

Twin Pioneers Entertain Royalty

A previously untold story from the pen of

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Duke of Gloucester's Royal Flight

XP 293 was the lightest Twin Pioneer in the 209 Squadron's fleet. It was also in very good condition and had been used as a VIP transport before it arrived on 209 when it carried Montgomery of Alamein. There was a small plaque on the rear wall of the aircraft commemorating that flight. I regret that I don't have the date.



XP293 in service livery - ready to go to war.

Military VIP flights in 209 Twins became fashionable in late 1965 when several Indonesian Air Force C-130s dropped parachute troops in and around Labis, a small town in West Malaysia, about 100 nm from Seletar on the railway line north.

Suddenly it seemed that every staff officer in Singapore wanted to go to Labis and, because there was a strip there, they decided they'd go in a Twin.

Because we were pushed to maintain our current commitments at our base at RAF Seletar and our detachments at RAAF Butterworth, RAF Kuching and RAF Labuan, I offered SEP (Single engine Pioneer) for these staff officers. . . But they wanted to ride in TEPs so they did. It was about one hour's flying from Changi to Labis. So by the time we'd gone from Seletar to Changi, waited for the passengers, flown them to Labis, waited there for them to come back, then returned to Seletar via Changi, a lot of time had passed. It was good that the Indonesian troops were soon mopped up. The Indonesian Air Force lost a couple of their C-130s on the way home so it was not a successful operation for them.

After Labis, we were left alone by staff officers, who, when they went north or over to Borneo went civil. When we were tasked with a proper VIP flight (Air Commodore and above, or equivalent in the Navy or Army) it was natural that 293, if it was available, should do it. Because of the high experience level on 209 we never had problems mounting military VIP flights. Almost all our TEP aircrew were Transport Command qualified 'B Cat VIP', gained from conscientious training at Seletar, their own personal professionalism and annual visits from TCEU (Transport Command Examining Unit).



The Duke and Duchess at home with their sons in 1956

However, when first we were tasked with a Royal Flight (Duke of Gloucester and retinue) I had to decline the task and doing that really did set the cat amongst the pigeons. I was summoned to HQ Far East Air Force (FEAF) at Changi to explain myself. What a reaction from the Air Officers who turned up to interrogate me! I reminded them that the Royal Flight requirements were stringent. We had one 'A Category VIP' TCEU qualified pilot but, regrettably, the Twin Pioneer couldn't meet the single-engine performance requirements in the high temperature

and humidity operating environment. I also said that if the Air Staff would clear the task in the circumstances, I'd be pleased to mount it at which, the Senior Technical Staff Officer said: 'The squadron commander has a point'. My operational commander (Air Commodore Quill, RNZAF) to whom I had voiced my concerns already nodded his agreement. I was told to wait outside. When called back in, it was to hear that Boscombe Down would be asked to send a test pilot to check the TEP performance. A test pilot soon arrived and very quickly verified our position.



209 Pilots and Navigators trying to look dignified. The Royal VIP pilot is standing fourth from the right behind the squadron commander's left elbow.

Suddenly, it was all sweetness and light. The Duke of Gloucester trip was ON! We received a special dispensation from the Royal Flight. Our man was to be the pilot appearing in the photograph of the 209 aircrew: he's the one standing fourth from the right behind my left elbow. 293, because it was the lightest and already the shiniest TEP in the 209 fleet, was to be earmarked for the trip and 'bulled' up like never before. As it happened, our Nav Leader was about the coutheast bloke on 209, so he was fingered to be navigator.

The Duke of Gloucester's visit started some interesting events for 209. The Duke was coming in his role as Colonel of a Guards Brigade serving in Borneo. His two Royal Flights would start from Labuan, one to a strip in the Interior where the Duke's regiment manned a fortified position and went patrolling round the jungle. The other, shorter trip was to another brigade outpost with a strip along the Sabah coast towards Jessleton, now named Kota Kinabalu.

We began to get information about the Duke's medical condition. He was not in good shape. We learned that most times he had to lie flat on his back sucking in oxygen. He would be accompanied by his personal doctor who was to go everywhere with him. The doctor would bring an oxygen machine with him, so we didn't have to supply. Adding up all the Duke's retainers, we soon deduced that they wouldn't all fit into one Twin, we'd need two. Then, the terrain around the strip in the Interior was mountainous and getting there could mean flying high, which would not be good for the Duke's breathing.

Anyway, we prepared for the event and got ourselves ready at Labuan. We installed a lightweight cane *chaise longue* for the Duke but his retinue had to sit alongside him on those canvas seats designed for soldiers. We were all very proud of TEP 293. ComAirBor (the Air Commodore who was the air commander in Borneo) came to inspect her. Our ground crew had worked another miracle, she was immaculate and no one was allowed to touch her.

However, when the Duke arrived in Singapore he was not at all well and his flight to inspect his Guards in the Interior was cancelled. The trip along the coast from Labuan was to continue, but not above 500 feet. We had also discovered that the Duke's personal oxygen equipment was too big and too heavy, it had to be replaced it with a portable oxygen kit from Sick Quarters.

Apart from the Duke's impressive military and civilian retinue, the size of the crowd that turned up at Labuan, all the way from HQ FEAF at Changi, to witness the coastal flight was also impressive. When the Duke arrived, it looked as though he wouldn't last the day. The

pilot said: *"What happens if he dies on me?"* I told him to let me know if he did. But he didn't die, and our pilot and navigator performed immaculately as usual. The Duke and his retinue returned safely to Singapore where the Air Staff had arranged another event for him – a Flypast. 293 stayed on at Labuan to contribute to the war effort as the shiniest omni-role battlefield support aircraft in the world.

The Duke of Gloucester's Flypast.



XL997 at work

This flypast involved a mix of all the aircraft types at work in FEAFF. Our contribution was a 'box' of one TEP (997) and three SEP. The aircraft were required to fly past the Duke who, on the day, took the salute lying down on a chaise longue (not ours from 293, that went into our crew room in Seletar) in front of the RAF officers' mess at Changi.

The plan was that the slowest aircraft, helicopters, were to lead the flypast at the lowest safe height – not below 250 feet - with the fast jets at the back coming along at not below 1,000 feet with all the others – heavier transports, maritime - flying along at defined heights in between. So each formation was catching up with the other aircraft in front. Each formation had to fly past the Duke at five-second intervals.

When we heard about this, I asked our couth Nav Leader to speak with the Air Staff people arranging the flypast and check it all out. We started training in formation flying and waited for the operation order. The Nav Leader soon reported back - he'd identified three problems.

One problem was the impossibility to rate the stopwatches so that all the flypast aircraft were standardised on the same time in minutes and seconds. The second was that the aircraft taking part must use the same map with the same scale. The third was that there seemed to be no plan to recover the aircraft after the flypast and that a few minutes after flying past, a lot of aircraft would be swarming around like bees, hardly separated, in the same airspace.

We had to accept the stopwatch problem, but the Air Staff did tell all squadrons to use the same scale map. An official recovery plan was not issued, so we drafted our own and told the other squadrons based at Seletar.



A TEP leads three SEPs in a 'box' formation.

So the helicopters, Army Beaver and Beverly squadrons knew what we planned to do. They organised their own escape routes to be able to get away safely from just south of Changi.

The flypast day arrived – 10th January 1966. 209 always had our regular ops briefing first thing in the morning in our own ops room. The forecast was ominous - there would likely be a widespread storm over Singapore Island later in the day. With this in mind, I half expected the flypast to be rescheduled or cancelled. It was not. We filled our aeroplanes with a lot of fuel and made sure our in-flight rations and a first line servicing crew were on board.

Off we went, did a buzz over our hangar at Seletar

and then joined our allocated holding pattern to the north of Changi. We started the run in to make good our ETA at the saluting base after, and slightly higher than, the helicopters. The CBs were shooting up rapidly and getting closer. My navigator and I (leading our formation in TEP 997) knew we would have to implement our personal recovery plan.

I'm sure all the other crews were watching those enormous clouds and were thinking the same thing - "where will we go when it clamps?" At that time the run in to Changi was clear, but we knew that Seletar, Sembawang, Paya Leba and Tengah were about to go out. It was very obvious that a severe storm was about to cover the entire Island.

A Devon and a Beaver in a VIC formation with a Beverly leading followed us. We could hear other flypast formations on the RT manoeuvring to start their own run in. Nav Leader had worked out the sums to arrive precisely on time to the second. Five seconds later the Beverly formation arrived and so did the downpour. The Devon and Beaver did swerving dives into Changi, but the Beverly had to divert. There was nowhere for the fixed-wing aircraft to go on the Island. The helicopters put down near Bedok Corner, a well-known place to buy satay. The twin rotor Belvederes made for Pengarang, a strip in Johore, north east of Changi and put down there. We set off across Johore and went to Mersing, a strip not far up the East Coast, landed and had a picnic on the beach with the in-flight rations. After the storm and air traffic turmoil had passed, we returned from the seaside to Seletar.

On that day, flypast aircraft diverted as far north as Butterworth near Penang (Hunters and Lightnings) and Kuantan (heavy transports). I believe a Shackleton went to Kuching, but perhaps they were going there anyway. FEAF was lucky not to lose an aircraft. My logbook records three hours of flying time for the Duke of Gloucester's Flypast. Incredibly, FEAF did not call an ops debriefing to learn what we could from the shambles. Perhaps they thought the mess was best forgotten. Sometimes operational aircrew wonder about staff officers.

Duke of Edinburgh's Royal Flight

Once the precedent had been set, we were tasked for another Royal Flight. This time it was the Duke of Edinburgh.

Once again, 293, our VIP pilot and our couth Nav Leader were earmarked. The Duke was



HRH The Prince Philip,
The Duke of Edinburgh

not coming as a military person, but as a royal showing the flag. Consequent to the days of the Raj at the time of Queen Victoria, the peoples of the Interior still had fading pictures of her pinned up in their long houses. The Duke was coming to show himself as part of the modern Royal Family. He would fly civil from Singapore to Kuching, thence to Sibul, call on the Sultan in Brunei, eventually to present himself for his TEP trip to Bario in the Sarawak Interior. On arrival at Bario he would be greeted by a school children's band playing God Save the Queen on drums and various other musical instruments including nose flutes. These children were very engaging and performed their repertoire of tunes very well. Then the Duke would meet the local pengulus to spread the Royal word. After that he'd return to Brunei and Singapore.

Flying south from the coast to Bario with the Duke and his aides, meant getting the trip done before the clouds developed. 293 shone in the early morning sun. The Duke arrived with his retinue as planned. All were in a very good mood. Because there were bound to be interesting sights en route such as the terrain and birds such as hornbills, the Duke was given a pair of binoculars in case he wished to look out from the aeroplane at something.

These very high quality binoculars were on a 209 Squadron inventory. and were used mainly on coastal reconnaissance for spotting suspicious movements such as Indonesian infiltrators coming ashore on beaches from longboats and bent on mischief.

A couple of minutes before getting on the aeroplane, the Admiral, the Duke's chief ADC, presented the Duke with a message. It said he was not to fly up front or to influence the flight in any way. The Duke had been told to sit down the back by someone in Buckingham Palace. Oh dear! The Duke sounded off with a dreadful oath (RN, I expect), dropped the binoculars to the ground where they broke to bits. The Admiral took him by the arm and led him to the aeroplane where he did as he was told. Apart from that incident the trip was uneventful.

On returning to Seletar I signed the form for the damaged binoculars that explained that a royal person had dashed them to the ground in a fit of rage and please replace. The Wing Commander CO of the Maintenance Unit sent the form back saying please resubmit. He'd put the binoculars U/S FWT (Unserviceable - Fair Wear and Tear). We received a replacement soon after.

Aeroplane Details

XP293 CC.2 (Constructor Number 571) first flew on 5th October 1960 being delivered to the Royal Air Force's Handling Squadron on 6th April 1961. It was stored with 19 Maintenance Unit before being transferred to 209 Squadron on 12th February 1961. After serving with style and distinction it was 'struck off charge' at Singapore on 20th December 1968 and scrapped.

XL997 CC.1 (Constructor Number 535) first flew on 1st July, 58 being delivered to the Royal Air Force's 22 Maintenance Unit at Silloth in Cambria on 30th July, 1958. It was stored until it was delivered to 209 Squadron on 16th December 1960. It was 'struck off charge' at Singapore on 30th October 1968 and scrapped.

