

**BEER, BRIBES AND BIRDDOGS** - The tale of a Birddog airplane NOT built by Cessna. One that flew in Vietnam and survives to this day - in Australia.

**THE SCENE:** Australia sent advisors to Vietnam in 1962, and later a brigade sized combat unit. In 1965 came the 161 Recce (Recon) Flight, callsign 'Possum.' By 1967, they had their own runway at Nui Dat, near Vung Tau in III Corps - with 6 Bell helicopters and 3 Cessna 180s. No Birddogs.

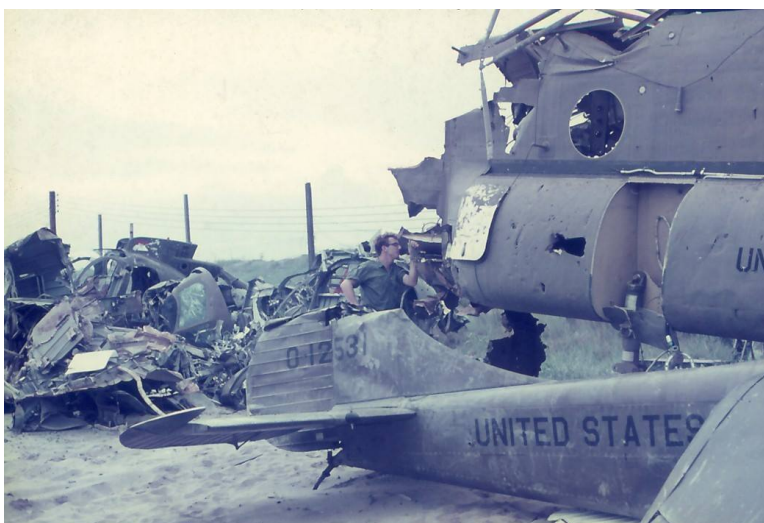


In 1970, an Australian Army aviator, Major Charles Miller, was assigned as a liaison officer - a go-between ground units and other Allied forces. What follows is proof that he and the others involved, were the stereotypical Aussies that pay little heed to pretension, convention or assumption - the types that "just get 'er done mate." Much of the following is from Charlie's written account of the story read after his death, and conversations with surviving members of the units involved, including Possum Len Avery, a Corporal Airframe Fitter in Vietnam. He was there thru the whole story - and is now the keeper of 161's history: <http://www.161recceflt.org.au/>

Their quotes, photos from them and other sources have been gathered, edited and "translated" by a half Australian and Vietnam era Birddog pilot, Rod Stewart. Photos are used with permission of the donors or in public domain.

**THE TALE:** Australian Army Major Charlie Miller first sighted the remains of the US Army O-1 Birddog lying defiled in a revetment at Vung Tau airbase, South Vietnam in May 1970. It had been crash-landed and flipped over in a rice paddy somewhere in Phuoc Tuy Province and recovered to Vung Tau, to await a decision on its future.

Charlie's earlier contacts with a then L-19, had been at a NATO exercise in 1961. He was quite impressed with its design and characteristics, which were much better than what other allies had. In 1965, while attached to the US Army, he was privileged to ferry a now designated O-1 from Alabama to Wichita, a two day jaunt - for its modification and shipping to Vietnam. Five years later he was in Vietnam, looking at another US Army Birddog ... or what was left of it.



The damaged O-1 he 'found' was so beaten up that it was soon moved to a graveyard, where lay dozens of wrecked US aircraft. There, a genial US Army Sgt. was overseeing a crew removing serviceable components from the hulks. The indignity of seeing O-1s piled in a scrap heap, led to this pilot's quest ... to build a Birddog.

But first the US Army had to be convinced that this O-1 was beyond economical repair. So he set about helping them come to that decision. Finding a shipping container, which seemed to have been abandoned, he obtained a padlock and thereby assumed ownership. Into this he stored many removable parts from the O-1, including wheels, tail stem, engine mount, instrument panel, door, seats, etc. Needless to say, when inspected, the O-1 was found to be beyond economical repair and so was officially awarded to an airport in the Mekong Delta for destruction in fire drills.

Charlie managed to get through by phone to the Delta Fire Chief even before he knew he owned the Birddog, and told of his quest - with emphasis on *Australian*. Charlie offered, rather graciously he thought, to swap a wrecked Huey for the O-1. The Chief's reaction was that of a Southern gentleman, "Y'all can have it major - and best of luck!"

Now with a Birddog, and many parts secured, the next problem was to convince the only Aussie aviation unit that could do the job, the 161 Possums, that here indeed was a viable project. To dress up the wreck for their assessment, the Major carried buckets of water across the graveyard to wash off the dried paddy mud, then cleaned out her interior, and reassembled what he could. Once again she looked more like a wounded warrior - if somewhat battered and wrinkled. At this point, he was able to sell Possum's commander, Major Phil Calvert, and their maintenance officer, Cpt. Bob Millar, on the benefits of such a moral boosting project. He got a yes, IF he could arrange delivery.



#### **MORE BACKGROUND**

*The Australians in Vietnam had developed a huge respect for the Birddog. In an earlier Aussie/US "deal" also involving less than official endorsement, the Australians "borrowed" two O-1s from the US Army's 184th "Nonstop" Birddog company - even painting a kangaroo on the tails.*

*Maj. George Constable, the Possums well respected commander (pictured) was shot down and killed flying one of these Birddogs on a combat mission in 1968.)*



A request for a US unit to transport "one dismantled aircraft" from Vung Tau to Nui Dat, was granted, but required a military police escort - which also had to be arranged. A tractor-trailer truck duly arrived at the graveyard, whereupon the US Army Sgt. gathered all his lads to lift the Birddog carcass onto the truck. Upon loading, there was still space, so the Sgt. offered to just throw in another damaged O-1 fuselage - which was accepted and also loaded on the truck. As a farewell to his long association with the graveyard crew, the Major presented them with three cases of good Australian beer, real beer - not the "piss" that the USA supplied the GIs. In Vietnam, any Australian beer, especially VB (Victoria Bitter) at 4.9% was bargaining gold!



After recovering from the shock of seeing the arriving O-1 corpses, stuffed full of loose parts on the truck, the Possum maintenance crew knuckled down to plan the project. They were to do this in addition to their Army duties, without any official support - and not in an air-conditioned hanger, but under tent/tarps or open air in the midst of a rubber plantation in tropical Vietnam. So keen these craftsmen became, that it was reported they would leave a movie or even a floor show, to go and work on their Birddog.

The project continued for months, supported by US troops hearing of the crazy Australians building their own Birddog. BBQ invitations enticed with plenty of VB beer and included: "PS. Please bring the following O-1 parts ..." A pair of wings meant for elsewhere, were delivered after being "re-routed" from somewhere, somehow.





Another crashed Birddog, lifted out by a 539th Transportation Company CH-47 named *Bodysnatcher*, was then just dropped off on the 161's landing strip by another Chinook from the 213th ASHC Black Cats - another US Army gift to the Aussies, and an adventure in itself: <https://davidelsblog.wordpress.com/pipesmoke-2>



Remember, these Aussies had no Birddogs in their inventory or the corresponding access to jigs, templets, or instructions on how to put one back together. Damaged skin panels from one wreck were flattened out to use as templates. New panels were hand-cut and drilled. Many items were 'donated' by US Army Aviation. How the tail-wheel assembly was acquired, demonstrated the lengths 161 Possums were prepared to go:



A visiting US Army Birddog was left on the flight-line while the pilot lunched at the 161 mess. An enterprising Aussie "discovered" that the tail wheel of the Birddog was deflated. The pilot was notified that his aircraft was unserviceable, BUT ... if specified replacement parts could be delivered, the 161 would be happy to repair his plane. With the prospect of an RON with the Aussies (and their beer), this did the trick. The tire was re-inflated in the morning and the pilot departed - with gratitude for such willing assistance and the fellowship he'd received from 161. The replacement part, of course, was added to inventory - as were some non-standard avionics, instrumentation and even magnetos salvaged from an old Sioux H-13.



By 1971, the airframe, wings and interior parts had come together from bits and pieces from varied sources. Crew from 161's workshop were told by a US Master Sgt. (who likely did not have the authority) that they could remove any serviceable item they needed from some well-used Birddogs in Vung Tau, which were soon to be given to South Vietnam. The only condition was any serviceable parts removed had to be replaced with unserviceable ones - of which 161 had aplenty.



Completion and flight test of the project was dependent upon finding an engine. None existed in the Australian inventory - nor were any likely to be found "falling off the back" of a US Army truck. Then, as if preordained, a new US Navy unit was assigned to a long vacant hangar at Vung Tau. The only object in the otherwise empty building was a round shipping container in which was found a factory fresh 0-470-118 Continental engine. Major Miller heard of this and quickly arrived on the scene to ask the Naval officers how many Aussie slouch hats, GP boots, poncho liners, NVA flags, and cases of Vic Bitter beer they would accept in trade for the engine.

As Uncle Sam would not supply Navy units with such land vehicles, what the Navy officers really wanted was a 'set of wheels.' Recalling that there was an old Holden RAAF Staff Car with a broken windscreen sitting in an Australian maintenance yard, and remembering his success with the Fire Chief - Miller soon had documentation accepting the damaged Holden as a target for Army artillery practice.



This deal required the car to be hidden away from any questions and prying eyes until the trade could be made. The local SAS (Aussie Special Forces types) commander agreed to hide it at his nearby camp, called SAS Hill. But the car wouldn't run and SAS Hill was constantly being inspected/shown-off by the Commanding General. Troops were assigned to push the car from place to place behind bamboo thickets ahead of the general's view. It had to go.

Finally a US Navy Lt. Commander showed up to make the trade - complete with a long official document deeding the ex-staff car from Australia's Air Force to America's Navy. Charlie's immediate reaction was to back away from signing, thinking ahead of courts martial, a certain military prison and the shame of discovery by providing written evidence. But this soon gave way to laughter as the US officer signed it himself - once on behalf of the US Navy and again for the Australian Air Force.

The car still would not run but with some quick work by 161, a new battery and some aviation gas, it was ready to brave the trip from Nui Dat to a small Navy base of Cat Lo where it was to be readied for the long drive toward Can Tho on the Mekong River.

The vehicle had no plates or required markings. It didn't even have a windshield. The two sailors tasked to drive it, used their own initiative to make a fake number plate before departing. All went well approaching and passing thru Saigon until coming to a Vietnamese Army checkpoint. While waiting in the traffic queue comprised of all types of vehicles, including ox carts, an ARVN officer spotted the hapless men, checked his clipboard and beckoned them around the barrier. It so happened that the number plate the two sailors had designed out of thin air, had given them some kind of priority.





Back at Nui Dat at the time, stories of Hugh Hefner's DC-9 "Big Bunny" and Playboy entertainers coming to Vietnam, led to christening the Birddog, **Bunny II**. The Possums painted their O-1 with what paint they could find, gloss dark blue and white, no Playboy black. Then they even included that mark to the futility of war, the peace sign (which was quickly ordered to be painted over).

On her tail, the three colors of the Royal Australian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (RAEME), to which all the makers were members, and the two Vietnam service ribbons. Most prominent of course, the famous logo of Playboy's bow-tied rabbit.



**TEST FLIGHT:** After a full year of work, she first broke ground on 9 May 1971, to the cheers of a small pack of Possums. Oddly enough, 161 pilots were ordered not to fly the plane in fear of exposure of the project while explaining any mishap. It fell upon the Yanks to do the honors. A pre-war instructor pilot, CWO Charlie Brewster, with the 74th RAC 'Aloft.' was the first. He did a long pre-flight with all the Possums gathered round. Up to 4000' spins, rolls and stalls - all very smooth. USAF FAC, Cpt. Jerry Highfill next took her up for a few short hops with an Aussie in the backseat. These were the only 3 Possums in Vietnam who got to fly in what they built.





**GOING HOME:** As Australia prepared to leave Vietnam in late 1971, there was the matter of this “off the books” aircraft built from sources of questionable providence. The RAAF brass, perhaps missing their staff car, refused to ship the dismantled Bunny II home. But the Royal Australian Navy’s cargo ship HMAS Jepariti, (reportedly already hiding a pilfered US Army Jeep in her empty swimming pool) was happy to oblige.

When the cargo marked “SPARE PARTS” was off-loaded and arrived at the Army Headquarters depot, the Possums realized it needed to be kept covered lest questions about this bright-blue Army aircraft be raised. They quickly arranged to move the still disassembled Birddog to their Army Aviation base in Queensland. Like the staff car that had figured in her resurrection, Bunny II was kept out of view, even painted Army green when finally reassembled.







**BUNNY II TODAY:** Bunny II flew next in 1977 and was shipped to Sidney for Australia's bicentennial air show in 1988. Bunny II had become a proud example of histories - of the RAEME, 161, Vietnam, Australia and of the Birddog. Having only logged 55.4 hours, Bunny II, now restored to her original blue, (less the peace sign) is on static public display at the Australian Army Aviation Museum in Oakey Queensland.

She only flew a few times in Vietnam or in Australia, but Bunny II surely was a wonder for those few who were privileged to see her fly, fly her, and fly in her. Some of the men who had toiled so long and hard to give her life, never saw her fly at all - including the man who's epic quest started it all, the late Major Charlie Miller. Charlie's shipping container was last seen outside the 161's Possum's mess at Nui Dat, being used for storage, including several cases of VB.



## PHOTO CREDITS

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Birddog 0-15321 was not used in Bunny II. 161 Recce Pictorial Collection
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Dave Menzies RAAF, 161 Possums - Vietnam And Beyond
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A Trooper Reports - by David Layne, World Press
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CH-47 Chinook 213th ASHC “Black Cats” c-1971. 161 Recce Pictorial Collection
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Getty Stock
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November 1989. 161 Recce Pictorial Collection
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- 9b - Bunny II outside of the Army Aviation Museum, Oakey Queensland. c-late 1990’s.  
Australian Army Aviation Museum



## SOURCES:

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Ken Jackson, 54th Otter, 'Big Daddy.'  
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Michael Abbott, 184th 'Nonstop' - Unit History 1968.  
Len Avery, 161 Recce 'Possum.'  
Ed Sullivan, VT-4 'Black Pony.'  
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Donald R. Daugherty, 54th Otter 'Big Daddy.'  
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The Loveable One-Niner. Minard Thompson,

## TAIL NUMBERS

Extracted from a letter written by author Minard D. Thompson Jr.:

*"I personally have inspected the aircraft last month while on a vacation in Australia. It does not have an official Cessna Data Plate. However, it does carry a modification data plate from Cessna when it went in for rebuild to a "G" model in September 1966. This plate calls out the tail number of 51-4883, which corresponds to a Cessna serial number 21775. 51-4883 was written off of the Army Aviation Systems Command on 70181. (June 30 - 181st day of fiscal year 1970). The other aircraft wreck utilized in the rebuild was 51-7300, another "G" model, this was written off by the US Army on 70120. (April 30)".* The third Birddog used is unknown.

Cessna numbers altered to Army (painted tail numbers)  
51-04883 (0-04883) was from 199th Avn, Company "Swamp Fox"  
51-7300 (0-17300) was from the 82nd Artillery, 1st Cavalry Division  
12531 then 14883 were assigned in Australia. Bunny II has no tail number today.

**MENTIONED IN DISPATCHES:** This was an award in the Armed Forces of the former British Empire and Commonwealth Countries. It is fitting that those men of 161 who did the building of Bunny II be mentioned in this Dispatch: Laurie Wood. Len Avery, Bob Zitzelsberger, Fred Bower, John Goritchan, and Don Rolfes. Good on ya mates!

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