



*One of Jack Malloch's unmarked DC-7's that maintained the nightly airlift of arms and ammunition into the shrinking state of Biafra throughout 1969. This is likely the actual aircraft that made the very last flight out of Uli.*

*Picture from Jack Malloch's private collection. © Greg Malloch.*

## **THE LAST FLIGHT OUT OF ULI**

By the beginning of January 1970 in the break-away state of Biafra, Uli or 'Airstrip Annabel' as it was officially known, had become the country's last remaining beacon of desperate hope in the eye of a swirling hurricane of inevitable death and destruction.

Since the beginning of 1969 the little widened section of palm-tree lined roadway had become the very epitome of hell itself. The country was completely surrounded by the encroaching Nigerian forces and Uli was the only place where food and ammunition could be flown in and the starving orphans could be flown out.

In early December '69 the veteran war correspondent Al J. Venter flew into Uli. Describing his experience he said, *"None of us will ever forget the heat and the noise that cloaked us like a sauna. Time meant nothing. You were simply too awed, too overwhelmed by what was going on, and the musty, unwashed immediacy of it all. Our senses were constantly sharpened by the stutter of automatic fire along the runway. The priests in their white cassocks, the rattle of war, the roar of aircraft, the babble of voices shouting in strange tongues and the infants hollering all made for a surreal assault on the senses."*<sup>1</sup>

Three days before Christmas the 'final assault' was launched and what remained of Biafra was finally sliced in two. Although they were cut off and surrounded with no hope of resupply, the Biafran army stood firm. They knew they were going to die, either in battle or at the hands of their vengeful captors.

The first week of January 1970 saw frantic fighting throughout Biafra as the remnants of the Biafran army tried to regroup and fight their way back into defensible positions around the resupply airstrips of Uli and the military airfield at Owerri. By the end of the week Uli was a major center of evacuation but getting aircraft in and out of the airstrip was becoming more and more challenging. By the eighth of January, due to the incessant air raids some five hundred meters of Uli's runway had been put out of service because of the large number of irreparable bomb craters.

On the morning of Friday the ninth the Biafran leader President Ojukwu summoned Ian Carpenter, a Rhodesian Major who was training Biafran saboteurs. He informed the Special Forces commander that Biafran armed resistance had finally collapsed and defeat was imminent. He wanted the Major and his South African teams to evacuate that night before they were caught by the Nigerians who were now less than ten kilometres away and were steadily advancing.

Ian, who in actual fact was none other than the now famous 44 Battalion commander Jan Breytenbach, rushed back to his jungle hideout and immediately radioed Jack Malloch asking for urgent extraction. Jack had been Biafra's main supplier of arms and ammunition since the

---

<sup>1</sup> 'War Dog. Fighting Other People's Wars. The Modern Mercenary in Combat' by Al. J. Venter. Published by Casemate, Philadelphia. ISBN 1-932033-09-2.

end of 1968 and his fleet of battered, bullet-holed aircraft had keep the country alive with their frantic nightly deliveries. Once the flight out had been confirmed Ian then proceeded to give orders for the dispersal and future operations of their guerrilla students. He and his men then issued all of their remaining vehicles, weapons and stores to their teams of Biafran saboteurs.

As darkness fell that evening Ian Carpenter and his men, operating under the direct orders of the French secret service, the SDECE, joined the tens of thousands of people converging on the bombed-out airstrip just outside the village of Uli.

He recalled; *“We left for Uli with our last vehicle in the company of our excellent Biafran guerrilla captain who we had nick-named ‘Vet Piet.’<sup>2</sup> I was genuinely sorry to leave him behind and wanted him to come back with us, but he would not. We had trained him for the job of overall guerrilla commander and he wanted to stay with his men. Vet Piet was to take immediate command of all the guerrillas and indications were that he did so most admirably. For several weeks after Biafra had fallen stubborn resistance was encountered in the area of our bit of jungle which took a very high toll amongst the Nigerians.”<sup>3</sup>*

Only seventeen aircraft landed at Uli that night, almost all of them Red Cross and Joint Church Aid humanitarian food and medicine flights. After hours of being ‘entertained by the sound of artillery fire uncomfortably close to Uli’, it was the early hours of the morning before Ian’s evacuation flight arrived. It was Jack’s Gabon-registered DC-7, TR-LOK which was captained by the Vietnam-vet Ed Davis.

According to the historian Michael Draper the flight ‘evacuated a number of French and South African advisors’, which included Ian and his battle-hardened men. It was broad daylight on the morning of Saturday the tenth of January by the time they landed back in Gabon’s capital city, Libreville. They were all relieved to have finally made it out of Biafra alive.

Although Ian was destined to go back.

---

<sup>2</sup> Actual name withheld by request.

<sup>3</sup> Personal correspondence with Jan Breytenbach - 29th January 2003

Even though the air traffic control 'bunker' at Uli was finally abandoned later that morning the French Secret Service wanted to make another flight into Uli. They needed to get a message to General Ojukwu and wanted to rescue some beleaguered French doctors and a large group of sick children who were in their care.

The flight was, of course, to be in one of Jack's DC-7's. The plan was to fly in a cargo of ammunition and petrol, and hopefully fly out the doctors, nuns and children. Ian and one of his trusted commando's volunteered to 'ride shotgun.' After a few brief hours of troubled sleep, as darkness gathered the crew and soldiers readied TR-LOK for yet another 'flight into Hell.'

While the aircraft was being loaded Uli was being savagely strafed and bombed in an effort to stop any further deliveries. The raids badly damaged the last few remaining landing lights and cratered the length of the operational runway. 'Airstrip Annabel' seemed to have been put out of action permanently. Yet the exhausted and starving ground crew once again got their shovels and spades and tried to smooth out the smouldering blast holes as quickly as they could, not really knowing if anyone else would be coming to help them or not.

The sound of artillery and machine gun fire was a steady rumble in the background.

With the panic, confusion and infrastructural damage, a single brave Priest went back to the 'control tower' bunker and switched on the equipment. In as calm a voice as he could muster he warned any last incoming flights of the damage, lack of order and likelihood that the airfield would be overrun by the Nigerian army at any moment. With no Air Traffic Control, hardly any landing lights and the airstrip now within artillery range, only a couple of aircraft landed, the last of which was Jack's TR-LOK.<sup>4</sup>

The crew of this last flight into – and out of – Uli included Captain Colin Miller, Flight Engineer Bill Rheeder and the two South African SDECE agents who were going along as load masters / body guards.

---

<sup>4</sup> 'Shadows, Airlift and Airwar in Biafra and Nigeria 1967 - 1970' by Michael Draper. Published by Hikoko Publications. ISBN 1-902109-63-5

Although it was dark the crew could see the whole Uli area was dotted with fires, punctuated by the bright explosions of falling artillery shells. After making a few low passes over the airfield they could see the roads were jammed with cars and terrified refugees, who were not even sure where to go anymore. As there was another aircraft on the tarmac with a throng of vehicles and people around it, Colin decided to attempt the landing.

Although it was bouncy due to the latest scattering of semi-repaired craters they got down okay and taxied into the nearest parking bay, where a scurry of wide-eyed loaders quickly started emptying the aircraft.

Colin stayed in the cockpit with the engines running ready to escape at a moment's notice, while Ian disappeared into the crowd to try and find someone who could get his message to President Ojukwu.<sup>5</sup> He found a senior ranking officer who instead of taking the message quickly led Ian to a small collection of vehicles at the side of the runway, where to his astonishment he found Ojukwu himself with some of his senior staff.

The President was surprised to see the white South Africa back in Biafra and was somewhat touched by this 'Boer' sincerely encouraging him to escape while he still could. Rocked by the almost continuous blast of incoming artillery fire, Ojukwu shook Ian's hand and thanked him for his concern, assuring him that sadly he was about to leave. His Super Constellation was already lined up on the runway with its props turning ready to fly him out to Abidjan.

At the far end of the runway there was a loud rip of small arms and machine-gun fire. The vast crowd of mostly women and children panicked and scattered. Ian knew that their time was up and that they needed to leave immediately.

Running back to the DC-7 he found it surrounded by a mass of desperate people, including many armed soldiers trying to fight their way onboard. They were trying to commandeer the aircraft to fly out the relatives of some of the fleeing government officials along with their piles of luggage. The fact that they were wanting to take luggage while leaving helpless children disgusted the Air Trans Africa crewmen.

---

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Colin Miller, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, January 1998.

Blocking the open cargo door at the back of the DC-7, the other SDECE agent was trying to hold back the surging mob. Seeing Ian's predicament, with a loaded pistol in his hand he screamed at the crowd telling them that the aircraft would not be going anywhere unless they made way for the 'pilot' to get back on board. Presuming that Ian was the pilot reluctantly the crowd parted, allowing him to climb up the flimsy ladder into the rear fuselage. The thin aluminium ladder was the only means of entering the aircraft, which was good for crowd control, but difficult to get the critically frail children up.

There was no sign of the French doctors and their sick kids, and no way of making contact with them. But amongst the throngs of pleading people were some Roman Catholic nuns who were trying to evacuate a large group of terrified orphans who Colin and the crew decided to help instead.

It was 2 a.m.. The Nigerian forces were less than four hundred metres away, held back by a thinning line of exhausted defenders, all of whom were running out of ammunition.

Ian takes up the story; *"At this time Ojukwu took off in his Constellation which seemed to increase the frenzy of the crowd. I was told by the crew that the Nigerians were attacking the far end of the runway and evidently artillery shells were falling dangerously close to the DC-7. My buddy and I were too busy trying to organise the ordered embarkation of the children to notice. Some of the 'brave' VIP officers ignored our attempts and scrambled past the children to force their way on board. Some made it but the flimsy ladder collapsed under the heavy load of the fully kitted men. We then tried to get a truck backed up to the rear entrance. The nuns tried to organise the children onto the top of the truck but suddenly what sounded like AK-47 fire started from very close quarters.*

*Whether it was panicky Biafrans shooting at the plane or Nigerians who had managed to break through – probably both – I could not tell. The fact was that the plane was now under direct fire meant that the time had finally come to leave, and for good. I informed the pilot and he opened the throttles. The props had been idling all along so we rapidly taxied out, followed by farewell shots from the frustrated crowds of Biafrans and the equally flummoxed Nigerians, who, no doubt, wanted to capture the plane and crew intact."*

Leaving the scattering throngs of refugees behind and leaping over fresh craters, the old aircraft with its terrified passengers and perforated fuselage scurried away, literally through a closing net of gunfire and falling mortar bombs.

Working his way through to the cockpit Ian noted, *“Captain Miller sidestepped some nasty, smouldering craters in the runway and managed to pull her up in probably the shortest take-off of his flying career.*

*We were the last plane out of Uli. If it was not for my buddy, I could still be rotting away in some Nigerian prison or pushing up the daisies next to Uli’s potholed runway.”<sup>6</sup>*

What became of the last piles of supplies left on the side of the runway and of the thousands of terrified women and children left running way in all directions no-one knows.

All help was gone.

The world’s media was focused on Vietnam and there was no-one left to report on the plight of the dying Biafrans or to answer their prayers for at least a quick death. They were to become nothing more than a tragic statistic in the history of a particularly bloody corner of Africa.

Forty-eight hours later Major-General Philip Effiong, the highest ranking Biafran army officer still alive and in command of any soldiers at all, broadcasts what was essentially an unconditional surrender. Very early the next day, Tuesday the thirteenth of January 1970, a field surrender was signed at Amichi officially ending Biafra’s thirty one months of existence.

The war was over. As was the largest civilian airlift in history.

And with defeat, the futility of the years of trying to save Biafra and her people was devastating. Steve Cook summed it up as follows; “A hastily assembled cast of smugglers, dreamers, mavericks and ministers came together on a stage where a tragedy of life and death was played. For two years, daring fliers carrying mercy supplies in rickety machines roared into the dominion of Hell itself. Though most of the pilots survived, millions of those they were trying to

---

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Jan Breytenbach, Sedgefield, South Africa, May 2004.

save perished. It was a noble effort that would end as an exercise in futility, now nearly forgotten.”<sup>7</sup>

As for Jack Malloch, his first sanctions-busting ‘meat run’ had been in October 1969 and over the three months before the fall of Biafra he had done several more meat flights, building the business into a regular weekly delivery for the Gabonese army bases in Libreville and Port Gentile. The day after the final surrender of Biafra, Jack captained another ‘meat run’ To Gabon with Captain Roger Brackley as First Officer.

The flight gave Jack an opportunity to see his airlift crews and get a first hand debriefing, as well as meet his SDECE clients to plan the future. Then, before heading back to Salisbury Jack made a refuelling stop at São Tomé to fill-up once more with their high-octane fuel while the stocks were still available. There were more than fifteen humanitarian airlift aircraft, mostly C-97 Stratofreighters, Constellations and DC-6’s, all still parked and loaded with food and medicine. They waiting for permission from the Nigerians to deliver the aid to the starving population in the Delta region. Britain and the US had also pledged additional aid flights.

That permission never came and the tons of critical aid was never delivered. Instead the Nigerians insisted that they could resolve the ‘internal matter’ by themselves.

No-one was allowed in to report on what actually happened to the hundreds of thousands of skeletal survivors of the war, and the inevitable retribution that followed. The world simply moved on.

© Alan Brough. All rights reserved. No part of this article can be reproduced without the written permission of Alan Brough

**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.**

**Simply email: [admin@exmontibusmedia.co.za](mailto:admin@exmontibusmedia.co.za) and place your order.**

---

<sup>7</sup> ‘Ghosts of Sao Tomé’ by Steve Cook, Flight Journal, December 1999