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Interview with Edmond T. Bridgwater

Conducted by D. Jacobs at UNICEF Headquarters

on 10 August 1983

Jacobs: Would you like to say who you are and your relation to the Nigerian/Biafran emergency of 1967-1970?

Bridgwater: I'm Edmond T. Bridgwater, previously Director, Supply Division of UNICEF, and the Biafra emergency was one of many we had experienced during my service with UNICEF.

Jacobs: Do you remember when you first became aware of this, probably it became serious around June or July 1968, UNICEF at that time was working closely with the International Committee of the Red Cross trying to find a way of gaining access to the people who were starving, especially children who were starving in Biafra. Does that re-awaken any memories after all these years?

Bridgwater: Only to the extent of the reams of cables that were coming back and forth each day. There did not seem to be any great possibility that the International Red Cross could handle the logistics of providing relief, food and other materials to the people in Biafra and it became fairly obvious that UNICEF would have to take a much larger participation than had been envisaged earlier on.

Jacobs: Who did you work with in those days? You were the Director of Supply; who else would have been in the meetings?

Bridgwater: Well, Mr. Labouisse, of course, the Executive Director; Dick Heyward, whose participation was very very significant and he of course conducted many many meetings in connection with either the programming or the actual operations of that programme, together with Louis Gendron, who was my Deputy Director of Supply Division. Louis Gendron made visits to other agencies including the Red Cross and as well as travelled to Nigeria to determine at first hand just how serious the situation was.

Jacobs: Yes, I think he accompanied Mr. Labouisse on the trip in July and early August 1968.

Bridgwater: Yes, he did.

Jacobs: He was seconded for a time either to the Red Cross or working directly with the Red Cross in Lagos. That took him away from being your Deputy?

Bridgwater: I don't believe he was "seconded".

Jacobs: He wasn't seconded?

Bridgwater: Not really seconded, but certainly he was released to participate in that operation for as long as he was needed. I can't even remember now how long he had to stay in the Biafra operation, but

of course he came back to Supply Division as my Deputy and remained in that post until he moved on to Personnel and Administration.

Jacobs: How did Supply operate in the Nigerian/Biafran situation, in general. I believe, that food stuffs came from all over, especially large quantities from the United States Government, but I think the medicine was brought principally from UNIPAC warehouses, is that right?

Bridgwater: Yes, nearly all of the medical supplies equipment and medicines did come out of UNIPAC. At first they were sent in what might be termed "bulk pack". Large containers of the single item or drug, later on medical kits of various kinds were put together or, if you like, assembled in the UNIPAC warehouse in Copenhagen and sent down in that form. It would be much easier to make distribution in a kit rather than individual items, much less work for the people in Biafra.

Jacobs: Was this one of the first big emergencies that UNIPAC was involved in? It was the biggest certainly.

Bridgwater: It was certainly the biggest but not by any means the first. I guess you might say our first operations were their first shipments of food that ever left the United States under the banner of UNICEF.

Jacobs: Well, I meant UNIPAC. UNIPAC probably came into existence under UNICEF at that point around 1968, it had just gotten organized.

Bridgwater: UNIPAC actually stemmed from a small medical supply warehouse which was located in the 3rd basement of the Secretariat building in New York.

Jacobs: Oh yes.

Bridgwater: So when we outgrew the space of availability in New York Headquarters buildings we had to find a site and located in Copenhagen by a take over of a previously used premises of small area at a time in about mid-1962. The operation began from there, took over if you like from the New York thing and expanded as space became available.

Jacobs: So a part of UNICEF's ability to respond to the Nigerian/Biafran situation was that you had a capacity of preparing this standard kind of kit, providing certain catalogue items, medicines and emergency medical supplies that could be sent in one kit in an emergency.

Bridgwater: Right, but we had in addition the capacity. What we had was the availability, which was much more important, I think, in any sense of the word. Regardless of the kind of emergency, if you need supplies it takes some time to gather them together, regardless of where they come from. Your procurement and your delivery time, your shipping time if it is involved, all adds to

the problem of getting goods to the site where they are needed, whereas the supplies being in stock in Copenhagen warehouse are available to go to work immediately. Sometimes planes were loaded in the same day, it was a whole aircraft load of supplies from the warehouse.

Jacobs: I've talked since this emergency in Nigeria/Biafra with people in the other relief agencies who came to work with UNICEF cooperatively during that particular emergency and have since have come to rely upon UNIPAC. I think that was a key emergency for getting UNICEF co-operating more closely with many of the large relief agencies.

Bridgwater: Yes, I think it undoubtedly had some bearing on the capability of providing these manifests of small items, many of which were of very low value but so costly to procure in relatively small quantities. The UNICEF requirements were quite substantial, so they could be bought at very good prices. The other agencies then began to realize that it was the way to handle it if they had a requirement of similar items. They would simply issue an order on UNICEF to pack and ship to their destination, then we would be reimbursed.

Jacobs: As I recall during the Biafran situation here in New York those working closely with you were Jack Richmond, on medicines, Ron Hill on CSM and, I think, the development of K-mix-2 (to help to treat children who were suffering protein malnutrition ) and Joe Parenti particularly on procurement of large shipments of food

from the US Government and maintaining contact with Catholic Relief Services and Church World Service. Were those the principal supply people?

Bridgwater: Yes. At that period Joe Parenti was handling the food stuffs, the surplus food stuffs from various governments but mainly the United States. He saw to the applications and the actual movement of the goods to their final destinations. And, of course, he attended all the interagency meetings in relation to the requirement of foods. But it was pretty much restricted to food stuffs; Joe did not get into, say, the planning side of anything other than food, whereas Jack Richmond took part in the meetings if there were other material requirements, particularly medical. Jack was of course a long employee and a very valued one and had many years of experience in the medical field. Not a degree -- he didn't have a degree of any kind -- but he certainly had the experience both practical and academic.

Jacobs: Am I correct in remembering that Ron Hill was working closely with the manufacturers who developed these children's formula foods, corn-soy a milk mix (known as CSM) and also the K-mix-2, which was an even better product for treating a child suffering protein malnutrition? It was developed during the course of this emergency, I believe. That was Ron Hill, wasn't it?

Bridgwater: Very definitely, Ron was working on it, but as to the actual timing of that particularly mixture, I'm not absolutely certain.



Jacobs: And Ed Kenny was handling shipping, I believe. The first ship, I remember, the first ship that went out was the Orient Exporter which was carrying 5,000 tons of food from the US Government. Ed Kenny handled the shipments of that kind.

Bridgwater: As our shipping officer, he would be in charge of the movements, together with Joe Miranda who did many of the bookings, but most of the charter was done by Ed.

Jacobs: Now, the other aspect of this that I recall you being involved in was the search to try to find cargo aircraft more suitable for the two airlifts. Am I correct in remembering that you had had service in the Canadian Air Force?

Bridgwater: Yes, that's true.

Jacobs: So you were an expert on aircraft?

Bridgwater: Hardly an expert.

Jacobs: Well, you knew about aircraft. And, I believe, there were two times in the summer of 1968, Mr. Heyward was seeking C-130s, the Hercules, a much superior aircraft that was needed if the airlifts were to get in more food. Then after September 1st, when Mr. Labouisse met with the head of the Red Cross in Geneva, he set out on a really methodical attempt to locate C-130s. Did you get involved in that or in seeking other kinds of aircraft?

Bridgwater: On the other kinds of aircraft yes, but not on the C130s, because that was a very high-level negotiation.

Jacobs: Those were just diplomatic requests to governments. What other kind of aircraft did you go looking for?

Bridgwater: Well any type of freighter that had the capability of carrying a reasonable freight load.

Jacobs: Did you find one in Canada?

Bridgwater: We did, yes we did. We located one in Montreal, but there were other transport aircraft available on the lease, or on time charter. But in those instances you would have to find your own crew, in which case we were very definitely in no position to locate crews for aircraft for foreign operations as we were not previously involved in that type of thing, and to hire or charter bare-bulk aircraft seemed to be really unwise, although we had lengthy conversations in Edmonton.

Jacobs: I'm sorry what - "bare-bulk"?

Bridgwater: Bare-bulk - you just charter the aircraft but you don't charter maintenance or anything else to go with it. We had no way of taking charge of the thing. We had to be absolutely certain that if we took an aircraft it could be maintained, somebody had to take care of it. It has to be literally examined after every flight, I don't mean a full inspection but certainly certain

parts of the aircraft have to be checked out. And we did not have sufficient experience in our own staff to undertake that kind of venture. But there were, I know, or at least I can remember, that there were two or three offers at very very high prices which we had to reject because they didn't want to go all the way with us to take care of the total operation.

Jacobs: So, although UNICEF searched a long time never, or never actually found a C-130. It was a long difficult search to produce any aircraft immediately.

Bridgwater: No, we did not. The only aircraft we located was as the result of our acceptance of the idea of the use of helicopters.

Jacobs: How did that come out?

Bridgwater: Well, I can say, it was more than partially successful because we did transport by means of the big old aircraft they used to call the "guppy". We transported helicopters over there. There were a series of incidents on the way, such as customs problems in Buffalo, a series of international problems in the Azores, but they were eventually taken right to location, unloaded and put to use.

Jacobs: Did you go out to find the air charter operators for the helicopters?

Bridgwater: No, the air charter that we finally used came from California, and he was good enough to come into New York.

Jacobs: Robert Robards, as I recall, he was from Danville, New York.

Bridgwater: That's right, he was a pilot though.

Jacobs: Oh, but the "Flying Guppy" had to come in from California?

Bridgwater: That's right. To conclude the arrangements on that, the president of the company, whose name escapes me, he came to New York and we concluded all the business here.

Jacobs: The helicopters were purchased in California. So how did the helicopter operation work out in your estimation? You weren't on the scene observing it, but you must have kept track of it during the next 8 or 10 or 12 months, or however long it lasted?

Bridgwater: Well without actually being on the scene it would be very difficult to evaluate its performance, but I do think that it must have provided, what I would term human service - because the difficulty of the operation - it was fantastically difficult to work under those circumstances.

Jacobs: These helicopters operated only in Nigeria?

Bridgwater: That's right.

Jacobs: Not in Biafra.

Bridgwater: Well they are restricted to fairly short distance flights, after all. But they are capable of doing a number of things, and did do a number of things which were extremely valuable, I'm sure.

Jacobs: Do you recall when the war ended, at the time of Biafra's collapse in January 1970, Mr. Labouisse flew out to Lagos, he travelled around the eastern area which was the stricken area of Biafra and observed the conditions. Did you get involved at all, at that time in January 1970, with an attempt to get food distribution going?

Bridgwater: No, not truly involved. We participated but not directly involved. I think we had operations problems in connection with obtaining materials that we needed but besides from that there was nothing very significant that I can recall.

Jacobs: Sasha Bacic had told me just the other day that they had procured, I believe it was, 30 Bedford trucks in Britain and had them on the way about the time of the collapse. That would have been done through Supply Division?

Bridgwater: Oh yes, it was done from here but under normal circumstances it might have been done by our Paris office.

Jacobs: Do you have any other recollections of any vivid moments when you were participating with other people?

Bridgwater: I don't at the moment but should anything occur I would get in touch with you.

Jacobs: Okay. Thank you.

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