

= Operation Pig Bristle =

Operation Pig Bristle was an unusual transport task conducted by the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) in May 1946 . The operation was ordered by the Australian Government in response to a national shortage of paint brushes , which was hindering house @-@ building efforts . No. 38 Squadron of the RAAF was given the task of transporting 25 tonnes of pig bristles from Chongqing in China to Hong Kong , from where the bristles were shipped to Australia . The squadron completed this task over a two @-@ week period .

= = Background = =

Following World War II , the Australian Commonwealth and state governments launched a joint Commonwealth Housing Scheme to address a national shortage of accommodation . This scheme , and private sector house @-@ building activities , was delayed by a shortage of materials , including pig bristles needed to manufacture paint brushes .

At the time , the only available source of pig bristles was China . In 1946 , the company Jardine Matheson acquired 100 tonnes (98 long tons ; 110 short tons) of bristles for the British government and a further 25 tonnes (25 long tons ; 28 short tons) for Australia from remote locations in China near the border with Tibet . These stocks were transported to Chongqing , the capital of the Kuomintang government , and Jardine Matheson eventually gained permission to export them to Australia and Britain . This supply of bristles would be sufficient to meet Australia 's needs for several months .

As the Chinese Civil War was raging at the time and Communist forces were attacking river boats travelling from Chongqing , it was judged necessary to transport the pig bristles from the city by air . The Kuomintang government agreed to allow RAAF and Royal Air Force aircraft to fly return flights between Hong Kong and Chongqing between 1 and 14 May only . After arriving in Hong Kong , the bristles would be shipped to Australia by sea . Both the Kuomintang government and the Communist forces were concerned about the presence of foreigners in China , and the Australian aircrew were warned that they would be imprisoned if they landed anywhere other than Chongqing or an emergency airstrip at Canton .

= = Operation = =

The RAAF 's No. 38 Squadron was selected to transport Australia 's share of the bristles . This squadron was equipped with Douglas Dakota aircraft , and was responsible at the time for conducting regular flights from Australia to Japan carrying personnel and supplies for the Australian element of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force . A detachment of three Dakotas led by No. 38 Squadron 's commanding officer , Squadron Leader John Balfe , was sent from Australia to Hong Kong in preparation for the task . As flying conditions were expected to be difficult , each of these aircraft was manned by two highly experienced pilots as well as another airman who performed the duties of navigator , radio operator and flight engineer .

The flights from Hong Kong to Chongqing began in early May 1946 . At this time Chongqing had been isolated by Communist forces , and foreign embassies were being evacuated from the city ahead of its expected occupation by the Communists . No navigation aids were available to guide the Australian aircraft , and their crews had to use inaccurate road maps for navigation during the 1 @, @ 100 @-@ kilometre (680 mi) trips between Chongqing and Hong Kong . The RAAF aircrew found the flights between Hong Kong and Chongqing to be challenging as a result of mountains around the Chinese city , as well as the expected lack of accurate weather forecasts and navigation aids . As the Australian legation was evacuated from Chongqing in early May , the RAAF aircrew slept at the British embassy when they needed to overnight in the city . The detachment was successful in flying out the pig bristles within the two weeks available , with eight return flights being made to Chongqing . In his memoirs Balfe attributed this success to " reasonable weather and everyone 's enthusiasm " . After completing their task , the three Dakotas left Hong Kong bound for

Australia on 14 May .

= = Delivery = =

Some of the pig bristles were rushed to Australia on board No. 38 Squadron aircraft , and the remainder were transported from Hong Kong by sea . On 29 May it was reported that the shortage of pig bristles had been overcome . One of the pilots involved in Operation Pig Bristle received the Air Force Cross in the 1948 New Years Honours in recognition of his role in the operation . RAAF official historian Alan Stephens wrote in 1995 that " John Balfe 's brief but thrilling account of his team 's exotic adventure should be mandatory reading in every RAAF air transport crew room " .