

DUST ON THE HORIZON

The Air War in German South West Africa 1914-1915

by Peter Chapman – Part 1

This morning the aeroplane paid us a second visit. Jove! but it was a lovely sight - seen miles off high in the air about 4000 ft. and getting more distinct as it approached us. On the approach to our camp - which by the way is called Haalen Burg [sic] - we just walked a few yards away from our lines. It flew right over our camp and was greeted with a regular hail of rifle shoots [sic] but all to no purpose. It flew on and on till it appeared a mere speck over Kolman's Kop. Now the fun commenced - as it flew over us it very calmly dropped two bombs and shells on us. One exploded and the other failed - no damage was done...¹

The above first hand account, written by Cpl Douglas Scott King of the Kaffrarian Rifles in his diary on 29 November 1914, gives a small but interesting glimpse into an air war that was fought far from Europe, in German South West Africa, between August 1914 and July 1915. Although small in scale, and fought over vast distances, the conduct of this war is a fine testament to the hard work, endurance and resourcefulness of both sides.

Development of Military Aviation in South Africa

The first military aviation undertaken in South Africa was by the British, who used balloons for aerial observation during an expedition to Bechuanaland in 1885, and again during the South African, or Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902.

A civil engineer from Brandfort, John Weston, built his own aircraft in 1907, but as he lacked a powerful enough engine to fly it, he dismantled it and shipped it to France. Here he installed a 50hp Gnome rotary engine, and in 1910 flew the aircraft successfully for the first time. However, the first powered flight in South Africa was made in East London on 28 December 1909 by a Frenchman, Albert Kimmerling, in a Voisin biplane.

Aviation had its first serious stirrings in South Africa in 1911, with the return from France of John Weston. On 6 June that year he made his first flight in Kimberley, in his Weston-Farman biplane, and he went on to found the Aeronautical Society of South Africa that same year.

Of more importance from a military standpoint, was the arrival in Cape Town of the African Aviation Syndicate, comprised of Capt Guy Livingston,² Cecil Compton Paterson³ and Evelyn Frederick Driver,⁴ in December 1911. The syndicate had two aircraft, a Paterson biplane and a Bleriot monoplane, with which they made a number of demonstration flights in the Cape and carried the first air mails in South Africa. Moving on to Johannesburg, the syndicate performed further demonstration flights until moving once more and finally settling in Kimberley, in 1912, where they established headquarters at Alexandersfontein.

However, their tenure was short-lived, as the syndicate went into liquidation in September that same year.

Ever the optimist, Paterson obtained financial backing from a number of business interests in Kimberley,

sufficient to purchase the assets of the syndicate, and he in turn had a hangar built and set up a flying school at Alexandersfontein.

At the same time as the first tentative steps were being taken to establish aviation in South Africa, the South African Government established the Union Defence Force (UDF), and in August 1912 the Commandant-General of the UDF, Brigadier-General C.F. Beyers, was dispatched to Europe to attend and study a number of military manoeuvres being conducted there.

As part of his brief, Beyers was required to report on the suitability of aircraft for military operations. While in Europe he attended manoeuvres in Britain and Germany, even obtaining a flight in a Rumpler in the latter country, and on his return to South Africa he strongly recommended that a South African air arm be established and a military flying training school be set up to train prospective pilots.

His recommendations were duly accepted by the government, and in the *Government Gazette* of 13 May 1913 the number and designation of all units of the Citizen Force, to be allotted and trained in the various military districts within the Union, were published. Included in this was a notice, inviting applicants to apply for training as officer aviators in the South African Aviation Corps. Among various stipulations, the notice also stated that all 'applicants are to be unmarried British subjects resident in South Africa, not more than 35 years of age, and of good educational attainment...'

The first course was scheduled to commence sometime between August and December 1913, and was to last from 10 to 14 weeks. At the conclusion, the Government would select five of the pupils who had completed the course and obtained their Federation Aeronautique Internationale certificate, and these men would be commissioned in the South African Aviation Corps. They would then be sent to Europe, at Government expense, to undertake advanced flying training.

On 10 September 1913, a year after taking over control of the flying school at Alexandersfontein, Kimberley, Cecil Compton Paterson signed an agreement with General J.C. Smuts, representing the Government, to train ten prospective pilots. The Aeronautical Society of South Africa would supervise the tests as prescribed by and on behalf of the Federation Aeronautique Internationale.

With the Government contract signed, Paterson made haste to obtain the services of another qualified pilot as instructor. The man he chose was Edward Wallace Cheeseman, a former employee of the Grahame-White School of Aviation at Hendon and holder of RAeC Certificate No 293 issued on 17 September 1912. Out of hundreds of applicants, ten successful Government candidates for training were also chosen. They were Kenneth Reid van der Spuy, Basil Hobson Turner, Gordon Shergold Creed, John Clisdal, Edwin Cheere Emmett, Gerard Percy Wallace, Marthinus Steyn Williams, M. van Collier, Hopkins and Solomon. A number of private pupils were also accepted for training,

Cecil Compton Paterson

