"TROPICAL WEATHER"

– A Fighter Pilot's Experience during 'Operation Sabre Ferry' - 1958

By Air Marshal Jake Newham

The *'Cumulonimbus'* section of the Butterworth Crew-Room Mural - featuring a Sabre break-up! ***[From a colour slide by Pete Scully.]***

'Operation Sabre Ferry'

First, some background. In mid-1958, Canberra bombers of No.2 Squadron RAAF were deployed to Butterworth in (then) Malaya, to be followed by 78 Wing Sabres (3 & 77 Sqns, plus 478 Maintenance Sqn), over the October '58 to February '59 period.

The route of *'Sabre Ferry One'*, October-November 1958.

Staging parties were established at Biak, then owned by the Dutch, off the north coast of West Papua; the second at Guiuan[1] on the SE tip of Samar Island, Philippines; and at Labuan, off British North Borneo. A forward maintenance element of 3 Sqn was positioned at Butterworth. Each staging-post was equipped with the usual communications kit, and Guiuan with a transportable Non-Directional Beacon (NDB). Neptunes were to provide mid-track Navigation assistance (via a neat trick of reading our gunsight radar on their ESM gear), Canberras about one hour ahead for enroute and destination weather recce and one USAF Grumman Albatross amphibian provided Search-and-Rescue cover at Guiuan. (For those who notice such matters, the Grumman Amphibian carried the designation **HU-16**. The callsign *"Duckbutt"* was part of the USAF universal convention for this type of SAR aircraft. By arrangement, the Sabre IFF [Radar Identification Transponder] sets were modified to transmit 'Mode 2' pulses continuously, *Duckbutt* having the capability to read both bearing and distance from them.)

For the ferry operation, 1:1million 'topos' [topographic maps] of Samar were not available; we carried 1:3million strip maps, which were fine for long over-water travel and adequate - ***if the weather was kind at destination...***

(...Yes! *Sod's Law* did intervene; that's the point of this tale...)

The longest leg, Townsville to Darwin, was 1010nm; the others just short of 1000nm, which is the very limit of the Sabre's range when carrying two external tanks each of 167 imp. gallons capacity. Importantly, we were well-briefed about the characteristics of tropical weather, especially the **Intertropical Convergence Zone** (ITCZ). We were told that, on form, we would transit before seasonal activity was expected.

No.3 Sqn was to deploy first, with 77 following in February 1959. In late October 1958, 3SQN deployed 23 aircraft to Darwin and the ferry started from there early November in sections lead by the O.C. 78 Wing, GPCAPT Glen Cooper, followed by CO 3 Sqn, WGCDR Cedric Thomas, FLTLT Reg Jones, FLTLT Jake Newham, and lastly a three-aircraft section lead by FLGOFF Bennie Raffin.

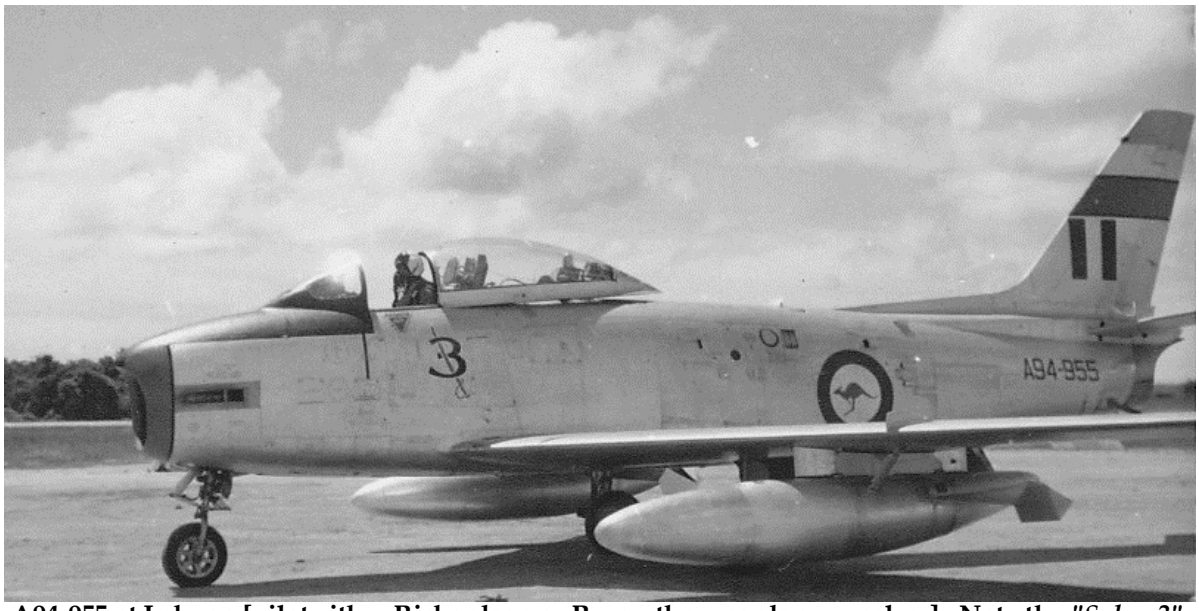
Ground Crew speak to Group Captain Cooper in A94-970 at Labuan (with 2SQN weather-survey Canberra A84-240 visible behind).
Cooper flew the lead ship of the first *Sabre Ferry* group[2].
[Picture courtesy David Bale, author of *RAF Labuan Borneo*.]

My section was made up of PLTOFF Mike Matters, FLTLT Jim Treadwell (on loan from 77SQN) and FLGOFF Ted Radford. We took off for Biak on 7 Nov '58, flying a southern dogleg to avoid Indonesian territory. The trip was straightforward, although there had been heavy rain before we arrived. We concluded the main briefings for the next day, when we were to cover two legs, to Guiuan and thence to Labuan. (As there were limited tented facilities at Guiuan – an isolated, largely unused airfield activated especially for the ferry of aircraft by the USAF.)

Next morning started better than planned, in that the ever-resourceful Jim Treadwell managed to scrounge a 1:1million topo of Guiuan area from one of his 11 Sqn mates. This he gave to me - as I was in front and expected to know how to use it. I laid-off our inbound track to Guiuan and a few distance markers on the chart. Little did we realise what a godsend this map would be!

The Canberra, crewed by WGCDR Jim Grainey and FLTLT Bruce Hunt, took-off on time, the Neptune having long since left. We followed and duly established air-to-air comms. Nearing PSR [Point of Safe Return] the Neptune confirmed our position and passed a special weather report, to wit: it was socked-in back at Biak. WGCDR Grainey, at that stage about 40mins ahead, then advised that he was crossing a line of medium cumulus which he did not expect would be a problem and that Guiuan was reporting local showers but generally clear. - We had no option but to continue.

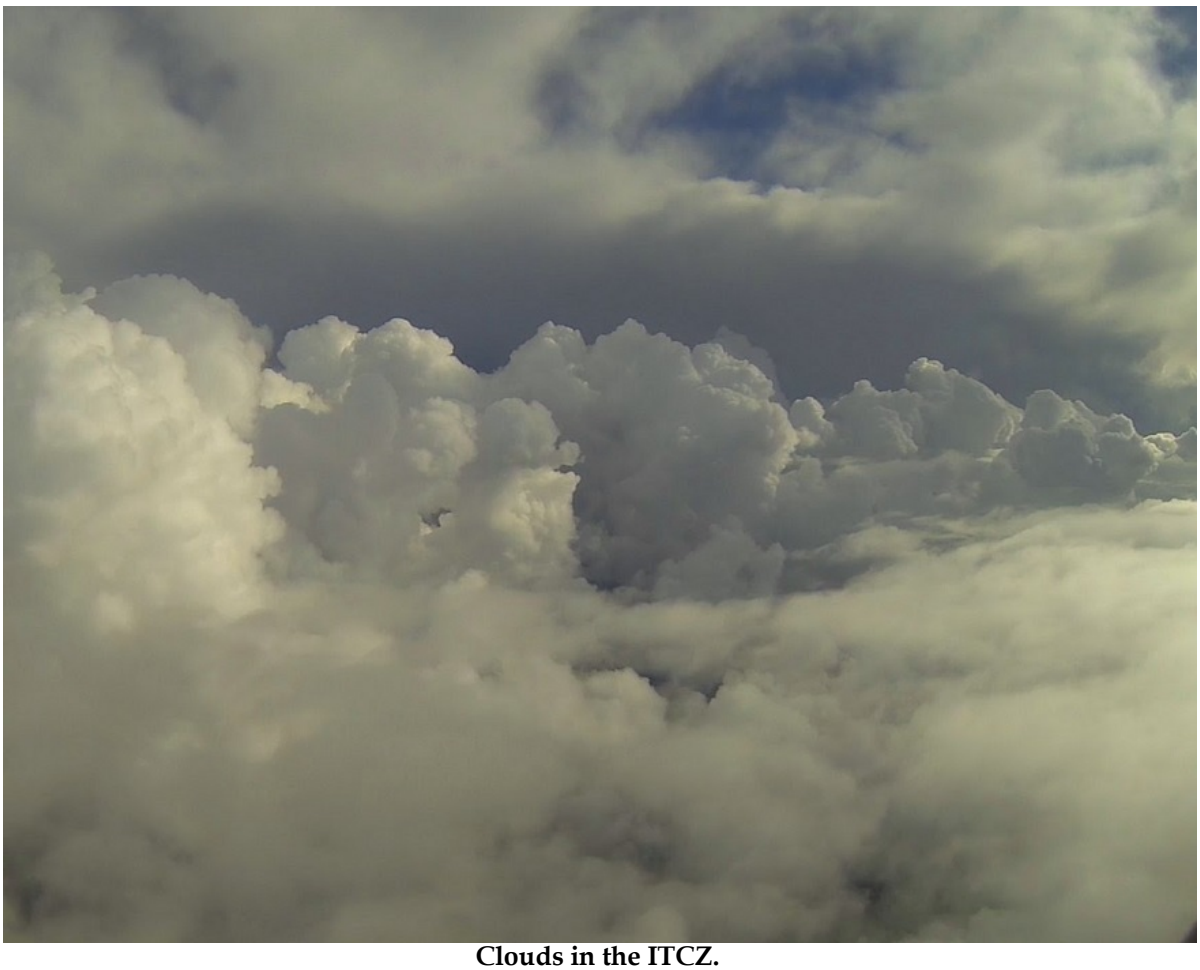
Later, WGCDR Grainey reported he was over Guiuan, could see the strip, no significant WX [weather], and asked could he continue to Manila, as he and Bruce were freezing. OK by me.



A94-955 at Labuan [pilot either Richardson or Reece, the records are unclear]. Note the *"Sabre 3"* logo from Williamtown still retained on a few of the Sabres flown on *Sabre Ferry*. This marking was later applied to the whole Squadron, but in a larger format and further aft. [Picture courtesy David Bale.]

A Narrow Squeak...

Not long afterwards I could see the line of *"no sweat"* cloud; it had developed into a wondrous sight; boiling cloud, crisp edges, tops nearing our altitude of around 45,000 feet and the 'Bird Dog' snapping to life as it pointed out centres of lightning, literally awesome. So we climbed higher.



Clouds in the ITCZ.

Now! To consider potential problems: the Sabre's stability was poor at low IAS [Indicated Air Speed] when carrying big jugs; secondly, No.4 Ted Radford had the least fuel; and thirdly, though the RR Avon compressors had been upgraded and given limited trials, the potential for compressor stalls was perfect: super cold air temps, high revs and low IAS[3].

As we got closer, the tops had grown to something in excess of 56,000' and did not look like stopping; the road ahead to Guiuan was blocked. I diverted west 30° to get through a saddle and started a rough plot on the precious 1:1million topo using my 21nm matchbox; Guiuan came on the air with the news that it was bucketing down and maybe we should go some other place. (We had passed Davao, which had a dubious strip, and I thought we might - with a lot of luck - find something at Leyte on the west side of the gulf).

Then I peered down a miraculous 47,000' hole and saw three distinctive small islands in the middle of Leyte Gulf, a very comforting pin-point; although we were still up the proverbial creek.

We were then able to turn east and on time I caught a glimpse of the neck of the Guiuan peninsular. Then thinner high cloud between the Cu-Nims permitted a right turn onto 165° to run down the peninsular. Our man at Guiuan contributed the

encouraging news that heavy rain continued with very low visibility – he could see no sign of relief in any direction.

"*Duckbutt One*", sensibly still on the ground, called to say he was reading our IFF pulses and we were on track 30nms south. As we were then about 50nms north, I had some doubts about this advice, but did not have the time to mull it over. (Later I realised his readings were indicating in the reverse sense.) Several times I had tried to operate the radio compass in the manual mode, but was too pressed with flying the aircraft and could not discriminate a signal though the bedlam of static. I held on to precious height and avoided penetration of the black stuff for as long as possible.

I had decided that on ETA we would jettison the tanks, then let down individually (normally, we would descend in pairs formation; this was out of question in the extremely turbulent conditions, and the pilots had had more than enough of tiring formation flying) outbound to the east and return on 260°, and - if no contact at 1000' - eject. The big decision was whether to go first (as I should) or invite Ted Radford, who was by then very low on fuel, to lead the descent. I decided on the latter course, composed my speech, pressed the mic/tel button, but found myself looking down through another of those magic holes - at the eastern end of a runway! - Instead, I announced this discovery saying (I'm told): "*If the strip below is not Guiuan, it will have to do. Don't worry about drop tank limits. Speed Brakes GO!*" (All within a few nanoseconds.)

The next few minutes were the hairiest I've flown, a spectacularly steep, tight spiral through 46,000', demisters blowing hot air full-chat, pilots furiously rubbing holes in the canopy ice. I flattened-out in heavy rain at about 800' and saw the most remarkable sight one could ever expect: *three Sabres clinging on like limpets!* (To this day, I do not know how they did it.) I could see the ground below, but horizontal visibility was only a few yards. The other three had little time to glimpse the disappearing scenery as we entered rain.

- All was not over, heavy rain continued and we had to land very quickly. As we slowed pronto, I called for spacing and open canopies[4], and turned onto downwind; No's.2, 3 & 4 were losing sight of the aircraft in front, but the urgency of the situation made them press on. We turned onto a curving base leg/final approach on instinct; we first three landed and managed to pull up without busting anything. Ted Radford's canopy would not open; he went around with near zero fuel remaining and landed in the most terrible conditions. The planned two-hour flight had taken 2hr:30mins; a sort of record for the circumstances. A narrow squeak.

We then had to wait several hours for the deluge to clear before completing the second leg of the day. I snatched an hour's sleep on Barry Weymouth's camp stretcher, to find Ted had to remain behind with an unserviceable canopy actuator. He joined the next and final section of three to stage through two days later[5].

The leg to Labuan was comparatively peaceful except for another 'met' phenomenon: we were cruising at around 45,000' in light cirrus when we found ourselves climbing whilst still holding cruising mach number and engine RPM; this continued, still in cirrus, for some 15 minutes, then the situation reversed and we were forced to descend to maintain mach; we finished somewhere near our start altitude. This event caused another bout of anxiety: ***what might be lurking within this seemingly innocent cloud?*** - We'd had sufficient tropical weather experience for one day.

I did not care to relate this tale without members of my flight being present because it seems far-fetched. - One needs to witness this sort of weather first-hand to believe the forces of nature that would cause such an incredibly rapid build-up of powerful Cu-Nims. I retain a clear memory of the event and give assurance that the record is not embellished.

A Labuan fuel truck tops up the starboard "jug" of A94-962 (FO Conn).
[Picture courtesy David Bale.]

Notes:

1. Neil Handsley was on the ground at Guiuan. His interesting report, with further illustrations, can be seen **here**.

2. FLTLT Ron Green, Wing NavO, carried out trials and planning. He flew in the lead section with GPCAPT Glen Cooper.

3. We cruised at "best range" speed, and there was little difference between this and endurance speed; more importantly we needed as high as possible IAS to counter instability excursions peculiar to the Sabre with big tanks, close to the stall boundary. (At 48,000' in the tropics we experienced temps of about –70°C, maybe lower, M.80, and IAS less than 200 kts, which is low for a swept-wing aircraft).

4. Guiuan was completely strange to us. The F86 Sabre windscreen goes opaque in rain and without familiar peripheral cues around a field and near the threshold it is necessary to open the canopy and stick one's head out into the blast to land

off a turning approach. In heavy rain the problem is exacerbated.

5. And two days later, Ted Radford was treated to a repeat ITCZ experience on the leg to Labuan. **Bennie Raffin's** section topped 50,000', avoiding the darker and more violent Cu-Nims, though the destination was relatively clear.

Pilot Officer Bennie Raffin, in Sabre A94-956, safely on the ground at Labuan .
[Picture courtesy David Bale.]