

Courier flights Sweden – Great Britain during World War II

- Notes on Carl Aschan, British Air Force Attaché in Stockholm



Draft version

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Preamble

Carl Aschan (1906-2008) has a remarkable life story, one that he could not have foreseen or expected in his younger years. He, a born Swede, in early years both by family tradition and personal career plans went to a Grand Tour in Europe, ending up to be a key person in several crucial and critical phases during WW II. An actor and observer of several important operations during World War II – from inside and from a British perspective. His reports deserve deepening and understanding even in relation to Swedish foreign policy: -neutrality.

The following notes are an attempt to shed some light on his contribution to the courier traffic Sweden –Scotland. As Assistant Air Force Attaché to Stockholm, this was a part of his duties in the beginning of his extraordinary military career.

Carl Aschan's Curriculum Vitae up to 1945 in brief

1926 Apprentice at Junkers Aircraft Industry in Dessau, Germany

1927 Exam (Diploma) as engineer at Cambridge

1927 Employment at Bristol Aeroplane Company Ltd (Division of Aircraft Engines)

1928 British citizenship (necessary for military supply industries)

1929 Employment at trading firm Wigglesworth. Importers of sisal and hemp.

Representative of this company in Hamburg for two years

1938-39 Commercial travel to The Far East

1939 October, employed as sub-lieutenant in The Royal Air Force

1940 Appointed as Lt Commander in the Royal Air Force and Assistant Air Force Attaché at the British Embassy in Stockholm

1940 Called back to London via Riga, Moscow, Odessa, Istanbul, Aleppo, Beirut, Jerusalem, Cairo, Tacoradi (Ghana). From there with cruiser and air craft carrier to London

1941 February. Ministry of Air Force

? Appointment as a Squadron Leader in RAF

1941 War office, Combined Operations, responsible for operations in Norway and the Channel Islands

1944 Air Ministry, security organization for liberated allied countries

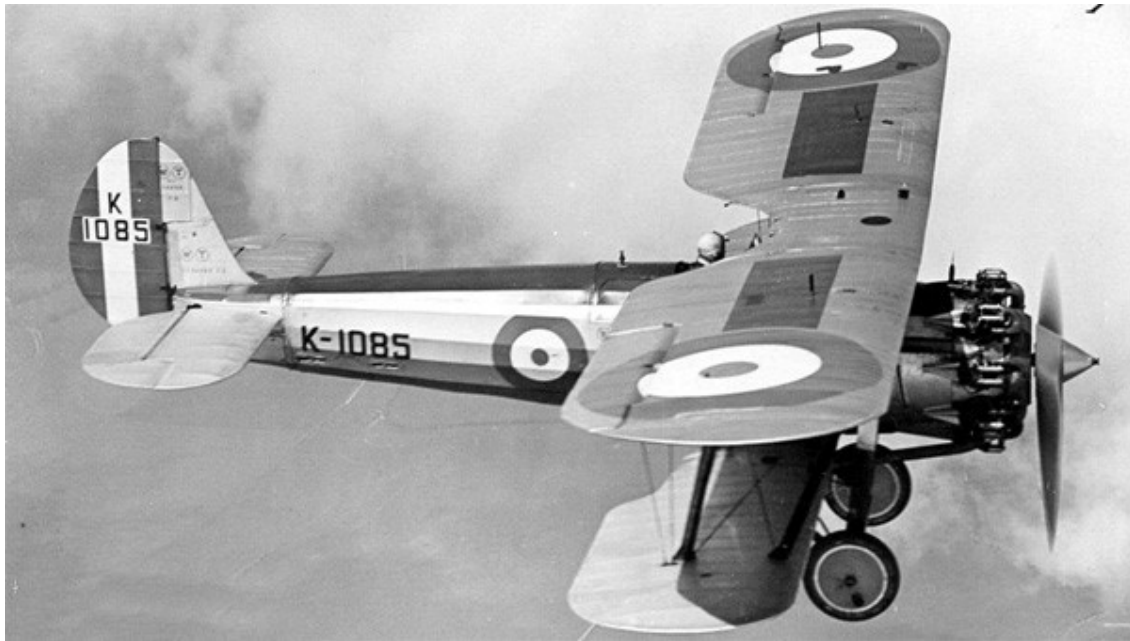
1945 September, demobilization at his own request

Carl Aschan enrolled into Royal Air Force, RAF, soon after the outbreak of the World War II, already having received his British citizenship, necessary for his duty as engineer at Bristol Aeroplane Company Ltd (BAC). He was sent to pilot training, in RAF that was a necessary component and condition in understanding the war environment. He became a little dissatisfied of not being addressed and appreciated of his capacities in military aircraft technology, which he saw as his competitive edge for serving UK war needs. As we will see later, his initial outlook was soon to change.

The beginning of the beginning - An aircraft engineer

Carl Aschan has not reported any details of his professional motives to enrol the RAF. But likely there is a strong link to his service in the BAC.

In 1927 when Aschan joined the BAC, the company was developing the fighter BAC Bulldog, which became the backbone of RAF fighter force between 1930 and 1937. The first flight with the prototype occurred in May 1927.



Bristol Aeroplane Company Bulldog, day and night fighter, 443 built, delivered to 10 countries

Although the BAC was a major supplier of military aircrafts, the Engine Division, a subsidiary to BAC and originally a separate company, was the absolute dominant part of the industry and maybe the flagship of the company brand. Under the legendary leadership of chief designer Roy Fedden several improvements of the WW I engine designs were developed resulting in such engines as several Jupiter varieties (VI, V and VI 1925-27), and the Mercury engine (first run 1925). During this period the supercharger was introduced for higher power performance, and the engines performed to the absolute top performance among engine manufacturers.



Bristol Mercury engine, first run 1925.
9 cylinder, air cooled single row piston radial engine.

Later licensed for production also abroad, i.e. to Sweden, engine company NOHAB to be installed in the SAAB 17, a bomber and reconnaissance air craft for the Swedish Air Force

The BAC Engine division was extremely successful, the Jupiter and Mercury engines were produced and sold to the RAF and worldwide in near 30 000 units, in a variety of models with different technical properties.

The 400 h.p.
Bristol
JUPITER RADIAL
AIRCOOLED ENGINE

Aircraft pilots favour "Bristol" aircooled aero engines, because they know from experience that their reliability can be depended upon.

Types:
Jupiter - 400 H.P.
Lucifer - 100 H.P.
Cherub - 1085 C.C.

Designers and Manufacturers—
THE BRISTOL AEROPLANE CO., LTD.
FILTON — BRISTOL.

RELIABILITY.

There is no other aero engine of any type which has proved its reliability under official test as has the

400 H.P.

Bristol

JUPITER AIRCOOLED RADIAL
AERO ENGINE.

The JUPITER was the first aircooled engine to pass the British Air Ministry Type Tests.

The JUPITER is the only aero engine of any type which has passed both the French and British official tests.

The JUPITER, under official supervision, has completed an endurance test of 150 hours at 90% full power, including a non-stop run of 50 hours.

The lightest proved aero engine of its power in the world.

Designed and Manufactured by—
THE BRISTOL AEROPLANE CO., LTD.
FILTON — BRISTOL.

Telegrams—Aeroplan Britis. Telephone—3966 Bristol.

Two advertisements of BAC Engine division 1924 and 1923, all in production when Carl Aschan made his service in the division and the development of the advanced Mercury was under way



Speed—
 Climb—
 Manceuvrability—
 Altitude Performance—

The *"Bristol"* **BULLDOG**
 ALL-STEEL SINGLE-SEATER FIGHTER
 fitted with the "Bristol" Jupiter Supercharged radial air-cooled engine.

**Adopted for the equipment of the
 Royal Air Force.**

Designed and manufactured by
 THE BRISTOL AEROPLANE CO., LTD.,
 FULTON — BRISTOL.

Telegrams: "Aviation, Bristol"
 Telephone: 2229 Bristol.

Advertisement for the Bristol Bulldog fighter 1929 when Carl Aschan was employed in the BAC. The new Jupiter engine installed with supercharged extra power performance



Carl Aschan in his early days as aircraft engineer

The end of the beginning – Royal Air Force Officer

We can only guess why Carl Aschan was not satisfied with his first assignments in the RAF, to start again from scratch and pass a RAF pilot education and training and then to become a teacher although second-in-command of RAF Technical School. A mature man aged 33, with a combined technical and commercial career, including service abroad and perfectly multilingual, maybe in he saw his professional competitive edge put to be the use in RAF services in procurement from the aircraft industry, or maybe in RAF engineering development programs? Or, did he suspect doubts on his patriotic reliability, a Swede, availed of a short-cut to the British citizenship, owing to his employment at the BAC 11 years earlier, who after that had stayed under the aviation horizon and worked in Germany for 2 years, sense some doubts about his reliability as a patriot? Whatever behind his unease or dissatisfaction, this would soon come to an end.

Immediately after the German invasion in Denmark and Norway on April 9th in 1940, Carl Aschan, then sub-lieutenant, was called to a lunch at the Travelers' Club in London. In the course of the lunch, the reason was soon revealed to him; he was approached by a senior member of the War Office proposing employment as intelligence officer and Assisting Air Force Attaché in Stockholm. Somebody behind the curtains and closed doors of the War Office had finally recognized his multiple capacities as an engineer, officer, fluent in English, German and all Scandinavian languages, and with an excellent network in Sweden.

The travel, which begun immediately, took him onboard the Polish vessel Batory with an escort of destroyers to Harstad north of Narvik, and via Tromsø, Kirkenes in Norway, Rovaniemi in Finland, and Haparanda, Sweden to his final destination in Stockholm.

British attaché service in Stockholm

Background:

The German invasion of Denmark and Norway placed Great Britain in a position totally isolated from continental Europe and Scandinavia. Sweden, as a neutral country, became a transit route for supplies to Britain. Further, because Stockholm city was a swarming meeting point for diplomats and spies. Great Britain needed to fly diplomats, diplomatic mail, exchanged prisoners of war, freedom fighters from Poland, Denmark and Norway, exile government ministers and officers and urgently needed ball bearings from the SKF Industry (Svenska Kullagerfabriken) in Gothenburg for its air craft and navy shipyard industries from Sweden.

From his war memories, one glimpse of the work at the British embassy in Stockholm dealt with the enormous needs of the British war industry. In cooperation with Bill Waring, Carl's business friend from Hamburg, and Sir George Binney, he was in charge of arranging the export of several strategic machinery, ball bearings etc. Great Britain as well as keeping the night courier flights going between Scotland and Stockholm. Carl mentions the role of the other Assistant Air Force Attaché Donald Fleet as indispensable.

Carl Aschans task was, among other things, to organize these commissions, vital for the allied. As a result of their work, the courier traffic between Stockholm/Bromma and Scotland was consolidated and made more effective and it was reorganized from March 2nd in 1941. At that time Carl Aschan had left Stockholm for London and other assignments in the Air Force Ministry and the War Office.

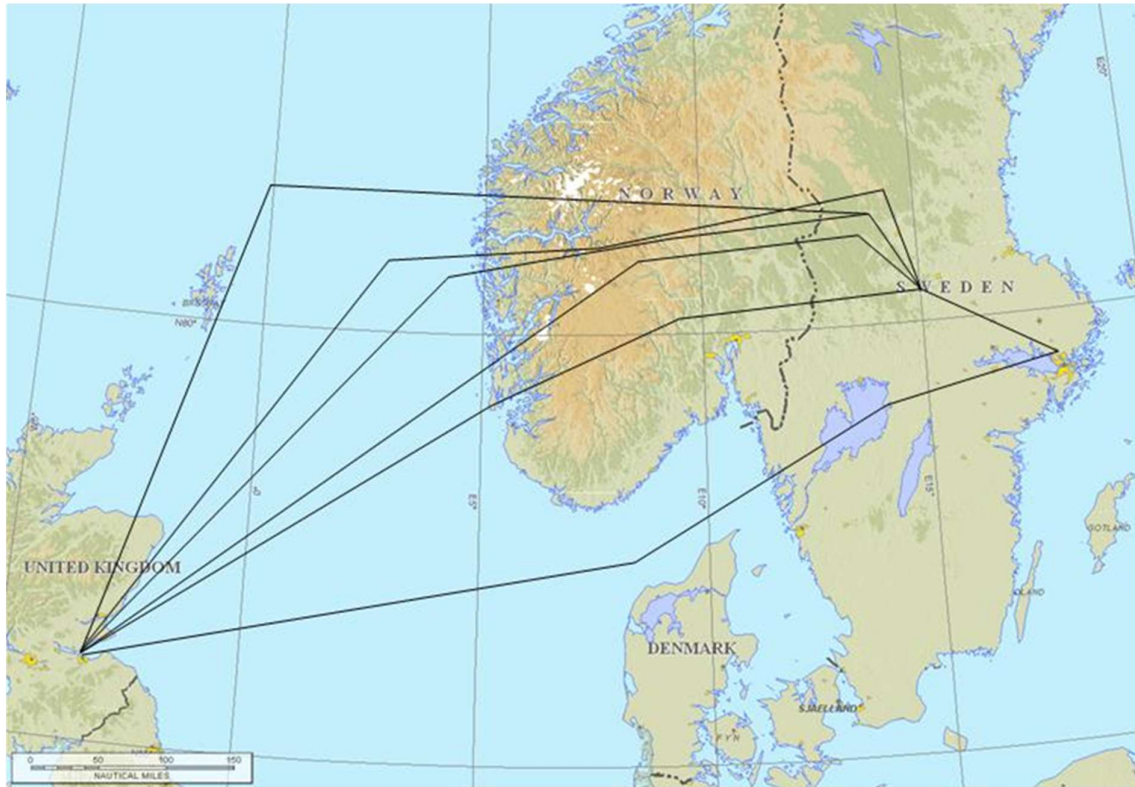
The logistics of the courier service

The traffic to and from Sweden was first maintained by the Royal Air Force, with civil painted air crafts in the colors of the BOAC (British Overseas Airways Corporation).

They continued with certain interruptions during the war. Mainly mail, a few passengers and ball bearings were transported. The traffic was maintained by Sweden and the allied with a number of different types of aircrafts: Lockheed 14 Electra, Lockheed 18 Lodestar, Lockheed Hudson, later Douglas DC-3, de Havilland Mosquito etc. Towards the end of the war there was traffic even at day time.

Soon, the capacity constraints called for a solution and, on British request, preparations begun to put in a Swedish operator in the traffic, ABA (AB Aerotransport, predecessor of the Scandinavian airlines System, SAS). ABA started the traffic to Scotland on February 16th in

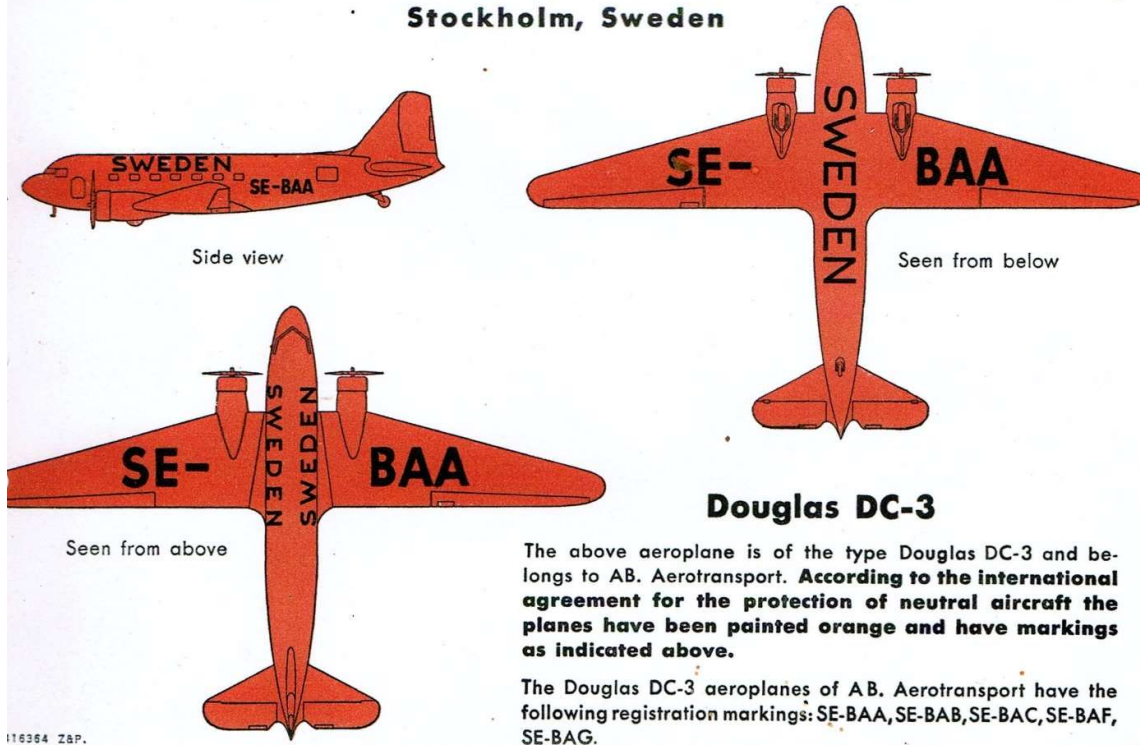
1942 with high capacity passenger planes, two Douglas DC 3, 'Gripen' and 'Gladan' were used.



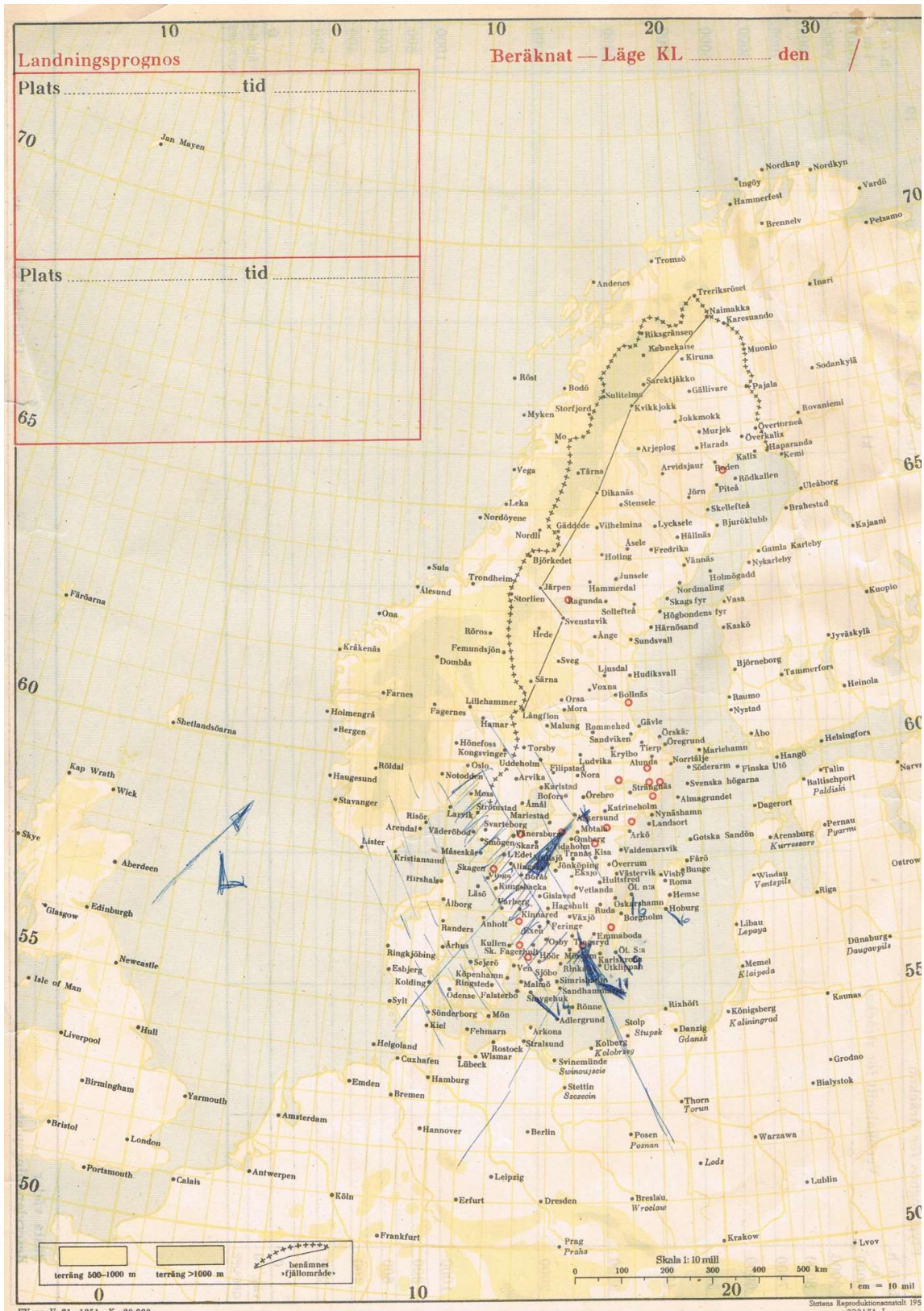
The map shows main flight corridors Bromma/ (Stockholm airport) – Scotland. At first the planes would pass the Skagerack Sea, but with the Skagerack blockade and improved German radar, some connections were changed to pass over Norway. The flights were preferably executed by bad flight weather, cloudiness more than 50 %, fog, rain, snow etc. Flights during clear summer nights, or in moonshine, were avoided.

The flights became more dramatic and the threat from the German fighters was constant in spite of the Swedish airplanes being painted both with: SWEDEN and SCHWEDEN and had an orange painted body according to agreements. Because of the German threat, Great Britain on February 4th in 1943, puts into traffic the de Havilland Mosquito, a light bomber with the advantage of flying as quick as the German fighters, therefore difficult to catch up. The planes were civilian painted with the colors of BOAC, and the cargo, mail, diplomatic mail and ball bearings were stored in the bomb bay.

Aircraft of AB. Aerotransport (ABA-Swedish Air Lines) Stockholm, Sweden



The Swedish Air Force had, for obvious reasons, no legitimate reason to engage in escort or presence in the routes over international waters, that was a war zone for the combatants. The limitations were the Swedish territory, limited to 3 nautical Miles outside the coast, and within that range, no real threat was to be expected. The Swedish Air Force used a small scale map for its flight planning, meteorology and overview of operations.



Swedish Air Force overview flight map. The red circles represent Swedish Air Force Bases. Map of edition 1951, heritage from Sw Air Force Officer Folke Ringborg

A Mosquito pilot from Scotland describes the work at the British legation in Stockholm as a meeting point of spies:

“Next morning at the Air Ministry we got our passports and details of what we had to do. If we came down in Sweden we had to burn the plane, as the Mosquito was still on the secret list. Our instructions were to collect a lot of intelligence information from the Russian front and return with it in the bomb bay. We had to be very careful of what we talked about with the Air Attachés staff there, as a lot of German spies were living in Stockholm”.

No safe conduct admitted

On June 20th in 1943, the Swedish airplane “Gripen” was attacked by German fighters en route from Scotland destined for Bromma airport. The plane was hit several times, but the pilot, Marshall Lindholm, succeeded in landing at Bromma.

One dark evening in October 1943, a clandestine passenger boarded a British Mosquito plane at the Bromma airport in Stockholm. When the Mosquito landed at the RAF Air Base Leuchars airport in Scotland a couple of hours later, the British, with good help from the Swedish authorities, had succeeded in smuggling Niels Bohr, the of physics and a leading nuclear scientist and Danish Nobel Prize winner, out of Denmark under the very nose of the Germans.



De Havilland Mosquito was a fast, lightweight bomber, construed of wood (also lightweight balsa). Several Mosquitos were registered as civil aircrafts (as above) and were often flown by Norwegian crews in the courier traffic between Sweden and Scotland.

On August 28th in 1943, the Douglas DC, “Gladan” belonging to ABA, was shot down by a German fighter over the North Sea. Everybody on board, the four in the crew and three passengers, perished.

Carl Aschan refers in his memories of the victims: *“... Marit and I had become friends with the Swedish Military Attaché, (in London) Reinhold von Essen and his charming wife Violet Hamilton. They invited us for dinner a summer evening in 1943. Reinhold’s and Violet’s 15 year-old son helped serving at the lovely dinner. The parents had succeeded in arranging a seat for him so he could go back to Gothenburg with the Swedish flight, in order to arrive in*

time for school start. We found that unnecessarily dangerous and tried our best to persuade them to let the boy stay, but obviously they had underestimated the risks. We shared their deep sorrow when this plane was shot down by the Germans with the loss of all on board.”

In London, Carl Aschan kept in touch with his countrymen, limiting himself to social contacts as professional communication with Swedish official representatives was prohibited by his delicate position. He got to know the Swedish Naval Attaché Oxenstierna, and at a meeting with the Swedish minister at the embassy, Björn Prytz, the latter proposed cooperation, which could hardly have been possible under those circumstances. Possibly regrettable for both, as Prytz representing the Embassy, was the responsible for the Swedish part of the courier flights of which Carl Aschan could have given information. But it was not possible to cooperate in what might have been of interest for them both.

Two months after the loss of “Gladan”, on October 22nd, “Gripen” of ABA was shot down during courier flight from Scotland to Sweden by a German night fighter and crashed at the island Hållö, south-southwest of Smögen in Bohuslän, Swedish west coast. 13 people died, two survived.

War casualties, but the courier line maintained

After the two losses, ABA cancelled temporarily the flights to Scotland. Earlier, the Germans had constantly denied safe conduct, but new discussions were initiated. The Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs succeeded in discussions with the German Minister of Commerce at the German Embassy, Schnurre. A deal was made about a route by night over Norway. No transport of ball bearings were allowed, but the director of ABA, Carl Florman, commented to the German Minister of Commerce that he would not know whether ball bearings ever had been transported earlier, and that the Germans would not lose the war even if one or two ball bearings should be on board.

Carl Aschan has in his own comments about the above mentioned Schnurre. One of Aschan’s last commissions during the war was to capture Heinrich Himmler, chief of the German SS in Northern Germany. He writes:

“We had no success, but one evening in Flensburg I received a message that Himmler would be found at a certain address, and I arranged immediately for a blocking of the neighboring streets and then entered the into house together with about ten British field-security policemen. This time Himmler was not there, but we did not leave the house empty handed. Among the guests was Karl-Heinz Krämer, chief of the Abwehr in Stockholm, a person for a long time known as one of our most dangerous enemies... ..further there was Dr Schnurre, the difficult and in Sweden reputed negotiator of commerce, and also two earlier unknown Abwehr officers, read from the German Secret Service”.

At the end of the war the courier traffic was intensified. Bromma got a new air strip, 13/31, 1.800 meters long, among other things, to be able to receive American Air Transport Service, AATS, which had begun to fly with civilian registered, unarmed Consolidated B 24 Liberator (C-87) to and from Leuchars in Scotland and Bromma.

Before the end of the war about 5 000 Norwegians and American pilots were flown out of Sweden. The life line, the courier flight to and from Stockholm was a gigantic challenge on diplomacy, logistics and aviation tactics. In total 2.784 single flights were made in the Scotland traffic during the period 1941-1945. According to official sources eight planes were lost during this period of traffic.

In conclusion it might be said that the flights were successful despite of losses of lives and aircrafts.

Carl Aschan put some of the corner stones for this liner traffic. With Carl Aschan's words: *"You rarely win success in war without losses."*

Sources:

Speech of Carl Aschan at Omberg June 10th 1989. Stencil in the War Archive, Stockholm and in English in War Archive in London.

Christer Bergström: How Sweden helped the allied during World War II. Swedish Military Library.

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Marshall Lindholm: Fly to night. Allhem, Malmö 1954 (?)

Paul Robson: Mosquito to Sweden.

N.B. Carl Aschan memories exists in double versions, original in Swedish language and translated to English. The author has not had access to the English version, thus the quotations made (*in italics*) are translations from the Swedish version to English, not originating from the English version.