

CHAPTER VAIR DIRECTORATE

The first appointment of an RAAF General Duties Officer to the staff of SRD was effected in Oct 43, when F/Lt P. COOK was detached from RAAF HQ.

F/Lt Cook who had commanded a flight of DC-2 aircraft at Parachute Training Unit, Richmond, N.S.W., was first appointed to the planning staff to assist in planning and launching a series of operations involving aircraft and paratroops, parachute supply dropping and flying boat extractions of personnel.

At this stage, the staff and personnel of SRD had no practical experience in this type of work; everything for the conduct of the operation had to start from the beginning, even to the extent of developing paratrooping from the only available type of aircraft in the SWPA considered capable of bringing the target within its radius of action, namely the B-24 (Liberator).

Knowledge of the practicability of paratrooping was so limited that it could not be certain at the planning stage whether statichute descents could be carried out from this type of aircraft with a reasonable amount of safety, owing to its flight characteristics.

The contention held at PTU was that it was practically fatal to attempt statichute exits at speeds much in excess of 90-100 mph. As it was certainly not possible to slow down an operational B-24 much below 135 mph indicated airspeed, there was a certain amount of pessimism regarding the results. Subsequent tests and live descents proved exits from B-24's to be practicable and the number of live descents from Liberators ultimately exceeded 900 without any fatalities occurring, the speed at exit being as high as 160 mph true airspeed. The injury rate throughout was about 2%, mostly sprained ankles, etc. caused by bad landings during training. There were no injuries attributed to parachuting on operations.

In order to develop equipment for aircraft modifications, paratroop exiting, flying technique, etc., an aircraft and crew was made available at Darwin for a period of three weeks in Dec 43. The most difficult problem encountered was the supply and transportation of statichutes from rear areas, for although a strong request had been made it was not possible to have the aircraft allotted at a rear base to carry out the necessary tests and experiments.

At this period statichutes were in extremely short supply and were held entirely by the PTU. Twenty parachutes for the purpose of carrying out the intended experiments, tests and operations could only be obtained after many appeals had been made to the highest of authorities.

A stringent rule laid down by the PTU produced a difficult problem. This rule provided that when a statichute had been packed for 14 days it had to be broken open, dried and repacked. (Later information from UK indicated that parachutes were packed and were kept packed up to a month before repacking). Furthermore, it was not considered practicable to repack in tropical climates without a specially designed drying unit. As Darwin is tropical and

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