



Biafra's Air Force

By MICHAEL DRAPER

ON May 30, 1967, the Republic of Biafra came into being and subsequently an air element was organised—but only as a motley collection of types acquired from dubious sources. On April 23, a week before the Republic was announced, Eastern Government rebels had hi-jacked a Nigerian Airways F-27 Friendship whilst on a scheduled service from Benin City to Lagos. The pilot and co-pilot had their headphones forcibly removed and, at gun-point, were forced to fly the aircraft, 5N-AAV, and its twenty-seven passengers to Enugu, the capital of Nigeria's Eastern Region. The passengers (including Nigerians, Americans, British, Irish, and Italians) were then searched, and after spending the night in a luxury hotel, returned the next morning to Benin City by road. Thus did the Biafrans acquire their first aircraft—destined to become a proud but ill-fated bomber.

More aircraft were needed for impressment into the embryo air arm as the Biafrans wanted to bomb Nigeria, to bring her to her knees. On June 29, the first of two civilised Douglas B-26s flew into Port Harcourt. It was painted dark grey overall and carried a small American registration. Its possible source was indicated by the Cuban crew. A second B-26 was acquired from a French civilian aerial survey company. Both aircraft later flew to Enugu, where they were to be based. Later a B-25 Mitchell was acquired and based at Port Harcourt from where it was flown by an ex-*Luftwaffe* pilot, Fred Herz.

Several sources have stated that the Biafrans have used a C-47 Dakota, and that a Nigerian Airways Dakota was hi-jacked. It is more probable that it was, in fact, a Ghana Airways aircraft. Early in June 1967 a Ghana DC-3 landed at Port Harcourt, and shortly afterwards developed engine trouble. Although the airport was a maintenance base for several other companies, the pilot was ordered to return to

Lagos immediately. He did so, on June 15, and it is safe to assume that the aircraft was left to the mercy of the Biafrans. Indeed, when Federal forces recaptured Port Harcourt airport on May 20, 1968, they destroyed a Biafran B-25 and a Dakota.

At Port Harcourt the Biafrans confiscated several helicopters abandoned by the oil companies. Bristow Helicopters suffered the loss of several Widgeons, and Aero Contractors at least one Alouette. The Alouette was flown for a while by the Biafrans but crashed at Udi airstrip, and when advancing Federal troops took the airstrip in late January 1968, they proclaimed the wrecked helicopter to be a "captured Biafran home-made tank". Udi had been under fire for some weeks prior to its loss but one helicopter escaped damage during the siege and Federal troops found it to be the former Bristow Helicopters' Widgeon, 5N-AGA, and still intact. It was flown back to Lagos on February 7 and impressed into the Nigerian Air Force who repainted the helicopter and gave it the serial NAF510. It was exhibited on February 14 at Dodan Barracks, Lagos, from where it later operated. Another former Bristow Widgeon was flown by the Biafran Air Force but crashed near Uzuakoli early in 1968. Local villagers believed the incident to be part of a Federal landing force, and in their panic seized the uninjured crew and promptly lynched them!

In late 1966, before war was declared, the Eastern Government had ordered a Hawker Siddeley HS 125, 5N-AER, for delivery later that year. It was despatched from England in December 1966, but its flight was terminated at Lagos, and it duly returned to England. In 1967, after independence had been declared, a French crew ferried the aircraft to Enugu, but not until after a curse had been placed upon it by a Federal ju-ju doctor. The curse seemed to pay off, for early in 1968 it was damaged by small-arms fire. After



FACING PAGE: Five Biafran MFI-9Bs scramble from the bush strip for an attack on Port Harcourt airfield.

ABOVE: The initial five Mili-Trainers stand "at the ready" at their Orlu base. Note the rocket pods and the different camouflage patterns. Seated in front, from left to right, are Martin Lang, Willy Bruce, Gustav von Rosen, Auguste Okpe, and Gunnar Haglund.

being patched up, it was flown to Sao Tome Island for more permanent repairs. However, these were never effected, and the aircraft still resides in a corner of the hangar there.

Also hanged at Sao Tome are two Fouga Magister fuselages, having been shipped from Lisbon. Their original source was Austria where they operated as 4D-YF and 4D-YI of the Austrian Air Force. Their respective serials (and c/ns) were 199 and 212, but they were stripped of all insignia, although their identities were still visible. They were reported at Lisbon on May 23, 1968, but ironically for the Biafrans their wings were destroyed at Bissau, Portuguese Guinea, whilst aboard one of Hank Wharton's gun-running Super Constellations.

One particular aircraft that the Biafrans almost acquired was an American-registered Riley Dove, which arrived at Port Harcourt on July 6, 1967, from Switzerland. The Swiss-born pilot, Andre Juillard, proclaimed that he was on a "sales mission", and whilst at Port Harcourt he flew several coastal reconnaissance flights with a Biafran Army major aboard, but the events were shrouded in mystery. Two days after its arrival a 24-hour guard was placed around the Dove, but after a week or so the aircraft left in circumstances just as mysterious as those of its arrival. Here the writer can only assume that this was undoubtedly the aircraft seized at Algiers on July 13 while making a transitional refuelling stop. According to reports the machine had "Swiss occupants".

From their small, but varied, selection of aircraft the Biafrans managed to produce a fairly effective wave of aerial strikes against Federal targets. Early raids were mostly made by the B-26s, as they outlasted the other types. The prized F-27 Friendship was lost during an attempted bombing raid on Lagos, on October 5, 1967. Again, the details are shrouded in mystery, for the Federal Government

claimed to have shot it down with anti-aircraft fire. The generally accepted story is that a group of mercenary pilots had set out from a wild drinking party, with the intention of destroying Lagos. The armament is thought to have been a full load of home-made bombs which were to have been pushed out through the fuselage door. One of the bombs probably exploded on board. At any rate, all the crew were killed, and the Nigerians proudly placed the bodies of the "white mercenaries" on show in the capital.

Initial raids conducted by the Biafran B-26s were:
August 12, 1967, Lokoja

Two B-26s bombed the town of Lokoja, destroying Federal military installations, and a ferry used to move Federal troops across the river.

August 16, 1967, Bonny One B-26 attacked a Federal landing force, crossing the Northern border of the Mid-West State, near Bonny.

August 19, 1967, Kano One B-26 attacked Kano airport, damaging a parked aircraft, and setting airport buildings alight.

August 20, 1967, Kano A repeated raid by a B-26 against the airport, destroying several Mig-17s.

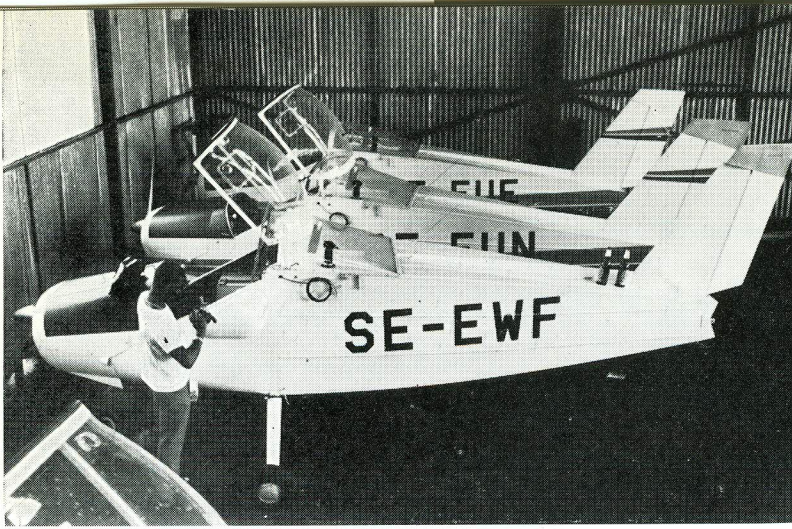
Kano airport had been closed to commercial aircraft on August 13 and immediately used by the Federal Government as its arms build-up centre. Russian Antonov An-12s regularly flew in with cargoes of Mig-17s, and armed L-29 Delfins, from Soviet bloc sources. The first operational sortie by these warplanes was against the Biafran airfield of Onitsha, and nearby Benin City, on August 30.

Fighting in the north progressed steadily and on August 12 Federal troops claimed to be within 28 miles of Enugu, the Biafran capital. Within a month the town was captured, advancing Federal troops having raided the airport on September 10, destroying one of the B-26s, and damaging airport buildings. The Commander of the Biafran Air Force, Lt Col Chude Sokei, denied the raid and stated that the airport was still functioning as usual. If the airport was still functioning, it was doing so in Federal hands—as was the second B-26, captured intact!

Thus Biafran superiority became another hard luck tale; the tables had turned, and the Eastern Region "rebels" faced a gradual retreat. The first real sign came with the

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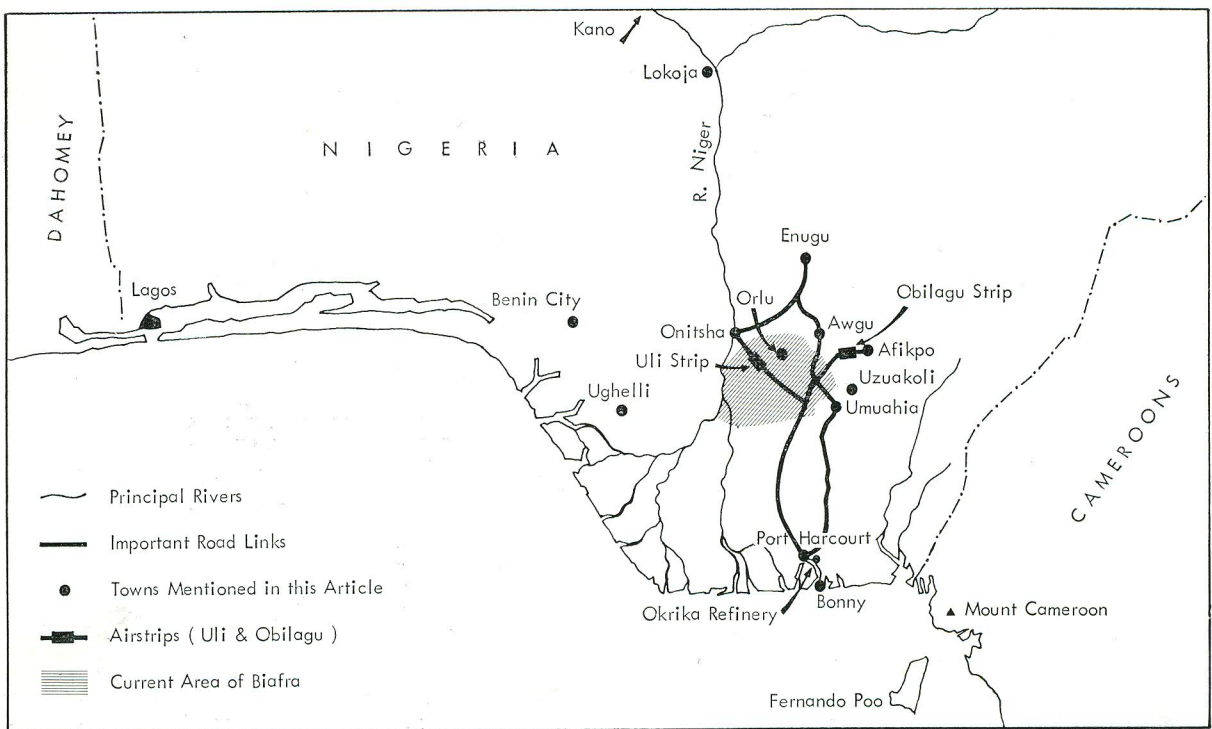
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Mili-Trainers SE-EUE, 'EUN and 'EWF are assembled at Libreville, Gabon, prior to their flight to Biafra.



Bristow Helicopters' Westland Widgeon 5N-AGA abandoned at Udi airstrip by the Biafrans in January 1968. The Biafran troops camouflaged the aircraft with leaves and branches to protect it from air attacks.



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recapture of Port Harcourt. It needed three Federal infantry battalions to take the town and the surrounding areas—one unit taking the airport, a second moving north-westwards from the blazing fuel storage tanks at Okrika refinery, and a third taking the industrial towns at the northern approaches. The battle for Port Harcourt was one of the fiercest of the war, the Federals having attacked by sea, landing in the Bonny channel. Much of the town's damage was caused by the retreating Biafrans. Angry mobs burned down the Shell-BP headquarters on May 3 as part of a resolution to systematically destroy all British investments in Biafra. By May 20 it was all over, the town was in Federal hands and the airport, five miles north-east of the town, could now only be used to handle Federal reinforcements.

The loss of Port Harcourt produced the turning-point in the war, and the loss of Awgu airstrip, on June 17, meant that Biafra's only link with the outside world existed virtually through the Uli (Ihiala) airstrip—Airstrip *Annabelle*—although the International Red Cross was working on a new strip near Afikpo.

Following the loss of the B-25 Mitchell at Port Harcourt, the Federal Nigerian Air Force quite rightly claimed full air superiority over the whole of Nigeria, although it was far from effective. During September 1968, in Umuahia, the Biafran administrative capital, it became clear that if the Biafran borders were to expand, then an air element had to be re-formed, if only to protect the nightly arms and relief airlift. Discussions were held, both in Europe and on Biafran soil, but rarely was a solution found. The most favourable suggestion put forward was for a collection of ex-World War II fighters to escort the gun-planes into Uli, but the pilots preferred to fly alone, for the Egyptian-piloted NAF Migs were rarely a threat at night anyway. Another plan was the use of the Anson G-AWMG as a domestic supply carrier, flying supplies to roughly-prepared strips close to the front-line. This scheme came to an abrupt end when 'MG crashed at Uzuakoli, on September 3.

Count Carl Gustav von Rosen was, at this time, flying Transair Sweden DC-7Bs into Uli, but he spent much of his time staying with the World Council of Churches representatives in Umuahia, so conveniently near Colonel Ojukwu's bunker. He saw a possible peace solution if the Biafrans could equal the Nigerians in military power and force a stalemate in the fighting. This view was also held by some of Ojukwu's top officers, and thus von Rosen's plans were executed with some ease.

It was decided that a Tanzanian syndicate should be responsible for the purchase of a small fleet of Swedish Malmo MFI-9B Mili-Trainers, a type recommended by von Rosen. Soon afterwards both parties approached an Italian doctor, who had previously been an agent for several

Swedish aircraft companies, with an interest in procuring five MFI-9Bs for use within Biafra distributing light loads of medicines, etc—a mission once reserved for the British Ansons. The acquisition of these aeroplanes originated from a proposed plan to form a company, Aircraft Lease Company, to hire planes for ore-prospecting. The role of the company, if it was ever actually formed, thus changed to selling to von Rosen, who at this time had a respectable record of flying relief into Biafra under the worst conditions. Part of the contract decreed that the aircraft were to be flown to Paris, dismantled, and air-freighted to Libreville, Gabon. During April 1969 MFI-9Bs destined for Biafra passed through Rotterdam en route for Paris where, in fact, they were dismantled, and each fitted with rockets and extra fuel tanks. It is reported that they arrived at Libreville on May 19, and were immediately assembled and flown into Biafra. The crews consisted of von Rosen himself with two Swedish and two Biafran pilots. One of the Biafrans, Augustus Opke, was shortly afterwards made Commander of the Biafran Air Force.

Aiming to reduce Nigeria's military strength, attacks were made against the airfields from which the Federal Air Force launched raids on Biafra. Initial attacks were:

- May 22, 1969, Port Harcourt Four MFI-9Bs, piloted by Rosen, Lang, Haglund and Opke, attacked Port Harcourt airport at midday. Two Mig-17s and two Il-28s damaged/destroyed.
- May 24, 1969, Benin Airfield One Mig-17 and one Il-28 destroyed, six people killed and eight injured.
- May 27, 1969, Enugu Airport Two Il-28s and two Mig-17s destroyed. One DH Heron damaged. Airport buildings damaged also. (Il-28s in this raid were claimed by Biafra to be Canberras.)
- May 28, 1969, Port Harcourt Against the Shell-BP refinery at Port Harcourt, but little, if any, damage caused.

Count von Rosen returned to Sweden early in June, and during his absence the Biafran Government procured further quantities of these small, but effective, aircraft. The Biafran pilots made more attacks, notably against the large oil refinery at Ughelli on June 18, and at Kokori, in Western Nigeria on July 28.

The "Biafran Babes" as the aircraft are called, are currently based near Orlu, the new Biafran capital, from where effective and calculated raids are made against Federal targets.

AIRCRAFT USED BY THE BIAFRAN AIR FORCE

Type	Markings	C/n	Acquired	Remarks
Douglas DC-3	9G-???		June 15 67	Ex-Ghana Airways? Destroyed Port Harcourt May 20 1968
Douglas B-26 Invader	N12756?		June 67	Destroyed at Enugu Sep 1967
Douglas B-26 Invader	F-????		June 67	Believed to be F-BMKT/ZS-ESX or F-BNTM/ZS-EUT. Captured at Enugu Sep 1967
Fokker F.27 Friendship 200	5N-AAV	10216	Apr 23 67	Ex-Nigeria Airways. Destroyed over Lagos Oct 5 1967
Hawker Siddeley HS 125 Srs IB	5N-AER	25099		Ex HB-VAU. Damaged and currently stored at Sao Tome
Hiller UH-12E	5N-ABY	2233		Abandoned by Shell at Ughelli Aug 1967. Not used
Hiller UH-12E4	5N-AGE	2129		Abandoned by Shell at Ughelli Aug 1967. Not used
Malmo MFI-9B Mili-Trainer		44	69	Ex SE-EUN
Malmo MFI-9B Mili-Trainer		51	69	Ex SE-EWE
Malmo MFI-9B Mili-Trainer		52	69	Ex SE-EWF
Malmo MFI-9B Mili-Trainer		53	69	Ex SE-EUL
Malmo MFI-9B Mili-Trainer		59	69	Ex SE-EUE
North American B-25 Mitchell				Reported destroyed at Port Harcourt May 20 1968
Sud Alouette 2	5N-???		July 67	Destroyed at Udi. Believed to be 5N-ACI
Westland Widgcon	5N-ABV	WA/H/1	July 67	Ex G-AKTW/G-APPR
Westland Widgcon	5N-AGA	WA/H/3	July 67	Ex G-ALIK/G-APPS. Captured at Udi Feb 1968
Westland Widgcon	5N-AGL	WA/H/140	July 67	Ex G-AOZD

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