

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

(This is the third and final part to this series)

But with the arrival of the engine it was time for all of us to get back to work. I told the crew chief that we were all available to him and that we, meaning the flight crew, would do whatever was necessary to help. I knew that there was a crane, sort of an A-frame unit and a forklift and old rubber tires scattered around the area belonging to Sabena or some other company. It appeared that we would not get the support that we needed so Jim Callahan and I went downtown and bought several bottles of booze—good stuff—and soon we had the A-frame and the forklift. We checked the old tires for anything that slithered or could bite and brought them into the hanger. We towed the aircraft partially into the hanger and thus we started the engine change. The old engine was removed and with the A-frame and forklift we carefully laid it on the old tires. Then we hung the new engine and started the all night process of installing it.

By the next morning all systems had been hooked up except for the fire extinguishing system. It seemed that the final piece of tubing was a tiny bit too short. The crew chief was rather perplexed about that, so I told him that I had over 2,000 hours in that aircraft type and had yet to have an engine fire, so we would just cap it off. I kept a straight face until he was about to explode and then we laughed together. I then suggested that we back off all the fittings and connections a turn or two and see if that would allow the firewall joining to be complete. I presume that is what he did.

We test hopped the aircraft later that morning and then I sent a TWX back to RAF Sculthorpe giving them our in-commission time. I added a little note at the end that read, "We have done so much with so little, we can now do anything with nothing." Sometime later when the squadron was disbanding, the Ops Officer, Dick Loucks, gave that TWX to me as he had saved it. Nice touch.

We had lost some flying time being down for a week, but in the end we still logged the third most flying time for the Congo TDY and still hauled 52,000 gallons of fuel. As we approached the end of our Congo tour our Kamina liaison, "Robbie," an Indian Army lieutenant and Sandhurst graduate, wanted to serve us lunch the last time we unloaded fuel there and to this we agreed. However, I insisted that he tell his batman to go easy on the curry powder as we were not used to heavily spiced food. This he agreed to.

On the day of the lunch, Robbie picked us all up in his jeep and took us to his quarters in the base housing area. Lunch was very nice, but I soon could tell that my idea of lightly spiced food and his batman's ideas were not exactly the same! Oh boy. We had been told that the base water was not potable and so I allowed the crew members to each have a beer while I drank what little bottled water Robbie had.

When we arrived back at the aircraft we were met by a number of UN troops, Swedes, I believe, who were looking for a ride back up to N'Djili. They were drinking from several bottles of champagne to celebrate the end of their tour. I explained that we were not a transport, but they pleaded with us to take them. At this time I was crying so much from lunch that I kept a hankie in my hand and tears were my main concern. I finally relented and they offered us all some champagne from several more bottles that suddenly appeared. En route back to Leopoldville, I con-

tinued to cry and to make it worse our water jugs were now empty. Finally, out of desperation I agreed to a glass of champagne—anything to help stop the tears. So for the first and last time, I had an alcoholic drink while flying in violation of USAF regulations! I can still remember wiping my eyes on final. By now we were coming to the end of our TDY and Tom Kennan, a TTAL member, along with George Lee, his navigator and TTAL member, arrived with their crew to replace us. After a short overlap, we prepared to depart for RAF Sculthorpe. By this time our aircraft had a series of problems that we could live with, as they were not major safety items. We had one recip engine that we only applied partial power to on take off, and I believe we had problems with one of the jet engines, and there was various radio and other electronic equipment that did not working properly. The aircraft was flyable but we did have concerns, so it was certainly time to go home.

On 12 March 1963, we launched out of N'Djili and headed for Lagos, Nigeria as our first stop for refueling. We could not use Kano in the interior of Nigeria, as there were massive dust storms in the area. Lagos was on the coast and was a good alternative stop. We lost a great deal of time in Lagos because we had to be serviced from trucks into individual wing tanks as there was no centerpoint refueling available. Also, we were being serviced by a British ex-pat who seemed to not like his job.

The weather forecast for the leg from Lagos to Wheelus was not even close to what we experienced and here we started to have some problems with navigation. En route we were under a high thick overcast which made day celestial impossible. Radar navigation across the Sahara was worthless, the ADF picked up nothing, but then there was nothing to pick up. So the only nav system available to us was TACAN at Wheelus, presuming it was operational. After some hours, Ron Heggan, our Nav, threw his hands up in disgust as we were 'temporarily disorientated.' We had now also picked up a lower cloud layer so that map reading was impossible although most maps had a disclaimer printed over the Sahara saying in effect, 'no data available.' Would we become another "Lady Be Good?"

Ron and I agreed that we would fly out time and distance on our 6 or 7-hour flight plan and then see what was available to us. Finally, as we approached the time limit, we received a weak signal from the Wheelus TACAN showing it to be about 190 miles off our left wing. I immediately made a ninety degree turn to a westerly heading and watched the DME unwind, much to my relief, and finally at about 100 or so miles we made contact with Wheelus and started our descent and finally broke into the clear. We spent the night there.

The next morning, I gathered the crew and told them we had two options, as I saw it, for this last leg. Our first option was to continue to use our UN call sign and fly west over the Med to the Atlantic and then north and northeast over the Bay of Biscay to the UK thus reversing our route to Wheelus the previous month. The second option was to file using our tail number and just go straight up over France thus saving a number of hours. Of course it was an unanimous decision, but I swore the crew to secrecy, as I was concerned about the political fall out if someone blabbed. So after an uneventful flight of 6 or 7 hours, we arrived back home at RAF Sculthorpe having (cont on P. 8)