

PM honours pilot's heroics

BY BRIAN WILFORD, THE DAILY NEWS SEPTEMBER 20, 2013



On Aug. 4, 1972, Ugandan President Idi Amin ordered the expulsion of all South Asians, saying, "I have dreamt that unless I take action, our economy will be taken over. The people who are not Ugandans should leave."

At first, people thought he was kidding.

But he wasn't. Some 60,000 men, women and children had 90 days to get out or face unspecified but dark consequences.

For Gordon Moul, a Vancouver Island pilot then working for Pacific Western Airlines, Amin's cruel dictum led to his hero's role in a flight to freedom - and, more than 40 years later, to an encounter last weekend with Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

Since most of these Ugandan citizens had British passports, the Commonwealth nations took the lead in organizing a massive airlift out of Entebbe airport on Lake Victoria.

The government of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau sought the help of the country's major airlines: Air Canada, CP Air and Pacific Western Airlines.

Capt. Moul was then just 40; nevertheless he was one of Canada's most experienced airline pilots.

As a boy in Port Alberni, he bought his first plane at the age of 15.

"It was a war-surplus Fairchild Cornell, call sign CF-ESC," he says. "I used it to get my commercial pilot's licence."

He achieved that milestone at 19 years of age.

"I was going to be a doctor," says Moul, now retired in Qualicum Beach and approaching his 82nd birthday, "but flying was a lot more fun."

When Pacific Western asked for volunteers for the Ugandan airlift, Moul stepped forward. He began flying from Lagos, Nigeria, on the west coast of Africa, across the Congo to Entebbe, then back across the Sahara Desert to the Canary Islands.

"The flying across the Congo and the Sahara was beautiful, at night the odd light twinkling in the desert. That was my favourite flight of all."

The grim scene in Entebbe was another matter. Even today, he still finds it profoundly disturbing. "I couldn't believe what I saw there. People were being rounded up, shot, brutalized," he said.

"Those who made it to the airport were allowed to leave with only what they could carry.

"It was a horror show, just a terrible thing."

Three months into the airlift, he and his crew were awakened around midnight in their Lagos hotel for a 2 a.m. departure.

It would be four hours to Entebbe. That would allow them to be out of Entebbe by 7 a.m. in the cool of the morning: After that, according to the manuals, it would be too hot for the loaded Boeing 707 to take off.

Upon landing, they were directed to taxi away from the main terminal building to a large hangar. Military police boarded the plane, and told Moul and his crew to stay where they were. No one was to leave the plane.

Moul advised an officer that they needed "a quick turnaround."

There was no response.

Soon they heard popping sounds from the hangar.

As a youth, Moul had been a prize-winning recreational shooter.

"I was aware what this popping meant," he recalls. "I did not share this information with the crew."

At noon, the hangar door opened and an officer came out and handed them the manifest, saying, "You go now."

Forty names had lines drawn through them.

By then, it was 114 F. Given the weight of the plane and cargo and the 3,785-foot elevation at Entebbe, this was a staggering 30 degrees too hot for take-off. Moul considered refusing to go. But, what would be the consequences of offloading the 75 passengers? "They would have shot the rest of them," he says. "It was unthinkable."

The crew distributed the passengers evenly around the plane. Moul tried to make the numbers work. But there was no way. "We were simply too high, too hot and too heavy to fly," he says. "We were truly in the hands of God."

And so they went, picking up speed on the taxiway, and engines redlined all the way down what was then one of Africa's longer runways.

With about 1,000 feet of runway left, Moul eased back on the control column and, miraculously, the more-than 300,000-pound craft was out over Lake Victoria.

It was also 10 knots below the stall speed, with all four engine temperatures over the redline.

"We should not have been airborne," he says.

But they were. And, burning 500 pounds of jet fuel a minute, the aircraft became lighter and gradually began to level off at a height of 50 feet over the lake.

About 10 miles from the approaching shore, Moul decided to attempt a flat turn. Any bank would have crashed the jet.

They could see the jet blasts on the water below and Moul knew "a greater power than us was at work. The nose came down, the speed increased, and the Lord gave this aircraft back to Bernoulli and his principles of flight."

Moul retired in 1991 after 40 years, two months and 17 days of continuous service, choosing to take his last flight not on a Boeing 747 or 767 but on a DC-10.

"I always liked the Douglas," he says.

He had flown 33,343 hours, over seven million miles, one of only a few in the world to do so.

On Wednesday last week, he got an interesting call. A member of the Prime Minister's Office whose hobby was aviation history had learned of Moul's story. He asked Moul if he was available on short notice. The Prime Minister wanted to meet him: Would he and his wife Sybil go to Vancouver? So it was that at 2:30 p.m. last Saturday, Myles Atwood, the Prime Minister's special assistant, ushered them into an eighth-floor office in the government building at 300 West Georgia St.

While they waited, B.C. Premier Christy Clark popped her head in and said, "Hello, Gordon."

"I've been very involved in Conservative politics most of my life," explains Moul, from John Diefenbaker ("one of the most remarkable men I ever met") to Brian Mulroney.

About 3:15 p.m., the Prime Minister came in and "we had quite a little chat."

After about 20 minutes, the Prime Minister said, "I have something I want to give you," and presented Moul with a citation marking his service at Entebbe.

The typed "Dear Captain Moul" had been crossed out by the Prime Minister and he had handwritten "Gordon."

"It has been my experience that quiet acts of heroism too often go unrecognized," the citation begins. "I am writing to you to express my personal admiration for your storied career as a pilot. In particular, I would like to acknowledge your courageous efforts at Entebbe."

"This is what we're here for," Harper told him. "It has gone unmentioned for too long."

He also presented the Moul's with a copy of the book *The Maple Leaf Forever - A Celebration of Canadian Symbols*, signed by himself.

Moul is deeply honoured by the citation, and points to one word in it: "altruism - it has quite a meaning, especially coming from him."

Last Friday, Moul had received word that his stage-four bladder cancer seems to have disappeared, so the citation from the Prime Minister capped off "a great weekend."

"It was one of the most humbling moments in my life," he says, "having the Prime Minister recognize something that happened that far back in time."