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### THE WAY WE WERE

55 Squadron

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### CORAL REEF SQUADRON

Why put warbirds in the deep?

### COLDITZ KING



'Bush' Parker, escape 'ace'

WORLD WAR TWO

### REAP THE WHIRLWIND

WORLD WAR TWO Westland's awesome cannon-fighter



# Features



## 38 Colditz King

In the first of a series of Australian-flavoured features, Dennis Newton tells the incredible saga of 'Bush' Parker - the man with the keys to Colditz Castle!

## 42 No Flak, No Fun

The Vultee Vengeance gave a good account of itself with the RAAF in New Guinea. Jim Grant records the type's exploits.

## 50 Tribute to an Ace

Jack Roush's newly-restored, award-winning, P-51B Mustang described by David Leininger.

## 61 Founding Fathers

Nigel Price outlines the history of Australia's Qantas Airways - from humble beginnings to world leader.

## 66 Time, Money and Energy

A tribute to the late Malcolm Long, Australian warbird pioneer, by Craig P Justo.

## 80 Back Where She Belongs!

Duncan Cubitt offers readers a limited edition photo, raising funds for Vulcan to the Sky.

## 110 Coral Reef Squadron

The popular tourist paradise of Phuket Island will shortly boast a reef made from Skytrains and helicopters. Louis Vosloo explains why.



# Contents

October 2008 No.327

### Front Cover

P-51B Mustang *Old Crow* complete with its 'Malcolm Hood' on a sortie out of AirVenture Oshkosh - see page 50 for the story of this thoroughbred. DAVID LEININGER

We present a series of Australian features, starting on pages 38 and 61.



72 Museums



82 Airshow



104 The Way We Were

# Coral Reef Squad



**A**LTHOUGH not a unique concept, the use of redundant airframes to form an artificial reef to attract marine life and divers is new to Thailand. A plan to establish such a feature off the popular tourist paradise of Phuket Island will reach fruition towards the end of this year.

Creating artificial reefs off Thailand's coast is not in itself unusual. Some time ago two surplus Royal Thai Navy warships, HTMS *Kham* and *Kut*, were scuttled off Pattaya.

Since May, four decommissioned former Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) Douglas C-47 Skytrains and five turbine-powered Sikorsky S-58T helicopters have awaited their new watery role on a wharf at Makham Bay on Phuket's north western coast.

Cyclone NARGIS, which unexpectedly hit the Burmese coast on May 3 this year, prematurely started the monsoon season in the region. This put paid to the sinking of what is locally referred to as the 'Coral Reef Squadron', planned for May 5. Since then, conditions have been deemed too dangerous due to the rough seas associated with the monsoon.

It now looks as though it will be November by the time the operation gets underway. The airframes will be positioned off the coast in Bang Tao Bay and face an 18-hour voyage past the southern tip of Phuket Island.

Prior to moving to the island's deep sea port, the aircraft had been in open storage at the air base at Koke Krathiem in Lopburi. For more than a decade they had slowly deteriorated to a state which did not render them suitable for display in a museum or as gate guardians. If they had not been earmarked to be used as an artificial reef, these machines would otherwise have faced the scrap man's axe.

Planning for their new role had been in the offing for some years, but only really got under way when 15 flat-bed trucks, loaded with the dismantled aircraft left Koke Krathiem for the three-day journey to Makham Bay. ❖

*The popular tourist paradise of Phuket Island will shortly boast a new offshore reef made up of Skytrains and helicopters. Louis Vosloo reports*



A day or two later the task began re-assembling the C-47s. This task was expertly undertaken by RTAF technicians and a private contractor under the watchful eye of the project manager Adisai Chindaprasert.

Prior to dismantling, all the sub-sections had been numbered to ensure that each airframe received its own wings, tail surfaces, etc, thus avoiding misfits. All had been comprehensively stripped of their interiors, fittings and other

**Overleaf**  
Inside one of the C-47s, prior to its new life as part of a coral reef.

**These pages**  
Dockside preparations ready for the sea transportation and sinking of the former RTAF C-47s and S-58Ts. ALL LOUIS VOSCEO

environmentally-unfriendly items such as engines and wheels, in order to create a safe diving conditions.

To ensure that they will sink as planned, areas of the fuselages have been opened, and three concrete blocks will be placed in each C-47 to make certain they remain in their designated positions on the sea bed. Lowering the airframes into the sea will be a delicate operation, hence the caution over weather conditions.

When sunk, the C-47s and S-58s

will be spread over an area of about 27,000ft<sup>2</sup> (2,500m<sup>2</sup>) at a depth of around 50 to 65ft (15 to 20m). For decades to come aquatic plants, corals and untold numbers of fish and divers will appreciate the new 'Coral Reef Squadron'.

*The author wishes to thank Steve Dark, Martin Best, Sakpinit Promthep and Adisai Chindaprasert for their assistance in the preparation of this feature.* ●





**"For decades to come aquatic plants, corals and untold numbers of fish and divers will appreciate the new 'Coral Reef Squadron'."**

#### Coral Reef Squadron **S-58Ts**

Thai serial	Type	US serial
10/05	H-34A	54-933
23/07	UH-34D	63-8257
27/07	UH-34D	63-13011
42/09	H-34A	57-1763
58/12	HSS-1	150218
63/19	HSS-1	153129

**Notes:** All built originally as piston-engined Sikorsky H-34 Choctaws (for the USAF and US Army) or HSS Seabats (for the US Navy) but converted locally by Thai-Am with PT6T-3 Twin-Pac turboshafts. In the UK the S-58 was known as the Wessex.



#### Coral Reef Squadron **C-47s**

Thai serial	Type	USAAF serial
36/14	C-47A-20-DK	42-93224
37/14	C-47B-30-DK	44-76734
47/18	C-47B-50-DK	45-1079
50/19	C-47B-50-DK	45-1093

**Notes:** All were built by Douglas at Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, for the USAAF. Through the years the RTAF has been a large operator of the venerable Skytrain, with an estimated 60 examples having been used. Today the remnants of these, and a few extras acquired from other sources since, continue to fly as Basler-converted turboprops. A total of nine of the rejuvenated 'Gooney Birds' being employed.

