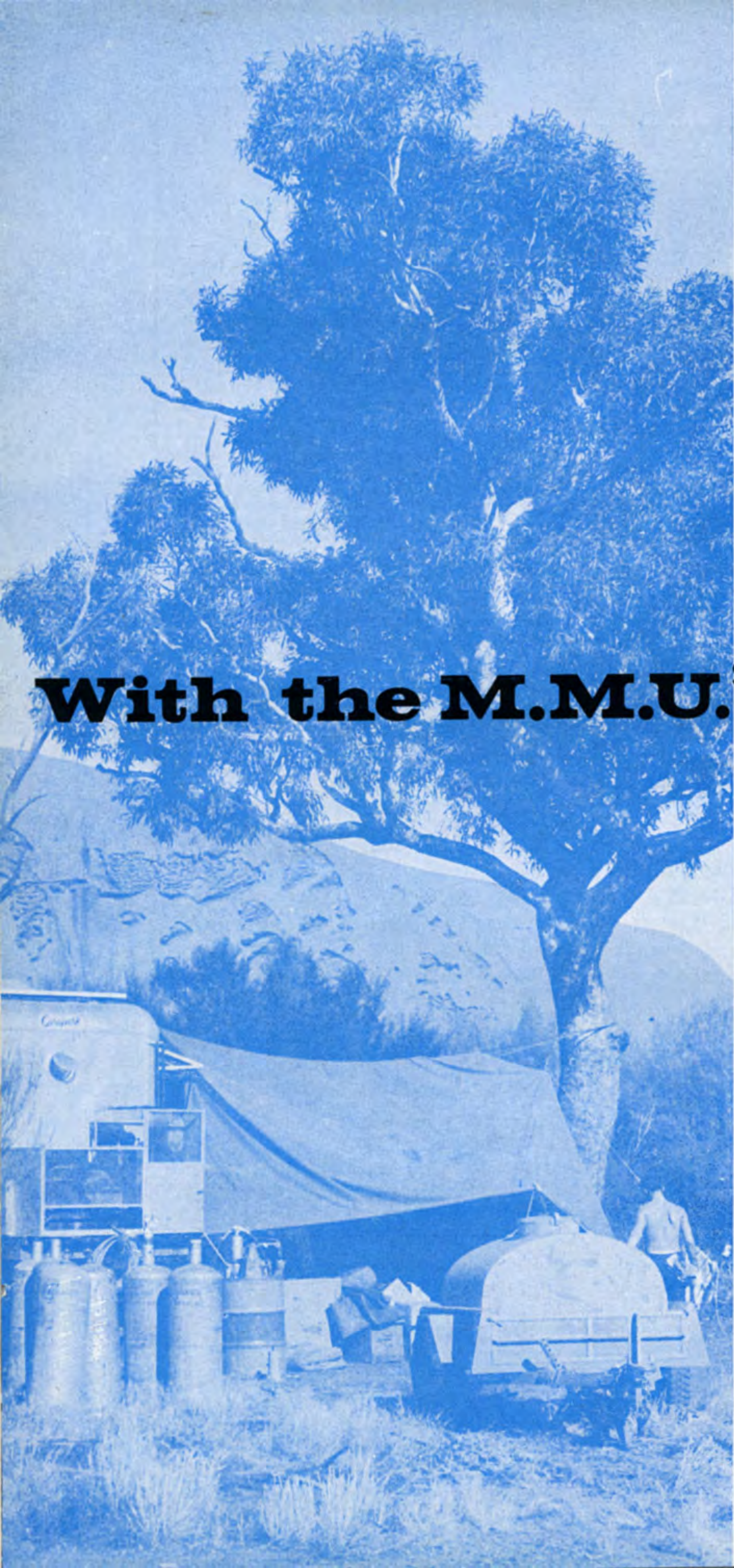


BOEING



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NEWS NEWS NEWS NEWS NEWS



With the M.M.U.'s Out Back

The 'dozer operator slipped his big machine into neutral and squinted up at the midday sun as the sound of an approaching aircraft grew louder. It was 110° in the shade on the airstrip at Ayers Rock and the operator was glad of a break.

Threading its way through the mulga and bloodwood around the strip, the ten-tonner too, with its load of gravel, ground slowly to a halt as its driver picked up the hum of the light twin. Around about him the rest of the D.C.A. Mobile Aerodrome Maintenance Unit (M.M.U.) slowed down as the aircraft became visible a few miles north of the Rock.

With the strip closed due to the maintenance works in progress the aircraft was unable to land. But it made a couple of low passes and had a good look at the work underway. And one of its passengers left this note with Ernie Lloyd, D.C.A.'s District Airport Inspector at Alice Springs:

Photographs of the Alice Springs M.M.U. at Ayers Rock by Ellis Kiel, Airport Engineering Branch, Head Office.

For D.C.A. M.M.U., Ayers Rock—

Sorry I missed seeing you. However I personally had a good opportunity to see results of your work from aircraft cockpit and am delighted with the job you have done. Regards and best wishes.

Don Anderson.

That message from D.C.A.'s Director-General is an indication of the high regard held for the Department's Mobile Maintenance Units—the strip-makers of Australia's outback.

Formed in the early 1940's the M.M.U.'s original role was to carry out works on Departmental aerodromes in the Northern Territory. But as outback aviation grew, so did the requirement for work on all licensed aerodromes. Cattle stations, Government settlements, missions and mining fields all use air transport as they once used the pack-horse mail.

D.C.A. now has nine M.M.U.s, the main ones based at Cairns and Charleville in Queensland, Alice Springs and Darwin in the Northern Territory, and at Derby and Carnarvon in West Australia.

The present role of the M.M.U.s is broadly, to maintain and on occasion to construct outback airstrips, where the services of local contractors are not available. This provision sends the M.M.U.s to some of the remotest outposts of civilization in the land.

Right now for instance, you would find the Darwin M.M.U. hundreds of miles south-east at Booraloola in the gulf country; and the Charleville unit 500 miles from home at Bedourie in far west Queensland, on the fringe of the Simpson Desert.

But the M.M.U.s are used to the life. Each is a completely self-contained convoy of eight men and a string of vehicles, equipped to work for months in rainstorm or duststorm, a thousand miles from base. There is a foreman and seven plant operators including a cook. The equipment includes bull-dozers, graders, ten-ton trucks, seven-tonners, five-tonners, shovel-loaders, refuelling tankers, multi-tyred rollers, travelling workshops, water tankers, and a 30 foot mess caravan with a freezer full of food and drink. It's hard and thirsty work. And camping in tents under the stars is the accepted way of life.

Each man in the Unit is vital, and each is dependent on the other—a plant operator can only be replaced at the expense of another piece of equipment. And a tip-truck lying idle is not only expensive in money terms, but also in time—a job may be substantially delayed by the loss of one man.

Jobs vary greatly in size and complexity. A recent project for the Northern Territory Administration at Kidman Springs, west of Alice Springs, involved earthworks and the compaction of an airstrip 300 feet wide and some 3,500 feet long, complete with taxi-way and apron.



At Ayers Rock, carting gravel for the strip extension meant the M.M.U. had to build a haulage road so that their trucks would not bog in the bulldust. An access road was also constructed from the apron to the main perimeter road around the Rock. New boundary markers were also supplied, and a standard wind indicator pole was set in concrete.

Access roads to some outback navigational aids are also the responsibility of the M.M.U.s. On roads and airstrips the big maintenance problems are scour (erosion by fast-flowing water), soft areas, gilgai (holes), and natural erosion by wind and rain. These, together with propeller blast, erode away surface material leaving the larger stones, which could damage aircraft propellers and fuselages and cause unacceptable surface roughness.

Whatever happens to the M.M.U.s, its seldom dull: one unit shot 29 crocodiles in its spare time and salted and sold the skins. Another unit was bogged for four days and dug a well so that they would have fresh water while trying to get out. And here are a few extracts from a DAI's inspection tour report:

Saturday, 14th . . . New windscreen fitted to utility . . . M.M.U. will be here to re-locate two sheds recently erected by station carpenters. I located these from the aerodrome plan, at short notice. What I did not know was that a recent scour and a newly erected fence cut off access to the sheds from the apron. A new site was pegged for both sheds, one is a waiting room and the other is an equipment store—both are lockable, but one would not need to be a competent burglar to open the doors. Departed 0915 . . .

Sunday, 15th . . . discovered a broken main leaf in the near side front spring of the ute . . . spring repaired by station staff . . . the strip is of fine red sand which is very susceptible to wind and water erosion. The western end is badly dished out due to propeller blast and sand drift. A gravelling job by the M.M.U. may be necessary here to prevent severe erosion. The windsock was split right down the seam, and will be replaced. Departed 1615 . . .

Monday, 16th . . . about 0945 . . . the tilted trailer on fire; the tyres had caught fire probably due to overheated brakes. Fire eventually extinguished with water after application of roadside gravel, foam and powder extinguishers had failed . . . ●

