

TALAIR Dash 8 Introduction



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It was freezing cold in Christchurch, New Zealand. Very much of a shock to the systems of our small party from Papua New Guinea, when we arrived to learn the mysteries of the Boeing Dash 8 aeroplane from the instructors in Ansett New Zealand Airlines.

More than once, I thought maybe I made a mistake in swallowing the carrot of temptation offered to me by Sir Dennis Buchanan, at a time when I was happily engaged in a retirement job, flying an odd British three-engined aircraft called a "Trislander." The work involved shuttles between Vanimo, on the extreme north west coast of Papua New Guinea, to Telefomin in the remote Star mountains, close to the Indonesian border.

Telefomin was notorious for the murderous uprising of the local headhunting tribes back in 1953. The tribesmen had agreed to put an end to Australian administration by murdering the two patrol officers, and then blocking the gravel airstrip with wooden logs. A loyal PNG policeman was able to warn of the massacre, carrying the severed heads of the Australians in a bag, across a mountain ridge, to the nearest radio outpost. By sunset the same day, there were ten DC3's on Telefomin airstrip and three hundred PNG policemen commenced hunting down the killers.

It had happened a long time ago but Telefomin was still a wild remote place, and on every flight that I took there in that wholly unsuitable Trislander, aiming the nose toward the mountains, I borrowed that great phrase from James Michener, for "my heart expanded!"

This donkey had accepted the carrot of a brand-new airline type, first of its breed in the Southern Hemisphere, and I headed the flight team for the ground course in Christchurch. We were in for some surprises: Ansett did not have the type in service, had not seen it, and the instructor was an ex British Royal Airforce maintenance officer, who was familiar with engineering technicalities but had little idea of the needs of pilots. So, we learned how to construct a solenoid sequence valve, about which we could not have cared less. What we wanted to know was the purpose of the valve and the action we should take if it ceased to function. No response from the instructor. He continued to tell us how we might build a Dash 8 if we had sufficient spare parts.

We really hated this man at the close of each day's lessons. He then took off his instructor's hat, and retired to his office, whereupon he became the airline cabin attendant recruitment chief. His office and

annex were besieged by a plethora of graceful young New Zealand girls, adorned in cashmere sweaters and pearls. Our lonely group retired to the hotel bar, to drown our sorrows in New Zealand beer. This brew was at least better than the PNG variety, and had a good effect on our systems: upon subsequent aircrew medicals we found our blood pressures lower than usual.

On return to Port Moresby, we learned that the local Civil Aviation office had made one of its more enlightened rulings; all of us were required to undertake another ground course on the Dash 8, this time it was the Canadian manufacturers audio visual. Vastly improved on the New Zealand course, and we could actually understand some of it. At any rate, we passed the course. Now to introduce the aircraft into operation.

Problem: we still had not any aircraft delivered from the factory, there was a delay of two months. Bigger problem: our competitor, Air Niugini, was well aware of the threat the Dash 8 would be to its own regional operations. Although the Dash 8 was a prop-jet, and would be up against the F28 pure jet, economics and performance over the short haul runs in PNG spelled out victory cost wise for our aircraft. As an aviation expert commented "The Dash 8 has a jet signature to 10,000ft". Which meant it performed like a jet on climb to, and on descent from, that altitude.

The minister of civil aviation in the government of the time was a dark-skinned lady from Manus Island. Despite her European name, Mrs Rooney was a full blood native of Manus. She was challenged in her knowledge of aviation matters. It would be fair to say that she knew it was faster and smoother by air to her island constituency than by sea. Otherwise, she depended very much upon expert help to run her ministry. Air Niugini were more than ready to make the bullets for her to fire. We were told that our company had no suitable hangars for the new aircraft. I refrained from the temptation of replying that I had not seen Air Niugini Airbus 300 wide body jets in any Port Moresby hangar. The A300s were all maintained in Melbourne. We had a very competent and much respected airport manager in Moresby by the name of Jack Pidik, a Tolai from Rabaul. He sent me up to our Goroka base, where I took photos of our hangar with my trusty Leica. Jack then ran full page ads in the local newspaper, to show that we indeed had a hangar suitable for the Dash 8.

The next gambit came from the Office of Civil Aviation. The senior inspector stated that since the runway slope at Goroka was 2.7% it was outside the limits for transport category aircraft, and so we were not able to use our new aircraft to operate services to our own headquarters.

This directive ignored the fact that since WW2, Goroka had been used by a succession of airline types, DC3s, B170s, F27s, F28s, and most recently the Dash 7. It would be useless for me to inquire from Air Niugini in what way, through the years, approval had been obtained for 2.7% slope approval for all these types.

I made my way to the fountain head of performance wisdom in the office of Civil Aviation, the Superintendent of Airworthiness, to find that he had just dropped dead from a heart attack! Stymied again.

The Dash 7 was a pre-cursor of the Dash 8, so I faxed a letter to Canada asking the manufacturers to let me know how the 2.7% slope approval had been given.

By return fax I got a lesson in duck shoving: at first neither the Canadian authorities nor their PNG counterparts would take responsibility. Finally, performance charts were produced for the type which proved there was no problem. I requested that similar charts be drawn up for our new aircraft, and surprise, surprise! The extrapolated curves for the extra .7% of slope were a straight lines. It made no difference at all. We were off the hook on that one. But there was more to come.

Mrs Rooney and her Ministry now went ahead with another directive about the introduction of our Dash 8 to airline service in Papua New Guinea. We were required to submit for her approval a complete Flight Operations Manual for the aircraft, which was to include an expanded check list of pilots drills from before starting, pre-flight cockpit scans, taxi, take-off, climb, cruise, descent, instrument approach and landing, down to the shutdown checks. This comprehensive list must also include all pilot emergency drills.

Next, the Operations Manual must detail a Minimum Equipment List, each item of which had to be separately approved by Mrs Rooney's Senior Inspector.

This Senior Inspector was an Australian of Scottish descent, renowned for his nit-picking abilities.

My first reaction was "Bloody hell!" Delivery of the first Dash 8 had been delayed two months, not one of our group had even seen the aircraft, let alone flown it.

Working very much in the dark, I tried to comply with these demands. Ansett New Zealand sent me a copy of their proposed Operations Manual for the type, but it turned out to be a re-hash of their manual for the completely different Dash 7. They didn't know either.

At my urgent request the Canadian manufacturers airmailed a copy of their manual, which did indeed steer me in the right direction, but it was very much abbreviated, being for factory use, and not designed to accommodate airline procedures. So, we got hold of checklists from Norontair in Canada, Tyrolean Airlines in Austria, and Henson Airways in the USA, and we tried to produce an amalgam of all the best points of these airlines' methods, bearing in mind the mountainous terrain we would traverse during all our flights. The closest we could get were the Tyrolean airlines practices, for Austria is a European equivalent to New Guinea, having no shortage of natural elevations in a fairly small nation.

Now arose the problem of getting actual flight endorsement on the type: it turned out that the factory pilots in Toronto were far too busy to undertake this job. No trip to Canada for us!

It was suggested that Tyrolean Airlines in Austria could do the work, but then our own Chief Pilot, who had been trained in lateral thinking during his university days, did some research and found out that the Austrian Defence Act of 1955 legislated against training of foreign pilots in that country. Foiled again! We stopped searching for ski boots and alpenstocks in the stores of Port Moresby.

Finally, Tyolean came to our aid: they had a Dash 8 chartered by Boeing Canada, presently on a worldwide sales promotion flight. It could stop-over for ten days in Port Moresby and the factory pilots could then train us to fly it.

No overseas jaunts for us, but it seemed like the solution. However, always keen to put a spoke in our wheel, Air Niugini learned of this probable answer to our problem, and suggested that Mrs Rooney advise us that the Canadian pilot licences held by the two factory crewmen would not be valid in Papua New Guinea! This little ploy was too much even for Mrs Rooney, and she had her Secretary for Civil Aviation issue the two Canadians with certificates of validation for use of their licence privileges while training us during their Port Moresby visit.

After two months of hassles, the Tyrolean Airlines demo flight aircraft arrived in Port Moresby and we were actually able to see a real Dash 8! It looked very much like the pictures we had long gazed at.

My own endorsement was to have novel features: for I was the nominated Flight Captain (temporary) and would be required to endorse and train subsequent intake crews. This had of course to include my

ability to simulate in-flight emergencies, and to handle those that might be inadvertently caused by the pilots I was to train. Rather a big ask!

The Dash 8 is very much computerised in its systems, digital computers getting information from flight data computers, then controlling the flight director system.

Our Chief Engineer returned from a factory course in Toronto to exclaim to me "It is an electrical nightmare!"

Enough to cause me some sleepless nights, and once more to question the wisdom of having accepted the job.

The demonstration Dash 8 from Austria was taxied to the entrance of our Port Moresby hangar. It looked lean, mean and beautiful in the setting sun.

The Canadian pilots were welcomed to PNG with a happy hangar party, with kegs of beer and a spit roast. Only then did I appreciate how much effort had been put in to the introduction of this aircraft type by other sections of our airline. Engineers had to plan for container loads of spares from Canada, and install ground starting equipment at our major ports, for although the aircraft came complete with its integral auxiliary power unit (A small jet engine in a fire proof compartment in the tail cone) we had to have support transformers capable of supplying over 1,000 amps for starting in the case of APU failure. This power demand was enough to dim the town lights at some small towns.

Stores had to detail and provide shelf space for millions of dollars' worth of spare parts, and cabin crew had to be recruited and trained. This last job was separate from my own flight crew set up, and was undertaken by an urbane well-dressed Britisher, whom we all knew as "Pav". There was more to come about this project.

Next day, the Canadian pilots ferried the Tyrolean Airlines aircraft to our head office at Goroka, in the eastern highlands, where it was to be temporarily given a Papua New Guinea registration mark, and our company logo, a tall highlands chief in regalia, was to be painted on the aircraft tail.

Passengers included the delegate from Mrs Rooney's' Office of Civil Aviation, (the Australian born Inspector of Airmen), company engineers, most of my team of pilots, our senior cabin attendants, and Sir Dennis Buchanan, the managing director and owner of TALAIR.

At Goroka we were greeted by a crowd of thousands of excited tribesmen from the Goroka valley. They were genuinely thrilled to see "their own airline" new hi-tech aeroplane finally arrive.

We watched with much interest as the tow tug backed the Dash 8 into our hangar. It was a tight fit above the high tail, but it fitted, as we had said it would.

That night at the company hotel I discussed performance with the Canadian pilots, and told them how, with reference only to the charts issued by the manufacturers, I had formulated standard flight plans for all of our projected schedules. The Canadians bet me that I was one minute wrong in my estimate for the flight time from Goroka back to Port Moresby. Two days later, I lost my bet. I told them how our company had been able to obtain computer generated take-off performance schedules for the Dash 8 for all the main PNG airports. With the knowledge that Ansett Australia had supplied individual PNG runway departure print-outs which provided for terrain clearance for the Air Niugini F28 jets in the event of engine failure, I approached them for the same information for our Dash 8. At that time Ansett were still handling foreign orders, and armed with the engine out data of the Dash 8, they produced the charts for our own aircraft for all main PNG airport runways for the bargain price of \$5,000.

While the Austrian aircraft was getting its new coat of paint, we showed the Canadian pilots around our base. We looked into the classroom where "Pav" was busy teaching his intake of PNG trainee cabin attendants. We got a surprise: as the Canadians were quick to point out, the course lacked any training about the Dash 8 itself. Nothing about opening and closing the airstair door, emergency exits, emergency equipment, fire extinguishers, crash axes, passenger briefing, cockpit liaison, emergency lighting or ditching procedures. Pavs' course was concerned with uniforms, grooming, serving of refreshments and the fitting of shoes. Many of these young women had been raised in a village environment, and had not been used to wearing shoes. It was quite a feat to obtain suitably sized footwear!

My business was training pilots, but at this stage it was necessary to muscle in. I requested Pav attend a meeting with our chief pilot, myself and the Senior Inspector of Civil Aviation.

I led off by telling Pav that his course would have to be re-structured to include all the vital missing information about the Dash 8 emergency procedures. The result was astonishing! The normally smooth and refined Pav completely lost his cool, and shouted abuse at me for five minutes. He couldn't see my point at all. When he had quite finished, I responded by telling him that he was going to have to change his course anyway. This made him angrier! But the course was changed.

The eventful day had not finished. The Senior Inspector now had his say, by questioning every item in the aircraft factory produced Minimum Equipment List. This list is an essential part of the operations manual for any airline transport type.

It seemed that our nit-picking Senior Inspector knew better than the Canadian manufacturers as to when the new type might safely fly. In later years I found this to be a commonplace mindset within the Department of Civil Aviation airworthiness section in Canberra. They knew much better than the manufacturers how US aircraft, which they had made, might safely fly in Australia. There isn't much of an argument against this line of thought from big frogs in a little pond. In New Guinea the Senior Inspector was a big frog in a very small pond indeed, and we continued to argue.

Back to Port Moresby, where the interesting bit started. At last, I started my training to handle the Dash 8. It proved a very sweet and superbly capable machine. We were about to beat the be-jesus out of Air Niugini.

A slightly incestuous situation came about when, after I was endorsed on the type, I had, under supervision, to in turn endorse my bete-noir, the Senior Inspector. While I was training him, he was likewise inspecting my performance! When all the training was completed, we started our scheduled services, not without one more curve ball from Mrs Rooney: we would have an Inspector of Airmen sitting in the jump seat for every flight we made for the first three months of operation. The officer allocated to my flights was my mate, the Senior Inspector. He made life difficult for the three whole months by questioning the sequence of our crew scans and drills. Each day he would come up with an amended check-list, and each night I would burn the midnight oil, using my portable word processor to print out his latest requirements, headed by the date!

Our own first production aircraft arrived in Port Moresby, and the demo Tyrolean aircraft with its Canadian crew departed. We were up and running. Then Sir Dennis got an urgent message from Ansett New Zealand. Their own first Dash 8 had just arrived, and the engineering staff had seen fit to check out the two 4.000 horse power P&W 120 turbo prop engines at full take-off power while the aircraft was on chocks, pointed at the hangar. It rolled smoothly over the chocks and destroyed a perfectly good hangar. It didn't do the Dash 8 much good either. Could Sir Dennis send down his own new aircraft as a replacement?

Sir Dennis told them to bite their bums. Not an easy task.

Three months later, I had some little satisfaction when I conducted a licence renewal test with the Senior Examiner, and I failed him! A small thing, but it gave me pleasure.

Meanwhile, in March 1987, Sir Dennis Buchanan visited Port Moresby to confer with the new Minister of Civil Aviation. As the result of a cabinet re-shuffle Mrs Rooney had been replaced by a wealthy retired German pork butcher named Sir Hugo Berghuser. Sir Dennis enthused about the meeting; at last, he would be able to put his case for airline expansion to a fellow European.

I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall at the meeting of the two knights: Sir Dennis was well known for straight speaking. At the end of half an hour's discussion with the pork butcher, he rose to his feet and shouted "You are nothing but a white Kanaka!" and went back to Goroka. It was the end of a pleasant re-conciliation.

By September 1987 I had finished all my training, a younger man was keen to assume my role as flight captain. He said to me "You can stay on if you want". "No thanks I'll go back to Australia" I replied. That wasn't really the end, for I was called back for more Dash 8 training a year later, and then did the same in Sir Dennis's new Queensland Airline, Flight West.

In all I flew 3700 hours in Dash 8 aircraft, and got an extra ten years of airline flying out of it.

In the words of an aviation writer, it had proved a resounding success, and is now the dominant type flying regional airlines in Australia and the South West Pacific. A jumbo jet pilot friend of mine said "A nice little aeroplane to retire on!" It was indeed.