

THE GOOD OLD DAYS OF THE RFDS IN KIMBERLEY

On 1 August 2007, Richard Youngs (a former RFDS pilot) spoke to the Kimberley Society about his time with the Royal Flying Doctor Service. Richard had images to accompany his talk but, because the Society did not have a projector on hand, he unfortunately had to forego that component. Interested members of the audience were able to see the images on his computer after the talk.

Richard went to Wyndham with his wife Pip and two young children from Hobart in 1989. They had no idea what to expect in the way of accommodation or facilities and, to say the least, they were a little surprised at the basic nature of both.

Wyndham was the first RFDS base in Australia, established in the 1930s by the Victorian section of RFDS and then supported by that section over the years. The basic nature of the Wyndham accommodation and facilities may have been due partly to the fact (unknown to the Youngs) that the RFDS was progressively scaling down its Wyndham operation. A newer base existed at Derby, and Richard was transferred there in 1990. The Youngs initially regretted that move because, even in their short time in Wyndham, they had made friends there.

At Wyndham the RFDS had one aircraft, a Piper Navaho, which was predominately used for clinic work. It visited Kalumburu, Drysdale River, Oombulgurri, Turkey Creek, and Lake Gregory. The clinics were well run, and the RFDS nurse and pilot generally worked a four-day week. Friday was almost a day off, with the maintenance and cleaning being done to keep everything pristine and ready to go.

If an emergency occurred, a call went to the hospital. Richard and the flight nurse had five minutes to dress before they drove to airport. They were generally airborne within 30 minutes of the call. The local police were helpful when it came to dealing with emergencies.

Richard related the story of one particularly memorable flight recorded in his logbook 17 June 1989. A 3.00 pm call came in from a police officer who had heard on HF radio that someone had fallen off the Mitchell Falls. With the possibility of that person being dead or near dead, the RFDS plane needed to carry a policeman in addition to the doctor, nurse, and the normal full kit. It also had to be ready to fly the person, if he or she was seriously injured, to Wyndham or Derby, or even Darwin.

The story loses some of its flavour in being committed to print but Richard told how the plane reached Mitchell Plateau in the late afternoon, flew low over the vehicles

that could be seen near the falls, and then flew on to the strip for a landing. No one was there, and, with no vehicle available to drive to the falls, the RFDS party waited to see whether someone would arrive with either information or the injured person. Daylight was running out, and, with no way of contacting the people at the falls by radio, there was nothing to do but wait.

Not having expected to stay overnight, the RFDS people ate the snacks they had brought with them. The policeman tackled his chicken sandwiches, and they all shared the bottled water. There was not enough room for everyone to bunk down inside the aircraft but those who slept there were better off than the policeman. He slept on the ground and had a close encounter with a dingo. That fearless animal had a good sniff around before it marked its territory and strolled off!

During the night, a radio call came in from Drysdale River Station via the RFDS Base at Derby, indicating that a man name John was driving from the station to the plateau to offer assistance and he expected to arrive at about midnight. Everything was ready to deal with an emergency but, next morning, a man with his wrist in a sling turned up at the landing strip. It had been a minor accident after all.

In 1990, Richard received only a few weeks notice that the Wyndham base would close. The closure occurred because, with the Wyndham meatworks having shut down, the focus on the provision of local facilities had shifted to Kununurra. The Wyndham hospital had been downgraded, and there were fewer teachers and school children in the town. It was also relevant that the RFDS plane at Wyndham was not pressurised. Derby had better and faster aircraft, and, because politics affect health care as well as most other things, it had become simpler to fly all the way to Perth rather than across the Northern Territory border and on to Darwin.

In speaking more generally about “the good old days”, Richard mentioned the effect of weather on the RFDS operations. The flying conditions he encountered in the Kimberley were predominately fine but lightning struck his plane twice. He also had to turn back on two other occasions. On one of the flights involving the lightning strikes, the nurse had the unfortunate experience of the trip being her first with the RFDS.

Richard’s talk provided good insight into what it was like to be a pilot for the RFDS little more than a decade ago. His answers to the questions from the audience filled in some more gaps, and the very well attended evening finished on a high note.

Daphne Choules Edinger and friends

Editor's note: Numerous books have been published about the RFDS. Coverage of the relocation of its services to Derby can also be found in the Western Australian State Heritage Register assessment for the Royal Flying Doctor Service House & Office in Derby (<http://register.heritage.wa.gov.au/>).