

INDIAN WINGS

THE RFC & RAF IN INDIA, 1915 – 1919

by Mike O'Connor and Ray Vann

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LATE IN AUGUST 1911, at Government offices in Simla, a meeting of the 'great and good' of the British Administration in India took place. Seated around a large green-baize covered table, were officers of both civil and military intelligence, including Field-Marshal Lord Nicholson, Chief of Staff of the British Army, Sir Charles Cleveland, Inspector General of Police and Chief of the Indian Secret Service, and Sir Henry McMahon, newly appointed Foreign Secretary in the Viceroy's Government.

Officially, the meeting had been called to discuss and review expenditure for the armed forces in India, (80000 British troops and 140000 natives), tasked with protecting the Eastern Empire from external attack and from internal disruption that had been increasing for some time. In fact, the principal subject on the agenda was the growing tide of nationalism, the growing international threat of terrorism, and internal insurrection.

For many, the growing threat of unrest could be traced back to a cold and wet November evening in Damascus in 1898. At a dinner held in his honour, the German Kaiser, Wilhelm II, on a tour of the Middle East, had declared *Tell the three-hundred-million Moslems of the world I am their friend*. Effectively, he had given the green-light to Germany's Intelligence Service for an all-out assault on the British Empire, already struggling to cope with the first stirrings of nationalism. The German Secret Service Eastern Bureau, operated from the respected façade of the Institute of Archaeology at 75 Wilhemstrasse, Berlin, reporting to Dr Zimmermann, the principal Under-Secretary at the German Foreign Office. Its chief agent was Baron Max von Oppenheim, Jewish Archaeologist and 'bon viveur', and known throughout Egypt as 'The Spy'.

In 1908, there had been a series of attacks on government employees in India, and several pro-British officials were murdered. In an effort to ward off the growing tide of rebellion, Lord Minto had appointed an Indian to his council, and the following year, the Morley-Minto reforms, gave more educated natives a greater say in the country's affairs. These reforms did little to halt the increasing crime wave and political outrages, and even troops of the Indian Army were being suborned.

By 1910, the British and Indian Navies were on high alert in the Gulf and Indian Ocean, trying to prevent the arms trafficking that had intensified, due to Germany's growing intervention. German finance was supporting members of the Pan-Islam Movement that was spreading propaganda, and encouraging dissidents across the British Raj. Bahrain and Oman were now threatened by the dealings of German agents, and intelligence at Simla, were working with the Directorate of Military Operations in London, trying to identify a web of business dealings, that saw arms purchased

by the Germans and distributed through Turkey to dissidents in Persia, to Afghans and Omanis, and the tribes of the North-West Frontier.

As the storm clouds of war began to gather in the summer of 1914, the Indian Administration and Military Intelligence began to re-consider its commitment to supply expeditionary forces for the British Army. The Viceroy and Chief of Staff were certain that Afghanistan and the North-West Frontier would be the flash point of any tribal uprising, and serious doubts were being voiced about a reduced army in India being able to respond. The entry of the Ottoman Empire into the war saw the War Office and Government in the UK insist that India mobilise its expeditionary forces for service in France, Egypt, Mesopotamia and East Africa. Semi-trained British Territorial units, with inferior equipment and arms, would be sent to replace the 35000 British regulars and Indian troops, who would make up India's contribution to the war effort. The Territorials and Indian reservists would have to respond to any internal unrest.

WINGS OVER INDIA

The Indian Army established an experimental Balloon Section at Rawalpindi in 1901, and in 1909 a branch of the Aerial League of the British Empire was formed. During the winter of 1910-11, three separate groups of aviators arrived in India to conduct demonstration flights. One was the British and Colonial Aeroplane Company, and in January 1911, one of their Bristol Boxkites took part in cavalry manoeuvres. Although only of short duration, the Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army was convinced of the future importance of aviation to the Indian Empire.

Captain Seaton Dunham Massy, 29th Punjabis, became the first Indian Army Officer to qualify as a pilot, when he gained his RAeC certificate No.84, on a Bristol Boxkite on 9 May 1911. During 1913 Massy, and three other Indian Army officers, returned to the UK to attend a course of instruction at the Central Flying School. On 1 February 1913, Massy was appointed to command the newly created Indian Central Flying School at Sitapur in Uttar Pradesh. By April 1914, it was reported that the school had three aircraft on charge, with a further five on order. The principal objective of the school was to gain experience of aviation under Indian conditions.

In November 1914, Massy sailed from Avonmouth docks for Egypt, as CO of the RFC 'Egypt Detachment'. In March 1915, a depot at Bombay was established, and Captain Philip Broke-Smith was appointed as Deputy Assistant Director of Aviation for the Indian Army. By April, Broke-Smith, Capt Hugh Lambert Reilly, 2Lt W.R. Wills and ten mechanics were on their way to Mesopotamia.