

BIAFRAN T-6's



Three ex-Biafran T-6's at Tires, Portugal, August 1971. The forward T-6, 14800, bore the insigne of a French unit, EIALAA 1/320, shown below.

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All photographs by Author.

On the 30th of May 1967 the Eastern Region of the Federal Republic of Nigeria seceded under the name of 'The Republic of Biafra.' This was not accepted by the Nigerian Federal authorities, and on the 6th of July hostilities began. Air-warfare had played an important role in recent conflicts elsewhere and Biafra's Sandhurst-trained leader, Ojukwu, considered establishment of an air arm as vitally necessary, thus several types of American aircraft were hence acquired during the early summer. These were reported as a DC-3, two B-26's, and a B-25.¹ An attempt to obtain 16 Texans was less successful however, and they remained lying semi-derelict at a wharf in Lisboa, Portugal.²

In actuality, the number of T-6's involved is believed to be only 12, since in mid-1967 twelve partially disassembled French T-6G's arrived in the Lisboa harbor-area, reportedly earmarked for delivery to Biafra.³ Their identifies were:

1306 (50-1306) 'L'	114873 (51-14873) —
114770 (51-14770) '24'	14959 (51-14959) 'KK'
14794 (51-14794) 'KH'	14991 (51-14991) 'KG'
114798 (51-14798) 'KY'	15046 (51-15046) 'KC'
14800 (51-14800) '21'	115051 (51-15051) 'KC'?
14810 (51-14810) 'J'	115083 (51-15083) 'KI'

By May 1968 the initial Biafran Air Force consisting of a Fokker F-27 Friendship, a Hawker Siddeley HS-125 and several Westland Widgeon helicopters (in addition to the other American airplanes) had ceased to exist.⁴ It became operational again in May 1969 under the leadership of Count Carl Gustav von Rosen, the new

force consisting initially of 5 MFI Militrainers (Minicons). Agents kept looking for readily available heavier equipment however, and the T-6 with its experience in many theatres of war was a natural choice. Thus by June 1969 several of the Texans at Lisboa had been transferred to the aerodrome of Tires, west of Lisboa, for overhaul by SEAMA.⁵

The first three Texans arrived in Biafra during the first week of November 1969, after a complex flight from Lisboa or Tires by way of Bissau (Portuguese Guinea), Abidjan (Ivory Coast) and the Cap Verde islands.⁶ Four Texans had been expected, but on the delivery flight one crashed in the Niger Delta when Air Traffic Control at Uga, Biafra's main military base, did not switch on the runway lights. The Portuguese pilot then had to find Uli in the dark, but his emergency radio-calls were picked up too late by relief pilots on the airbridge.⁷ Another report suggests however that the T-6 was claimed as shot down by a Nigerian Mig 17, and that it crashed in the Benue State (North of Biafra).⁸

A special Texan squadron was formed under the leadership of Fred Herz, a former Luftwaffe pilot who had flown B-26's for the Biafrans earlier, and who lately had been travelling around Europe to purchase aircraft. The T-6's operated in close cooperation with the Minicons, and within a few days of their arrival two of the Texans were put into action on a combined operation with 3 Minicons. The target was Port Harcourt Airport, and although damage was limited, they forced the Nigerians to base their jets further away.





The strategy of the Biafrans was based on surprise hit-and-run attacks at dawn, the main task for the Texans being to keep the Nigerian Air Force at bay while the Minicons were attacking oil-fields. The aircraft had to go in at low altitudes, often below 100 feet, and were to zoom back to their own base before the Migs could get airborne. These bases were often unknown to the Nigerians, and were merely a well-camouflaged stretch of cleared bushland, or a converted road.

In the last few days of Biafra's independence delivery of Gloster Meteors was imminent, and these were to be used to escort aircraft on the nightly airlift to defend them against 'Intruder Oscar,' which was a Nigerian DC-3. The vast supplies of up-to-date equipment of the Federals proved however to be decisive, and the cease-fire and subsequent surrender put an end to Biafra's secession in mid-January 1970.

According to a report from Lisboa, six Texans had ultimately reached Biafra, but available reports on aircraft at Tires suggest that factually not more than the initial four were dispatched.⁹ In 1970 seven Texans remained at Tires, while another had been dismantled. Three of the seven were camouflaged, however, so it is possible that these had been on their way to Biafra at the time of surrender, or else that three fled Biafra on the eve of surrender. The latter would indeed make a total of six as suggested by the Lisbonese report.

Of the Texans that reached Biafra at least one was captured intact by Federal Nigerian forces, one being spotted at Lagos Airport on the 14th of May 1970 in a green all-over colour-scheme. The colours of the camouflaged aircraft at Tires can be described thus: basically matte olive drab-green on all surfaces, with patches of matte dark green outlined in extra-dark green (nearly black)

superimposed. The canopy-frame, radiomast and propellor-hub were in natural metal finish and the propellor blades were black with yellow tips. The pattern was different on each of the three aircraft.

In 1970 the group at Tires still included 14800, 14959, 15046, 115083, 114770, 14794, 14991 and 1306, and of these only 14800 was assembled complete.¹⁰ 1306 was a wreck, in natural finish but with some French markings. The four (of twelve mentioned earlier) not recorded as being there may by process of elimination be assumed as those delivered to Biafra in November 1969. In August 1971 Texan 115083 was not recorded there but may have been in one of the hangars which could not be inspected.

The Texans are surrounded with much secrecy, and the SEAMA people were not willing to reveal any details to this author. The local manager even had orders from his superiors to prohibit photography, and close inspection was not allowed. Confirmation of their original destination was at first not given either but a pointed question about the Biafran assumptions resulted in the more or less confirmative reply "How do you know that".....

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

1. Michael Draper, "Biafra's Air Force," *Aircraft Illustrated* Nov. 1968.
2. See also *Flying Review International*, March 1968.
3. -----Thayer. *The War Business: The International Trade in Armaments*. London: Weidenfield & Nicholson, 1969.
4. Op. cit., Draper, page 439.
5. SEAMA — Sociedade de Exploracao do Aerodromos e Manutencao de Aeronaves SARL (Limited Company for Exploitation of Aerodromes and Maintenance of Aircraft).
6. R. Caratina reported in *Aviation Letter*, May 1970, one Biafran T-6G at Abidjan/Port Boet Airport, not later reported.
7. Special Correspondent. "Biafra's Air Circus Plans More Oil Raids", *Manchester Guardian*, 9 Dec. 1969.
8. "Mig's vs. Minicons," *Flying Review International*, Feb. 1970.
9. *Flight International*, 1 August 1970.
10. A. le Nobel, in *Airfix Magazine*, July 1971, mentions the T-6's at Tires, also pictured in *Air Britain Digest*, January 1972.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

Thanks are due to L.A.D. Tavares and F. Spangenberg for additional information.

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Ton le Nobel became the North American T-6 Harvard specialist for Air Britain, having joined A-B in 1965 and the AAHS in 1969. Articles and letters on various aviation subjects have been published in some 15 different papers and magazines, mostly on the T-6 airplanes. He is a full time student at Amsterdam University, which provides a base for reference and a good methodological background for historical research. Material on T-6's had been collected since 1966, and various research trips have been made to England and Portugal.

