



PRIME MINISTER

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
OPERATION IMMUNE "THANK YOU" CEREMONY
RICHMOND RAAF BASE - 15 DECEMBER 1989**

On behalf of the people of Australia, it is my pleasure today to thank all those pilots, aircrews and support staff who over the last three and a half months have taken part in Operation Immune.

Operation Immune has provided the nation with vital air services at a time when the domestic airline industry had been crippled by the shortsightedness and greed displayed by the leadership of the pilots' Federation.

The dimensions of your contribution to the nation during this damaging period can be simply measured:

You provided some 224,000 seats including, at the height of operations, 3071 seats on a single day;

You carried 175,000 passengers;

You were, for the first four weeks of Operation Immune, Australia's major domestic carrier, providing between 30 and 40 per cent of available seats;

You serviced seventeen locations around Australia and in particular maintained air links between Tasmania and the mainland;

You flew nearly 2 million nautical miles - that's to say, equal to one thousand trips across Australia, or about 5 times to the moon and back.

Behind these statistics of course lies something harder to measure - the intangible but all-important quality of the service you have provided.

And as you know from the tributes you received directly from passengers, your service has not just been good, it has been exceptional.

As Prime Minister, I have the regular pleasure of flying RAAF on my official travel around Australia and overseas. I've even flown in a Herc - most recently, to the South Pacific Forum in Kiribati. I've always known that RAAF flights are synonymous with reliability, good humour and service.

So it did not surprise me at all that when the RAAF was exposed to many more Australians, the public's response was overwhelmingly positive.

I do have some questions, however.

Is it true that passengers were told in pre-flight briefings to "sit down until we reach the terminal, or else you will be shot?" They apparently obeyed, anyway. And were passengers reassured when told that the only time to panic was when they saw "the men in green running down the aisle and jumping out of the rear of the aircraft"?

I want to pass on to you the contents of a letter written to me by Michael Field, the Premier of Tasmania, expressing the gratitude of the people of Tasmania for the vital help you provided.

He said:

My dear Prime Minister

Now that the Defence Forces are winding down their passenger air services to Tasmania, I wish to express the profound gratitude of this State for the vital help provided by our flying servicemen during a period when air travel to and from the State has presented many stresses.

The pilots, cabin crew and ground crew of the Defence Force aircraft have filled a gap which, quite frankly, could not have been closed without their presence.

The planes might be somewhat old and noisy and the on-board amenities fairly basic, but they have carried thousands of people from point to point in safety, with little fuss and in great humour. Everyone I have spoken to has been full of praise for the Defence Force effort.

The sudden switch to general passenger carrying must have come as a shock to many of the crew, pilots and stewards alike, but all responded in the positive manner we have come to expect from our armed services.

To you and to those of your Ministers responsible for the "air lift", and to all the Defence Force pilots, cabin crew and ground crew involved, I extend a hearty thank you from the Government and the people of Tasmania.

Yours very sincerely

Michael Field
PREMIER

This is an opinion that has been repeated over and over by the many people who have travelled on Defence Force aircraft.

In expressing that widespread gratitude today, I don't want to spoil the occasion with undue political partisanship.

But I cannot let pass in silence the amazing hypocrisy of the Opposition's spokesman on aviation one David Jull, in attempting to add his voice to the national expression of thanks to the defence forces.

After spending the last few months doing nothing but support the Pilots' Federation, including questioning the safety of RAAF flights - which led to a specific repudiation by Air Vice Marshal Radford - Mr Jull yesterday issued a press release vouching for your "professionalism and dedication".

If you think that's a breathtaking U-turn - you're right.

And let me take this opportunity to pass on Hazel's appreciation for your hard work. As she has told me on a number of occasions after her Defence Force flights, what you have been doing over the last couple of months has been the best possible publicity for Australia's defence forces.

Now, of course, as normal conditions return to the commercial aviation industry, the need for your services has dramatically declined. In the week ending 8 December, Air Force and Navy aircraft accounted for less than 4 per cent of available seats.

In other words, you've done your job, and you've done it well.

So to all those involved, in Squadrons 32, 33, 36 and 37, Maintenance Squadrons East Sale and 486 RAAF Richmond, and to the Royal Australian Navy HC 723 Squadron, let me express my thanks and the heartfelt thanks of a proud nation.
