

Cecil Robert "Tommy" Thompson

A SOUTH AFRICAN AVIATION PIONEER'S STORY

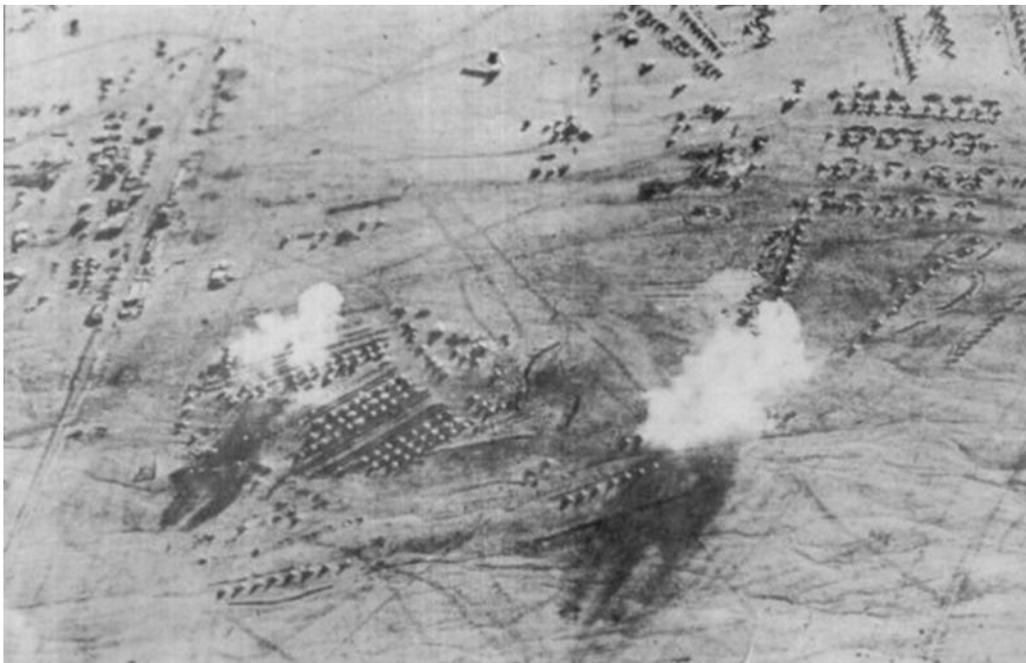
by Angela Embleton

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(Photo: By courtesy. SA National Museum of Military History)

Above: What was probably the first air attack in Africa took place in 1914, not long after the outbreak of the First World War. The attacker (and photographer) was a lone German piloting a small aircraft. The attacked were troops of the Transvaal Scottish, the Imperial Light Horse, the Pretoria Regiment and the Kaffrarian Rifles. They were camped in the hot South West African (now Namibian) desert at Tschaukaib, near Aus.

The German South West African and East African campaigns, 1914-1916

Periodically, the Germans flew over the South African regiments and dropped Howitzer shells, each with a strip of torn sheeting attached to it with thin wire, to ensure that the shell landed nose first and exploded on target. A monkey unwittingly became the first African air raid siren. The monkey, a mascot of one regiment, would hear the aircraft long before any human ears picked up the sound and give warning by squealing and chattering excitedly. 'It was the first time I ever saw an air attack', Tommy Thompson told me. Tommy (Major C R Thompson, DFC) is one of South Africa's pioneer aviators.

It's a far cry from the jumbo jets of today back down the years to the goggles and oil-spattered overalls of those pilots who learned to fly, not on beams or beacons or radio fixes, but by the seat of their pants. The graduates of the 'stick and string' days, the men - and women - who piloted flimsy, under-powered, open machines, were regarded (to quote from an early cutting of The Star) as 'a congregation of amusing and comparatively harmless madmen with suicidal tendencies'. Tommy (he has always been known by this name and it seems impossible to refer to him by any other title) was one of those courageous 'madmen'. He flew in the Royal Flying Corps long before Lindbergh had flown the Atlantic. He was the first pilot to 'loop the loop' in South Africa.

On that fateful day, August 4, 1914, when South Africa entered the First Great War. Tommy was in his twentieth year it was to be the end of a career on the mines. He joined the 1st Transvaal Scottish and was shipped from Cape Town to Luderitz. The Germans surrendered at Otavifontein. All troops were then returned to South Africa and disbanded.

After the German South West stint. Tommy volunteered for service in German East Africa with the 4th South African Horse under Colonel Elliott and Major Hopley, in 1915 to 1916. Finally, after a rigorous campaign, he went down with

malaria. Later he was discharged and returned to South Africa to spend a 'get fit' period at Mossel Bay. It was then that he read an advert in a Cape paper, calling for volunteers for the Royal Flying Corps.

The Royal Flying Corps (RFC)

The small band of South African officers who had joined the RFC in 1914 had well proved the worth of South African flying men. Such was the excellence of their performance that the British Government asked the Union Government to conduct a recruiting campaign in South Africa. The task was given to Major Allister Miller, DSO, son of a Swaziland pioneer, who arrived in Cape Town in October 1915 to recruit young men for commissioned rank in the RFC.

'Men like Pierre van Ryneveld. Johnny and Hector Daniel. Chris Venter and Kenneth van der Spuy were already in the RFC. I was one of Allister Miller's first 100 to be shipped over to England in 1916 to learn to fly. First we were put through military training at Hursley Park, then went to Christchurch, Oxford, for technical flying training.' Tommy was a second-lieutenant when he was sent to Uxbridge for practical training on Maurice Farmans.

'They looked like big kites,' said Tommy. 'You sat up in front with the engine at the back and you were well aware that if you crashed nose-first the engine would drive you into the ground. The whole contraption was held together with piano wire festooned in every direction - lift wires, landing wires, drift wires, bracing wires; we used to say that the mechanics tested these kites by putting a canary in the middle of the wires and if the damn bird got out, there must be a wire missing!'

After a mere three to four hours' dual, the pupil pilots went solo and received their wings and then went on to Avros and Sopwith Pups - the latter the forerunners of the Sopwith Camels. These machines had the advantage of the engines being situated in front.

The SE-5 was, in 1917, the last word in fighting scouts turned out by the Royal Aircraft Factory. It was a single-seater which would do 128mph (206km/h) at 10 000ft (3 048m) and 115mph (185km/h) at 15 000ft (4 572m). It was powered by a 140Hp Hispano Suiza engine and had two guns - a synchronized Vickers machine gun which fired through the propeller by means of the new Constantinesco gear; and a Lewis gun, clamped on to the top and firing over the propeller. The Lewis could be pulled down on a quadrant mounting if necessary to reload.

Bomb load of the SE-5 was four 25lb (11,34kg) Cooper bombs, to be used when ground strafing. The craft could be looped, rolled and dived almost vertically without breaking up and was altogether the most successfully designed scout of the Great War. It was relied upon to re-establish the Allied air supremacy.

Tommy had three hours' experience on SE-5s when he was booked to go to France. 'A group of us, booted and uniformed in our best, were due to go up to London for a last spree before leaving for France on the Tuesday. Unfortunately, the CO decided I must have a total of four hours on SE5s.' It was Friday afternoon and snowing when Tommy came back to put in one more hour. Taking off in the whirling snow resulted in a cart- wheel and broken shoulder which kept Tommy convalescing again, in England, until the following February when he put in a few more hours on Avros and SE-5s and then, in May 1918, he went on to join No 84 Squadron at their base north of Amiens.

One September morning at about 09.00 a patrol of fifteen SE-5s took off from No 84 Squadron, flying in three groups. They had completed their patrol and were on their way home when, coming out of a cloud bank, Tommy spotted nine German balloons. He was leading, the last flight and broke away with two of his scouts to attack.

'As I was diving on one balloon I became aware of somebody shooting at me from behind and for one moment thought the other two guys were firing too soon'. Then he realised that the firing came from a group of Fokkers who had also come out of the cloud. Despite this, Tommy continued to attack and blew up the first balloon. He then managed to get one Fokker before he got a burst which went through his shoulder and jaw. He came to in a spin, regained consciousness, pulled out and somehow limped back to the squadron where he was able to land, but unfortunately finished up in a bomb hole on the runway, much to the annoyance of the CO. Tommy had landed at 09.45. By noon, he had been operated on and come round from the anaesthetic - a tribute to the medical service of those far-off days.

He was sent back to England in a Red Cross ship. Reluctantly he admitted that he received the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) for this encounter. Armistice came in November and by then Tommy had regained his health and become so fit that he was chosen for the newly renamed Royal Air Force rugby side in a series of inter-Dominion rugby matches. (I must mention that the famous South African, Capt Beecham Proctor, VC, DSO, MC, DFC, was also a member of 84 Squadron. He was the only flying South African to get a VC in the First World War and had 52 victories to his credit.)

'Looping the Loop' in South Africa

After Tommy had returned to South Africa, Major Allister Miller asked him to join him in the newly formed South African Aerial Transport Company which was formed to foster flying in South Africa. The pilots were Major Honnett,

Major Carl Ross and Captains Thompson, Rutherford and Harrison. 'We had five Avros and carried out a series of commercial and propagandist flights in practically every town in the Transvaal, Free State, Eastern Province and North and South Rhodesia (now Zambia and Zimbabwe).'

Pegoud, the famous French airman who was killed in 1915, had looped the loop at Brooklands on a specially rigged Bleriot in late 1913, but the first person to 'loop' was a Russian officer, Lieutenant Nesteroff. Tommy became the first pilot in South Africa to perform this aerial feat when he looped over Baragwanath, although he was a trifle out of practice and 'hung on top' of the loop. Later, he looped over the old Wanderers Cricket ground during a test match between South Africa and Australia - much to the enjoyment of the spectators and the annoyance of the players! Eighteen months after its inception, the South African Aerial Transport Company was forced into liquidation. To its credit, however, the company's machines had carried 5 000 passengers and flown more than 30 000 miles (50 000km) without a single accident or injury to passengers and only comparatively minor mishaps to the aircraft.

Tommy, in partnership with Carl Ross, purchased the aircraft and equipment and, in 1921, formed the Ross-Thompson Co Ltd, which barn-stormed its way through the Transvaal and Natal for the next eighteen months. 'When we intended visiting a town or dorp, we'd telephone or telegraph the local town clerk and tell him we'd be there on a given date. We'd ask him to select a flattish piece of ground, about 150 yards square (125m²), and clear it of ant hills. Then we'd ask him to test it by driving a Model T Ford over it at 30mph (48km/h). If the car could take it, we reckoned our planes could too. When we arrived they'd shut up shop and the crowds came out to watch. We'd ask them to make a smoke-fire and light it as they heard us approaching so we could get the wind direction.'



The mayor of Johannesburg, Mr T F Allen, prepares for the inaugural flight from Baragwanath with pilot Carl Ross.

After a variety of experiences Tommy and his business partner sold out to a Rhodesian syndicate. Carl Ross joined the newly formed South African Air Force and Tommy joined a commercial company in Johannesburg. Although no longer engaged in full-time flying, in 1926, together with enthusiasts such as Col Rod Douglas and his sister Marjorie, Frank Boustred, Bert Evans and his sister Dulcie, and Mr and Mrs Gordon Haggie, Tommy was a founder member of the Johannesburg Light Plane Club at Baragwanath. Captain Stan Halse was one of the club's flying instructors. Tommy, who had 'had flying in a big way then', took an active part only by being official examiner. The first club member to gain his 'A' licence was Glen L Bateman. Twenty-five years later, at the club's anniversary celebrations in 1952, two of the original members were asked to give flying demonstrations again. They were the late Sir George Albu, and Tommy Thompson. And once again, although a trifle rusty, Tommy triumphantly looped the loop above Baragwanath.

Second World War service

Tommy's military career was not quite over. He joined up again in 1939 as a transport officer in the 5th Brigade, which was broken up in 1940, and he was then appointed Officer Commanding Military Police, Johannesburg: 'We had to turn out the 2nd Transvaal Scottish in Johannesburg in 1940 to keep the peace during the riots.' After this, Tommy transferred to the air force and went to SAAF Headquarters in Nairobi. 'When the campaign against the Italians up there came to an end, I was transferred as adjutant to 24 Bomber Squadron. Eventually we got organised and equipped with Maryland bombers and went up to the desert early in 1941.'

Tommy was in one of the biggest blow-ups in the desert when 24 Squadron was stationed at a railway siding called Fuka: 'Through the grapevine, the Huns heard that an ammunition train and a petrol train were in the siding. One evening they came over and bombed the lot. The ammunition train had several trucks loaded with 250lb (113,4kg) bombs which went up in smoke.'

Together with the burning petrol, it must have been quite a sight. The noise was unbearable as the bombs exploded. The next day, a heavy truck wheel was found 880yds (805m) from the siding.

Finally, Tommy was seconded back to South Africa and appointed administrative officer to the training camp at Milner Park. Today, as the great craft of the modern air age come flashing out of the skies and land gracefully at Jan Smuts Airport, as the American spacemen land on the moon, it is amazing to realize that it is within the lifetime of an air pioneer like Tommy Thompson that all this has developed.

Obituary

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Thompson, Major C. R., DFC - Obituary
D. P. Tidy

Major Cecil Robert Thompson, DFC, RFC, RAF, SAAF, died on 16th March, 1973, at the age of 78. 'Tommy' Thompson was one of the most personable and best-loved of the 1914-18 air aces, and made friends wherever he went. On 5th August, 1914, he joined the 1st Transvaal Scottish and was soon on his way to the South West African Campaign. He used to recall vividly the first action in which South African troops were bombed. Colonel J. Dawson Squibb, DSO, VD was a martinet, but Tommy related with glee how at the end of the bombing, when he picked himself up, he noticed Dawson brushing sand from his moustache, 'so I knew what he'd been doing - lying flat on his face like me!'

With the 4th South African Horse he went off to German East Africa and the campaign there, returning in 1916 to join Captain Allister Mackintosh Miller's 'first 2000' in 1917. Miller personally interviewed 8,000 candidates and selected 2,000 who were known as 'Miller's Boys'. Tommy teamed up with Hugh Saunders on the boat to England, and these two were nicknamed the 'Dingbats'. The name has stuck for life as far as Hugh is concerned because he is still known affectionately as 'Dingbat'. Also in the first 2 000 was another who was to join Tommy and Hugh in No. 84 Squadron RAF, Andrew W. Beauchamp-Proctor, VC, DSO, MC, DFC, South Africa's most decorated airman of that war. C. J. ('Boetie') Venter and H. G. Willmott, two of the SAAF's most senior officers of World War II were also in the first 2,000, so Tommy was in great company.

Tommy and 'Dingbat' Saunders were sent to the training school at Northolt, near Uxbridge, Middlesex and were trained by another South African, A. G. Kiddie, from Kimberley, alongside the brother of Hesperus Andrias van Ryneveld (later Sir Pierre), this brother being killed later in the war. Tommy acquired his RFC nickname of 'Ruggles' at this time and is described thus in 'Tiger Squadron' by Wing Commander Ira ('Taffy') Jones, DSO, MC, DFC, MM who trained with him and later visited him in South Africa. Tommy, 'Taffy', 'Dingbat' and van Ryneveld all joined 74 Training Depot Squadron at London Colney (my book 'I Fear No Man' (Purnell) has a detailed description of this unit in 1917).

The advanced pupils, including Tommy and 'Dingbat', were posted to No.84 Squadron. Tommy related how his departure was put back because, when in a blinding snow-storm, he was about to depart for the bright lights of London, his instructor demanded another training flight. He skidded a wing-tip in the slush, crashed and injured his shoulder. However, he eventually reached 84 and served under Sholto Douglas (later Marshal of the Royal Air Force Lord Douglas of Kirtleside), who was C.O. of 84 from August, 1917 to November, 1918.

Tommy shot down five enemy aircraft, flying the SE5a which he loved. On a balloon strafe he led his flight into the attack only to hear the pop-pop-pop of machine-gun fire behind him as he attacked. He turned furiously to shake his fist at his No.2, only to see it was a Hun, and to receive a bullet straight in the side of his jaw. He got home somehow and spent some time in hospital, receiving the DFC for his services.

After the war he met and married Enid, the inspiration of his life, and flew all over South Africa in a barnstorming air-circus on the lines of Sir Alan Cobham's, giving flips to all who would come. His friend, Tommy Duff, tells a story of one who would not. Seeing the sad-faced chap who would not fly, Tommy asked him why. He said he would not fly if he were paid, and that, if the people who owed him money for meat would pay him instead of wasting their money flying with Tommy, he'd look happier!

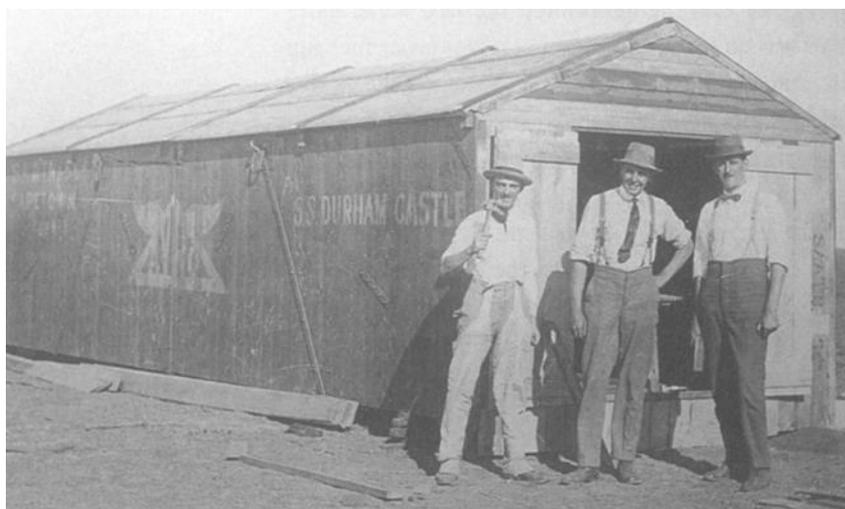
In World War II, Tommy was Adj to No.24 (originally 14) Bomber Squadron SAAF and went to East Africa, and in May, 1941, to Egypt, with Marylands attached to an RAF Wing, the Squadron later receiving Bostons, Tommy returned to South Africa to assist in the demobilisation scheme, and later joined a famous whisky firm, receiving in

consequence, yet another nickname 'Whisky' Thompson (to distinguish him from 'Typewriter' Thompson, a bowls colleague of his).

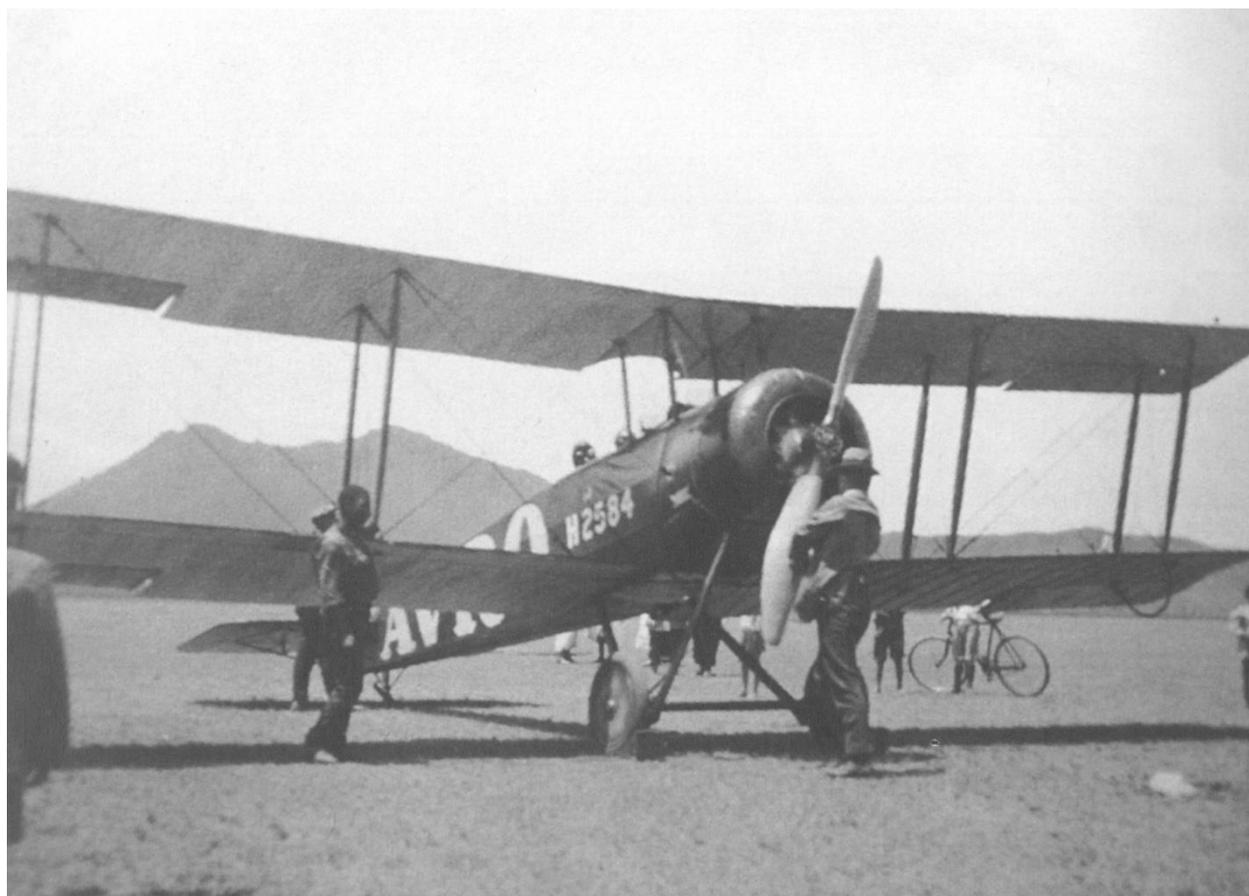
Tommy was active and cheerful right to the end, despite a painful foot and knee affliction. He entertained me to dinner a few nights before he went and his hospitality, humour and vigour were undiminished. He goes, mourned and missed, but his grand sense of humour and friendly disposition raise a tear of laughter rather than of sorrow. He would have wished it no other way.

D.P.T.

Additional material relating to “Tommy” Thompson from the archives of The Johannesburg Light Plane Club, Baragwanath.



The 'office' of South African Aerial Transport Company Ltd with Captain Charles Ross DFC, Major William Honnett and Lieutenant Tommy Thompson DFC (Photograph: In Southern Skies by John Illsley)



Thompson's barnstorming tour of South Africa in the AVRO 504K H2584



AVRO 504K H2583

Baragwanath aerodrome saw the departure, on November 15 1919 of an Avro biplane piloted by Major Allister Miller, on what was the first commercial charter flight in South Africa. The Star was the company which had hired the aircraft to fly a special edition of the newspaper to Durban. This picture was taken at 7 am by a photographer of The Star 45 minutes before take-off.

Three Avro 504K's were owned by the South African Aerial Transport Company, H2583, H2584 and H2591. All of them were meant to be part of the Imperial Gift of aircraft that the South African Air Force (SAAF) received at the end of WWI but these were sold off before they could serve in the SAAF. The UK registrations were not taken up.

Registered	Cert RAF	s/n	Type	Named	UK Reg	Orig Reg	Owner
10/7/1919	EA75	H2583	Avro 504K	Natalia	G-EAFU (ntu)	H2583	South African Aerial Transport Company
		H2584			G-EAFV (ntu)	H2584	South African Aerial Transport Company
		H2591			G-EAFW (ntu)	H2591	South African Aerial Transport Company