



ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE

Podcast Transcript

In Conversation – MH-370

Host: FLTLT Dean Squire

Guests: AIRCDRE Andrew Heap, FLTLT Russell Adams and SQNLDR Jessica Aldred

FLTLT Dean Squire

Welcome to in conversation from the Royal Australian Air Force on March the eighth, 2014, a Boeing 777 with 239 people on board departed Kuala Lumpur, headed for Beijing. It never arrived. Following final communication with the aircraft, 38 minutes into its flight, it disappeared from air traffic controller's radar having changed course. In the coming days, satellite analysis suggested Malaysian flight MH 370 was likely to have come down somewhere in the southern Indian Ocean off the coast of Western Australia.

FLTLT Dean Squire

What was to become one of the world's largest maritime search operations started with Air Force EP three Sea Orions under the guidance of the Australian Maritime Safety Authority. Whilst a multinational group gathered at RW RAF Base Pearce outside Perth to help with the search. In this episode we'll hear from the Air Force pilot flying 300 feet above the ocean, looking for clues.

FLTLT Dean Squire

A public affairs officer just three days into her Air Force career with the world's media camped on her doorstep. But first, Air Commodore Andrew Craig keep the commander for the multinational task group with a very unique insight into the search for MH 370.

AIRCDRE Andrew Heap

What we were searching for initially was not where the airliner went in to the water. We were actually looking for where the remains of the aircraft, possibly any survivors were floating to. And we're now playing with by the time I got there, almost two weeks' time late on when the aircraft went in the water.

FLTLT Dean Squire

Talk through, if you would, that that kind of search area. Those figures are mind blowing on. They really the sort of scale of.

AIRCDRE Andrew Heap

Things if you understand that the distances and the challenges there. Yes. So I suppose the best analogy I could make is that if you understand how big Australia is and people don't quite get that either sometimes. But if you were flying all these missions out of, let's say Richmond or East Sail, the RAF bases, Richmond or East Sail, then what we are doing is doing a visual search of an area the size of Western Australia, our largest state.

AIRCDRE Andrew Heap

The reality was what we're looking for but is something the size of a car that it's mixed in with. It's a white car mixed in with white whitecaps and it's probably only a car door, not so much the car that we're going to be looking for and that area is the size of Western Australia.

FLTLT Dean Squire

How confident were you if there were things to be found that you could?

AIRCDRE Andrew Heap

I was relatively confident if we got in and on top and close and the debris itself was large enough that we'd be able to call it. But on some of the days, for people that understand maritime flying and maritime searchers, as soon as the wind gets above 15, 20 knots, you generate significant whitecaps and that's pretty much 50% of the time out in the Indian Ocean.

AIRCDRE Andrew Heap

In certain areas there was there was some very still areas where there wasn't any white caps, where we have a much higher chance of seeing something if we fly right close to it. But then there's there was other times where there was, you know, significant thunderstorms in the area. And on the day in those search areas, if the debris was underneath those thunderstorms, then we obviously didn't fly under it because we wouldn't have been out to see anything anyway.

AIRCDRE Andrew Heap

That's sort of the danger of flying under a thunderstorm at low level.

FLTLT Dean Squire

So what did the international community, the international air forces bring to the search that maybe helped and assisted?

AIRCDRE Andrew Heap

They brought an ability in daylight hours to conduct a concentrated search of the areas that James had wanted to look at, a search of the surface, that looking for debris of any description or any other sign of MH 370 without their contribution. At best, we would have probably only had up to about five Australian P-3s, which would have not covered the same area.

AIRCDRE Andrew Heap

We would have only covered sort of a third of Western Australia, not the remaining two thirds.

FLTLT Dean Squire

Can I touch on the expectation? Not only from yourself and colleagues of trying to find debris, but also external expectation of the public, the press, VIP is the gaze was really on you all of that time.

AIRCDRE Andrew Heap

Yes, there was a significant amount of I suppose, well, this massive strategic interest, obviously, because of all the nations involved. But I think the reality was we were all either trying to find the people for the family and friends, the missing people, the missing passengers and crew of MH three, 74, the family and friends of those people were also very appreciative and understood that the media, while they were pretty aggressive, they were also really there's tremendous interest in this as we just lost an airline to an international.

AIRCDRE Andrew Heap

And that doesn't happen very often. And it had not been found. And it was there's lots of questions to be asked about that. So there was there was a lot of strategic imperatives, including the one about, you know, the safety of international aviation, really, and that type of aircraft, the 777, which is a very safe aircraft with a great safety record, know how does how all that played out?

FLTLT Dean Squire

Were you surprised at that level of interest? The international level of interest?

AIRCDRE Andrew Heap

Not really. But once you actually in the pack of media is, I don't think too many people, even at the prime ministerial level. As I got to talk to a number of prime ministers in the space and seen senior people as well that were interviewed rarely, if ever, had they seen the same sort of, I suppose I'll call it a media pack.

AIRCDRE Andrew Heap

That level of international interest, whenever there were the especially the first three weeks when there were early media interviews conducted both with the senior VIP that came through, that the acting Prime Minister or the Prime Minister or other senior officers or me or it moved over into syringes. Houston, as the head of the Joint Agency Coordination Centre after a while.

AIRCDRE Andrew Heap

But there was tremendous interest and we understood that that was all part of of what we're doing is this had a tremendous international interest for a whole bunch of different reasons.

FLTLT Dean Squire

You took the view of being inclusive with international media, of domestic media, and you drew them in. And that was a deliberate act.

AIRCDRE Andrew Heap

It was deliberate. It was deliberate to treat the media as an opportunity, not a threat. And in this case, what we did was a number of different tranches. The first one was to be open as best we could. But the last thing we wanted to do is also, I suppose, for want of a better term, give false hope to those family and friends of those people at all.

AIRCDRE Andrew Heap

But be very honest, absolutely honest at all stages for what we saw. We found what we were doing.

FLTLT Dean Squire

Every sortie you must have felt you're going to come back with something positive. And then there wasn't, but there had to be day to day three.

AIRCDRE Andrew Heap

And so there was always a tremendous hope and optimism that we would get lucky, that we would be able to find the needle in the haystack because we had a very good team from across all those nations. The best, again, that the Pacific could certainly produce with some of the best aircraft. When the conditions were good, we had a we had a red hot chance of finding that debris if we got in the right place at the right time and everything was there.

AIRCDRE Andrew Heap

But it's like it's very it was all of this so many different factors in there that that my that that have led us to not being out to find one of those pieces of debris.

FLTLT Dean Squire

Can I just touch on the expectation politically? Almost everybody of any significance visited your doorstep at some point?

AIRCDRE Andrew Heap

Yes, there were a lot of visits. And again, opportunity, not threat. This was a great opportunity to directly brief people in all the way to the prime minister of Australia, the prime minister of Malaysia and other dignitaries from different nations. The chief of the Malaysian air force also was there as well, but it was a great opportunity for them to come to be briefed by us in the heart of the search as to what we're doing.

AIRCDRE Andrew Heap

From my perspective, the great job we were doing, but also the challenges that we were facing, and then to give them an appreciation so that I can go back and talk to their people and say, Hey, we're doing, they're doing we are collectively doing the best we can do as far as trying to find MH 374, those family and the friends of the people on the aircraft, were.

FLTLT Dean Squire

They pleased with the effort the search was going on?

AIRCDRE Andrew Heap

I think they all were. They saw their own nations contribution being appropriately utilized and appreciated. And also, we were all dedicated to the one time there.

FLTLT Dean Squire

Was a very clear window for potential in the sense of a transponder that we had a battery life of 40 days.

AIRCDRE Andrew Heap

Yes. So the type of, I suppose, transducer it's called, which is on the flight data recorder, this is two black boxes, a flight data recorder and a cockpit voice recorder in most days on us and some military aircraft. So there were two things we were searching for. They had a transducer that transmitted at 37 and a half kilohertz, a signal underwater when it got wet.

So these both these boxes would have been transmitting that signal. But the signal, you know, the difficulty was the depth of the Indian Ocean generally deeper than 4000 meters. The other issue was that that signal is not is not readily received able in with normal acoustics in Asia. So we utilized some kit that we got and we managed to then demonstrate that we could find and find and recall that that's transducer signal.

And from there we then because we only had a limited amount of kit, so we put one of them on each of the five Australian aircraft and we went out and conducted a different sort of search, which was a search realistically for the around the impact point, the predicted impact point as opposed to the debris field which was moving significantly at a rate depending on the wind and the currents in that space.

We dropped something like 2000 sonobuoys over a period of a number of days inside that 30-day window to search for the site, to search for the transducers. And unfortunately, we didn't we didn't find anything. Some of that might be because of the extreme depth.

FLTLT Dean Squire

One of the most important things as a commander going into any task is not so much what you do when you arrive, but plan your exit. How difficult was it to withdraw from the search?

AIRCDRE Andrew Heap

The ending of the search was something that was really decided at with the heads of government. We were happy to keep going for as long as we believed there could be an outcome. But it was it was moving into the period where we were now about nine weeks down track, and the debris field would have moved significantly.

The significant challenges of trying to find the transducer, which is probably almost now ran out of its battery. So the battery was assessed as being 30 days might have gone to about 40 or a little bit more if the battery was relatively new. But past 40 days, you really had minimal chance of getting a signal at all.

In other words, the transducer would have stopped working. The heartening piece was that the search wasn't really ceased, just that the FTA task group part of the search was called off at that point, which I think was early May, late April. The surface search continued for a little bit longer than there were various other ventures that that occurred to search the seabed, which I think sort of go on to this day to a certain extent, with different ventures.

And hopefully one day the deal on a will be found.

FLTLT Dean Squire

Do you think it will?

AIRCDRE Andrew Heap

I would. I hope it would. I think I think it will at some stage in the future. I think it will.

FLTLT Dean Squire

As a leader, you've taken part in an international event, but something so significant that it actually is part of the fabric of history. Do you feel your role in that is looking back ten years, did you realize you were taking part in something so significant?

AIRCDRE Andrew Heap

Oh, I think you do. You realize that you're in something big when there's 100 journalists from all over the world and that the prime minister keeps turning up, along with many other senior dignitaries, including, you know, the prime minister, Malaysia. You look at the tremendous concerns, the tremendous resources that were thrown at this search, which was the longest range maritime search from what I understand, in sort of human history.

Then then you get a sort of an idea of the gravity of what we were doing. But by the same token, it's while it was disappointing not to have found anything that was confirmed as coming from the airliner at all, I'm still very convinced for all the people that participated in the search and also for the family and friends of the people that are on that airline, on both the crew and the passengers, that we did the best we could as a bunch of professionals from around our region, we put away historical issues and challenges.

It was the first time, I think, a Chinese military aircraft had come to Australia, let alone participated in an operation. And so it's one of those things where it it really demonstrated and gave me some heart as to what humans can do when we all get together in the one noble and sort of defined cause.

FLTLT Dean Squire

That was Air Commodore Andrew Craig Eve, commander of the multinational group at our Air. Piers, coming up, just what it's like to deal with the world's press in 125 media requests every day for news on the missing flight. But first, my colleague Rob Hodgson caught up with Flight Lieutenant Russell Adams. He flies fast jets these days. But in 2014, he was a couple of months into his captaincy of a Royal Australian Air Force EP three Sea Orion, the aircraft of choice for search and Rescue Operations and for maritime surveillance.

FLTLT Russell Adams

The projected path had taken it down off the coast of Western Australia and that was the point where we started to think could this be us? And then I got a call from my flight commander saying, Hey, you guys are off the Pearce tomorrow. You're leaving at midday. So we had, you know, that 18 hours' notice to move and yeah, I went from kind of watching it glued on TV to then, you know, being a part of it. So it was a pretty surreal moment in time.

Rob Hodgson

Just tell us about the aircraft, what it can do, you know, its capabilities and you know what it's designed for?

FLTLT Russell Adams

This aircraft was designed in the fifties that the sheer engineering and mechanical engineering that goes into making that aircraft is completely was never surpassed before. The idea of computers, microchips, you've got four engines on it and multiple hydraulic systems, flight control systems, what it was designed for in the fifties was to mount maritime patrol.

What made it amazing for that was its massive fuel capability. It could carry £60,000, so about 12 hours of fuel, roughly. And you've got an amazing camera on it. You've also got a really big crew, which is what was what made it such a versatile platform.

Rob Hodgson

You've flown out to RAAF base Piers out in why they believe they've got a search area to target for the missing aircraft.

Just tell us about the conditions out that way when you head west obviously to Fremantle, Doctor, you know about that when you're in Perth, but when you head into the Roaring Forties and Furious fifties, like they get the conditions in the air and fly in the Orion. Just what was that like?

FLTLT Russell Adams

Unfortunately, I guess for the search in the time between where they think it went down to the time we got there, there'd been a big low pressure system come through.

And what that means is we were the first search area we had. It was about 1200 miles southwest of Perth. So that's about a four-hour flight to get there in and around. We get down there and it is low cloud. So we're down, you know, maybe three or 400 meters above the water and we are just below cloud from memory.

And the swell was it wasn't, you know, it was significant. It was enough that if there'd been debris there, it would have been quite hard to see. We had a Navy ship at the time. It was one of the fleet support vessels that was tracking on south and they were definitely restricted in terms of the sea state down there. So we got big waves kind of I think from memory, kind of 3 to 4 meters in in swell height and then low cloud and then winds at the surface, making it quite choppy. So we got down there, get below the cloud and then you don't find anything on the radar. So then we started basically a visual search and that's flying the aircraft at 300 feet, so about 100 meters above the water.

And you're just flying like a GPS guided pattern, basically up and down with intermediate legs that were no more than potentially a mile, a mile or so apart. And you're just doing a big zigzag pattern for until you ran out of fuel. We only had about 90 minutes to 2 hours of fuel to search down there be a long way from home in not great weather conditions the first day specifically.

Rob Hodgson

And so that would be all eyes on the water at that point. Then when you visually searching for it you have people need windows that you can just tell us how you should do that.

FLTLT Russell Adams

It's something which I think people you know about with all the incredible systems like, you know, amazing radar, you've got electronic detection systems on the aircraft.

But if you were out there looking for like survivors in the water or boats and, you know, life rafts that aren't, you know, significant on radar, the primary sense that you have is the eyeball at the time. So on the Orion had a really big flight deck. You'd have two pilots and a flood engineer, but you would also have seating areas and observation windows with two other people, your five people up in the nose.

You then just after that behind that you'd have the tactical coordinator and the navigator, and they had big bubble window so they could look out the side and see really. Well, coming back from that, you also had an over wing window which you could still see out of, but the wing obstructed it. But then towards the back of the aircraft, you had two more observation stations there, so at any time you'd have six or seven sets of eyes out looking sideways where you're flying, you know, relatively low, pretty slow to try and, you know, visually save it. You have to take shifts in watching. You know, it's kind of especially in a bit of cloud and bad weather when you're out there looking at the water and it's just this massive grey expanse of ocean and you're trying to spot any bit of any sign of debris, your life raft or anything.

It's quite draining. So I would, as a captain and with the tactical coordinator, you try and make sure you could rotate the people through the observation windows as much as possible, specifically the aft left and right or port and starboard side observation windows where you'd be making sure that the people there were changing at like at a maximum of every half hour or so.

Rob Hodgson

Our former Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, described it as close to nowhere as you can get that region down there was that did you see anything down there at all? Any fishing trawlers or was there any sort of boating activity or was it just absolutely, you know, like a, you know, surface of the moon?

FLTLT Russell Adams

Yeah. In in the eight flights that I did down there, which totalled 70 hours flying.

So about would have been all out, maybe 30 to 35 hours. I was out the window. We saw a fishing net once. Right. That was that was what we saw down there. So it's a big ocean. The only ships that were in the area where the Navy ships that were coming down to help out and there was no other there's no diver airfields.

If anything goes wrong in your aircraft, you would be home the thousands of miles back. So from a French aviation perspective, there's literally no other even today, there's no other aircraft in the world that I would want to be on in that part of the world. We've got four engines with all that redundancy if anything goes wrong. You know, a lot of fair the Orion be able to make it back where it started with a lot of fuel,

Rob Hodgson

I guess you and your crew went into it with perfect situation and you would have found something. But I guess as the days progressed, it was becoming probably slightly more clear that this really is a needle in a haystack and we might be coming back empty handed at the end of our job here. How did that feel?

FLTLT Russell Adams

It's a slow realisation over a course of days that what outcome you think you were going to achieve, you shifting the goalposts on that every couple of days. So, for example, the aircraft was white, limited to approximately 70 tonnes. And of that, roughly half of that was fuel, about 40% that weight was fuel.

What we were carrying at the start was two life raft kits, which had the capacity to hold approximately 40, 40 or so people. We on the first flights were taking life rafts because we genuinely thought there is a reasonable chance that if this aircraft is gone down here and people have survived, whichever way that has gone into the water, we are going to be able to either drop extra life rafts, extra supplies and what that meant was we couldn't carry as much fuel. So we compromised our fuel load for those first few missions to take these life rafts to stay below the maximum weight of the aircraft.

We thought we were going to find survivors when that kind of hope faded. And coming out of the second week, the decision to stop carrying life rafts and take a bit of extra fuel, we thought we were looking for debris and we still thought we're going to do it based on the updates we were getting every day. We went from hoping we could save lives to then hoping that we could find some closure. And then over time you're not really able to do either of those. So it comes down to a private thing of going at least I can look anyone in the eye where there's a family member or any of the people that were tossing us going like crew, Crew 310 Squadron we gave 110% with what we were asked to do. And I'll put my hand, my heart and say, the areas you ask us to look, there's nothing there, which is all we could really contribute at that time.

Rob Hodgson

It was a sensational sort of news event, World II y, you know, front page around the world suddenly becoming yourself and your crew, part of this enormous story which has got worldwide media interest. How did that sit with you?

FLTLT Russell Adams

We were the first aircraft to take off that day, took off at 6 a.m., came back 10 hours later. And as we're landing and taxiing in on the flight line, I look at and I can see hundreds of media, dozens of cameras, and they're watching my aircraft taxiing. But my squadron XO walked straight up and he says, Ross, we need you to, you know, tell the media what you found Australia saying.

So we didn't find anything. We went out there. We did what we've been doing the last few days. You guys, I sent you to give a statement to the media. You're not going to answer any questions. You are. You just need to tell them what you've been doing. I think what you lose sight of is what was mutually my day job was of intense interest to the world, and that was what my crew, the entire crew was doing and the organization was presenting was a capability that was giving people some sense of hope and what that you know, you look back and I think I basically told them what the weather was doing and the fact that we were genuinely hopeful that we would find something tomorrow because we were and of course, the headline is Air Force Crews hopes of finding MH-370.

Rob Hodgson

How often does it cross your mind like you think back of things you've done in your life how often does this bob up in you know, in your ocean of your thoughts?

FLTLT Russell Adams

It would be to this point the greatest moment, like single point in my career that I wish things had had a different outcome. Ideally, we if we could have found survivors like that, would have just been, I think, one of the most ultimate survival search and rescue stories in the history of aviation, and unfortunately, we weren't able to do that, but if we'd been able to find debris at the time, I, I honestly would I think about that, you know, a couple of times a year about things that I've done in my aviation career and if we'd been able to find it or be part of that, that group that found it, I just think some sense of closure to the families in the world would be we would have been, you know, unbelievably humbling to be able to be a part of that.

FLTLT Dean Squire

Lieutenant Russel Adams speaking with Rob Hudson. So we now know how the Air Force search was planned, what it was like at sea, looking for clues to tell us where the missing flight and the people on board had ended up. But let's take a look at the world's media camped at our Earth base. Piers. Squadron Leader Jess Aldridge has a decade's experience under her belt, but remembers very well taking a call as a new public affairs officer to deal with a global news event.

SQNLDR Jessica Aldred

Her breathing in really deeply and thinking, what have I got myself into? I've spent three days in uniform at an air show, and now I'm going to this massive thing where a plane is missing and a lot of people are on it.

FLTLT Dean Squire

And we are aware of how big that story was.

SQNLDR Jessica Aldred

I don't think I was aware of how big that story really was and the scope and the scale of it and how we would never see something that really that big again because it was so fresh. I thought, right, this is the excitement that I joined the Air Force for. Like, this is what it's going to be. I'll go and like give this a shot.

SQNLDR Jessica Aldred

But, you know, surely there's other people going and I can learn from them and it will be great. So no, I think I was pretty clueless on that six-hour flight to Perth.

FLTLT Dean Squire

Six has passed pretty quickly. Then boots on the ground. What did you see?

SQNLDR Jessica Aldred

Boots on the ground? Heels on the ground. Because I didn't have any boots yet. Because I was so fresh. We drove up to RAF Base Pierce. There was media all outside, all along the roads. There was media moving into to the base. I have never seen so many link tracks, so many flexes, so many, you know, microphones and just people just trying to find out what was going on at the base.

SQNLDR Jessica Aldred

It was gobsmacking to me.

FLTLT Dean Squire

And the interesting thing, of course, is the base became this epicentre of media activity. And yet the real story was two and a half thousand kilometres west into the sea.

SQNLDR Jessica Aldred

Yeah, it was. But we with a gateway to that at RAF base, Piers, we were the way that they could find out. That's where the aircraft were coming back in and I could find out what was happening out there. It's just this huge appetite to know if we'd found them, if we'd found debris. It was just phenomenal to see how many people wanted to know, like how many people in the world wanted to know where this aircraft was.

FLTLT Dean Squire

So what kind of organisations were they camped outside?

SQNLDR Jessica Aldred

Oh, everything. So, you know, we had everything from our own journalists here, all of the commercial networks and print and radio and then some that I hadn't seen before. A lot from South East Asia, obviously, because of the Malaysian Airlines connection, I think that brought a lot of them down. But then we had ones like the BBC and things from over in the UK.

You are really doing in this little backwater in the back of Perth trying to find out about an aircraft that's crashed somewhere out there off Australia, which we thought at the time. It's a long way to come for a news story.

FLTLT Dean Squire

So interestingly and it doesn't happen a lot, big events like that for the press, the Air Force took the view that it would better have them inside the fence than outside, which was a really good, cool thing to do. Did that help with sending messages, setting things up, making approaches to the media?

SQNLDR Jessica Aldred

Absolutely. So the first thing was very much around safety, right? Like it was really unsafe for them to be out there. And every time we had cars going and out, it was also about just making sure that they weren't trying to rush at the gate and things to get interviews from RAF members going in and out. But once we had them in there, we set up a system with a whiteboard because you know, there's a lot of bandwidth being used by their equipment of, you know, background information on aircraft, on regular briefings, on when we would be doing flight line tours.

So they would come and get vision of take-offs and landings where we would have air interviews with the aircrew. So we really could shape that with them so that they we manage their expectations of what we could provide them and to ensure that their reporting was also accurate with that the aircraft fact sheet and things like that.

FLTLT Dean Squire

And you've also got this added complication that it was a broad bunch of media. So not just television, radio, print socials, the list goes on.

SQNLDR Jessica Aldred

Yeah, it really was. And trying to make sure that we could feed them in a relevant way. The content that they needed was really challenging and sometimes we were quite restricted in what we could do that day because we only had one wave of flights departing and they weren't returning until, you know, midnight or 11 p.m. at night, which isn't great for TV news to kind of capture an aircraft landing in the dark.

It doesn't tell the story. So that provided some challenges to us in how do we support them. We did do what we call a rack and stack, but we got their media inquiries in and I think by my second day that rack and stack of media inquiries asking for specific actions from us was that about 125 different requests of interviews or imagery or flights as well.

So that was quite complex to deal with to meet the needs of theirs and of the 24-hour news cycle.

FLTLT Dean Squire

The other thing you had that was challenging is there was no good news coming out of this. If you were successful as an Air Force in the search, there was no good news.

SQNLDR Jessica Aldred

Yeah, that was the really complicated part or the hard part of it, I think is trying to tell the air forces and the international partners story in a way that was still really respectful of the fact that 239 people were lost out there, a lost not missing, and they were unlikely to come back, which meant 239 families were viewing this media output.

So making sure that our coverage was respectful of the fact that we would going to be talking about loss at some point.

FLTLT Dean Squire

The epicentre of the news, but also the epicentre. Almost every VIP in this country, visiting dignitaries, Malaysians, Chinese. How did you cope with that?

SQNLDR Jessica Aldred

The visits were big, but I saw the visits as an opportunity to one kind of ease, the burden, a little bit on us, because we didn't really have an answer of have we found it yet for the media? So it gave the media something to cover. And to our really appreciated that it brought a lot of retained interest in the search from a number of governments that was important to keep the search going.

And I think we were hopeful still collectively that we'd find the aircraft. So visits of visits and they're busy, but it provided the media something that day when we felt we couldn't always give them something.

FLTLT Dean Squire

So you've done the first few days, you've had your VIP as you've had your initial hits, the aircraft come and go. Britain itself satisfies a global audience for a little bit. They then wanted more and more and more. The next thing that sort of happened is you were embedding journalists into flights.

SQNLDR Jessica Aldred

We flew with the journalist for media flights. We had a plan in place if we saw debris in the water that we potentially identified as the missing aircraft. But it mostly relied on us building a relationship with those outlets that were on board the aircraft with us and trying to build that trust that they would give us some time before they release that.

Because at the end of it all, every media outlet there wanted the exclusive. They wanted that story, and it was complex for us to manage that. It never came about. We didn't find the aircraft, but I kind of was never sure how we were actually going to make that work of Please don't go and break the biggest news story in the world.

We just need a little bit of calm before you do.

FLTLT Dean Squire

And duty of care to those families who've lost, you know, their loved ones.

SQNLDR Jessica Aldred

Absolutely. And part of it is a duty of care because whilst we might perceive that we'd seen debris of the aircraft, we wouldn't be able to confirm it until it had been properly identified. So, you know, if we saw something, we would come in low. The weather was pretty bad. So we'd come in at like 300 feet above sea state, six seas and look really closely at it, take imagery of it.

And if we thought it was something, we would then have to provide that into the ship, the Navy ships out there, and they would go and collect that debris and it would be assessed. So it was almost trying to demonstrate to them that if you reported something that was just a hunch, maybe that wouldn't be credible reporting and could make the families feel the loss more profoundly.

SQNLDR Jessica Aldred

If it turned out to not be true.

FLTLT Dean Squire

They then want to know Why have you not found this thing? Isn't it just the easiest thing in the world not really understanding the scale of the search, the conditions out there? Did you change a few hearts and minds when they'd sort of spent time in you, in your shoes?

QNLDR Jessica Aldred

Yeah, absolutely. I think they saw that we were searching for the absolute tiniest needle in the world's biggest haystack when they got out there and that the conditions were really rough, that flying your square like the air crew were doing was quite they been quite thorough in their search. And then to think of that multiplied out with all of the assets, I think that gave them really good perspective and it was a really good thing for us to be able to do for them to say that in saying that we only had a three-person team.

So every time we had a media flight, we left two people back up base to deal with 120 of the world's media, while one person had to media on board an aircraft. So it was big for us to be able to manage that, but it was important for the media to see it and gave them extra vision as well to kind of keep the story going.

FLTLT Dean Squire

Ultimately, the real focus of the potential search was about finding the the black box and the beacons, which had a 30-day shelf life in their batteries. So 40 days as a rough guide. And that was, I think, the driving force to scale back and decide that was enough. How difficult is it to stop that operation when it's so intense?

SQNLDR Jessica Aldred

That was the hardest day of my career. Walking away. We just felt sorry for that. We worked so hard and we felt like as an Air Force and as a combined force, you know, when we work hard, when we have a strategy, when we plan, we can deliver. That's what do as a military force. And we couldn't.

FLTLT Dean Squire

It's easy to see the impact that it's had on you and probably other people. You can't take part in global events without taking some of that home with you. I wonder now they're looking ten years back that are you still hopeful that there may be some news sometime?

SQNLDR Jessica Aldred

Yeah, absolutely. I follow every news story that things they've found delayed. Every news story.

FLTLT Dean Squire

Thanks to Squadron Leader Jess Aldridge ending our look at the Royal Australian Air Force operation searching for a missing Malaysian airline MH 370. Thanks to our other guests, Air Commodore Andrew Craig Heap, commander of the Multinational Task Group and Air Force pilot, Flight Lieutenant Russell Adams. Thank you for listening and I hope you'll join us again for another episode of, In Conversation from the Royal Australian Air Force.