



## Flying Wild

The US Air Force have a song that starts “Off we go in to the wild blue yonder.” However, in Arnhem Land there are times when it is not blue but it is definitely wild! Like many tropical regions, Arnhem Land has a defined rainy season and when it comes, it comes. The weather can go from dry to instant deluge and then back again all within the space of a few hours. Then at other times you get up with the rain, sleep with the rain on your roof, and then it is there waiting for you when you get up again! And don't think light rain either- this is the instant flood variety where the gutters are swamped!

Times like these are a real challenge to flying both from a logistical point of view and also of course for those who are actually braving the elements. For the MAF ground staff things can get hectic quite quickly. First of all there is the call from the base to tell you that though it may be fine & sunny where you are, where they are they can't see the end of the runway! That's always frustrating as the passenger waiting to fly is looking at a sunny sky and can't understand why you don't want to take off!

Then there are the increased phone calls as people become anxious about whether they are flying or indeed if they now want to fly at all! Some people do refuse to fly in the rain and others are quite serene about it all. Probably the most extreme was the dear soul recently who yelled out “I don't want to die!” the MAF pilot's reply was “Nor do !!”

Add to that the cancellations as the weather takes a hold, and then the re-scheduling as everything shuffles backwards an hour or more as the flights get delayed. It's all a bit like doing a jigsaw puzzle at times but very rewarding when it all comes together. In the meantime the weather radar becomes the most watched screen of all, closely followed by the flight tracker to see whether the plane has got through or is right now heading back where it came from!



And for the MAF pilot it is a testing time. The biggest danger aloft is the thunderstorm that wasn't on the radar! It can produce massive downdrafts, zero visibility and lightning so that the ride becomes more like an Extreme Sport event than a commercial charter! And even if the thunderstorm stays away he or she has to find a way around the rain clouds in order to get where they are going. It's not unknown for the plane not to get through and on occasions a night in a small community is the result, with the plane itself becoming a mobile bedroom. Rainy season flying is best done with a pillow and toothbrush tucked in the plane! On the other hand once the storm has passed you can find some of the smoothest and most pleasurable flying you can imagine and much cooler to boot.



## **Arnhem Land Communications**

On top of all that the pilot has to allow for TEMPOS. A TEMPO is a kind of weather alert which means that you are legally required to carry an extra hour's fuel because of conditions. This will affect the amount of weight you can carry and even whether a flight can take place or not. And it may well be that the weather over the destination has changed and so an alternative destination has to be thought of as well! All that takes even more fuel and some days, in theory, you may need to carry more than your tanks will hold! As one MAF pilot put it "probably a good sign you shouldn't be flying that day!"



And yet fly they do, and with impressive regularity. In terms of medical, education and social support, it is the planes of organisations such as MAF that keep Arnhem Land going. Long after the roads become impassable, the planes are still flying and the impossible is only taking a little bit longer!

**The rainy season – there's nothing quite like it!**

