Civil War in Nigeria (Biafra), 1967-1970

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An excerpt from the book "African MiGs", detailing the deliveries of MiG-17s to Nigeria, and their deployment in combat during the civil war in Biafra, 1967-1970

Nigeria is a Federal Republic, compromising four regions, the richest of which is in the south-east of the country, primarily populated by Ibos. In the same area considerable oil reserves were found, and there were reasonable expectations Nigeria to become highly influential in the development of the whole African continent, if not even outright African superpower. Nothing of this happened: instead in 1966 a military junta came to power in a coup, however, and after riots and massacres against Ibos, on 30 May 1967 the Governor of the Eastern Region, Lt.Col. Ojukwu, announced an unilateral secession of the state of Biafra. There was a serious chance of Biafra managing to gain and remain independent, then the independence was widely supported by the local population, the country could reach back on its oil resources, and had also a long coast with several ports. Although the secession was being prepared by Ojukwu for quite some time, and considerable Nigerian government funds were transferred into Swiss bank accounts to finance the new state, the junta was taken by surprise and it was not before the summer of 1967 that there was any significant reaction. Even then, it was foremost thanks to the direct or indirect involvement of foreign powers – foremost the Great Britain and the USSR – that the central government became capable of starting a war against Biafra.

The Biafrans were swift to understand the importance of air power and to start organizing a rag-tag air force, as well as using transport aircraft for brining supplies of weapons into the country. Regular flights of Air TransAfrica DC-7s from South Africa were undertaken already since the summer of 1966: other aircraft operated from Portugal, via Portuguese Guinea (today Guinea-Bissau), and Cameroon. In October 1966, for example, a Royal Air Burundi DC-4M Argonaut, flown by a mercenary Henry Wharton/Heinrich Wartski, crashlanded at Garoua, in Cameroun, while carrying a load of army from Rotteerdam. The same pilot supposedly flew also the Transportes Aereos Portugueses (TAP) Super Constellation (5T-TAF), impounded with a load of weapons at Malta, in September 1967. More aircraft were to become involved subsequently, including time-expired Constellations (some wearing bogus Nigerian registrations like 5N83H, 5N84H, and 5N86H), DC-4s, DC-6s, and a AirTrans-Africa DC-7 (VP-WBO/ZP-WBO), flown by Ernest Koenig, Rhodesian Jack Malloch, and British mercenaries Alistair Wickes.

On 23 April 1967 a Nigerian Airways Fokker F.27 (5N-AAV) was hijacked while underway from Benin to Lagos, and forced to land in Enugu. The aircraft was later equipped as makeshift bomber. A second transport, a DC-3 (9G-AAD) of Ghana Airways, was added on 15 June, after being hijacked from Port Harcourt. From early July also an ex-French Douglas B-26R Invader (41-39531) was operational from Enugu, after being delivered to Biafra by Jean Zumbach (also known as Johnny Brown or Kamikaze Braun). A second B-26 (41-34531) was to follow in August. In July also a US-registered Riley Dove (N477PM) was delivered to Port Harcourt from Switzerland, by Andre Juillard/Girard/Gerard, carrying a load of 2.000 Hungarian-manufactured rifles. The aircraft was used for reconnaissance, but already on 13 July 1967 it was forced down inside Algeria and then impressed into service with the local air force.

The federal army started mobilizing only on 6 July, initiating the war several days later by securing Ogoja, Nsukka, and the oil terminal at Bonny. But, already on 10 July the Biafran Air Force (BiAF) hit back, sending its aircraft to bomb the airfield at Makurdi, where several civilian DC-3s – used for transport of federal troops - were damaged. In the following days the sole B-26R was used to strike Lagos and Kano, both of which caused only slight damage: due to the NAF still being inoperational, there was also hardly anything to hit on either place. On 26 July the B-26 and the hijacked DC-3 were used to attack the destroyer Nigeria, which was blockading Port Harcourt. As soon as the second B-26 arrived in Biafra, on 12 August 1967, both Invaders were used to attack and sink a ferry across he Niger.

With the Biafrans being completely uncontested in the air, the federal forces became desperate to obtain combat aircraft, and after negotiations with the Soviets and Great Britain, from 13 August the USSR started delivering first MiG-17s from Egypt to Kano IAP, simultaneously sending a large shipment aboard a Polish merchant. Sudan also lent two Jet Provosts, but these were soon inoperational. The BiAF reacted with a series of strikes against Kano, on 19 and 20 August, destroying several MiGs on the ground. Lacking conventional bombs, the Biafrans improvised, Nevertheless, the MiGs became operational and flew their first combat sorties on 30 of the same mount, attacking the Onitsha airfields. The NAF achieved its first success on 10 September when the MiGs destroyed one of the B-26s on the ground at Enugu.

Kano – Mallam Aminu IAP, Nigeria, August 1967; the first eight MiG-17s (NAF603 thru NAF610) and two MiG-15UTIs (NAF601 and NAF 602) supplied to Nigeria came all from Egypt, being flown to Kano IAP aboard several Aeroflot An-12 transports. They entered service with the 1st Fighter-Bomber Squadron, and were relatively easy to distinguish by the remnants of the white identification strip around the rear fuselage and crude national markings, consisting only of the green colour (white fields were left in bare metal).

Known Serials, Markings, and Camouflage Colours of MiG Fighters in Nigeria

The NAF always used the national colours of green and white (representing country’s forests, with peace and unity) on its roundels and the fin flashes, adopted in 1959, just before independence from United Kingdom. Fighters in service with the NAF traditionally wear the roundel on the fin, but on the MiG-17s in the late 1960s there were frequent exceptions from these rules.

The application of roundels on the wings was frequently important but never a standard for the NAF: especially early during their service, many MiG-17s wore no national markings on wings whatsoever.

The MiG-17 and MiG-21 fighters carried three-digit serials, prefixed by “NAF”, as follows:

- MiG-15UTI NAF601

- MiG-15UTI NAF602

- MiG-15UTI NAF627 - reported in Kano, in 1967, not confirmed

- MiG-17F NAF603 – NAF 630 up to 33 delivered, but only 28 received serials

- MiG-17A NAF631 – NAF638 - 8 delivered, one possibly a MiG-17PF

The arrival of the MiGs changed not only the situation in the air, but was soon to be felt on the ground as well. In a large offensive, on 22 September the Biafrans were pushed out of Benin City, and in the following days have lost more ground: Enugu fell on 4 October, and Ojukwu was forced to move his capital to Umuahia. On 7 October the BiAF F.27 was lost over Lagos: the federal troops have claimed it as shot down, while there is a possibility that one of the makeshift bombs was prematurely activated.

During the following winter the bad weather and lack of spares on both sides made flying almost impossible, but in May both sides were back in the air, as the federal troops started a new offensive. On 18 May Port Harcourt fell, the BiAF losing its DC-3, as well as the second B-26. At the time the Biafrans and their mercenaries attempted to acquire jets as well, purchasing two Fouga Magisters from Austria. But, while the fuselages of the 4D-YF and 4D-YL arrived intact, their wings were sabotaged while in Bissau, leaving them useless.

The federal offensive was continued, and on 18 June 1968 Awgu fell, leaving Biafra with only a single airstrip, a stretch of a strengthened road near Uli-Ihailia, named “Annabelle”. The Red Cross was constructing another airstrip near Afikpo. The strip was to be used not only by C-97Gs of the International Red Cross, but also DC-4s and C-130s used by French and Swedish Red Cross, respectively, and aircraft chartered by JointChurchAid and the World Council of Churches from Balair (two DC-6As), as well as many others, incluidng smaller relief organizations, mainly flying ex-RAF Ansons, to haul food and medical supplies (by November 1968 20 tonns of fodd and supplies were flown in to Biafra on average every night). The West German government even released the third prototype Transall C.160 to Balair: the aircraft flew 198 missions from Cotonou, in Dahomey, in 1969. But, the NAF was meanwhile not only operating MiG-17s: six Il-28 bombers, flown by Egyptian and Czech pilots, were delivered from Egypt and stationed at Calabar and Port Harcourt. The aircraft were used for an indiscriminate bombing campaign, which not only heavily damaged both airstrips in Biafra, but also many other objects and installations, and killed over 2.000 civilians. With the NAF in possession of complete air superiority, flights to Biafra by day became extremely hazardous, and everything had to be done by night.

But, the Biafrans were nevertheless reinforced and managed to fly-in even enough mercenaries to organize the 4th Commando Brigade, which was to become the leading unit in the following offensive on Onitsha, as well as to encircls the 3rd Nigerian Commando Division at Oweri. The NAF attempted to resupply the besieged garrison and the 3rd Division from the air, but eventually both towns were captured by Biafrans. This was in part caused by the leader of the Nigerian junta, Gen. Gowon – under immense pressure because of the very negative image of Nigeria in the international public, influenced by a highly successful PR-campaign about the suffering of Biafran population, instigated by Ojukwu - issuing order the NAF to find ways of enabling relief aircraft to continue operations into Biafra, while trying to filter arms supplies. In the end, a proper solution was never found: the arms-flow into Biafra continued right unitl the bitter end. This in turn enabled the final drama of this war.

In late 1968 and early 1969 the World Council of Churches was flying supplies to Biafra aboard several Transair DC-7Bs, one being piloted by Count Carl Gustav von Rosen. Von Rosen led an adventurous life, flying for the Finnish Air Force during the war with the USSR, in 1939, and in Ethiopia at the time of the Italian invasion. Greatly concerned by the plight of the Biafrans, he returned to Sweeden trying to form the new BiAF, by purchasing five MFI-9F Minocon armed trainers and contracting several mercenaries. The Minicons were shipped to France, to be armed with unguided rockets, and then to Liberville, to be assembled and camouflaged. The new Biafran “fighters” became operational at Orlu, on 22 May 1969. On the same day one of them was used to attack the Port Harcourt airfield, where two MiG-17s and two Il-28s were claimed destroyed or damaged. On 24th Minicons also attacked Benin City airfield, claiming damage to one MiG and a single Il-28 as well. On 28th May Enugu was hit, and in the following night the oil installations at Port Harcourt. Von Rosen then returned to Sweenen to acquire more Minicons, allegedly for the Abidjan Flying Club, but these were not to arrive before October. Meanwhile Ernest Koenig bought two ex-West German C-47s, and in November 1969 also four AT-6 Texans were acquired. On 9 November the Texans hit Port Harcourt airfield and claimed destruction of a Pan African Airways DC-4. In turn the NAF started flying combat air patrols over the area, and one of the British mercenaries flying MiG-17s claimed one of the AT-6s as shot down. In the same month also a Fred Olsen Line DC-6 crashed at Uli, while attempting to land at night.

Enugu, Nigeria, November 1968: "NAF619" was one of the MiG-17Fs supplied as a part of the third batch to Nigeria, between 12 October and 4 November 1968. It entered service with the 2nd Fighter-Bomber Squadron, operating from Benin, Enugu, and Port Harcourt, and is known to have been flown by one British mercenaries contracted for a pay of

GBP 1.000 a month. The first six MiG-17Fs supplied from the USSR arrived aboard Aeroflot An-12 transports. Subsequently additional examples were shipped to Lagos.

Port Harcourt, Nigeria, 1969; NAF612 belonged to the second batch (NAF611 thru NAF614) supplied to Nigeria in April 1968 to form the 2nd Fighter-Bomber Squadron. could have been one of the MiG-17Fs supplied later during the Nigerian Civil war, directly from the USSR, via Poland. This aircraft was originally seen still in bare metal overall, but already wearing a crudely applied serial on the rear fuselage. The serial was apparently left in such condition when this MiG was overpainted with dark green, in order to better conceal it from Biafrans, which used to suddenly strike against a number of NAF airfields.

Despite the blows inflicted by Minicons, the Nigerian federal forces were meanwhile besieging Biafra successfully, trying to starve the country into submission. The NAF MiGs flew even by night trying directly to harras the supply flights. In June 1969 a Red Cross DC-7 crashed after crossing the coast near Eket, after being attacked by a MiG-17, flown by a British contract pilot. The Biafrans immediately attempted to purchase night-fighters, acquiring two Meteor NF.14s, used as target towing aircraft by Enterprise Films., via Templewood Aviation. Both fighters reached Africa, the first ending the voyage in Bissau, from where it was not permitted to continue: the other was reported missing on 10 November 1969, off the Cape Verde Islands, but the Dutch pilot was rescued.

On 22 December 1969, the federal troops, supported by surviving NAF MiG-17s and Il-28s, launched the final offensive, cutting the territory under control by Ojukwu in two. On 13 January 1970 the remaining Biafran forces capitulated – Ojukwu escaping from Uli to Abidjan aboard the Super Constellation 5N-86H.

After all the years there are still quite a few unknowns regarding the background of some aircraft involved in the Biafran War: this deHavilland DH.104 Riley Dove (serial unknown) of the Biafran Air Force was found in wrecked condition after the war, in 1970, at the playing field of a school in Uli. Biafrans are not known to have got a second Dove - except the US-registered Riley Dove N477PM delivered to Port Harcourt from Switzerland, by Andre Juillard/Girard/Gerard: that example, however, was impounded in Algeria, already in the summer of 1967. This Dove carried also a unique camouflage pattern consisting of patches in Khaki over Turquise Green over, with the Khaki patches being rougly outlined in Black. Lower surfaces were Mid-Blue.

With the end of the war in Biafra, the major role of the MiG-fighters in the history of Nigeria was over. The MiG-21s delivered in the 1970s to replace MiG-17s were not to see any major combat operations.

Lagos, 24 November 1969: between 13 and 18 October 1969 eight Soviet An-12s delivered one MiG-17 each to Kano IAP. The aircraft in question were so-called “MiG-17 Glatt”, supplied from East Germany that was retiring its MiG-17As from service at the time. The nickname “glatt” came from “gloss pipe” in German, which was marking these aircraft as those not equipped with afterburner. These MiGs were serialled NAF631 thru NAF638 and entered service with the 2nd Fighter-Bomber Squadron, being camouflaged immediately upon arrival at Lagos IAP. Note the application of the national markings without the white field.

Biafran Relief Operation Account

The following are excerpts from an interview with Fred Cuny, one of foreign pilots that flew transport aircraft for different charity organizations during the Civil War in Nigeria, done by the BBC Timewatch and published on 15 June 2000.

(Note by BBC Timewatch Editor:

This is the most extensive account Fred Cuny ever provided of his experience in the Biafran relief operation, his first international relief work. This BBC interview with Cuny was conducted in January 1995 for a documentary on the Nigerian Civil War. The documentary was produced for the BBC's Timewatch series and entitled, "Biafra: Fighting A War Without Guns.")

INT: Fred - could you tell me how and when you became involved in the Nigerian civil war?

CUNY: Well it was an accident. I'd just finished working on a big project in Dallas - in fact I'd been working on helping design some of the systems for the Dallas Fort Worth airport. I got a call one night from an old professor of mine from college and he confessed that he'd taken a paper I'd written about Nigeria and the prediction that it made about the likelihood of a civil war in Nigeria back in the early '60s and he had published it. And as a result of that he had under his own name... and as a result of that he had been approached by some foundations who were interested in looking at the Biafran war to see what could be done when the war was over about getting humanitarian aid in for

reconstruction.

And I'd always been interested in reconstruction. It was something I'd wanted to do. And he called and said he felt that he should get me involved in this project. So I said "OK, fine. The two of us will do it together and..." - I liked the guy. He was actually quite good despite the fact that he was using my paper.

And so we went off to Nigeria. I arrived in Lagos. I went up to the Foreign Ministry - got a meeting through the good offices of the United States Embassy there - and went to see the Minister of the Interior and said "I'm from Texas and I'm here to study your war and tell you what you can do when it's over to get the humanitarian aid in here."

And the Minister said "oh, that's interesting. Let's see your passport." And he thumbed through and got to the part where my visa was, ripped the visa out and said "we don't want anything to do with these damned Biafrans and all you Americans and others that are helping them out and want you out of here in 24 hours" and threw the passport back. And 2 guys came and escorted me to the airport, took all the money and put me on a 'plane and (laughs).. next morning I was sitting on the airport surrounded by all these Red Cross airplanes and a few other groups that were working there.

So my partner in the study said "that's it. I'm headed out of here" and he went back to The States. And I thought there might be some chance to salvage it. I didn't know anything about these organizations - the Red Cross or anybody else - so I went over and knocked on the door of the Red Cross and "Hi. I'm from Texas and I'd like to look at your operations and see what we might be able to do when the war's over."

And the fellow who was in charge of the flight operations there said, "I haven't got time for this."

He said "I've got a whole bunch of new airplanes coming in. I don't know how to use them. I don't know how to fly them. This whole thing is really crazy. We're having trouble with the Nigerians. My cargo systems are breaking down. Everything's a mess."

And I said "well, that's interesting. Cargo systems - I just worked on an airport, the world's largest airport in Texas and I know a little bit about that. And furthermore I'm a pilot. Maybe I can help you out."

And he said "well you help me and I'll try and help you." So I sat down and started working on the problems of integrating his new aircraft that were coming out and the first ones arrived and then I went out and helped check out with him and next thing I knew I was heavily involved in the air lift.

INT: You worked as part of a large group of pilots flying into Biafra. Who were the pilots? Where did they come from?

CUNY: Oh they were all sorts of people. They were some of them were contract pilots from a Swiss company called Belair and they were recruited largely from the United States. The airplanes that we were flying at the time were the C97 which was a cargo version of the B29 and it had only been operated by the US air-force and some of the reserve units in The States, plus the Israelis.

So what we had to do was to find people who were qualified on the airplane or similar airplanes and get them qualified. So they recruited from some people who'd been in reserve units in The States and they got a number of Israelis that

knew how to fly them and how to maintain them, which is even more important.

Some guys were mercenaries who couldn't find a job flying guns. Others were idealists. There was a real mixed bag of people. The fellow that I was closest to in my crew was there because he believed in the Biafran cause and he refused to take any money to fly. The Chief Pilot was a former Air America pilot. He'd been in and out of all sorts of scrapes in various places and a very colorful character. We had one guy who was a Baptist missionary who saw the Biafrans as some lost tribe of Israel that had to be salvaged - or saved. Whatever.

It was a real mixed bag. We used to call it the world's largest flying zoo.

But I think everybody there was dedicated to the mission and the more you got involved in the flying the more you began feeling something for the people and even the hardest nosed guys were always willing to run the risks of going in at night in these crazy places and delivering the goods because they felt very emotional about the need to try and keep people alive.

INT: Could you describe to me how the air lift differed from the more conventional air lift of supplies?

CUNY: Well first of all there was no co-ordination. We had many different aircraft that were going into the various air-fields. The air-fields are a misnomer. They were wide spots in the roads in a lot of cases. No traffic control to speak of. At one time we had a guy in a jeep with a hand-held radio that was co-ordinating all the traffic.

Most of the air-fields in the latter stages of the war were under fire. The relief flights that were going in had been announced to the Nigerian authorities to try and gain them protection, but often the gun-runners would try and mask their flights by getting up underneath and flying close behind to get in. The air-lift had a variety of different organizations. You had ICRC which was probably the best managed and operated air lift component. 6 of the C97s.

You had the inter church aid which was the big... really the biggest private group that was there and what they did is they had first a variety of different aircrafts. Some were the old constellations. Some were the LC54 or the DC4 aircraft. A couple of DC6s. A real mix of aircraft. And the 'planes had different speeds. They had different capacities and with no schedule they'd arrive over different airfields at different times and sometimes at the same time and it was always hairy because if you get there when somebody else is on the ground you can't get in. Have to circle and there's always the danger of interception or being shot at by ground fire. So there were times when it was pretty chaotic.

Numerous times we tried to work out various arrangements and the ICRC who wanted to try and get permission to fly daylight flights, announced through a special corridor where they wouldn't be shot down. But the Nigerians kept denying them permission to fly and there were all sorts of problems with that.

At one points the pilots got together and we actually voted, saying "now, look, we'll go out. If the Nigerians say 'no', everybody on the plane will vote and if it's 100% that we go, we just drop below the radar and we make the run and try and get in otherwise", because we felt that it was important that we get the supplies in. So many of the crews had their own arrangements to try and break the rules and get in.

INT: Clearly the organizations involved in the air lift were willing to stretch or break international law and ignore national civility.

CUNY: Yeah.

INT: Could you describe some of the discussions that were held?

CUNY: I was a very small piece of the machinery in those days and still, I know. But the evel of discussion was often a much higher level. The pilots didn't worry about the sovereignty. They saw a mission and figured ways to get in. Certainly at ICRC and there was the whole issue of having to deal with agreement on both sides and the ICRC does not work unless they have concurrence and what they call transparency. Whereas inter-church aid and many of the other guys in the air lifts - the private groups. Canair Fare, Foundation War Relief and some of the others. They all said, "look, we're going to go in. We're not going to worry about what the Nigerians say. We'll operate at night if we have to. We'll take the risks" and they felt that the risks were worth taking. They felt that in this case had a legitimate cause of a people who had been persecuted, who had revolted, who saw no other solution, and deserved help. And a lot of that was wrapped up in the belief that the EBOs had been the persecuted group and, therefore, had deserved support and in that light they were willing to take the risks to help them.

There were other motives certainly. Some of the governments that were supporting the perations had eyes on the oil fields. Others had other motivations. There was meddling to try and break up Nigeria.

All sorts of political agendas that were also being played out through this. Our discussions came down to one thing and that is if you keep the air lift going you save lives, if you don't the country's going to collapse. And the worry was, and in retrospect it proved not to be the case" but everybody was worried if the air lift stopped, the Nigerian forces carried out a number of atrocities at that time would either seal the area off and let the country starve to death. Or that they would be able to swiftly move in and there would be masses of massacres throughout the area and the fear of retaliation.

I don't know if you remember that in '68/'69 there were a number of atrocities where villagers had been captured and they'd been executed or soldiers had been executed. And these stories got back and fed the belief that there was going to be a total massacre. And the fact that the EBOs had been massacred during the early '60s in some of the riots against the ?????? and the influence that the EBOs had in Nigeria, led to that feeling of persecution. And so there was this willingness to take the risks to try and keep the people alive and hoping that either a negotiated settlement would come about which would give them independence or at least.. towards the end it was a lot of thinking about autonomy. But some means of protecting the people and keeping them alive until it can happen.

INT: As a pilot flying in on the relief missions what were military relations like with the federal pilots?

CUNY: Well you had a variety of mercenaries that were flying their aircraft. The Nigerians at that time proved to be fairly incapable pilots. They weren't up to the interceptions. The air force was new. The country had only been free for several years and they didn't have a professional air force and their pilots were very reluctant to engage and so the government began hiring mercenaries to fly. They used Egyptians. They used some Brits, some South Africans and others that were called in to fly. And there were very few of those guys who were really willing to go out and shoot down people because they knew the pilots on the other side. It was actually a very bizarre situation. There were times when our pilots would go over to Nigeria, to the Bristol Hotel and meet their pilots and in the lobby have a few drinks and work out the rules of engagement. And the basic rule was "you shoot us down, you'll be out of business and you're getting a nice lucrative contract so wouldn't it be better for you just to miss the interceptions and claim that the radar had sent you the wrong places and whatever."

Often we'd be intercepted by MiGs on the daylight runs and they'd make passes and shoot like mad and then, of course, never hit anything. We never knew whether.. in the early

days we didn't know whether those guys were the Nigerians who just couldn't hit anything or whether these were the mercenaries who didn't want to hit anything.

Some of the flights that I made we actually could hear what sounded like these awful gun battles going on with planes getting shot down and everything over on the other end and

it turned out that they were just up, standing around and firing off stuff and making all these claims on the radio, so that the ground controllers would think that they were actually engaging the aircraft.

And, we'd see the next day in the papers that a plane had been shot down and we could, sort of, count among ourselves and say "no, we're all still here". So there was a lot of that going on.

But there were also times when they would get somebody who was quite determined to earn his bread and he would go out and knock an aircraft down and then suddenly the whole operation would stop. So we had a number of incidents like that but the biggest danger to the planes was ground fire. Especially towards the end when we were going into ?????? and the airfield was surrounded. The planes coming in were subject to the direct observation from nearby and they could hear the planes coming and they would open up fire and the Nigerian soldiers were not at all reluctant about shooting at the airplanes. They hated us and they were quite successful and quite a number of planes went down at the end of the runway.

INT: So Nigerian Federal Army could, in fact.. or the Nigerian Federal ?????? could have, in fact, have closed ?????? airport?

CUNY: No. They couldn't close it. They tried. They were firing on it. They would open fire at random at night but the Nigerians kept them at right at the extreme range and a lot of their stuff fell short. In fact, it would sometimes go into the camps and so on. But they could fire at the aircraft and they were using crude.. by today's standards. They didn't have anti-aircraft missiles. They didn't have radar guided guns. They were just firing into the region as many shells as they could, hoping they would hit something.

Overlap...

INT: But the Nigerian Air Force, with the use of mercenaries, could have closed ?????? airport?

CUNY: Oh yeah. They could have done.

To give you an example of what happened. One of the planes coming in got hit by ground fire and couldn't get the gear down and he was trailing fuel and didn't have enough to make it back. So the guy had to sit down on the air strip with his gear up and he landed and, sort of, skidded right to the middle of the air-field and that was it. The air field was effectively

closed. There was no way we could get in and out. There wasn't enough room.

Everybody said "this is going to take a long time .. maybe tractors could pull it off." We were sitting there the next morning doing an assessment; "what are we going to do about this and how do we get this thing off?" And we looked up and here come two Mig 17s and they flew over and sort of, came in close for a look and then they went back. And then about 2 hours later they came back with bombs and just proceeded to bomb the hell out of the airplane. Broke it into nice little pieces so we could clear it off the runway and get back in operation. They clearly knew that if it was over that their bread ticket was going to be punched and that would be it. So they're in many ways the Nigerians certainly were not well served by the people they hired. They could have stopped us. The Russians put a trawler with radar at the Bay of Biafra and they could track us. So there were times if they could have vectored the aircraft up to intercept us. The guys would just simply shut off the

radios and not be vectored. And.. it was hairy. There was times when certainly they knew when we were coming. The planes had to go in low at night through the.. through the hills.

There was certainly the weather was awful. That was one of the big problems. In the summer time you had these incredible storms that would come up and you'd have to weave your way through the storms at night. There were no real facilities on the airfield. The lighting system was smudge pots along the side and you'd come in. You'd give them a code. They'd light the smudge pots to show you where the runway was. You'd hit the runway and as you went past the lights it would snuff them out again. So the whole operation at night was a dark operation. It was timed for your own group and you had no idea who else was coming in. Sometimes if the weather was still and there was no wind,

you'd land in one direction and take off in the other and going out suddenly some guy would flash his lights and he's coming right in as you're going out and everybody was taught... break left so that you'd pass in these situations. There was some hairy experiences going in and out of there.

INT: When did you first arrive at ?????? and how do you recollect the conditions there when you arrived?

CUNY: I was there in try to remember. I came in early September, I guess. Started working on the air lift in September of '69. And then I didn't actually make my first run in until October. And then continuously for several months afterwards. But the conditions at the time were quite hairy because by that time the Nigerians were within range of the airfield and could hit it. And we were losing the other airfields. While I was there the first of the last of the other airfields was shut down. So everything had to go into ??????... which increased the traffic was much thicker and you were trying to operate around the clock and it was much more hairy at that point.

The people who were operating earlier before I got there had a number of fields to choose from but as the country constricted with the offensives of the Nigerian army, every time an air field was lost it would increase the traffic on all the others.

INT: If you take away one memory from Biafra - one personal memory, what would that be?

CUNY: Oh I think the first flight in was certainly the one. We went out at sunset. I was riding in the plane. I wasn't flying, I was simply going out to get the system down before I took to the controls. We were on the ground and we were waiting for take-off and were sitting there. We were geared up and ready to go and we were about to pull out on the runway and the flight co-ordinator came up and said "hold on, we've got a plane coming in. So we're sitting there. The pilot says "OK Fred, do you want to take it?" And I say "yeah". So I get in and strap into the seat. Call up the co-ordinator, you know, "Red Cross 3 ready for take off."

And we're sitting there and he says "hold it. We've got another plane coming in."

And we looked out and sure enough here comes this guy in and he's been hit and his engines are smoking and I'm watching him come in. And all of a sudden the engine that's.. the last engine that's turning starts smoking and one seizes and he just rolls over and the plane just slides right past me and almost, you know, in memory in slow motion.

It cart-wheels off the end of the runway. Slides into a fuel.... Blows up and there's flame all the way down the side of the parking ramp "Red Cross 3, clear for take off." (Laughs.) Nothing stopped. We just kept going. So that's the memory.

Sources & Bibliography

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