



AUSTRALIAN COMMANDO ASSOCIATION VICTORIA

AUSTRALIAN SPECIAL WARFARE ORAL HISTORIES

Interview Number 9. Flight Lieutenant Frank Ball, RAAF Flight 200 (Special Duties)

Interviewed by Dave Sheehan

Speaker 1: [00:00:00] Frank Ball spent five years in total in the RAAF being discharged in 1946 with the rank of Flight Lieutenant. After Flying Training, he flew in Northern Australia, New Guinea and the Pacific Islands, mainly in DC-3 aircraft.

In 1945, he was posted to special duties Flight 200 and participated with the insertion of the SEMUT parties into Sarawak. After the war, Frank had a distinguished career 41 years with what was then TAA, rising to the positions of general manager and board member. Dave Sheehan is talking with Frank.

Dave: Tonight, it's my pleasure to be talking with Frank Ball on his experiences with 200 Flight, working with SRD during World War II.

Frank could you start off with telling us your military background prior to getting involved with 200 and how that came about?

Frank: Military Air Force- [crosstalk] Now I was a product of the Empire Air Scheme. I joined it in Western Australia, learnt to fly there, took the first year. I'd spent five years in the RAAF. One-year learning to fly, three years would be DC-3 mainly cargo [00:01:26] transport up in Australia Northern, New Guinea in the Pacific area, the last year with 200 Flight. I must say it was late in the war by that time, it was early-- I went to 200 Flight in 25th of February 1945. We looked forward to it because it was such a change from pushing all the DC-3s around New Guinea and we always saw the war but never got into it. We thought 200 Flight was an opportunity to do something that was different anyhow.

Dave: [00:02:00] How did the actual flight get established? What was the background to it?

Frank: Well my understanding is, and I've got a note here out of the book that has been written on it, which is *The Formation of the RAAF Special Duties Flight 200 and with B-24 Liberators*.

I might read that if you don't mind Dave. It says, "Formation of 200 Special Duties Flight for dropping operatives and supplies behind the Japanese lines. In conformance with general Kennedy's orders to Air Vice Marshal Bass Dock a special flight of aircraft was assigned to AIB was designated Flight 200 and consisted first of six B-24 Liberator bombers, and later was increased to eight with nine air crew of 11 men each plus staff amounting some 450. The idea was to carry out missions assigned by the controller



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of AIB¹ and the aircraft used by us were modified to slide parachutes through an open camera hatch and drop storepedoes from the bomb bays.

Storepedoes being those specially designed stores cardboard containers with parachutes for dropping stores, some of the more sensitive than others.

Our mainland headquarter was Leyburn near Brisbane the Darling Downs and the operational headquarters was at maritime I must admit I didn't spend much time in maritime, we seemed to go straight through it on to Mindoro and other places.

The B-24 was an American bomber four engine- four power plants the same as the Pratt and Whitney's fitted on the DC-3 and it had an excellent range, and we could put extra fuel in the bomb bays.

I think the longest trip I did in an airplane was some 13 hours but that doesn't match the Catalina. It was fairly long for a bombing aircraft in those days. The unit was equipped as it said there first of all with six of those [00:04:00] and then later we increased to eight.

Dave: Could you give us some outline of the training programs that were conducted once the unit was formed and prior to going on operations?

Frank: Well, as I said, we had the unit on February the 25th 1945 and there was a briefing by the unit's intelligence officer, an army liaison officer who was in the camp there, two camps, army on one side and the air force on the other and the commanding officer.

Pretty general briefing, all it said was we were there. The idea was that we would take parties of operatives into the field in tropical islands and drop them behind the lines.

Well, that was in line with the security adopted right through the operation. We started aircraft flying and training on the 9th of March, and that was the 9th through to the 13th.

That comprised of drops, drop dummy drops, live drops, store drops but they were conducted on the plains Down again, beautiful country nice sunny weather, no hills in sight. We did drop also the party that were later going to take over the operations. At that time, we never really met them or knew them.

On the 15th of March we left for Darwin and Darwin were instructions to proceed and we went through to Mindoro and that took us 22.5 hours flying time from Leyburn three days.

¹ Allied Intelligence Bureau.



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Of course, at Mindoro the mission objective became clear and that was to take the two parties two aircraft. We left with three, two to perform the mission and one as a spare aircraft.

Dave: This was the first SEMUT.

Frank: First SEMUT 1. Well, we were advised of the codename in Mindoro [00:06:00] and then we were told the DZ and we did a reconnaissance flight on the 20th I think it was.

Then we had an attempt to put the parties in on the 21st and the 22nd and both of those were aborted. In the first case, we got into the DZ area, which was the [unintelligible 00:06:26] the DZ was right in here between the border, that's a new map and our map of North Borneo, Sarawak and Dutch Borneo. We got into the DZ but the time we came around on the second run to drop people, it had gone from three tenths overcast to ten tenths, so we had to abort the operation went back to base in Mindoro.

The second one, it was clouded when we arrived there. Now this cloud consists of what's pretty typical in tropical areas, valley mist forms into fog, settles just in the valleys here and sticks around for a while.

At this time the two parties the first party was in the CO's aircraft was led by Major Harrison, and second party in which was on board my aircraft was [unintelligible 00:07:17]. They arranged for us to get in and do their job or work, to put our training and experience into practice. When we went out on the 25th, we got there the DZ looked alright, it was a broken cloud. The first leading aircraft squad leader Buckley and Major Harrison dropped their personnel by the time--and we're only half a minute behind them, it had clouded over so we dropped blind. We later found out many years later, I found out of course we dropped a mile or two away from the DZ head and it took them two- or three-hours hard slog [00:08:00] to get straight back to the party. However, they made it that afternoon, and then we both came around again and dropped our stores.

Then this time we used I think it was a flare. The first aircraft indicated they had dropped and we're able to try and drop on the remnants of that flare. Now all the stores were recovered although it took them a couple of days to do it.

On the way back, two aircraft squad leader Parkley and my aircraft we separated in cloud up near Labu and Brunei bay about 5000 feet in cloud and proceeded home independently.

The whole operation was started that we would proceed as independent aircraft from Mindoro to the North Eastern Coast of Borneo. We'd rendezvous at a particular island there, proceed together in, perform the operation and then depart separately.



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That was the plan we adhered to and unfortunately, squad leader Parkley and his aircraft and crew never made it back to base and to this day, I don't know what happened. I don't know. I haven't heard of any record of any trace being found of the cause of their loss or the fate of the crew. Obviously, by now, something happened, and they just didn't make it.

Dave: Was that the only aircraft you lost on those operations? Or were there others as well?

Frank: No. Well, when we got back to on the 30th of March and we went out again, I think on about the 15th on it was SEMUT One but later code name SEMUT two. By this time, we knew what we're doing. We flew again to Mindoro and Toby Carter was and I was the lead aircraft on this occasion. Tommy bridges was the second aircraft and [00:10:00] Bill Sation was in the second aircraft and we went straight down on the day after arriving at Mindoro into the area. Unfortunately, when we got to the DZ, the DZ itself was not suitable for dropping personnel and Toby Carter asked me to drop the stores a little bit about a mile and a half away from where we could locate the DZ, but not good enough for dropping. We dropped at the stores there, and the second aircraft did the same and then we proceeded a little bit further long along to an ultimate DZ and we're able to drop the paddy there. I think the only incident and that's well-narrated, now Bill Sation was a pretty big bloke, he had a few thrown risers, so his descent was a bit more rapid than planned. Now, these things we only heard later.

We departed the area and was back to base now. The unit then performed another three successful missions and on the 15th or 17th of May, 17th of May we lost an aircraft in Timor. That was a solo aircraft, one aircraft on a mission and, unfortunately, it was lost before the paddy had been inserted. The other one then on the 25th we lost a second aircraft although the paddy had been inserted, but after the insertion in North Borneo. The remains those aircraft and the remains of the people were found and crew, they had crashed, but there's no indication of what caused the crush. That wasn't a very-- that's our first operation on the 25th of March, by the 25th of May, we'd lost 50% of our aircraft and personnel. That replacements were available, but somewhere and later I'd like to talk about that, I think-

Dave: Talk about it now [00:12:00] with a [inaudible 00:12:02] selection or training of the crew. Do you think that [crosstalk].

Frank: When you take this was February 1945 and there were a large number of aircrew available and many of us at Tocumwal including people from overseas in the Australian theater war were being converted onto the B-24 there. We did our conversion and then we're on parade one day in a very special selection for people for a special operation and the roll call was Anderson, Ball, Bridges, Carson, Clark, and Cocks, Emert. I'm pretty certain that was alphabetical, and then later on our replacements were Walker, Wallace, and Winch so they tried the other end of the alphabet. Probably a nice one, it's fair enough, there were a lot of crew around and that's the way we were selected.



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However, when you look back on this, 50% of those people were from the Northern Hemisphere operation. Nearly all of them engaged in high altitude bombing and one squadron leader Parkley was an expert on flying both low-level submarine chasing. The other half had been as I said earlier pushing DC-3s and transport aero planes around New Guinea and in that area. I feel having regard to the geographic location of the Borneo and the nature of the place it's a mountainous tropical area and where we were dropping it was typical of that. We'd had the benefit of a lot of experience flying in around there and not trying to chase subs or drop bombs, we are on transport [crosstalk] We're on transport.

A bit of biscuit bombing but the type of flying that we were doing in this operation. There's no doubt selection on experience should be an important factor in any unit that you were Airforce unit or other units you're using to insert a paddy in the future. I think it's an important pre-selection area [00:14:00] just the same as the aero plane. If you're using aeroplanes you're going to have one that's got the range and ability to do the job.

Dave: Do the job. Starting with that as far as training goes in hindsight, do you think it would have been better to train in those conditions as opposed to training in the flat land areas.

Frank: Well, I could think of a few dry swims although to be in wet weather could have been completed say up in New Guinea in that area. I think the experienced people if they had not been exposed to tropical flying conditions in the valleys and that, it would have been helpful. The other element in the training there was that performing on the Darling Downs beautiful flat plains and perfect weather without any training in respect and the performance of the aircraft in the dropping configuration, because in the lib we went in with a two inboard throttle back some flap down, you had the slide down so it was an unusual configuration.

There would be room for people to experience various maneuvers in the aeroplane when you're in the dropping configuration particularly because frequently in the areas you've chosen there, straight after the drop you had to get on power and climb out or turn and circle out of valleys. It's very important to know what you could do with the aeroplane. However, I would think nowadays there's a lot more known about aircraft performance and when we were there.

Dave: With the actual dropping who made the final decision? The leader or the senior bloke of the paddy onboard the aircraft or the pilot as far as whether the jump or the store's drop or whatever was going to go ahead?

Frank: The final decision on jumping, in the case of the first two missions we aborted it was fairly simple because the weather closed in, and it was completely blind dropping. You then had not anxiety but people anxious to get [00:16:00] and do their job as I said and then the next time it looked as though we might be able to make it and the decision that was made by the leader of the party from the Air Force point of view, the flying point of view, we could drop, so they decided to go in and have the



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stores drop in whatever conditions they were and we were able to do that. In the second case, it was clearly the leader of the paddy who decided that DZ wasn't good enough to take him further along.

Now, there's no doubt that where you have more than one aircraft you've got two sorts of command. You've got one on the technical operational side of flying and getting in whether on proceeding to your DZ but once over the DZ, there was no doubt the leader of the paddy was in charge. He then had to have his orders conveyed back to the second aircraft and then conveyed to the [unintelligible 00:16:54] of the paddy on board the second aircraft. You also had your normal overall briefing before you left base, in respect of the IAAF side of it. We have two aircrafts, you clearly need to know who's in charge or is it as in this case we were certainly to proceed independently to let the DZ, do the job and proceed home independently and that was the same on all operations.

Before going in the field, one would need to know that that is the order and it can't be changed other than in an emergency when you're routing during the operation. There's a fairly important establishment of command between the army or the paddies and the aircraft.

Dave: Obviously on the first, you had nobody on the ground to talk to but on succeeding drops did you communicate from the ground to the aircraft or did you just go over and-

Frank: That tag will always be the problem in the first paddy in which you get no assistance from the ground, [00:18:00] and that probably made it more difficult. The second one, the first paddy in had put up a flare, although in reading in reading one of the accounts here of the operators who are in there, the operatives, there's one occasion they landed the wrong place and saw smoke but it wasn't a flare, it happened to be a village fire. I would think nowadays with modern navigation there'd be no problem in finding a DZ. It would be technically, and you'd be the expert and that's how you get-- You're happy to go through a cloud and guide yourself if we can drop you exactly with Sat-Nav or something like that.

Where it can there's no doubt from when you're visually dropping, we had a bomb aimer that had to do the dropping. Ground indication on drift and things of that nature would help them make a more accurate drop.

Dave: The bomb aimer actually looked down and he worked out the releaser point?

Frank: Well, he had a very efficient gyro balanced bombsite, but we put a piece of wire and a bit of a sticking on it to try and make a small drift meter out of it, and they mainly use the bombsite as a guide with a drift stick. The aircraft, the B-24 you handed over control of the flying to the bomb aimer, switch down and when he wanted the guide, he could guide the aeroplane, was banking the wings. It was very suitable for the dropping in the area, but you had to know what it could do because it was a fairly cumbersome old aeroplane. Not a high performer.



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Dave: With the actual flights in and the return flights after dropping people, did you carry out any form of deception to try and put the Japanese off the track that you were dropping people, or was this just a matter of straight in and straight out?

Frank: The only instruction was, other than down to the independently, and then different, we didn't follow one another but quite independently and [00:20:00] to set a time at the rendezvous point and they would be separate flight paths to that area. Then together to do the operation and then home independently and to do it as quietly as possible. There was no, what would you call it, calculated deception plan. The track in and out over the land would have been-- Would have made it difficult I think because it was in a different direction of someone in sight of the airplane leaving the island or coming in. We're coming in and out of the different direction than we'd arrived from the base of operation.

Dave: You said with particularly that the first SEMUT party that until you got to just about all the way in that you didn't really know what the nature of the operation was or even the codename. As the operations progressed, did you get to work with the people more prior to taking them in or get more information prior to dropping people in?

Frank: Three points there. The first one was that you've got the right airplane, second one aircrew have sufficient training to be able to handle it. The third one was command between the two parties in the field. Then the fourth one is a more general topic, but I think at least is more important than any of the others is to try and build an empathy between the flight crew that people aside from calling the taxis we're taking you in and the party and the operatives were taking there, because as far as we knew, they were just a group of army chaps down and another camp we weren't allowed to speak to them for security but their selection may have been the same as ours.

We didn't know the depth of training background, the long period of training [00:22:00] with the whole planning of the operation. There's no need to know it in detail or even though you must maintain security and security was good in the unit. It's only the last few years I've understood what these names were and who were in the paddies. I believe as we learned, experience grew out of the first one, the ones who survived. Then later as an example, a few of us we did a jump. So the party leaders then felt at least we knew what it was like hanging in the silk and you found that was a better understanding and I think you found a bit more dedication and certainly I know in my own crew, dedication will get the people an understanding of what the task was, would have been helpful, again, if in our first briefing if we'd known a bit more of the nature of the operation.

Dave: With the planning for the operations, was it ever considered or planned for in the case of an aircraft going in still with the-- Or some surviving members of the crew and you suddenly finding yourself in Borneo with the remains of the party [crosstalk].

Frank: [unintelligible 00:23:12] we were given a normal briefing, a briefing given to aircrew in this area because by that time we had other Air Force at [unintelligible 00:23:22]. We had one of our own RAF groups in the area. There was a general



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briefing for air crew operating in that way on [unintelligible 00:23:29] was it called? Do you know the? Through AIB somewhere but it was general intelligence survival kit. What to do in the area, but no briefing in the first two of being able to contact the parties we'd put in or even attempting to do that. I think afterwards when we realize with people there that would have been natural if we'd been in the area to try to look for a friend on the ground. But no, it was the normal [00:24:00] IFF briefing for crews operating in that area.

Dave: Did the crews ever receive any training? Survival type training? [00:24:08]

Frank: Yes. That was--RAAF people that time weren't required to parachute unless in emergency, so they didn't do parachute training. Training there was only verbal and written, not field training in respect of survival in these areas. Now, I can't really answer for the people who came from European Zone Because we were used to New Guinea in that area. Maybe I was accustomed to the normal jungle training having seen that but there was no field training.

Dave: What was the majority of your operations? Was it once the parties were in, was it on an as required basis you'd take in operational [00:25:04] supplies and additional personnel [00:25:05]?

Frank: The units operated very successfully after that on a number of missions and it was insertion of parties which were, I think the code names were [unintelligible 00:25:13] and PLATYPUSES in the Borneo area. SUNFISH was it, in Timor. They were both personnel, resupply right up until-- When did the opposition's stop in Borneo? September wasn't it?

Dave: September '45.

Frank: Right up until then. Then after that the unit did some bringing people out of the various places after the war was over, but it was on all as I said that piece of paper. All operations were approved in AIB, so I take that's on the request of said special, and they're all of the same nature, either personnel, supplies or both.

Dave: What sort of [00:26:00] workload did the crew have with only a certain number of crew and losing several aircraft?

Frank: At that time, we had got replacements very quickly. The workload wasn't heavy on the crew. In fact, with such a large crew, 11 on the aircraft some of them found it not monotonous but pretty boring sitting in a [unintelligible 00:26:26] because at this time and that's why the loss of an aircraft seems so strange that there wasn't any enemy aircraft of note, that I know of. There was certainly-- I don't think there's higher altitude [unintelligible 00:26:42] of that nature, so it was a straight forward operation [00:26:47] The rest of the crew, Waist Gunners, Tail Gunners, navigator was busy and the Bomb Aimer. It was a fascinating operation and one that the only disappointment is that we lost three aircraft and our buddies.



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Dave: In hindsight what do you think were the main points people would have to consider if they're doing a similar task these days as far as selection of crew or training?

Frank: We've been through selection of crew, experience and some better training I would think, exposure to conditions like them. The area that's hard to comment on is local conditions and weather conditions because the key to this sort of operation, particularly the first one is weather. I understand Harrison had had experience in the area and so Toby Carter, so they were aware of it. I think in the first part we tried to get to the DZ too early. It was just the mist and fog [00:28:00] and developing the cloud because later on if you were there about eleven o'clock in this area, this time of the year tends to break up a bit before the afternoon queue set in. The best possible information you get on matters would be terribly important and deciding your time into the DZ. I said I felt extremely sorry for our paddy because the third took them three goes to get in. They were biting their fingernails for that time.

Dave: Were most of these day drops, or did you do any at night?

Frank: These were day drops. They did no night training. Some done it I believe at platypus when dusk.

Dave: Was that a conscious decision or just the way it worked out?

Frank: I wasn't involved in the decision making of those, but we were told to get there at a certain time and that was-- I would have felt they would have again come from the said chiefs, whoever's in charge. The nature of the operation I think they wouldn't have wanted to night drop into that mountainous area the way put the first paddy SEMUT one and two. It couldn't have been very comfortable at night or that you might differ with me there. [laughs]

Dave: I do a lot of night parachuting [00:29:21] these days and there are two schools of thought on it.

Frank: Our party finished in the top of tall trees and that much to my regret, but they got down, but it wasn't a very comfortable drop for them.

Dave: I think if we had to do a similar task there these days, even with the more sophisticated equipment, a lot of the weather problems and possibly even ground-air communications are going to be exactly the same as '45 and certainly the [unintelligible 00:29:55] training and selection.

Frank: Selection and training, you're right, all that would be [00:30:00] very similar. The local weather is-- There's no doubt, there's good knowledge of that, but the-- On communication, because we were virtually radio silence in the aircraft. On a couple of supply drops on Eureka- Rebecca, Eureka, was it? Small ground unit which gave you a left-right indicator in the cockpit. As long as you-- Virtually, if you've found the DZ, you were right. It gave you an indication where to drop.



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Now, I don't know what's been developed since as a-- Something used from the ground. Although there are a lot of things on aircraft now that are self-contained, they're very accurate. I don't think that there'd be a problem finding a DZ, but just getting there at the right time.

[laughter]

Dave: Always seems to be a problem. [laughs]

Frank: Yes.

Dave: I think that covers most of the points we wanted to cover.

Frank: Well, I hope that works out all right and the success in the future, it's back 44 years.[laughter]. You made me think a little bit and do a bit of research.

Dave: Well, a lot of the principles are still the same these days. Just some of the equipment has changed.

Frank: You start to forget the old service terms.

Dave: [laughs]

Frank: Okay? If that's all right we'll end.

Dave: Yes, thank you very much, Frank.

[00:31:22] [END OF AUDIO]

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