

## **A ROUTINE CLINIC DAY**

**by Sister Rhonda Plumridge**

Thursday was always routine clinic day at Fitzroy Crossing. The day commenced early, about 0600 to be ready for ETD of 0800. Patients for return to Fitzroy Crossing had to be organized and ready for pick up. Emergency rations also had to be prepared ie. Thermos flasks of tea, rounds of sandwiches and usually a nice slice or biscuits made for us by the kitchen staff at the Derby Hospital. This all had to be packed into carry bags and made stable for the flight. Immunization drugs also had to be collected and packed into eskies, along with other requirements for the hospital at Fitzroy Crossing and nearby Stations. When everything was ready the orderly from the hospital would pick us up and transport us to the Derby Airport. The organization that went into all this was quite intensive as messages easily got mixed up and patients were not ready or had gone walkabout!

It was not unusual for us to be diverted to an emergency on route to Fitzroy Crossing clinic but this particular day we were lucky and had not been diverted. We had a full load of patients returning to Fitzroy Crossing plus the surgeon from the hospital who didn't usually conduct the clinics. We were flying along nicely and about 40 mins. out of Fitzroy Crossing when the fire alarm sounded in the left engine. Our aeroplane was a Beechcraft Queen Air VH-FDV. Jan Ende our very experienced and competent pilot immediately sent out Mayday calls whilst at the same time preparing to land on the road. We were very lucky there was a straight stretch of road underneath us and an area close to the road that was treeless and relatively free of too many obstacles that would catch the wings of the aeroplane. Jan skilfully landed FDV as if he were landing her on the safe airstrip in Derby. As this was a rather unusual diversion from the normal, everyone on board was to say the least a little bit shaken up! We all evacuated the aeroplane as soon as it was safe to do so, and proceeded to move FDV off the road to allow traffic to pass (not that there was much of that, vehicles were few and far between!) Patients and Doctor were all a bit disgruntled by this whole state of affairs, as here we were stuck on the side of the road. The engine was thankfully not bursting into obvious flames, but Jan had already experienced one fire in an engine before, and recently an aircraft from Alice Springs had experienced a fire in an engine. I organized everyone to settle themselves under the wing out of the sun as the temperature was 40 degrees with plenty of flies and there was no other shade around. Thank goodness for our emergency supplies, everyone soon had a nice cup of tea and some sandwiches to take their mind off what was potentially a very serious situation. Now, what happened next was really quite funny. As I said before, there were not very many vehicles on this road, but not long after we were settled and drinking our tea along came a vehicle which drove right past us and didn't stop. I could see the driver slow down and look around in disbelief at what he had just seen, and then continued on his way! Can you imagine that, and then another vehicle followed shortly after and did exactly the same thing. Maybe they thought it was quite normal for the RFDS aeroplane to be stopped on the side of the road for a cup of tea! I could not believe they did not stop to offer assistance, after all we could have done with a lift into Fitzroy Crossing. Jan had managed to make contact with DCA and messages had reached Fitzroy Crossing hospital. Vehicles from Fitzroy Crossing eventually arrived to pick us up and take us into Fitzroy Crossing. Jan had permission to fly the aeroplane back to Derby after he had determined it was safe to do so, so he took off back to Derby, and we continued on to Fitzroy Crossing to start our days work! I by now wanted to go back to Derby with Jan instead of continuing on to Fitzroy Crossing, but of course patients were waiting in Fitzroy Crossing for their appointments with the Doctor and others for their immunizations and the antenatal ladies needed checking and all the many and varied reasons why the flying Sister just had to carry on!

Jan flew safely back to Derby, and managed to correct the fault in the alarm system after being given permission to do so by DCA. We attended to the clinic at Fitzroy Crossing, completed our days work and were flown home by an aircraft that had been chartered from Derby. I will never cease to be amazed by the actions of those drivers who just passed us by.

Unbeknown to us another drama was unfolding in Derby at the same time. Penny, RFDS nurse and wife of Jan was taking the emergency calls from the hospital radio. (story ends)

(This account was retyped by Ron Cuskelly with minor editing from an undated and unattributed document supplied by Jan Ende in December 2021. Jan Ende confirms that this report was written by Sister Rhonda Plumridge who who was the flying Sister on VH-FDV at the time of this incident on 13 September 1973. Sister Plumridge later married Trevor Birch a Derby pilot who owned a Maule Rocket. While Rhonda was on the Queen Air VH-FDV with Jan, his wife Penny, who was six months pregnant, was back in Derby taking the call about the "other drama unfolding". This involved a farmer who sustained serious burns trying to start a tractor by pouring petrol in the intake. Trevor and Penny set off in the Maule to bring the patient back to Derby. The Alice Springs reference involved Connair Queen Air VH-CMI which suffered an inflight fire on 20 January 1972 crashing with the loss of all seven onboard.)