

DE HAVILLAND DOVE CRASH AT CHINA BAY IN 1958: THE FIRST FATAL ACCIDENT INVOLVING A RCyAF TRANSPORT AIRCRAFT

Compiled by Gp Capt Kumar Kirinde, SLAF (Retd)

Annex A - Brief on the de Havilland D.H.104 Dove and the six inducted to RCyAF, Page 7

Annex B - 'The Batticaloa Airstrip' by Maj A.J. Hacker, Royal Engineers (a passenger who died in the crash), Page 9

**Based on material and pictures supplied by Roger Thiedeman and
Capt Dhamseth Pallawela**



**RCyAF Dove CS 403 when new with two other Doves.
Note absence of word 'ROYAL' in the titles above the window line.**

Pic Courtesy: Dhamseth Pallawela

Thursday, December 18, 1958 is recorded as a dark day in Sri Lankan military aviation history. A de Havilland D.H.104 Dove aircraft of the Royal Ceylon Air Force (RCyAF), with serial CS 403, crashed on takeoff from China Bay, Trincomalee on a flight to Katunayake. At the time, the deaths of all six occupants earned the accident the dubious distinction of the worst RCyAF or Royal Air Force (RAF) crash in Ceylon in terms of number of lives lost during peacetime. (Earlier, the RCyAF had suffered three separate single-fatality crashes since its 1951 inception; and in late 1945 and

1947, seven and 11 persons were killed in crashes of, respectively, a Consolidated Liberator and Avro York, both of the RAF, in the vicinity of Katunayake.)

Victims of the 1958 Dove accident were:

- Flt. Lt. A. Varatharasa, RCyAF (pilot)
- Flt. Lt. A.J.M. Shibly, RCyAF
- LAC T.T. Peries, RCyAF
- Major A. John Hacker, British Army Royal Engineers
- Sgt. Maj. Gentle A. Fernando, Ceylon Army Engineers
- Sgt. A. Guy, RAF

There was a 'connection' between the death of Major John Hacker and the construction of the Batticaloa airstrip, which is explained in an article by Maj. Hacker in Annexure B.

In memory of Flt Lt A Varatharasa, the pilot killed in this crash, the RCyAF introduced the 'Varatharasa Trophy' which is awarded to the 'Most Outstanding Sportsman of the Year' at its annual (sports) colours awards ceremony. The award is made even to this day.



Varatharasa Trophy

Pic: <http://www.airforce.lk/afsc/facilities.php>

Roger Thiedeman collection via Department of National Archives, Colombo

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4 Ceylonese, 2 Britons dead in plane crash

WING HIT CHINA BAY PETROL TANK

(By a "Daily News" reporter)

Two British officers, and 4 Ceylonese servicemen were killed on the spot when a Royal Ceylon Airforce Dove crashed at the China Bay airport yesterday.

The plane which was piloted by Flight Lt. Appalah Varatharasa was on a routine communication flight from Katunayake to China Bay. The plane crashed near a petrol storage depot shortly after noon yesterday when it was taking off from China Bay and failed to gain height.

Those killed were the pilot, Flight Lt. Varatharasa, Major A. John Hacker of the Royal



Flight Lt. Varatharasa

Engineers, Sgt. A. Guy of the RAF, Sgt. Maj. Gentle Fernando of the Ceylon Engineers, Flight Lt. A. J. M. Shibly and Leading Aircraftsman T. T. Peries.

A Court of Inquiry was convened at China Bay presided over by the Chief of Staff, Royal Ceylon Air Force, Wing Commander Rohan Amerasekera DFC. At the time of going to press the Court had not completed its inquiry.

The Royal Ceylon Airforce was making arrangements to give those killed a burial with full Air Force honours. Messages were sent by the Commander of the Air Force to the relatives of those killed expressing sympathy.

The bodies of those killed were removed to the mortuary at the Naval Yard Trincomalee where a post-mortem was held by the D.M.O. Trincomalee.

A RCyAF headquarters spokes-

man described the crash as the worst in the history of the RCyAF.

Our Trincomalee correspondent adds: The Trincomalee Magistrate, Mr. Dassanayake, held an inquiry at the scene of the crash yesterday evening at which Naval Policeman Banda gave an eyewitness account of the crash.

Witness said that he was on duty when he spied the plane at about 12.30 p.m. coming over the oil tank No. 14 as if to force land. He then saw it crash over the tank.

The bodies were disfigured and dismembered.

The Magistrate directed that a post-mortem be held immediately after which Flying Officer Mendis was to hand over the bodies to the next of kin.

Near oil tank

The Trincomalee correspondent earlier reported that the left wing of the plane struck against an oil tank before it crashed at the foot of it. The left wing and the front portion of the plane were completely damaged.

When Pressmen went to the spot after the disaster they were chased by an European who was in civilian clothes. He even threatened to arrest them for trespassing.

The crash has taken place in the area where oil tanks are situated.

The pilot of the ill-fated plane, 27-year-old FLIGHT LT. VARATHARASA, of Alutmatwatte Road, Mutwal, is a bachelor. He was a qualified flying instructor, and promoted to the rank of Flight Lt. in January this year. He underwent his training with the Air Force in Ceylon and later proceeded for engineering training with the Royal Air Force, Central Flying School in the United Kingdom. He was educated at St. Benedict's College. His elder brother, Mr. A. Pathmarajah, is attached to the Overseas Service and is at present at the Ceylon High Commission at Ottawa.

FLIGHT LT. A. J. M. SHIBLY, a Technical Engineering Officer attached to the Royal Ceylon Air Force was 32 years of age. He was a science graduate of the Ceylon University and had his education

(Continued on page 16)



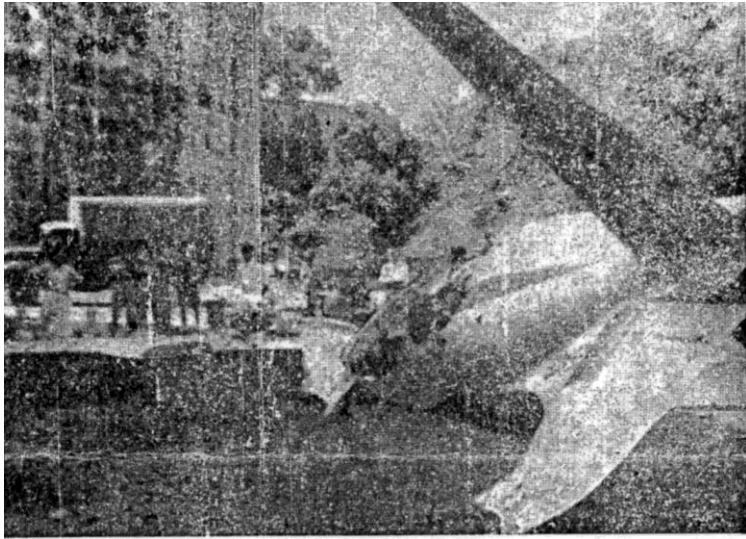
PLANE CRASH

(Continued from page 1)

at Zahira College, Colombo. He was trained at the Royal Air Force Technical College, Henlow, England. He was married and was from Barber Street, Kottahena.

MAJOR JOHN HACKER (34) was seconded for duty last year with the Ceylon Army by the British Army's Royal Engineers. He did a great deal of organisation and building work on the new airstrip at Amparai. He was married and his wife and 2 children live in Colombo. Sergeant Guy was a Technical Officer on loan duties with the Royal Ceylon Air Force. He was a senior N.C.O. in the R.A.F. and counted 17 years of service with the Air Force. He was married and his family too lives in Colombo.

LEADING AIRCRAFTSMAN T. T. PERIES (23), was a bachelor. He hails from Watarappola Road, Mount Lavinia. He was a Draughtsman attached to the Technical branch at R. Cy, A. F. Headquarters. He was educated at Christ Church College, Dehiwela.



The ill-fated R. Cy A. F. Dove, which crashed at China Bay on Thursday, brushed against the oil storage tank on the left of this picture before it came to grief, a mass of twisted wreckage of which only the tail assemblage can be seen above.



A close up of the wrecked RCYAF Dove trainer plane which crashed at China Bay airport while taking off on Thursday afternoon killing all six occupants. (More pictures on pages 9 and 11)

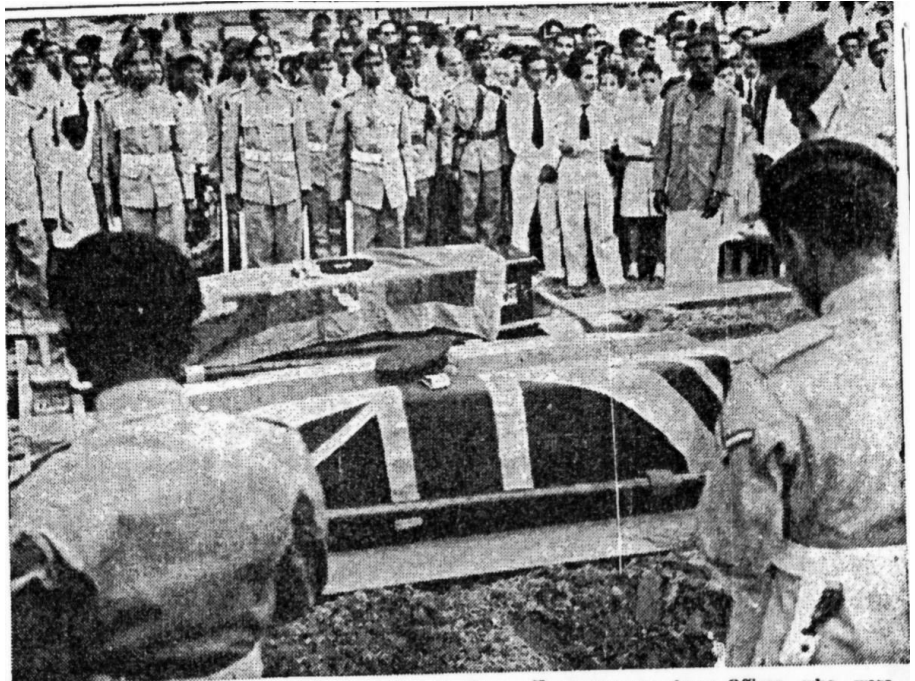
STOP PRESS

DEATHS

FERNANDO — GENTLE AUBREY. The death occurred under tragic circumstances at China Bay on 18-12-58, of Sergeant-Major G. A. Fernando, Ceylon Engineers (V.), beloved son of Mrs. A. Fernando, husband of Joyce (nee Symons) of Petris Avenue, Kalubowila. The remains will be interred at the General Cemetery (Anglican Section) Kanatte, at 5.0 p.m. 19-12-58.

SHIBLY—Remains of FLIGHT LIEUTENANT A. G. M. SHIBLY R.Cy.A.F., husband of Zubelda, daughter-in-law of Mr. M. K. Muthalib, son of Mrs. Abdul Ghaffor Khan, grandson of A. R. G. Hosson, brother of A. G. Shabbeer and A. G. M. Shakir, nephew of G. M. M. Akbar and cousin of H. F. Akbar Ali, will be removed for interment at Maligawatta Burial Ground. Cortege leaving residence at 11 a.m. today.—57 Barber Street, Colombo.

VARATHARASA—FLIGHT LIEUT. VARATHARASA. son of the late Mr. Appiah and Mrs. Appiah, brother of Pathmarajah, Ceylon Legation, Canada, Dr. Tharmarajah, General Hospital, Galle, Amirtharajah, Mrs. Rupa Thillainathan, Leela, Anandani, Lalitha and Thilaka, brother-in-law of K. Thillainathan of Dunlop (Ceylon) Ltd., expired under tragic circumstances. Cremation today 5 p.m. at Kanatte. Cortege leaving 363, Alutmawatte Road at 1 p.m.



The funerals of two of the five Royal Ceylon Air Force officers and one Army Officer who were killed in the China Bay air crash were held at the General Cemetery, Kanatte yesterday. One of the dead officers who was a Muslim, was buried at the Muslim cemetery at Maligawatte. Full military honours were accorded.

De Havilland D.H.104 Dove

The de Havilland D.H.104 Dove, designed as a short-haul airliner, was also used to good effect in the communications role by various air arms around the world including the RAF in Britain, Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) and, not least, Royal Ceylon Air Force (RCyAF)/Sri Lanka Air Force (SLAF). The version supplied to the RAF and RNZAF was designated Devon C.1, while 'navalised' variants operated by Britain's Royal Navy from shore bases were named Sea Devon C.20.

A few of the 544 Doves manufactured between 1946 and 1967 had their original pair of de Havilland Gipsy Queen six-cylinder, in-line engines replaced with other powerplants such as Lycoming flat-eight piston engines and Garrett AiResearch turboprops.

Between November 1955 and October 1958 six examples of the D.H.104 Dove 5 variant were delivered to the RCyAF, as summarised below:

msn*	serial	hand-over date
04663	CS 401	30 Nov 1955
04664	CS 402	10 Jan 1956
04489	CS 403**	9 July 1957
04497	CS 404	1 Nov 1957
04501	CS 405	20 Nov 1958
04502	CS 406	30 Oct 1958

* manufacturer's serial number (a.k.a. constructor number)

** the aircraft involved in the December 1958 fatal crash

(The D.H.104 Dove was developed into the larger D.H.114 Heron, powered by four Gipsy Queen engines. Four examples of the Heron Series 2D were delivered to the RCyAF between September 1959 and September 1960.)



CS 402 of the RCyAF during a pre-delivery test flight in Britain.

Credit: Roger Thiedeman collection, from *The DH.104 Dove and DH.114 Heron* monograph published by Air-Britain, UK, 1973

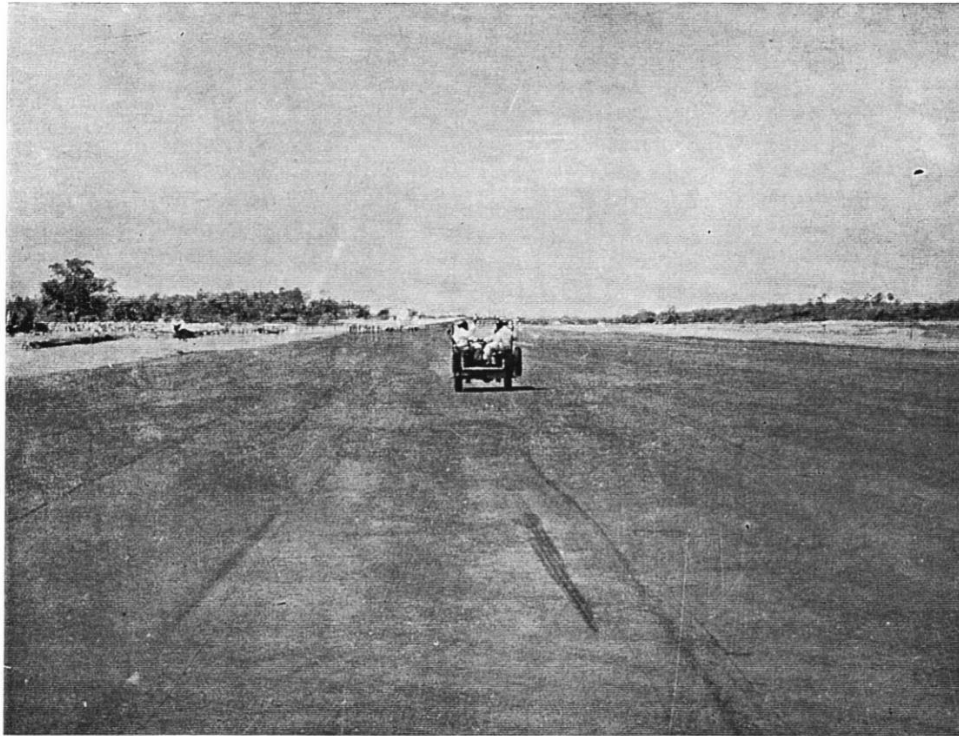


CS 404, in original RCyAF colour scheme, at SLAF Museum, Ratmalana
© www.oldjets.net



CS 406 in flight over Sri Lanka.
Credit: Roger Thiedeman collection, via Sri Lanka Air Force

This article, from the December 1958 issue of *CEYLON Today* magazine, was written by Maj. A.J. Hacker to mark the official opening on November 7, 1958 of the new Batticaloa airstrip, following its construction which Major Hacker had project-managed and overseen on secondment from the British Army Royal Engineers to the Ceylon Army. Ironically, Major Hacker's article was almost certainly published just before, if not soon after, his tragic death and those of the other five occupants of RCyAF Dove CS 403. (Roger Thiedeman collection via Mr. Victor Melder)



The Minister of Transport and Works inspecting the runway of the new airstrip by jeep

The Batticaloa Airstrip

Major A.J. HACKER, Royal Engineers

(Seconded for Service with the Army)

DURING the recent Emergency, the Government decided that an airstrip should be constructed at Batticaloa, with a view to opening up that area and including the town in the internal services of Air Ceylon.

It was appreciated that in the prevailing troubled circumstances the Army—through the Corps of Ceylon Engineers—had the best resources to carry out a task of this kind, if supported by Government Departments.

The mission given to Brigadier Anton Muttukumar, Commander of the Army, in the

middle of June, was to construct an airstrip 1,000 yds. long and 50 yds. wide by October 1, 1958 (about 100 working days). On June 19, 1958, I was present at a conference presided over by the Army Commander, and attended by the Chief of Staff, Royal Ceylon Air Force, Wing Commander R. Amarasekera, and the Director of Public Works, Mr. H. R. Premaratne.

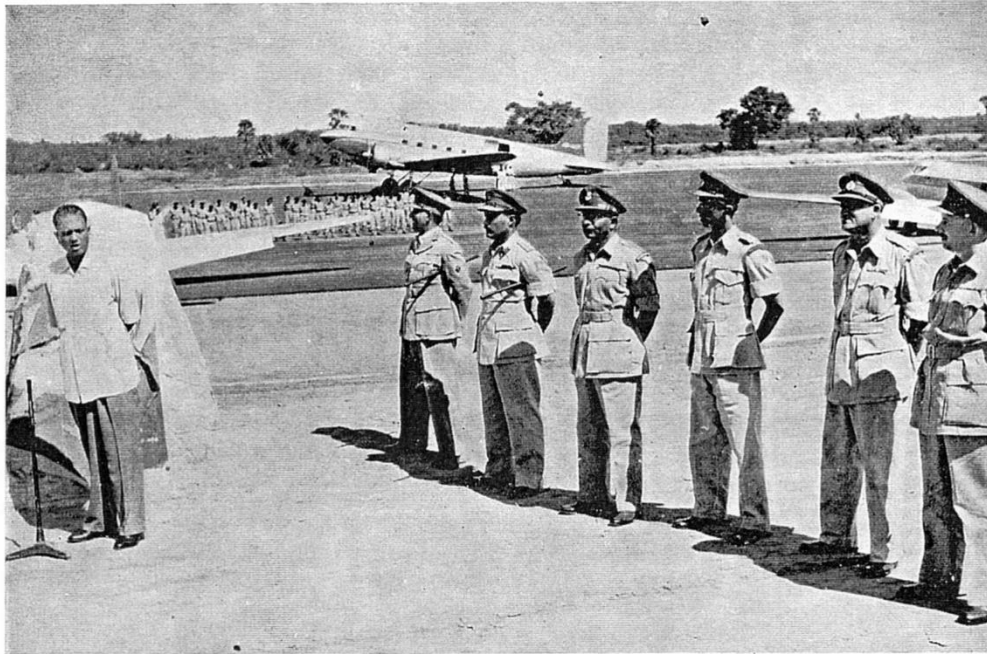
An outline plan was agreed upon and the following day, with Air Commodore G. Bladon, C. B. E., Commander of the Royal



◀ Soil stabilisation in progress. Gobble disc harrow mixing 'kabook', sand and water to form a base

▼ Mr. Maitripala Senanayake inspecting the commemorative pillar





The Minister speaking at the ceremony

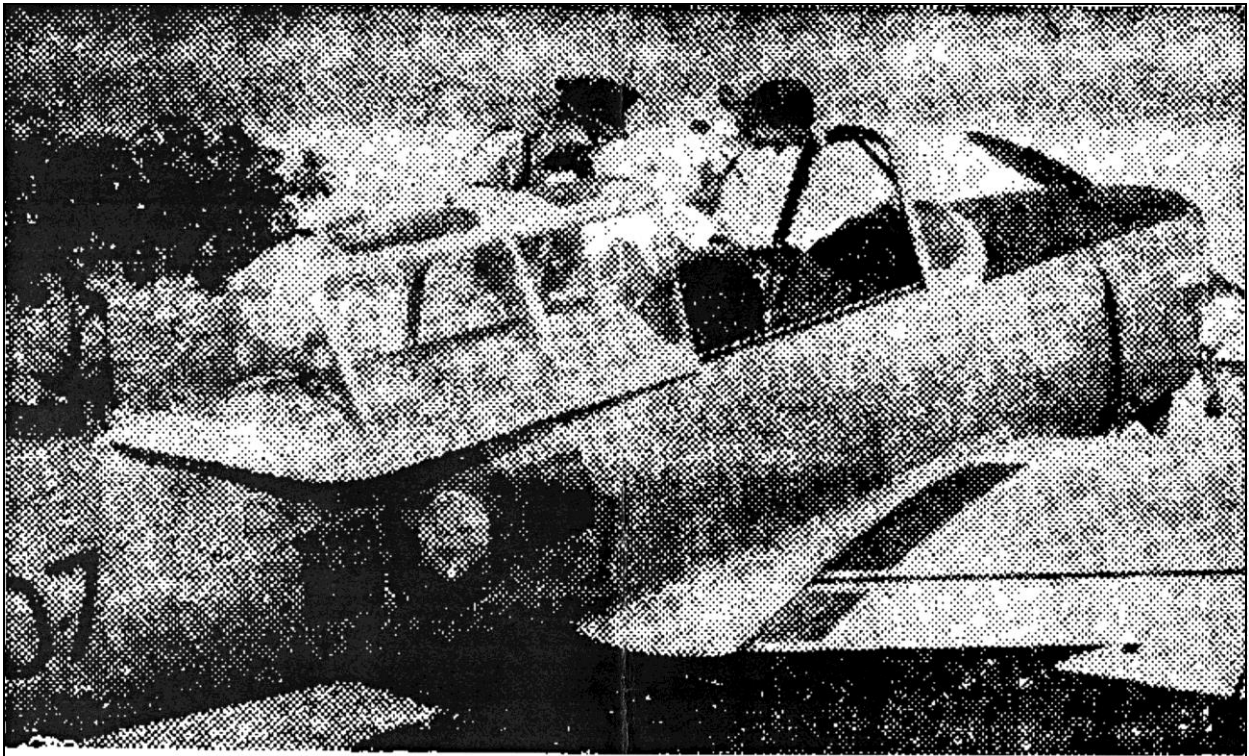
Ceylon Air Force, I flew to Batticaloa to study the site from the flying and engineering points of view. The plane flew over the site and then landed at Amparai for us to move by road to Batticaloa. The alignment of the airstrip was agreed on, and instructions were issued to Major C. Jonklaas, O. C. (Volunteer) Plant Sqn. C. E., to move with earthmoving machines supplied by the Gal Oya Development Board, Amparai, to the site and start work on June 25.

Soil samples were taken and we flew them back to the Public Works Research Laboratories at Ratmalana for analysis. The design of the runway was completed by July 9, and drawings issued to (Volunteer) Plant Sqn. C. E., who had now been reinforced by (Volunteer) Field Sqn. C. E. personnel from Colombo. These two squadrons were at that time commanded by Major H. Alwis, C. E., O. C. 2 (V) Fd and Plant Regt. C. E.

At Army Headquarters I was placed in charge of overall planning of the work and co-ordination of the Army units with Government Departments. I assessed the amount of equipment and operational crews required and arranged for them to move to Batticaloa from all over Ceylon. A huge Barber Greene road layer owned by the P. W. D. was towed to Batticaloa by an Army tractor, P. W. D. granulators were moved by a giant Army trailer, and an Irrigation Department generator supplied electricity for night work under arc lights installed by C. E. Works Services personnel. Other equipment came from Kalmunai, Trincomalee and Colombo North by road and rail.

First Aircraft

ON July 28, I landed at Batticaloa in the first light aeroplane to use the airstrip. The



The news of the death of Major A. John Hacker and five others in the R.Cy.A.F. plane crash was received with sorrow at Batticaloa. People in Batticaloa have particular reason to remember Major

Hacker because he played a prominent part in the construction of the air-strip. This picture was taken when Major Hacker (in uniform) tested the air-strip for the first time.—(Batticaloa cor).

This photo from the *Ceylon Daily News* of December 23, 1958 depicts Major Hacker with RCyAF Chipmunk CT 107, in which he carried out the first test-landing on the newly completed Batticaloa airstrip, as described by him in the boxed portions on the previous and following page of his *CEYLON Today* article reproduced here.

plane was piloted by Squadron Leader James Short, Royal Ceylon Air Force.

Heavy rain stopped work for ten days in August, but by working at night it was possible to land the first twin-engined Dove aircraft on August 28. The aircraft was piloted by Flying Officer G. Goonetilleke, and I accompanied him as passenger.

The (Volunteer) Plant Sqn. C. E., operating heavy equipment, battled through September and October against heavy rains, working long hours when weather permitted. It is a great credit to all ranks of the C. E. squadrons and the P. W. D. crews with whom they worked that in spite of all adversities progress was maintained.

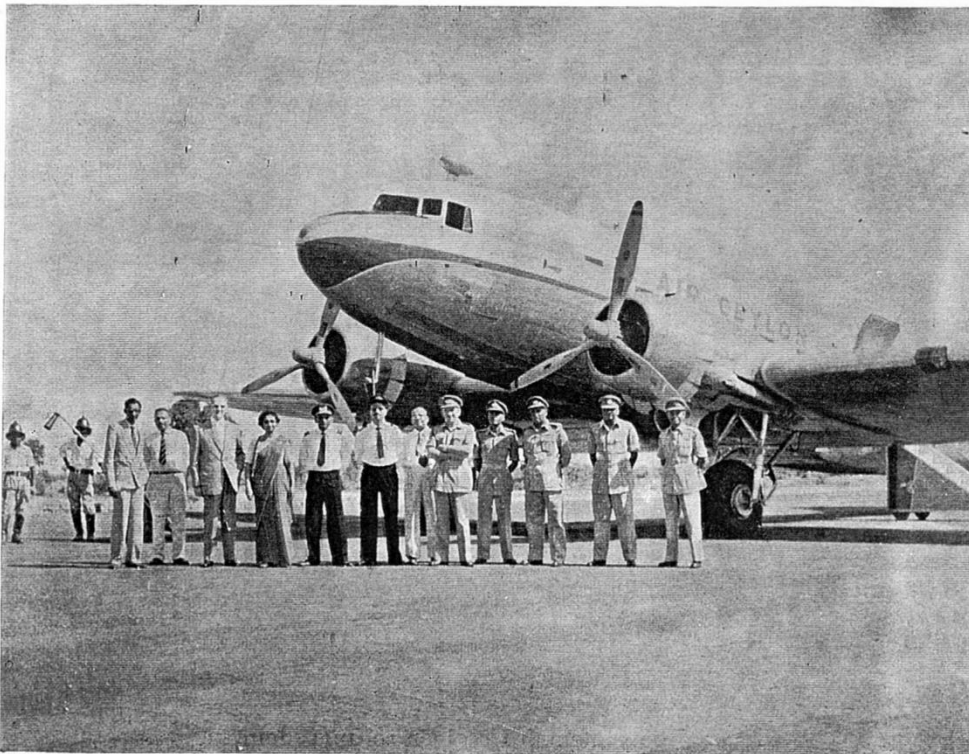
On November 4, I accompanied Captain George Ferdinand, Chief Pilot, Air Ceylon,

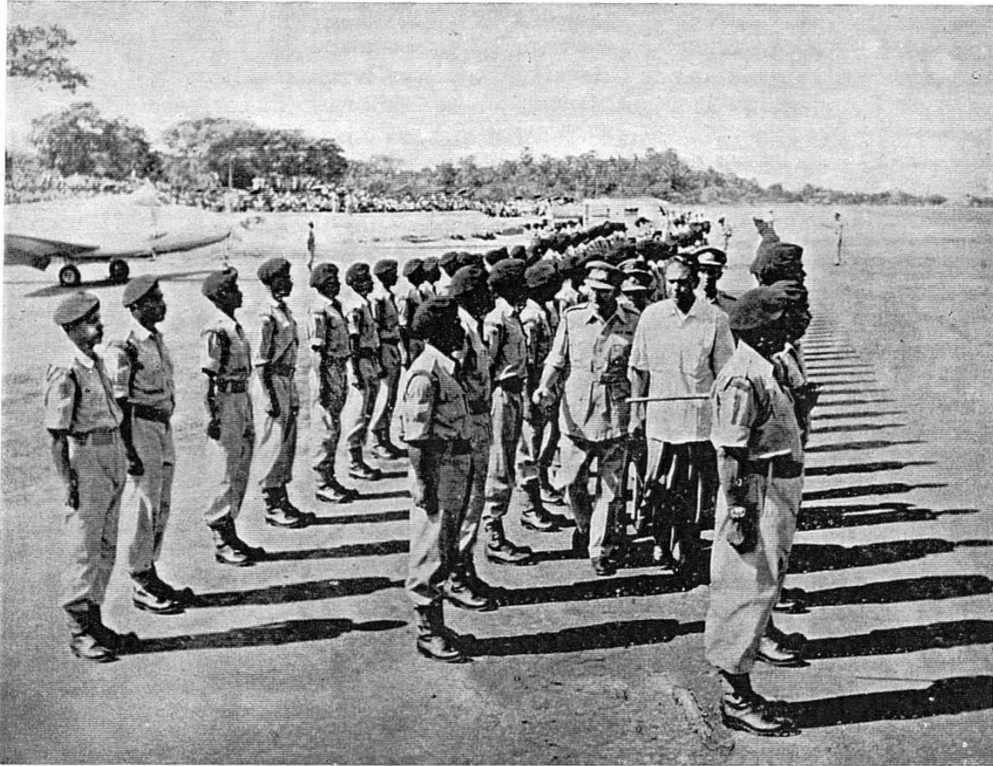
on a proving flight to Batticaloa to observe the reaction of the runway to the weight of the heaviest aircraft to land—a Dakota which normally carries 28 passengers and a crew of three. The proving flight was a success despite the fact that the aircraft hit a hawk in flight at a crucial stage of the landing procedure.

Shortly after, on November 7, the Minister of Transport and Works, the Hon. Maithripala Senanayake, accompanied by the Army Commander and Government Officials, attended a ceremony to mark the conclusion of the military work at Batticaloa. In his speech the Army Commander said :—

“When I undertook this job, I made it quite clear that it could not be done in the time stipulated unless I had the assistance of

The Air Ceylon Dakota in which the Minister of Transport and Works landed at Batticaloa on November 7





The Minister of Transport and Works, accompanied by Brigadier Anton Muttucumaru, Commander of the Army, inspecting a guard-of-honor on the airstrip

various Departments. It was clear from the outset that that assistance was forthcoming in abundant measure. The P. W. D., under the enthusiastic direction of Mr. Premaratne, helped not only to formulate the design of the airfield in the P. W. D. soils laboratory at Ratmalana but also produced much of the equipment and the crews, I should like to thank, in a special way, Mr. Sinnathamby, the Executive Engineer, whose energy and enthusiasm have been unfailingly placed at our disposal. The Gal Oya Development Board, with which we are so closely associated at Amparai, and the Irrigation Department let us have all the equipment we needed. The work on the site was backed by the workshop of the Gal Oya Board, the Government Factory, the Railway and the Survey Department. To all these Departments, I



Typical jungle in which the Batticaloa Airstrip was built. D8 Tractor, supplied by the Gal-Oya Board and operated by Volunteer Plant Squadron, Ceylon Engineers, felling trees

should like to express the gratitude of the Army for their encouragement and assistance given so ungrudgingly.



Overloader feeding Barber Green Road Laying Pre-mix Plough, supplied by P. W. D. and operated by P. W. D. crews and Army personnel

“I should also like to pay a tribute to the Royal Ceylon Air Force and Civil Aviation who were unsparing in providing aircraft for communication work and assistance in solving flying problems.

“On the military side, the main responsibility for construction fell on the Plant Squadron of the Volunteer Regiment of the Ceylon Engineers. They were backed by small elements from other Squadrons. All the military elements worked under the inspiring leadership of Major Jonklaas who saw to it that, no matter what the odds were and I can assure you there were several, my wishes were carried out. His was the greatest single contribution to this achievement. I was fortunate in having two other officers who played a significant part—Major Hacker, a R. E. officer seconded to the Army in Ceylon, who performed the difficult task of technical liaison between my Department, Colombo Departments and the local field organisation with credit, and Lt.-Col. Udugama who was in overall control of the entire effort.

“The fact that such a large undertaking was completed in such a short space of time

is a lasting tribute to the splendid teamwork and co-operation between the numerous individuals who executed the job. Technician and non-technician, civilian and soldier, senior and junior—all teamed up with the burning desire to get on with the job, after working 24 hours in the day to make up time lost through bad weather. At a time when this lovely little land of ours is being rent by strife and bitterness, I am proud to have been associated with a project in which Sinhalese, Tamil, Burgher and Muslim worked together towards a common goal.

“Their efforts will inevitably benefit the people of Batticaloa, and its environs. We leave behind this airstrip as a sample of our work and as a token of friendship. May the airstrip bring much benefit to the people of Batticaloa and this province.”

Minister's Reply

IN reply, the Minister said that the Government had decided to open that airstrip in order to provide the facilities for an internal air service connecting Batticaloa with the rest of the country. As soon as the radio connections and the necessary buildings were put up, Batticaloa would be included in the internal air service.

The great work done by people of various communities who built the airstrip would give us in this little country the example to get on with developing our country unitedly.

He added: “I have just returned after a trip abroad, and I have come back with certain ideas for the development of air travel in our country. I have found that Air Ceylon is popular in the world of aviation and has made a name abroad. I intend to extend within the country quicker modes of travel.

“I wish to pay special tribute to the Army for the wonderful work done; and for the wonderful manner in which they completed the assignment given them in record time.

(Continued on page 32)

THE BATTICALOA AIRSTRIP

(Continued from page 27)

I also wish to thank the officers of the P. W. D. who gave of their best efforts. The construction of the Batticaloa airstrip by the combined efforts of the Army and the civilian services will be precursors to future efforts which will be made to undertake other development projects, with the united efforts of the Army and the civilian services.

“This scheme will be tried out soon in regard to Anuradhapura airstrip and the opening of roads in the upcountry leading to areas of the Kandyan peasantry among others.

“The Brigadier of the Army has kindly pledged his whole-hearted co-operation in this venture which has given birth to the construction of the Batticaloa airstrip.”

The Minister, speaking next in Sinhalese and after that in Tamil, appealed to the

people to prove themselves sons of the same mother. He was speaking in Tamil as he had received his education in Jaffna and was no stranger to the Tamil community. Carrying all along the bitterness born of the recent disturbances would not help the country to progress and the times called for the united effort of all people to make Ceylon prosperous.

The Minister then unveiled a commemorative pillar which had been erected on the site to commemorate the achievement of constructing an airstrip in 98 working days—2 days under the target figure.

The last Army Engineer unit was withdrawn from the site on November 15, and the airstrip is now being maintained and developed by the Department of Civil Aviation.

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