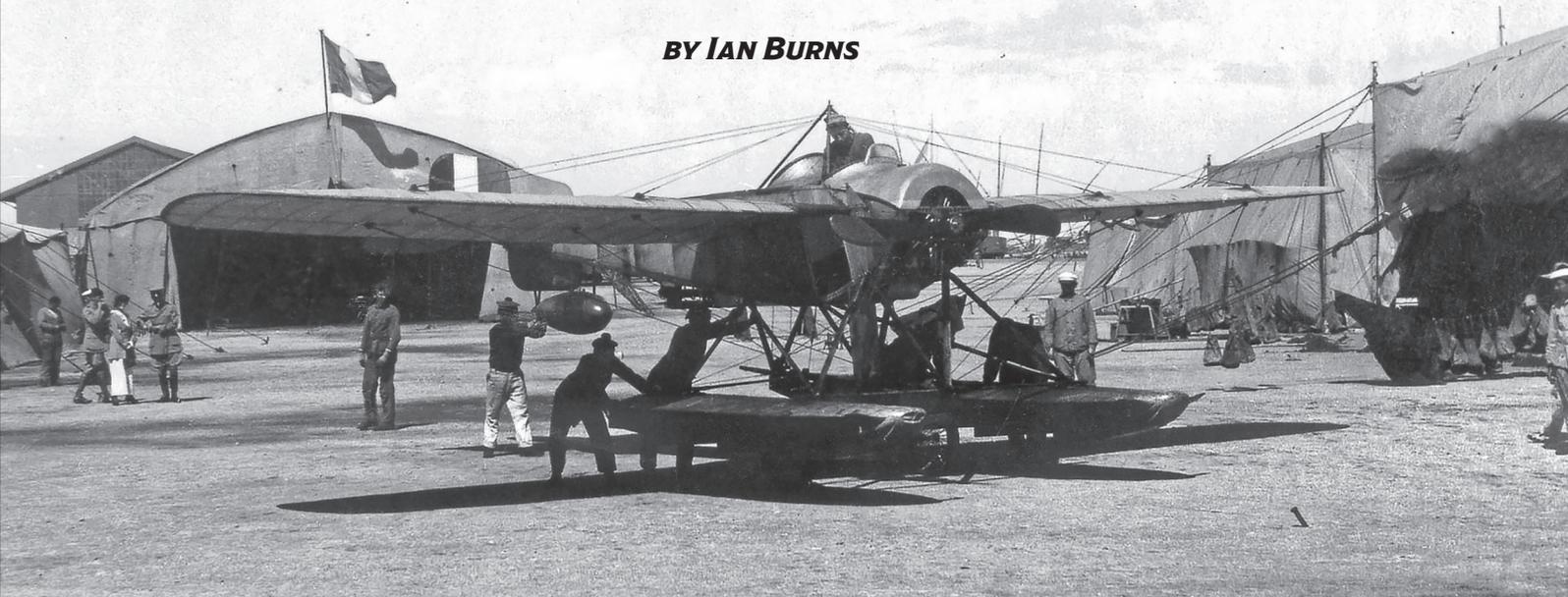


# FLOATPLANES OVER THE DESERT

## THE ADVENTURES OF L'ESCADRILLE DE PORT-SAÏD, 1914-1916, PART 1

BY IAN BURNS



A Nieuport XH of l'escadrille de Port-Saïd at Port Said in 1915. A French tricolour flies from the Bessonneau hangar while all the remaining hangars are by Hervieu. The two British officers and a lady friend make one wonder about security. :Michel Benichou

I went down to Port Said full of joy, but when I heard that most of the work done by these machines – 80 h.p. Gnome Nieuport monoplane seaplanes – was 30-40 miles inland, my joy was somewhat dashed.

2Lt K.L. Williams, 2nd Rajputs, Observer

For reasons completely beyond the scope of this article Egypt became a veiled protectorate of the British Empire in 1882. Until the beginning of the First World War the British effectively occupied a tributary state of the Ottoman Empire, taking over and running both the civil service and army. On the outbreak of war Britain declared Egypt a formal protectorate under the control of a High Commissioner, Sir Henry McMahon.<sup>1</sup>

The defence of the Suez Canal was a prime concern for the military forces in Egypt. The British officered Egyptian army was primarily employed to maintain order in the Sudan. Great care was taken not to place it in a position where it might have to fight fellow Muslims, although some volunteer and labour units served on the Suez Canal front. Therefore, in 1914/15, the actual defence devolved on mainly British forces – army units from Britain, India, Australia, and New Zealand, with a small Egypt Detachment, RFC (ED RFC). Lieutenant General Sir John Maxwell commanded the land forces in Egypt from September 1914 until, in January 1916, Lieutenant General Sir Archibald Murray was given command of a newly created Egyptian Expeditionary Force.

The Royal Navy and French Navy also played key roles in the defence of Egypt.

The Anglo-French Naval Convention of 6 August 1914 provided, in part, that *In the Mediterranean the general direction of operations will be in the hands of the French. ... Malta and Gibraltar will serve as bases for the French Forces. ... The French Fleet will undertake throughout the Mediterranean the protection of British and French commerce. ... It will also watch the exit of the Suez Canal. When vice-amiral Boué de Lapeyrière<sup>2</sup> was appointed French Commander-in-Chief, on 22 August he requested that the Royal Navy should be responsible for protection of trade between Malta and Port Said. This eventually came under the purview of Vice Admiral*

Sackville Hamilton Carden commanding the Royal Navy's Eastern Mediterranean Squadron, based at the Dardanelles but also looking after Egyptian naval affairs.

Throughout November and December 1914 French and British ships had, in the spirit of the Convention, been co-operating in operations along the Palestine and Syrian coasts from El Arish to the Gulf of Alexandretta (İskenderun). As the Dardanelles situation developed these continuing operations required more direct control, resulting in Vice Admiral Richard H. Peirse, Commander-in-Chief, East Indies Station, being instructed to add Egypt to his command and to move his flag from Singapore to Port Said, where he arrived aboard *Swiftsure* on 17 November 1914. As will be discussed later, in February 1915 to uphold French interests in the area, *vice-amiral* Louis Dartige du Fournet was appointed *Commandant la 3ème Escadre* also to be based at Port Said.

### L'AÉRONAUTIQUE MARITIME AND THE NIEUPORT MONOPLANE

French naval aviation, *l'Aéronautique maritime*, had a head start of almost a year on British naval aviation. For manifold reasons, which would require a separate article to discuss, it failed to prosper. One advantage *l'Aéronautique maritime* held was a year-round warm water base, the *Centre d'aviation maritime (CAM)* at Fréjus - Saint Raphaël, on the Mediterranean coast. It also had the use of a seaplane tender *Foudre*, a ship considerably more practical than the Royal Navy's converted cruiser *Hermes*. It had, however, been unable to form the same close relationship with aircraft designers and manufacturers willing to develop aircraft specific to naval requirements that the RNAS had achieved.

Whilst the early struggles and successes of *l'Aéronautique maritime* are beyond the scope of this article, we should spend some time looking at the principal floatplane it employed in the first months of the war – the Nieuport Hydravion.

Edouard Nieuport (b.24 Aug 1875) was an early proponent of the monoplane. Like some other designer pilots, he had a previous history in the bicycle racing world, winning many prizes in the mid-1890s. The original family name was Deniéport, Edouard adopted Nieuport in 1894 apparently