

The 420th AREFS Great Adventure In the Belgian Congo- II By Dan Weber

My other memory of Elisabethville was probably the worst I have ever felt while on flying status. There can be no worse feeling than being in a remote location thousands of miles from home and feel the aircraft lurch as a landing gear breaks through the asphalt taxiway crust.

We were being directed by an unknown Caucasian in civilian clothes, perhaps a MATS or UN person and he had us close to the edge of the taxiway so the hoses could easily reach the tanks. Suddenly we lurched to the right and stopped. As soon as we stopped, he took off running and we never saw him again. At any rate we had already cut our outboard engines and had not squared the props so this prevented damage to number four engine prop. The engineer and I talked this over and decided that we would first offload the fuel we had brought in and then transfer wing fuel from the low side to the high side. When all that was complete, we dropped flaps and steadily brought up the power on the inboard engines until suddenly the aircraft lurched up out of the hole. I rolled forward a ways and then we put the engines in reverse and carefully backed up some distance, missing the hole, until we got to the concrete ramp and could turn around. That was enough excitement for one day.

When it became apparent that traffic control was minimal, and that there was very little traffic, we opted to fly low level and enjoy the scenery. There was one river in particular that we like to fly down. This river had broad sandy beaches and would be loaded with crocodiles sunning themselves. As we flew down at low level there would be a tremendous turmoil as the crocs all raced for the water. While we could not view it from up front, the refueling operators in the back always enjoyed the show.

On some days we would be flying along in the middle of nowhere and suddenly spot a small car, one that looked like a VW, chugging along a dirt track. Where he was going or where he had been, we never could imagine. But one day, we saw a huge buzzard at our altitude and so I decided that was enough low level. If we had hit one, I might still be in N'Djili waiting for a new windshield!!

Upon our return in the afternoon from a mission, we would taxi on to the single point refueling pits which were right in front of the terminal building—a nice concrete structure of two or three stories. Pan Am and Sabena jets came through Leopoldville a couple of times a week and so we had very little competition for the pits. Normally, we would park on the 115/145 pit, refuel, then start the inboards, and with the refueling operators shooing everybody away, we would back up a couple of hundred feet or so and then pull on to the adjacent JP-4 pit. A crowd of locals always gathered to watch us back up. Following that we would taxi away and park the aircraft for the night to be guarded by a very sharp Nigerian soldier armed with a rifle. We never went to the aircraft at night!

Early on, we had a delay in getting serviced one afternoon by the ground servicing man, a local. So I thought about it for a minute or two and then told "Chef" ("Chief") that I would give him a full box (one meal) of the rations that we carried if he would take care of us pronto each time we parked on the refueling pits. His eyes lit up like a Christmas Tree and we had good service from Chef after that. All jet aircraft, regardless of manufacture, passing through N'Djili were called "Boeings" by the

Chef and I'll bet the Boeing PR folks loved that.

One time after finishing our refueling, a fellow came up to me wearing civilian clothes and with a heavy Russian accent asked why we were wearing civilian clothes when we were "flying an aircraft with 'U.S. AIR FORCE' in one meter high letters on the side?" I just smiled at him and walked off.

Late one afternoon, after refueling, some of the crews and I were having a drink up on the balcony of the terminal building. A Sabena four engine jet landed and taxied to a stop below us. Within a few minutes work stands were rolled up to the fuselage and the ground crew put large peel-off decals over the Sabena letters until it read "Air Congo." We found out later that the president of the Congo was going to Europe to attend a conference with other African leaders and he was not going to let himself be outdone.

One morning shortly after take off, number two engine died on us and after we feathered the engine, we began to dump down to our maximum landing weight. As we circled the field and dumped, I became very concerned about all this as we were so far from home. Upon landing, I went into the Ops facility and got on the short wave radio net called Twilight and was patched through to Maintenance Control at RAF Sculthorpe. I suppose I talked to Horace Furlough, a TTAL member, and explained the situation. Much to our surprise about 5 or 6 days later a MATS C-124 arrived with a new engine for us.

During our enforced idleness, we made some trips into downtown Leopoldville where we visited the local markets and bought paintings or woodcarvings to take home. I still have two nice paintings which hang in my family room and cost me more to frame in the U.K. when we returned home than what I paid for them. By this time the Belgians who had lived and worked in the Congo were slowly returning and we went out to one of their country clubs in Ma Valley several times for a swim. Bikinis were still nonexistent in the U.S. at this time, but very much the European fashion, so we enjoyed the scenery around the pool.

Once a week I journeyed into the offices of a major oil company in Leopoldville to settle my fuel accounts. The lady I worked with was a Belgian who spoke perfect English. She had recently returned to Leopoldville and taken up residency again hoping there would be no further problems. She told me that her yard boy had brought a friend that morning and asked her if she could employ the friend as well. It seems he worked for Coca Cola, but when the Belgians fled the plant closed. She replied that she was sorry but could not help. He was very disappointed and he then asked her when independence would be over so he could get his old job back..

We met up with some Swedish UN troops at one point during our stay and one day they asked some of us if we wished to accompany them out to a village in the bush. They were hoping to acquire some souvenirs prior to their departure. They assured us it would be safe as they would be armed and so off we went to a village called Kintubu. After negotiating a terrible mud track, we arrived to be greeted by the village chief. He had all his displays of wealth laid out to show us—a bicycle with flat tires and a radio that did not work. We took pictures, bought a few items and tipped the chief for sharing his village with us.

(To be continued in the next issue)