**Hasselblad Camera**

In the mid 1960’s the Forests Commission commenced looking at the use of in-house collected aerial photography. The early work was mainly undertaken by forester Ray Spencer both as part of his duties and also as his subject as a post graduate student at Melbourne University.

The initial flights were undertaken by Head Office staff until the early 1970’s when regional (Forest division) staff began to also carry out the photography flights. My initial experience occurred at Ballarat when John (Smiley) Harris and I undertook the first mission in that part of Victoria. On the morning of the first flight John and I constructed a camera mount consisting of a sheet of steel about A4 paper size to which we screwed a gate hinge, then a length of water pipe and finally the mount for a 35mm camera! This mount was located in the cargo space of a small Cessna plane after taking off the cargo door. John sat in the cargo bay with a length of rope tied around the waist as a safety belt to operate the camera. The camera could be swung into the plane to change the film and to advance the film between shots. We then completed our photography run in the afternoon. Conducting a photography mission with the cargo door removed was not without its hazards as later shown when returning to Ballarat after a mission in the Otway Ranges both John and the pilot became so ill from engine fumes that they had to make an emergency landing and be rescued by another pilot.

Soon after moving to Bairnsdale in 1979, I commenced a long period of photography flights. This coincided with the Forests Commission purchasing and supplying a Hasselblad 500ELM 70mm camera. The kit comprised camera body, 50mm lens, film back, intervalometer (to automatically time the interval between photos), 90 degree prism eye-piece and remote shutter release cord, all stored in an aluminum case. Charging of the battery used an old-fashioned electric jug cord as the battery charger came with American style 2 pin plug. Total cost at that time was approximately $30,000. Soon after it was supplemented with developing and enlarging equipment for processing the film. Film was purchased from the local camera store in 100 foot (30 metre) rolls. The film was loaded into cassettes that held 60-65 frames using a home-made winder (constructed from a fishing reel – 12 turns of the handle loaded a cassette). A roll of film would load about 6 cassettes. Each cassette could only be used about 6 times before light leakage became an issue. A dark room was required for loading film cassettes, developing negatives and printing. A room in an out-building at the Divisional Office was used for this. The room had formerly been used as the Agriculture Departments animal post-mortem room, a task that had been transferred to the recently built regional veterinary laboratory, it was well set up with stainless steel benches and running water.

By the time I arrived in Bairnsdale, rather than removing the cargo door a hole had been cut in the floor of the Cessna 172 (VH-DJE) owned by Bairnsdale Air Charter. Cover plates over the hole were removed and the camera mount screwed to the rear passenger seat floor. A mirror was screwed to the wing allowing the pilot to ascertain when we were directly over the photographic target. Everything was ready for take-off. It was a tight squeeze to kneel on the floor of the plane to be able to see through the camera lens to ensure the correct area was taken. A navigator from the home district sped up tracking from one site to the next. Missions were generally taken from about 10,000 feet altitude, taking about half an hour to reach this level in the Cessna. A normal days flying would result in the use of 3 cassettes of film (200 photos). The only mishap was to write off the Cessna (VH-DJE) when it stalled after aborting a landing at Noorinbee airstrip (north of Cann River) to pick up our navigator. Luckily both pilot Ken Hussey and Forest Overseer Phil Morgan (camera operator for the day) walked away from the wreckage uninjured.

For a few select jobs colour film was used and this had to be processed commercially while black and white was developed and printed black and white film in-house. In the dark room the cassette of film was loaded onto a spiral, immersed into the developing solution then washed and dried. Each photographic frame was numbered, using Letraset numbers and a title panel prepared. The title panel included the film number, date, flying altitude and forest district. These were typed up by a typist then copied onto an acetate sheet, cut up and sticky taped to the masking plate of the enlarger. Photo negatives were enlarged about 3.5 times onto 8 x 10 inch (20 x 25 cm) glossy photo paper, developed, washed and dried before being packaged up and sent to the forest district.