

AI R CRAFT WHICH NEARLY ENTERED THE WAR (1914-1915)

Shortly after the outbreak of the First World War the Department of Defence was offered the services of a number of pilots and aircraft. A number of excerpts now follow.

An aircraft is offered

On 3 August 1914, Captain A. K. Robertson of Cambridge, in the Eastern Cape, wrote to the Senior Staff Officer of No. 3 Military District (East London) that

"... I have recently constructed a tractor biplane here which flew stably for a short distance when through inexperience in piloting aeroplanes, I smashed the machine; the damage though considerable is repairable, the engine a latest pattern Anzani motor 60 horse power is undamaged and the remainder of the machine is here though unrepaired. Should the machine be of any service to the Union Defence Forces it is at their disposal."

Captain Robertson's letter was forwarded to the Secretary of Defence. On 17 August Robertson was informed that the matter was under consideration, while the staff officer of Cape Town Military District telegraphed on 22 August:

"Capt Robertson of Chiselhurst, East London, has a 60 H.P. Anzani engined biplane built on Cordon lines. Robertson left for England last Saturday and left the key of the shed with B. G. Breda of Avenue Francais Seapoint. Mr A. V. Clark could get the use of this machine."

Lea's and Doogan

On 3 August 1914 a Mr Leale of Johannesburg sent a telegram to the Secretary of Defence.

"Offer my services and those of experienced aeroplane mechanic. Familiar with Curtis & Bleriot machines phone 537 Johannesburg."

Three days later came an offer from Mr Doogan, of the Johannesburg Telegraph Service.

"Offer you my services in any capacity Aeroplanes and Balloon Section speciality."

Apparently no further correspondence was entered into about these offers. This happened also with J. D. Willis's offer.

J. D. Willis

Mr Willis, a resident of Cradock, offered his service as a volunteer to the brigade major of the Pretoria district and declared:

"I have been for the last 10 years with leading motor firms in England, and if there is any need of men who thoroughly understand motor engines, either for transport or aviation I have had a good deal of experience with both. I did two years training as a volunteer in the Worcester Artillery Corps."

The General Staff, more concerned with immediate necessities, ignored the transport and aviation. They enquired:

'Have you knowledge of 15 pounder breech loader. If so apply District Staff Officer Pietermaritzburg pay gunners 5/- per diem.'

Willis did not reply.

Arthur V. Clark

Clark, a member of the Aeronautical Society of South Africa, contacted the staff officer of No. 1 Military District (Cape Town). Major H. Blew wrote as follows about his offer:

"Mr Arthur V. Clark, who is a member of the Aeronautical Society here and who conducted flights at Hendon and Yorkshire, has offered his services to the Government. He says he was employed by an Aeroplane Company in England to fly all their machines during their tests

and in this way he says he has had a great deal of experience.

He has no certificates but is ready at one to prove his ability if given the opportunity.

He can make all his own repairs."

The staff officer was instructed to find out the conditions under which Clark was prepared to serve, and to make any appropriate recommendations. On Aug 28 the officer was able to say that Clark assumed he would be granted commissioned rank and pay of rank. He maintained that the Aeronautical Society would vouch for his abilities. In fact the Society had four days previously provided the Secretary of Defence with a list of certificated pilots on which Clark's name was mentioned. The Society's letter said, *inter alia*:

"Following certificated: Royal Flying Corps, Lieutenant Western (Staff officer) The Castle Lieutenant Thompson East Lancashire's Lieutenant (now Capt) De Grey-Warter latter has just left for England.

H. Dennis Cutler has registered his name with us for service if required. He holds the Royal Aero Club Certificate No. 189. Lieut J. Geo Dunlop & Mr Venables Clark are willing to serve. They both have had experience in flying, but neither hold a pilot's certificate... This Society grants Royal Aero Club pilots certificates for this country."

It is not known what eventually happened about Clark's offer.

H. C. Carter's offer

H. C. Carter, of Umkomaas, wrote to the staff officer of No. 5 Military District (Durban) on 14 August 1914 that he would

"Volunteer my services, if required, as an Aviator. My experience in Aerial Navigation extending over six years. No doubt you are acquainted of the name 'The Carter Biplane'. This is one of my machines built and designed by me. I may go further to say I was the first to fly in Africa.

Any further information required I shall be pleased to call on you at your convenience."

On 7 September the acting Secretary of Defence enquired of Carter whether any of his aeroplanes were in the Union and whether he was prepared to place any of them at the disposal of the Union Defence Force. If so, an offer could be extended to him too. There is no evidence that Carter reached to this request.

J. H. Dewhirst and P. G. Viljoen

Dewhirst wrote from Johannesburg to the staff officer of No. 13 Military District (Kimberley) on 24 August.

"I should be obliged to know if you are in need of an Aero Mechanic or Pilot. I am by profession an Aero and Motor Engineer having served my apprenticeship in Yorkshire where I was a member of the Leeds Aero Club. I have had considerable experience in constructional work and gliding, having a Monoplane of my own.

At present I am employed by the Rand Garage 112 Marshall Street, Johannesburg, having come out here on their behalf in January last, but I thought I may be of more use to my Country during the crisis at present, so I made application to your Headquarters here and Cape Town.

Therefore if my experience is of any avail, I gladly place myself at your disposal..."

A day later came an offer from P. G. Viljoen of Pretoria.

"I beg to offer my service in the event of you forming an Aviation Corps, I have a good knowledge of the construction etc., and have been interested and studied aviation for the last three years."

M. van Coller and Mr Garvin

Lt M. van Coller of Pretoria wrote on 24 August to the Secretary of Defence that

"I have pleasure in offering my services for Active Service. I have been through the Aviation Course at Kimberley and was given the rank of Lieutenant on the Supernumerary List of the Aviation Corps whilst training at Tempe. If my services are not required for this work, I will be glad to be transferred to some other branch of the Service."

On 31 August General Smuts acknowledged van Collier's letter and said that he would be informed if the Government decided to accept his offer.

A Mr Garvin of Salisbury telegraphed on 26 August:

"Offer my services as Aero pilot can fly but haven't certificate known to Weston whom I met at Hendon."

A reply was sent the same day.

"Many thanks for your wire offer has been recorded you will be communicated with if services desired."

The General Staff considers

On 31 August Major J. Mitchell Baker, staff officer to the General Staff, sent the relevant file to the Secretary of Defence endorsed as follows:

"... The scanty information I have in the file is of no use in arriving at an opinion as to whether a scheme for the construction of an Aeroplane Unit is feasible; on the other hand however it may be of some use to you in conjunction with that much you have..."

Allan Roach's offer

Allan Roach of Cape Town approached the Commandant General, Citizen Force. His telegram was forwarded to the Secretary of Defence.

"An aviator with home experience can government supply aeroplane willing to fly and proceed with troop know where machine can be obtained this country."

Major Mitchell Baker endorsed the covering letter:

"Is Minister prepared to consider the employment of Aviators if we can get suitable men and machines? If so there are one or two offers such as this which can be closely investigated."

General Smuts arranged an interview with Roach and on 3 September Roach answered:

"Wire received both mechanic and self joined South African Engineering Corps date of departure and destination uncertain can you arrange earlier interview or instruct our Commanding Officer."

Roach's Commanding Officer was informed of the correspondence to date. It was also mentioned that the Engineering Corps would not leave before 12 September, so that it was unnecessary to alter the date of the interview. On 3 September Roach telegraphed as follows:

"Your wire received have joined South African Engineering Corps obtained first class aviation mechanic can you instruct officer commanding about aeroplane for me otherwise my services useless."

Two days later came the reply:

"Your wire... not possible at present to do anything will communicate further if necessary."

Later applications

Three more offers were received from A. Baldwin, a member of the Motor Cycle Corps (3 November 1914); H. W. Rild (26 November) and a certain Doran, a signaller (5 January 1915).

Doran wrote:

"I am a fully qualified motor mechanic having had several years experience. I feel confident that I shall qualify for a pilots certificate with just a few days training, or would be pleased to offer my services in any capacity with any flying corps."

For references as to qualifications as motor mechanic I beg to refer you to Mr Whitehead 'Johannesburg Motor Mart' to Mr Whittaker, 'Whittakers Garage Johannesburg' to Mr Hoare 'Hoares Garage Johannesburg'."

On 8 January 1915 the Director of Signals enquired of the Staff Officer to the General Staff whether anything was being done about building-up a South African flying corps. The staff officer sent a negative reply.