AIRLIFT TO BIAFRA

One Man’s Mercy Mission

In August this year a 24-year-old former bank clerk, Michael Draper, flew out from Bovingdon to West Africa in an ex-RAF Anson bought by Mercy Missions and sponsored by them to airlift food supplies into Biafra. The following account of what happened to the aircraft and its crew after they arrived at the island of Sao Tome off the West African coast, until their aircraft crashed in the Nigerian bush, has been written by a "Flight" staff member on the basis of Mr Draper’s verbal account. It gives a vivid first-hand picture of the sort of thing that has been going on over the past months in attempts to fly in supplies to the diminishing breakaway State of Biafra.

Were it not for the bitter civil war which its existence has provoked, Biafra would be little more than a new political name to most people. As it is, this independent State in Eastern Nigeria has provoked almost as much emotion, though in a different way and on a smaller scale, as has South Vietnam, although the number of white people involved has been relatively small. Most of these have been either journalists covering the war or aircrew involved in delivering arms or food to the beleaguered Biafrans. The latter operations have largely taken place from two islands off the West African coast, Sao Tome and Fernando Poo, and it was at the former of these that Anson G-AWMG, a former RAF Mk 21, arrived on August 17 with a crew of three aboard, carrying Oxfam supplies. The pilot was John Smith and with him were Ray Roberts, a photographer, ex-RAF, and Michael Draper, upon whose account of subsequent events this article is based.

Sao Tome is nearly 300 miles south of the coast of Biafra, while the other island base for these airborne relief supply operations, Fernando Poo, is 240 miles to the north-east, and it was there to which the Anson flew, arriving on August 18. Fernando Poo is the base for International Red Cross relief operations. There is also a French airlift of arms and supplies which operates from Gabon, as indicated on the accompanying sketch map (page 719).

Fernando Poo, part of Spanish Guinea, is an island about 25 miles long from north to south and about ten miles wide; on its east side is a mountain rising to 8,000-9,000 ft. Population is about 60,000 and the main town is Santa Isabel which is served by an airport with concrete runways. Some of the airlift aircraft which have been using it recently are seen in the photographs on this page.

The Anson occupants’ "passport" was the fact that they were carrying Oxfam supplies, but before they could do an airlift they had to make their number with the International Red Cross. At the time the Anson party arrived the Red Cross had ceased making flights into Biafra, ostensibly "for technical reasons," in fact because their aircraft were being shot-up. Their officials on Fernando Poo told the Anson crew that they had frozen all supplies. This meant that other organisations' supplies could not be "disentangled" from those stocked up for the Red Cross airlifts.

It happened then that a World Council of Churches representative came in from Sao Tome and chartered a Heron to transport his supplies from there to Fernando Poo. This move by another organisation to get more supplies into Biafra provided an opportunity for the Anson to airlift them in addition to those already sent out from the UK by Oxfam. The intervening period, while they were brought from Sao Tome, gave the crew an opportunity to repair the Anson, which had flown over 4,000 miles on its way out across Europe and round the coast of Africa and had gone through two tropical storms. The crew therefore worked on it and Iberia mechanics...