



## Axel Duch

Danish born Axel Duch has the reputation of being one of the most interesting men in Canadian Aviation. When he left school at 17 he was attracted to aviation, but, thinking his education insufficient to be a pilot, he went to sea instead. His first experience was as a cabin boy on a cargo/passenger ship which sailed to Vancouver and back via the Panama Canal. This was followed by a position as cook on a schooner, which would give him experience under sail. While unwrapping the newspaper from stores he had purchased for the ship, he saw an advertisement, by the Danish Military, for students to train as pilots. Only an elementary education was needed so he applied and was eventually accepted.

**Born:** Denmark about 1931

Initially planned to go to sea

Officer/pilot Royal Danish Airforce

Wife: Mimi

Flew for **CPA**, **PWA**, and **BC Airlines**

Chief Pilot Air Vietnam

Prominent in Biafran Airlift

Flew for Conair

Author of 2 books in Danish

Flyver – (Memoirs of a pilot)

LuftBroen til Biafra – (Air Bridge to Biafra)

Axel was one of the first to be trained as a jet pilot in the Danish Air Force after the German occupation. In 1951, while training in Texas with the USAF, the engine of his Harvard failed after takeoff and he crashed causing a hip injury which troubles him still; his instructor was unharmed. Once trained, he began a long and varied career in the cockpit. He spoke English, had been to B.C. as a sailor, and, around 1954, he found work as a pilot in Canada. He flew the DEW lines in the Arctic for **CPA** before their bankruptcy and flew for **PWA** out of Edmonton. He also flew for **BC Airlines** sometimes flying to Port Hardy but was never based there.

Axel left **PWA** for personal reasons, joined Air Vietnam as their Chief Pilot and married his second wife, Mimi, in Saigon. The war in Biafra was big news when he was on leave from Air Vietnam and he became one of the two founders of the Biafra Airlift. When a group of Danish Churches combined with other churches and formed “Jesus Christ Airlines” to fly in humanitarian aid, Axel was their first volunteer. He became Chief of Flight Operations soon after the airlift began, leading a group which made a total of 5,314 missions and more than 30 flights each night. The planes were considered illegal and were shot at and bombed by the Nigerian Airforce, killing 29 pilots and crew over the course of the airlift. Axel’s account of this time is recorded in ‘LuftBroen til Biafra’ (The Air Bridge to Biafra) and in English in an article of the same name, available in the Museum Resource Centre. Two million Biafrans died of starvation over the two years

civil war, but the airlift project saved up to a million more. At their peak, they operated 16 four-engine planes.

Following this, he was the first DC-6 captain for Conair and trained their crews. He also flew the TBM Avenger and A26 Invader for Conair and was at their 50th anniversary in 2019.

Axel is not only an aviator, he is also an author of two books and a painter. In 2024, he was living in West Vancouver

*More information can be found in Axel Duch’s books named above though no English translation is available. Justin de Goutiere has a story of him in “The Pathless Way”. More information is also available on the databases in the Museum Resource Centre.*

