



## TASMANIAN AVIATION HISTORICAL SOCIETY Incorporated

### BASS STRAIT DC3 FREIGHTER – KING ISLAND BEEF TO FIJI

#### **Bass Strait DC3 Freighter – King Island Beef to Fiji**

*Author: B. Dannecker, Sept 2021*

In April 1975 I commenced flying with an Essendon-based Forrestair.

In the early seventies Forrestair carried out a number of ferries of ex-RAAF C-47 Dakota aircraft to Southeast Asia on contract to the federal government and this included refurbishment of each aircraft. With this experience and a small pool of qualified pilots to fly the civil version, the DC-3 – it was decided that two aircraft should be placed into service on the busy Bass Strait night freighter routes. There was enough business for everyone alongside Brain & Brown, Air Express and even smaller aircraft such as the Piper Navajo – not to mention the two major domestic airlines of the day, T.A.A. and Ansett.

Later Forrestair struck up an association with Hobart-based Air Tasmania operating a single DC-3, VH-MMF. At times we were sent down for a week to crew on Air Tasmania's commuter services around the island – anti-clockwise in the morning and clockwise in the afternoon.

During my Forrestair days primarily flying DC-3 freighters 1975-77, on occasions we would deliver King Island beef directly to Melbourne's Tullamarine Airport for transshipment on to a Qantas B707 freighter bound for Fiji. This enabled the beef quarters processed the previous afternoon to hang overnight in their cheesecloth wrap prior to being flown out early the next morning.

The longer-serving DC-3 operator on this work (also Essendon-based) was Brain & Brown Airfreighters, but newer players such as my company Forrestair (and also later SETAIR) were in the mix too, although carrying fresh beef was not our prime work. However a backload from Tasmania was always welcomed by the company's beancounters!





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So on occasions we were programmed to land at King Island's major airport to the north of the island's principal town, Currie, on our return flight to the mainland from Tasmanian ports such as Launceston, Devonport and Smithton.

The island's abattoir lies north of and not far from Currie township, right on the southwest boundary of the airport, giving direct access to aircraft arriving to collect their load. Getting there after landing involved taxiing off the runway and onto the grass on the western side, and into a long thin paddock wide enough to allow two DC-3s to pass each other in opposite directions serving as our taxiway.

The abattoir had its own "airside" sealed ramp tailored to receive DC-3 aircraft with a painted lead-in white line for the starboard main wheel to track in on, leading to a special rotatable metal plate on which the aircraft's right-hand main wheel was positioned and then braked, whilst the left engine was powered up to achieve a turn, bringing the aircraft to a stop as the left main wheel reached the painted line on its side.

This manoeuvre required good co-ordination between both pilots and a level of skill. The reason for this requirement for precision parking of the aircraft at the abattoir was to facilitate alignment of the powered gantry bringing each carcass quarter to the aircraft. A wheeled worktable for the beef lumpers to stand on was then rolled up against the aircraft after the two cargo doors had been opened and secured.



**Loading Beef on King Island, Forrester DC3 VH-TAK**

When circa 3.5 tons of beef had been checked and loaded on to tarpaulins spread on the aircraft's floor, with the beef then wrapped over, nets were then spread over the load and secured at various tie-down rings along both sides of the floor. The load sheet was then



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completed and signed off. Once this had been accomplished it was time to shut doors and get the show on the road.

We flew direct to Melbourne Airport and parked the aircraft at the cargo ramp where both domestic and international freighters stood. After unloading normal procedures were followed and Air Traffic Control was made aware of our final destination per the flight plan.

On some occasions when winds were relatively light, we would take off from Runway 16 Melbourne which would immediately bring us onto left base leg for Runway 08 Essendon. With a change of radio frequency to Essendon Tower and all pre-landing checks briskly completed we were ready for a landing at our home base. After touchdown at Essendon we noted our total airborne time was always in the order of 5-6 minutes.

This would probably rank as one of the shortest flights between two airports by a DC-3..... And we did it many times.... Those were the days!



**Ben Danneker in the Cockpit of the DC3 VH-TAK, December 1976**

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