

ALGARVE NEWS TAKES A LOOK AT FARO

To those who arrive at Faro airport and view with nostalgia two Super Constellations and a Dakota standing sadly at the edge of the runway, this article might answer their questions. To others who never knew the story behind the planes, what I write now might simply add something to their holiday or to the next conversation with some friend in the Algarve.

I cannot recall exactly when the Biafra war started, nor can I indicate correctly its end, but I can tell you the period I write about was between May 1968 and October 1969.

I ran a bar in Faro at that time, and one night a group of real strangers came in for drinks. The person obviously in charge of the group was English, but all his colleagues were Irish. It turned out they were the crew of an aircraft just landed at Faro airport. They had booked into the Faro Hotel but had heard about our Bar. Money seemed to be no object to these chaps and, in addition to buying their own drinks, they were extremely generous to our other clients. We were to see quite a lot of these lads and their colleagues in the months ahead. They were, in their own small way, mercenaries!

The visits became regular, and we gradually became informed as to the reason for their trips. They were running guns. The schedule was this: leave Shannon for Faro; pick up instructions from a quiet coloured gentleman in the Hotel Faro; depart for Prague. Then it was Faro — Prague — Faro and then return to Shannon. They dropped off their load at Faro airport, with the authorities apparently turning a blind eye. No, we are not at the point of the Super Constellations yet!

The Irish group flew DC6's



Flying Mercenaries

for all the time I knew them.

In the meantime, another outfit loaded the guns onto these lovely aircraft and flew the weapons to help the Biafra armies, to an island off the mainland, called Fernando Pó. They then returned to Faro for more freight. And so it went on. The crews of the Constellations were totally international. Quite a number of the pilots were Americans, with the engineers being either British or German.

It's been such a long time, the names do not readily come to mind, but I well remember, as will some of our readers, two such engineers. Hans and Wolfgang. They had an enormous capacity for beer, and spent most of their free time at the then popular Ski Club on Faro Beach. They drank and laughed, but they were not easy to mix with. In fact, I can say we all felt rather afraid of them. The pilots were friendly and often spoke of

their families. One American flyer was called Hoppy. Where and how he got that unusual name I can't say. What we did know was that he just didn't trust people or banks. The story was that all the money he earned by his flying was stored in his suitcase.

We never knew how much they were getting paid, but it was plain that some large sums were involved. About the same time, another flying mercenary turned up with a Meteor Jet. I think he was Dutch, but the point was, in spite of advice from his comrades in arms, he flew off to join in the battles. He was told his fuel tanks were not sufficient, but he wouldn't listen. Nobody ever heard of him again.

The war was coming to an end, or so the papers said, and Hoppy was on his last flight (with his constant companion — the suitcase). His plane never made Fernando Pó, we later learned. His wife visited Faro many months later in the

hope that someone just might have heard something, but alas we couldn't help.

The Biafra war was over, and Faro ended up with four Constellations and the Dakota. The crews hung around waiting for their monies. After many delays and threats on their part, the organiser finally paid them. They then set about restoring two of the aircraft by removing the best from the planes that were to remain. When all was ready, one aircraft flew to the Bahamas, and the other went first to Lisbon and then — destination unknown.

There we have it; the sad tale of proud Super Constellations. If you fly to Lisbon, you will see at least another two such aircraft tucked away on the grass verges. It seems a pity they are left as a permanent reminder of a chequered past — war planes, mercenary aircraft. I think it is time they were removed, (we have been informed one has been sold and the other two are slowly being dismantled for scrap) so that arriving tourists will think only of sun swept beaches and manicured golf courses.



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