

ON THE JOB TRAINING

An unseasonably cold wind blew across Southampton water, and not for the first time I wondered if I had done the right thing by volunteering, not once, but twice.

In August 1914, at the outbreak of war, I had been working for the Electricity Generating Department at the Bexleyheath Tramways Office. A companion and I had both wanted to enlist but had been told that only one of us could be spared; my friend went into the Royal Engineers but after about six months he had been medically discharged, however he was fit enough to be able to resume his old job. It was now my turn.

I was eager to join the newly formed Royal Naval Air Service and had written to the Central Air Office at Sheerness who had told me to report for a medical to the Graham White Aerodrome at Hendon.

This I had done and was duly signed up as a first class air mechanic.

Kitting out was accomplished at the then disused prison of Wormwood Scrubs, this was followed by a train trip to Sheerness to report for drill training. The second time I volunteered was when a corporal in charge of our party asked for the names of those willing to serve overseas, no other details were given, but along with thirteen others I now found myself shivering in the cold wind at Southampton docks.

Word now came through that we were to catch the midnight boat to Le Havre where we would then get the train to Paris. Paris in the spring, now who was going to have the last laugh, if only my old chums from the Tramways office could see me now.

Paris was cold and damp, we may as well have still been in Southampton, but in any case it did not matter as this was only a short stop on our European mystery tour, we were now to proceed, via the midnight train; I've never understood if this travel during the hours of darkness was a means of security or economy; to Marseilles.

Here at last we began to get warm weather, we were met by a Major in the Royal Marines and a Petty Officer who escorted us to a first class hotel where we spent the night and next morning, following a good breakfast, we reported to the docks. Our latest form of transport was to be a French liner of 5000 tons, the Torrilla. We assisted in the loading of three very large crates and a good number of smaller ones; when at last all was ready we left for Malta, sailing at midnight!

Our stay in Malta was less than twelve hours, during which time we picked up about 150 soldiers who had just been discharged from hospital and were returning to their units. We were now heading for Port Said.

At one point, the Royal Marine Officer, who had introduced himself as Major Robert Gordon informed us that the white overalls we had been issued with should be dyed khaki, each man was issued with a cube of Condy's permanganate to accomplish this task. If there had ever been any instruction as to the use of this dye with the original package, then there was none with it now. Next day when paraded for inspection we presented a sight to behold, none of realised you could get so many shades of khaki out of one small cube.

After Port Said we went through the Suez Canal, by now the weather was too hot for wearing overalls, which in the circumstances was probably just as well.

Our days were filled with physical drill and small arms practice also we had to partly unpack the crates that had been loaded at Marseilles as in these climatic conditions things turned to mildew

overnight. Two of the larger crates contained a complete aircraft, in bits, and the third a hangar to put them in. We had to pay particular attention to see that the propellers were kept in a cooling draft since any warping of the wood would affect their performance. We also practised lifeboat drill, and by day and by night we kept a watch for submarines.

At Aden, we all, prefabricated aircraft and hangar included, changed ship transferring to the SS Laurentic. After leaving port, we had the purpose of our mission explained to us. Put simply it was that we were to proceed to Mafia Island off the coast of German East Africa, join forces with the Royal Navy and together sink the German light cruiser Konigsberg currently lying in the delta of the Rufiji river, awaiting our arrival.

In detail the plan sounded no better, it seemed that the Konigsberg had originally been sent to the colony of German East Africa prior to the outbreak of war to take part in a colonial exhibition being staged at Dar es Salaam, but at the outbreak of hostilities she had left port and had sunk The city of Winchester two days later and at first light on September 20th, under the British noses, had sunk the cruiser Pegasus then undergoing repairs in Zanzibar harbour.

The Konigsberg, which was equipped with ten 4.1 inch guns that could fire a 31 lb projectile 15,000 yards, had then gone into hiding and several months had elapsed before an RNAS seaplane had located her in the Rufiji delta, a blockade of Royal Navy warships had been set up to ensure that she remained there. Stalemate had been reached; however, since the surrounding forest prevented either side from seeing the other, also lack of knowledge of the navigable channel prevented any of the British ships from approaching closer. Attempts had been made by the RNAS seaplane to bomb the Konigsberg but when loaded with bombs the plane had difficulty in getting airborne.

The Admiralty had thus decided to send two ships of very low draught, originally built for the Brazilian government for river work, but purchased by the Royal Navy and renamed Severn and Mersey. These ships, called monitors, each armed with three 6 inch guns would be able to get within range since they were capable of penetrating further up the delta, then with the aid of a spotter plane, currently lying in bits on the deck of our ship, would proceed to remove this menace to the British fleet.

The 650,000 square mile colony of German East Africa ranged from mountains through the open plains of the Serengeti to the forest and swamps of the coast. It encompassed some of the most benevolent climates in the world and also had lands deemed to be uninhabitable by the white man. The area in which Konigsberg had now sought refuge was very much the latter.

The surrounding forest was damp, dark and inhabited by snakes and leaches, the waterways were home to crocodile and hippo, and the air to tsetse fly and the malaria carrying mosquito.

In the months that the Konigsberg had remained at anchor the ship's crew, aided by German land forces had established look-out posts and defensive positions equipped with Maxim machine guns at various strategic positions on the delta; all were now linked by telephone land line to the ship.

Exciting as all this was, it did make one think of the wisdom of volunteering for anything. The bit about the Maxim machine gun was of particular interest to me, since in my childhood my father had been a cow keeper, but as he only had a small field, in summer he was always looking for land he could rent for grazing. Baldwin Park near Dartford Heath was then the home of Sir Hiram Maxim, the inventor of the gun, an American by birth who had settled in England. His home was a charming walled estate with large open grasslands bordered by trees, which he was willing to let to my father, however the grasslands also went right up to the lawns adjacent to the house, and Lady Maxim was very much against the cows trespassing on to her lawns. That is where my younger brother and I came in, we took it in turns to ensure the cows remained in their allotted area; consequently we got to know Sir Hiram very well.

A lot of his time seemed to be spent trying out improvements to his gun as he would be firing it on and off for hours at a time. He often had visitors and would exhibit the gun's ability by cutting down a tree by pouring shots into it. He also was working on an aircraft; it had three wings and at the centre where he called the bridge, was a steam engine fitted with a propeller. When trials were under way, apart from a large amount of steam there was always a strong smell of paraffin; the contraption was held on a four wheel truck which in turn ran on a tram track extending several hundred yards down a slight incline. After a trial 'flight', to my knowledge the machine never got airborne, it would have to be pushed back up the incline, often my brother and I would assist with this task.

Sir Hiram always received plenty of telegrams, as at this time no telephone lines had reached this part of Kent, but as his house was outside the free delivery area, a surcharge was payable. To overcome this charge he had had built on his Bexley boundary wall, which was within the free delivery area, a letter box which he had ingeniously equipped with an electrical device which rang a bell in the house when a telegram was placed in the box. He would then know to send one of his staff to collect it. It was not the success he had hoped, as the local boys, the same ones that the local Post Office had formally used to make the telegram deliveries to the house, discovered that a stone inserted in the box had just the same effect as a telegram. The boundary box was quickly abandoned and harmony was restored.

Our ship arrived at Mafia Island early in the morning of June 18th and immediately all hands set to work unloading the stores which because of the shallow harbour had to be done by a small boat; in the case of the aircraft this was accomplished by two cutters linked by a platform of planks. We also started to erect the Bessonneau which was the correct name for the prefabricated hangar.

Major Gordon had taken over command of the RNAS team from Lt.J.Cull, who since the Konigsberg had been located, had acted as the eyes of the Navy in trying to learn if the Konigsberg was about to attempt a break out of the blockade. That night we were all housed on board HMS Loconia which was to remain our headquarters ship.

The next two weeks were busy with preparations; the aircraft we had brought out were two seater Henri Farman's Type F27 fitted with 40 HP Gnome engines, these were quickly made air ready and Lt. Cull and Major Gordon and their observers were kept busy with frequent flights to photograph the ship which was only thirty miles away.

They also practiced the technique they would use in keeping the Severn and Mersey advised of their fall of shot.

Because of the possibility that the spotter plane might be damaged by enemy fire and be unable to make the thirty mile journey back it was decided that I and another mechanic, named Williams, should be moved closer to the enemy coast.

Accordingly, early on July 6th we, together with stores, tools, petrol, iron rations and a small dingy fitted with an Evenrude outboard motor were left on a small island just off the delta, I think it was called Boydua Island. Things did not go according to plan; the plane was equipped with a wireless with which it communicated in Morse with the two monitors. It was working at its limit; also the observer of the plane had difficulty in seeing where the shells landed, particularly if they went into the forest.

On the other hand the German gunners had direct verbal communication with their observers which they had had months set up. Early on they scored a direct hit on Mersey, the firing continued for several hours, but when abandoned neither side had made a decisive blow.

My friend and I were collected by whaler which returned us to Mafia Island. For the next few days repairs were carried out to the monitors and our aircrafts were got ready for the next encounter. Again Williams and I were dispatched to Boydua Island, where once more we were able to watch the preparations for battle; both monitors were towed from Mafia Island but were then able to make their own way up the delta and sometime after, the spotter plane was seen to pass overhead. The firing started at about 11:30 but this time the monitors' shells were close enough for the planes to see them and were quickly able to make the appropriate corrections and thereafter both monitors were able to keep up the barrage, knowing their shells were finding their mark, however our plane was hit and because it did not have enough height was unable to volplane to where Williams and I were waiting and it crashed in the water near the monitors where thankfully the Pilot Lt.Cull and observer Sub Lt Arnold were picked up by a small boat.

The firing had petered out by mid-afternoon but our expected whaler did not appear and we guessed that in the excitement we had been forgotten; they did eventually turn up but by then with there being no twilight we were all forced to spend the night on the island.

Whilst waiting for the whaler I had time to reflect on all that had happened since I had joined the RNAS and concluded that I was not going to be as bored as that day, 11th July 1915, was exactly two months to the day since I had been sworn in at Hendon.

Epilogue

Following the successful action, Major Gordon, Lt Cull and Sub Lt Arnold together with captains of both the Severn and the Mersey were all awarded DSO.

The Laurentic was mined and sunk on 25th January 1917

The Laconia was torpedoed and sunk on 25th February 1917

The Severn and Mersey both survived the war and were broken up in May 1921

Major Gordon subsequently led a successful expedition to Persia where in 1917 he was promoted to Colonel.

Lt J.T.Cull continued to serve in East Africa, survived the war, became part of the newly formed RAF in 1918 and finally retired in 1933 with the rank of group captain.

The Author remained in Africa as part of Lt Cull's force, returned to England in 1917 was subsequently commissioned in the RAF but following the armistice was considered too old at 37 for further service. He subsequently became the last Plymouth City Tramway Manager. He died in Plymouth in 1970 aged 88.

German East Africa is today known as Tanzania.

The Konigsberg remained for many years but the mud and salvaging saw her disappear from view in the 1960's.