



Jack Malloch's first gunrunning flight into the Yemen

In the middle of 1963, once again, Jack Malloch was facing bankruptcy.

With the defeat of Katanga at the beginning of the year Jack's regular air charters for President Tshombe and his mercenary flights for Mike Hoare had all dried up. Left with excess aircraft and more staff than he needed he simply didn't have the contracts to cover the running costs of his fledgling airline, Rhodesian Air Services.

To make matters worse Tshombe had been unable to pay his final bills so had given Jack, who he regarded as a personal friend, his own personal DC-4 aircraft in lieu of the debt that was owed. The four engine DC-4 was a very valuable asset worth much more than the outstanding debt. But it just made Jack's cash-flow even worse, as without enough new customers it couldn't pay for either the salaries or the fuel bill.

Although Jack had no money, he did have a reputation as a fearless flier and had built up a formidable network of contacts in the shadowy world of mercenaries, spies and arms dealers. Amongst this network of contacts was the famous French mercenary Bob Denard who Jack had got to know in Katanga.

With Tshombe having fled into exile Bob and his band of ex-Foreign Legionnaires were back on the market, and it wasn't long before the Yemeni king offered them a contract to help get him back into power. To do this Bob needed to set up a reliable supply of arms and ammunition, for which he turned to his old friend Jack Malloch.

At that stage Rhodesian Air Services were flying as many charters to Europe as they could in Tshombe's DC-4. But the Skymaster was giving trouble and the long European charters were taking their toll on the ailing aircraft. Jack knew it needed a major overhaul but he just couldn't afford to have it serviced.

By early August 1963 the mechanical problems were becoming more frequent and more severe. Fire warnings and engine failures were becoming a feature of most flights. Agonising over the decision Jack eventually decided to take Bob's contract. He needed the money, and despite the danger he felt it was the only way he could keep the operation afloat.

On Sunday 7th August the DC-4 went off on an overnight charter to Mauritius, returning to Salisbury at lunchtime on Monday. After a quick clean-up and refuelling the waiting passengers were loaded for the UK and the aircraft was back in the air by mid-afternoon. This time the return flight was going to take a different route altogether and Jack had chosen his crew carefully. He needed men of courage, discretion and loyalty.

They were getting back into the gunrunning business.

As soon as they got the passengers to Gatwick, all the seats were removed and stored in some empty hangar space. They then did a quick flight to Dublin where they picked up some freight for Frankfurt. There Jack met with Pierre Louraines, another friend of Bob Denard. Louraines owned a restaurant in Paris and was an accomplished pilot. He had flown fighters in the Second

World War and had been awarded the Legion of Honour for his bravery, so he had much in common with Jack. Although there was a lot more to him than merely a restaurant and an interest in flying. He was also the arms supplier for the secret Yemen mission.

From Frankfurt they went to collect the weapons. Jack's Flight Engineer Ronnie Small who was on the flight takes up the story:

"From Frankfurt we set off for Sophia and then flew on to Prague in Czechoslovakia. I never left the aircraft as I was on a South African passport, and I can't imagine the distinctive 'R' on our tail and the name 'Rhodesian Air Services' on the sides did us any good either.

We loaded the weapons in Prague, but we had trouble with Number 2 engine. Jack and Pierre went into town to sort out the deal and a military guard was assigned to look after me. He stuck to me like glue. If I was in the cockpit he was right next to me. If I went outside to the engines he was right there again. Up and down, he never left my side.

At the time the plane was empty. There was no cargo, just the two front seats and some ropes and netting. Then all the soldiers and packers arrived. They loaded huge crates of Czech guns. They were packed in sets of three, with each set wrapped in brown paper, so they were very easy to handle. In the end the whole plane was full to the ceiling from the front to the back bulkhead with just a little corridor to the back toilet. The interesting thing was that all the loading was done by female soldiers. They were digging a trench by the side of the runway and all the labour there was female too. Very unusual for the early 1960's."

The guns that were loaded were Czech 9 mm Sampola submachine guns. They were small, reliable and very easy to handle – ideal for Bob's mercenary infiltrators.

"When the guns were loaded, Jack and the Frenchman got back inside. As we took off number one engine started backfiring. We set the mixture to rich while we climbed as we knew we couldn't return with that cargo. We got to altitude and the aircraft settled down. There was the occasional backfire so we put the mixture back to rich. Jack said he thought it must be the carburettor, but I thought it was a poppet valve on one of the cylinders malfunctioning. We were

flying into Africa so there wasn't much chance of sorting it out, and we had to just take our chances.

As we crossed the Mediterranean it started getting dark and it was pitch dark by the time we crossed the North African desert. The Automatic Direction Finder was out, and we only had the ADF and dead-reckoning, so dead-reckoning it was. It was worrying though as we didn't know where we were, there was just the vast expanse of black desert with odd little lights far below. I guess they must have been Bedouin camps maybe. The auxiliary tanks were finished and we were beginning to run out of fuel. As usual Jack was very calm and confident. It was as if he had a sixth sense when he was in command of an aircraft and always knew exactly where he was.

Eventually we picked up Djibouti, and as we were going in, it must have been at two or three o'clock in the morning, the troublesome engine started backfiring again. As we were planning to go into the desert we couldn't have a sick engine. Being so low on fuel we had to land in Djibouti. When the tractor came with the steps I told the guy to go away and that we just needed fuel and oil. We carried a little aluminium stepladder with us so the crew could get off. I then retracted the steps so no-one could see the cargo we were carrying. We obviously hadn't told the authorities in Djibouti that we were stuffed full of machine-guns.

I also needed to change the carb before we took off again, so I set up our ladder by the engine, took the cowlings off and put them onto the wing. It was difficult working in the dark with no light and I had to hold a little torch in my mouth. Jack asked if I needed any help, but I said I'd be okay, so Jack and the rest of the crew went into the terminal building where they could get some sleep.”

Once the repairs had been made Jack submitted a new flight plan and was given clearance to take-off. Their cover story, which they continued to use for many of the flights, was that they were doing aerial mapping of the Yemeni coastline.

“It was daylight by the time we took off again. As we flew out across the Gulf of Aden there was strict radio silence and we didn't answer any calls – all the switches were off and there were no beacons. Jack flew along the Yemeni coast to a certain position where we were to try and find the mercenaries. We flew in low to look for them. Over the sea we had been at about four or five



Jack revving the engines of the DC-4 trying to escape from the clutches of the soft sand after making his first delivery of weapons to Bob Denard and his band of ex-Foreign Legion mercenaries.

Picture from Jack Malloch's private collection and reproduced here and in the book 'Jack Malloch. Legend of the African Skies' with the permission of Greg Malloch.

thousand feet but when we crossed over into the desert we dropped down to about five hundred feet. Once we'd found them we looked for a bit of flat desert without any dunes where we could land. There was obviously no windsock so we had no idea of the wind speed or direction which added to the risks.

That first landing that we made was okay and we managed to find a flat bit of yellow-brown desert floor without any dunes crossing it. But the takeoff was a problem because we couldn't turn the plane around, so we needed to find a long enough patch of ground to land and take off in the same direction. The soft sand was our biggest problem.

When we came in Jack approached as slowly as he could and tried to touch down right at the start of the flat patch so we would have as much space as possible to take off again. The worry was the thin nose-wheel snapping off when it dug into the sand. Jack tried to hold the nose up as long as he could, but as soon as we touched down the wheels dug into the sand throwing the

nose down hard. We came to a halt very quickly. Fortunately the nose wheel survived, but seeing how all the wheels had sunk into the sand we were very concerned about whether we would ever be able to take off again,”

Apparently shortly before Jack made this, his first landing in the Yemeni desert, the British SAS had tried to organise a re-supply flight using a Lockheed Super Constellation that belonged to an American, ‘Hank’ Wharton. However, the Connie’s nosegear was long and spindly and he was worried that it would not survive a landing in soft sand. Apparently Wharton made several low passes, but decided to abort a landing attempt as he realised they would probably never be able to get out again. The Connie and its cargo of military hardware was later impounded in Malta. As for Hank, he went on to continue his gun-running career elsewhere, where he inevitably ended up competing with Jack again.

As Ronnie Small later said, *“There was only one guy in the world who could have landed in the desert – and that was Jack Malloch. No one else was mad enough!”*

But now they were the ones in the desert sinking into the soft sand.

“I was frightened when we opened the back door to see that we didn’t need the steps to get out. The wheels had sunk right up to their axles in the fine, powdery sand.” Ronnie recalled.

The mercenaries offloaded the weapons very fast. In just about ten minutes it was all out of the plane and being loaded onto their camels.

Then it was time to take off. Jack started up the engines and gave a bit of power, but we didn’t move at all. He added some more to no avail. Eventually we were at full power with the brakes off, but it didn’t budge an inch and wouldn’t roll. Usually you take off with 15° flaps, but Jack set them to 45°, so it was full flaps and full power. The plane was shaking and the engines were screaming. Overheating the engines became the next very real risk. The cylinder-head temperature was right in the red at 232°. Once you start moving you can cool the engines by opening the cowlings, but you need momentum and it does add to the resistance.



Jack Malloch (right) and his trusted First Officer and Korean War fighter pilot, Captain Doug Lock waiting in the desert while the French mercenaries unload their aircraft.

Picture from Jack Malloch's private collection and reproduced here and in the book 'Jack Malloch. Legend of the African Skies' with the permission of Greg Malloch.

"There was high tension in the cockpit as eventually the aircraft started shaking loose from the sand and slowly we started to roll forward. But the sand was sucking us in all the time and although we were moving, we just couldn't get the speed up. Eventually Jack called "Vee one." The dunes were approaching fast and we couldn't turn around."

'V1' meant that they had reached 'decision speed' and were committed to the take-off, although considering they couldn't turn around they were actually committed before they had even started the engines.

"Jack had sweat running down his face, so much so that I gave him a wipe on the forehead to try and stop it going into his eyes. We just couldn't get to V2 speed and we were almost right into the dunes. We were still on the deck, but eventually Jack just

called out "Gear up!" The wheels tucked but instead of taking off, with just the very minimum of speed the plane seemed to sink down a little closer to the ground.

I remember looking out of the cockpit window and the props were actually skimming the ground right on the deck, sand-blasting their tips. Another inch or two and they would have certainly dug in and it would have been over for us all. The engines were also still right in the red at 232°. They could have seized at any second, but I dared not open the cowlings by even a fraction as it would have dropped us like a stone.”

At that point Pierre Louraines, who was also crowded into the cockpit and watching the approaching dunes in wide-eyed terror was beginning to regret having come along for the ride.

Ron continues the story, *“As we raced up to the dunes Jack tweaked the wheel back and we skimmed over the top of the first one, but sank back to ground level on the other side of it. We just didn’t have the momentum to pull up. There was another stretch of flat ground ahead of us and we picked up a bit more speed and a little more height. We must have been about ten feet off the deck when I opened a tiny crack in the cowlings; we dropped a bit but it started bringing the engine temperature down and eventually Jack was able to start slowly climbing out of the clinging desert. As soon as he could he banked and turned back towards the sea. I remember looking down and seeing the dark line of loaded camels and the mercenaries all in their robes just like local Bedouins waving as they walked away towards the mountains in the distance.*

The only words that were spoken in the cockpit throughout the whole take-off were “Vee one” and “Gear up”, but I can assure you there was one hell of a lot of thought going on!”

We landed back in Djibouti, filled up with fuel and hurried back to the UK to collect our passengers. That was the first of the trips into the desert that we made. I’m not sure how many Jack did altogether. There must have been quite a few. I know Jack piloted every one of them,” Ronnie concluded.

On the morning of Wednesday 14th August 1963 having refitted the seats and loaded the passengers, Jack and the exhausted crew took off just after lunch, flying to Rome where they picked up some more passengers before flying on to Malta. None of the excited passengers would ever have imagined that just a few days before, the cabin they were sitting in had been filled to the roof with battle-ready machine-guns and steel cases of ammunition.



Jack making a clandestine delivery of weapons to the British SAS in the Yemen in late 1963. Unlike the French the British had commandeered some vehicles which made the offloading more efficient. Jack himself is seen walking in front of the vehicle being loaded.

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By the time they landed back in Salisbury the success of their daring flight into the desert had come to the attention of Johnny Cooper and his team of SAS soldiers who were also hiding out in the Yemeni mountains and who desperately needed re-supply. Jack had also come to the attention of the British MI6 who were responsible for 'foreign activities'. Routed through the British High Commission in Salisbury, a discrete message was delivered to him requesting a meeting to discuss additional flights for the British Special Air Service.

Over the next six months Jack built up a major arms supply route for both the French and British mercenaries in the Yemen, chartering additional aircraft out of Austria to support the effort, along with several dhows that delivered weapons into hidden coves in the dead of night.

Unfortunately the operation got too big too quickly and after a security breach it collapsed in a spectacular implosion.

Yet Jack was not deterred. His experiences in the Yemen only honed his capability and by the end of the 1960's he was able to build up one of the largest gunrunning operations in aviation history. Though not before he had to retrieve an aircraft that had been shot-down over the Congo and face bankruptcy, jail-time and an actual firing squad.

If you would like to read more about Jack Malloch and his extraordinary life, order a copy of the book 'Jack Malloch. Legend of the African Skies' now.

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