes and flying immediately resumed as before.

Throughout the proceedings, the local public address system had periodically advised us not to worry, that things were under control and we were not threatened. This turned out to be true, the fighting soon died down and everyone was happy – except, I imagine, the foam drenched F-100 pilot and the enemy whose attack had failed yet again.

I also did a full Ambassadorial tour of South Vietnam, flying the Australian Ambassador and staff to places large and small. I can't remember most location names and as my log book was burnt in a fire I can't check. But I do remember going to Da Nang, where I slept though a rocket attack after a drink or two, and where I saw an unforgettable sign over the entrance to the flight planning area. It read:

#### WARNING

You are entering an anti-gravity area. If you have not noticed, it is because:

DA NANG SUCKS.

The sign was not new, so it seems those in charge agreed.

The Ambassadorial tour was only possible because South Vietnam is actually quite a large place and the war was sporadic and spread out. In most places, most of the time, there was little or no enemy threat. The problem was, this was not assured – it was all a bit unpredictable – and this seems to have escaped the RAAF officer who planned the tour.

This became obvious when we landed at a small airfield, the name of which I can't recall. We dropped the party off for a three-hour visit to a nearby town and began playing cards in the shade of the wing. At larger airfields we would wait in the terminal, but the only building here was a concrete bunker that looked uninviting so we chose the shade of the wing instead.

Some minutes later a US army sergeant came over. He asked how long we were staying and told us that the airfield was not secure. He and his men lived in the concrete bunker and checked airfield security just before aircraft arrived, but couldn't guard against things like mortar attacks. No one parked there – they just unloaded and loaded, then left.

He invited us to join him in the bunker. This we did, watching all along for a mortar to lob on to our aircraft, but this didn't happen. When the party arrived back we greeted the offending RAAF planner with the news that we were lucky our aircraft was still in one piece. He made no comment, there was no further discussion and we left asap. As the old saying goes: 'no names, no pack drill', but I still remember who he was.

My final memory of time in Vietnam concerns how an airline made a politician look more foolish than usual and embarrassed a RAAF CO. The airline was the innovative US carrier Braniff, who entered into the spirit of the 1960s by painting their aircraft in pastel colours and dressing their stewardesses in the epitome of sixties style and colour to match the aircraft.

To do their part to support the troops at Christmas, Braniff sent some aircraft and teams of stewardesses bearing simple gifts and seasons greetings to Vietnam. There were no stewards, just good looking young women dressed in the height of 1960s fashion. This was, of course, before the thought police took over and airlines could still make such decisions. And, in this case, that was a very good thing.

The politician concerned was an Australian (who will remain nameless in case I don't have all the detail right). Anyway, the essence of the story is that this hapless individual and crew decided to go to Vietnam to boost the morale of our troops over Christmas, and we flew him and his crew to Phan Rang.

To hear his words of wisdom the squadron was assembled in a large outdoor area after dinner. When the Great Man arrived, many were reading the newspapers from home we had brought with us featuring full-page pictures of protest activities in Australia and related articles. As it turned out, this was interesting preparation for what they were about to hear.

Having been introduced by the squadron CO, our man began by saying that the entire nation, every man, woman and child, supported what they were doing and thanking them for their efforts. This was clearly 'pollie speak' rubbish. It was obvious from the newspaper accounts that quite a few Australians didn't support our presence in Vietnam. The assembled squadron nevertheless sat quietly until a group of brightly dressed Braniff stewardesses appeared to the left.

Instantly voting with their feet, large numbers stood up and hurried across to chat with the girls. Embarrassed, the CO called for them to return, but soon realized this was pointless and just stood there with a resigned look on his face. Braniff is no longer with us, but I have not forgotten them and the part they played in helping an out of touch politician get his just deserts in Vietnam.

So although I was never posted there, I saw bits and pieces of Vietnam during the war, especially Vung Tau and Phan Rang where our aircraft were based. But that said, I have never considered myself a Vietnam Veteran, although by current definitions I am. But there are veterans and veterans, and I doubt many veterans would see me as one of them.

In general, I agree with them. Knowing well the dangers faced by the infantry, ADGs, and those who flew in the war, and how brief and comparatively safe my visits were by comparison, I am guided by Will Rogers' quip that: 'We can't all be heroes, someone has to stand on the roadside and clap as they march by' and join the roadside crowd.

Next to our neighbourhood of Butterworth and Penang Island, we got to know Singapore best. It was then the region's most developed and modern place, with a mix of people, great food, good hotels and public buildings, a large port, and so much more that made it the natural regional hub of trade and commerce.

The shopping was amazing. If shopkeepers didn't have something many would arrange to get it for you in very short time. A good shopping venue was Changi Village, near RAF Changi, then a large transport base. (The international airport was at Payar Lebar, nearer the city.) We often stayed at RAF Changi and were regular customers of a shop in the village so good we joked they could get

you anything from a watch to an elephant - but you had to order the elephant overnight.

Compared with today, the island was mostly a collection of villages with a smallish city and large port to the south and airfields in the north. The air traffic was already heavy and very well organized and run. There were standard in and out routes and all traffic was directed to and from four airfields by skilled controllers using radar and a continual stream of patter, changing from one aircraft to another by saying 'break, break' and the next aircraft's call sign.

I was told the controllers worked in pairs. One decided what had to be done and the other talked on the radios. The work was so intense they had a rest every hour before re-entering the fray. I never confirmed this, but obviously something along those lines happened. It was a very professional effort, typical of what Singapore was becoming then and is now.

On one Singapore trip we took a young British Army officer to Butterworth. He had spent a week or so in Singapore with the army to widen his horizons before beginning further training, and told us he had concluded that Singapore would fall apart when the British left. How naïve can you get. We knew Singapore better than that and told him the Singaporeans couldn't wait for the Brits to leave so they could do things their way – which, of course, proved to be completely true and modern Singapore continues to impress and amaze.

Thailand was a popular destination for all the reasons it is today – agreeable people in a country that is modern and old, western and eastern and usually a welcoming place for visitors. Like everywhere, they had their share of crooks and villains. Few were more villainous than the pirates in Songkla who operated high-speed boats north into the Gulf of Siam with ruthless efficiency, and of course there was the usual crime all countries suffer. But that was not the norm and the Thailand we visited was generally peaceful and safe.

To my surprise, north-east Thailand has a pronounced dry season and red soil, and in the dry is more like western Queensland than the green and lush world I had imagined. The mighty Mekong is the border with neighbouring Laos. Even that far from the sea it is very big, and the row of clouds that forms along it in the dry season can be seen from miles away.

My first visit was to take part in a SEATO (South East Asia Treaty Organisation) exercise by flying participants around Thailand. We were based in Korat, one of six USAF airbases, all officially Thai Air Force bases, but in reality American. The others were Ubon, Udorn, Takli, Nakon Phanom and U-Tapao. By our standards they were very big indeed, with 5 000 or more personnel and lots of aircraft.

This arrangement owed much to a civil war in neighbouring Laos during the 1950s. One side, the communist Pathet Lao, was backed by the Soviet Union and North Vietnam. In 1960 major riots in the Laos capital, Vientiane, raised fears among Thais living along the Mekong River, and in the country generally, that if Laos went communist, Thailand could be next. US bases on Thai soil were seen as a much better alternative.

Korat was a typical USAF airbase, with three combat squadrons of F-105 Thunderchiefs, a squadron of an electronic intelligence version of the Super Constellation, and various transports and trainers. The F-105s were operating into North Vietnam and taking heavy losses – we were told they had replaced most of their aircraft in just six months owing to losses.

The scale of the air war over the north, and the quality of the North Vietnamese opposition, came as a big surprise to us. We knew, of course, about the war in the South, but the war raging daily in the north, the air battles with various MiGs and the deadliness of the Russian surface-to-air missiles got virtually no coverage in our press and very little in our intelligence reports.

We soon learned from talking to the F-105 pilots that it was pretty big stuff, demanding and dangerous. Some, like US navy pilot Senator John McCain, finished up in the Hanoi Hilton. The Officer's Club had a number of plaques over the bar listing pilots who had completed a tour of 100 missions. A single plaque listed those who done 200 missions, with honorary mention of two who had done 198 missions and not come home.

While we were there an F-105 returned with a heat-seeking missile that had failed to explode jammed up the tail-pipe. The engine was still OK, but with the jet efflux partly blocked the pilot couldn't get full power and just made it back to base. When on the ground he

couldn't taxi effectively and pulled to the edge of the taxiway so the aircraft could be towed in. When back in the lines he got out and saw the missile, still jammed in the back of his aircraft. We met him later that day, sitting in the bar drinking to his good fortune and still visibly shaken.

I also did two ambassadorial tours of Thailand. These tours were very sought after, as they always included a few days in and around the charming northern city of Chiang Mai during the cooler part of the year. Chiang Mai is far enough north that for some months each year it is dry and warm, not humid and hot like Bangkok is almost all the time.

This, along with the fact that Chiang Mai offered a delightful and relaxing blend of ancient and modern, including first-rate hotels, made it irresistible to the foreign affairs people based in crowded, hectic, hot and humid Bangkok. The tour also went to other places, many quite interesting, but Chiang Mai was always the highlight, as I believe it still is on the tourist map today.

Laos was different again. The legacy of its French Colonial past and recent fighting was still evident and, like Thailand, there were Buddhist temples everywhere. Vientiane, the capital, is on the Mekong across from northern Thailand. It has some nice French colonial buildings and wide streets, but the most memorable feature was a large concrete temple at the intersection of two major roads that cut the city like a giant cross.

Some years previous, the Americans had given the Laotians enough concrete to build an international airport with a 10 000 foot runway. Instead, the Laotians built an airport with a 5 000 foot runway and the giant temple. The Americans labeled it The Vertical Runway and the name stuck.

It is a substantial structure, and although dedicated to peace and harmony it proved to be an ideal place for an armed force to take over and control a large area in the city centre. Apparently it saw quite a bit of fighting in the early 1960s, and still bore the scars of bullets from attackers when I saw it a few years later. I saw it again recently on a TV documentary, fully restored, painted in bright colours and now filling its intended role.

French food was still available, especially exceptional Onion Soup in the hotel we frequented, and French bread. But the biggest attraction to some tourists those days was drugs. You could buy almost anything, and it was all cheap. Many of the drugs in Vietnam during the war came through Laos. Some, our embassy people told us, were flown to Vietnam by Laotian army generals in C-47 Dakotas provided as part of an Australian aid package.

That I can't confirm - but I do know that Vientiane had attracted some Scandinavians seeking Shangri La. Just how many is uncertain, but being tall and blond they stood out like the proverbial sore thumb among the locals. Apparently, they had set out for Kathmandu, but in Vientiane had found what they wanted - cheap drugs and cheap food - and stayed. To get there many had hiked across Vietnam, war or no war, to reach Paradise.

Eventually, the inevitable happened. They ran out of money and began begging in the streets and stealing to support their drug habits. The Laotians got sick of them, put them in a boat and sent them across the Mekong to Thailand. The Thais took one look at their ragged, dirty clothes, scruffy beards and drugged out look, gave them some food and sent them back again.

The Laotians didn't want them back, fed them, turned the boat around and began talks with the Thais about what to do with them. In the meantime, they were stuck on the boat and spent more than week on the river. We arrived just when this circus was coming to an end. The Thais agreed to accept them on the condition they were cleaned up and out of the country within days - paid for, I assume, by their governments or long suffering parents.

Vientiane was home to some Air America and Continental Airways people who did all sorts of overt and covert flights for US government agencies. Much of their work was simply openly flying people around in non-military aircraft for diplomatic reasons. Some were staying at the hotel we used and happily talked about this side of their work. They also shared local knowledge, including their booklets listing airfield and air traffic details for Laos - the only source of up-to-date data available, and very helpful to us.

Vientiane is well inland and gets very hot at times, with temperatures over 40C the norm. One rest day we had done the tourist thing and

by midday the heat drove us to seek an air-conditioned sanctuary – which just happened to be a café bar. It was dimly lit and we were the only customers until a tall man dressed in a felt hat, moleskin trousers and elastic sided R M Williams type boots walked in. He ordered a beer in an outback Queensland accent, then turned around and greeted us cheerfully.

It turned out that he was from Longreach where he had been managing a cattle station that changed hands and made him redundant. While staying at the local pub wondering what to do next he got a phone call from someone in Canberra offering him a job in Laos helping the locals breed cattle. He had never heard of Laos, but he looked in up in an atlas and finding the offer intriguing, accepted after lengthy discussion with his wife – who also had never heard of Laos.

So we asked him what he did. His answer was along these lines. He had a Holden ute and drove it to the local villages with a large esky of beer on ice in the back. He didn't speak Lao so he had some signs made up. On arrival, he held up a sign reading "take me to the chief" or something similar. He then found some shade and handed beers around while he showed them signs of Australian beef cattle, along with an undertaking to teach them how to turn their scrawny, boney bovines into big, strong Aussie-type beeves.

It all sounded like a bit of a joke, but he said it worked well, he was having immediate success and was making friends everywhere. I asked what he did and he said it was easy because: 'they breed their cattle backwards.' Maybe I'd had one beer too many, but this conjured up visions to me of cattle in all sorts of convoluted and impossible positions until he explained what he meant.

It really was easy. For generations the Laotians had castrated the strongest bulls to pull their ploughs and used the others to breed from. The inevitable outcome was poorer and poorer cattle. He simply pointed this out and helped the villagers run a recovery breeding program. The ambassador later told us he was the most successful aid worker in the country. And not only did he like his work, but he thought hot and dusty Vientiane and surrounds was: 'a beaut place, just like Longreach.'

There were no ambassadorial tours of Indonesia. President Suharto had ended 'Confrontation' with Malaysia on assuming power, but the years of mutual suspicion under Sukarno, with his liking for Soviet aircraft and ships, was only slowly abating. Nevertheless, I was lucky enough to go to Indonesia and have good look around.

Our task was to fly an Australian aid team installing a long-range, HF radio, air-traffic link throughout the archipelago. The need for such a link was driven home when I submitted a flight plan, only to be given a frequency to call enroute to file it and get a clearance. The controller concerned had no way to contact people at our destination and was enthusiastic about the forthcoming HF link that would allow him to do so. Nothing had happened yet, but one heart and mind had already been won.

The national tensions were not shared by most Indonesians who were generally welcoming and friendly – sometimes to our detriment. We couldn't drink the water in most places. Foreigners and the better hotels boiled water and placed a bottle in the bathroom for teeth brushing. Not understanding this quaint custom, and thinking that for some odd reason we preferred our water from a bottle rather than the tap, everywhere we went someone had filled a bottle from the tap for us and put it in the bath room.

We took clean water with us and emergency rations of soft drink in case the water ran out. It was only when this happened in one place that we discovered that the emergency soft drink was all Fanta – never my favourite drink and definitely not so after two days of drinking it exclusively and brushing teeth with it.

Some airfields we visited had Indonesian Air Force aircraft of Soviet origin parked to one side. Most were just sitting there from lack of spares and money to keep them flying. Many had flat tyres, with the bottom of the tyre so merged with the tarmac by the heat you could no longer see where the tyre ended and the tarmac began.

But perhaps the most interesting fact about Indonesia in those days was the population figure: 90 million. Despite government population control programs it's almost three times that high now. Malaysia too has grown to more than twice the population in 1969.

Indeed, the entire region is much changed. In Vietnam most people have been born since the war, as have many of the Australians who now happily visit there.

I am now a genuine 'oldie', left over from more turbulent times, an old codger with fading but happy memories. So if the past really is another country, as so many have told us, I can only thank TSF for its part in taking me there and showing me a few of the highlights. I hope you have enjoyed what I can remember about the trip.