Imperial Air Routes: Discussion

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Source: *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (Apr., 1920), pp. 263-270

Published by: geographicalj

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1781732>

Accessed: 06-06-2016 13:36 UTC

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Before the paper the PRESIDENT said: Your Royal Highness, my first duty this evening is a very pleasant one. On behalf of the Royal Geographical Society I desire to thank you, Sir, for the honour you have conferred upon us by becoming Vice-Patron of our Society; and especially for coming among us so soon after you had been good enough to accept that position.

My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, His Royal Highness is in the midst of a work of the very greatest Imperial importance, and requiring the very finest delicacy of treatment if it is to be brought to a successful conclusion. His Royal Highness is putting the different parts of the Empire in good temper with each other. He is cheering us all up after the war. He is helping us to get full enjoyment out of life. He has made himself a very dear and precious asset of the Empire, and one of which we here ought to take special care. It is for that reason that the Council of the Royal Geographical Society have refrained from asking His Royal Highness to speak to us this evening. We are unwilling to trespass on his great generosity and wish to spare him as much as possible. We want him to enjoy himself here this evening, and we hope he will be interested in listening to the lecture and hearing how future Kings—and perhaps he himself—will progress about the Empire, open Parliaments in Canada, Australia, New Zealand or South Africa, hold Durbars in India, and spend their holidays (and may there be many of them!) in Kashmir, that most beautiful country in the world, and the probable successor to the throne of which, Raja Sir Hari Singh, we have great pleasure in welcoming here this evening.

The lecturer to-night is Major-General Sir Frederick Sykes, and like the Field Marshal on my left, like the Secretary of State for War, and like your President, he had the good sense to begin his military career in the cavalry. But the horse was not good enough for him, so he forsook that noble animal for the balloon, and finding that not good enough, he deserted it for the aeroplane. He did some of the pioneer work of military aviation even before the war. He played a distinguished part during the war in France, in Gallipoli, and at Headquarters, and is now Comptroller-General of Civil Aviation. We earth-bound geographers are inclined to look with a jealous eye upon these fine gentlemen of the air. For they soar up aloft and glide gracefully over the most terrible obstacles, unsurmountable to us geographers. We dislike them especially for a very nasty habit they have contracted of taking photographs of us from that superior position in which men appear like ants, mountains like mole-hills, and even the President of the Royal Geographical Society appears of very insignificant proportions. But we geographers get our own back upon them in the long run, because they cannot stay up in the air for ever. Sooner or later they have to come to earth again, and then they become very particular indeed about their geography. If they are in an aeroplane they are most anxious that the surface of the earth beneath them is not water, and if they are in a flying-boat they do not want it to be land. They want to know all about the surface of the earth. They want to know if it is covered with forests or buildings, whether it is hilly or plains, whether it is crowded or free and open, and whether there are communications to their landing-place. They want, in fact, to know everything they can about its geography. So in the end they are glad enough, these haughty airmen, to shake hands with us humble geographers. And we geographers are glad enough to shake hands with them, because we realize what great use aviation may be to geography. At our last meeting we had a very distinguished French traveller present, Colonel Tilho, who travelled in the deserts of French Sudan,

and he told us how very useful they found aeroplanes for their reconnaissances of parts of the desert which were not accessible for camels. Then we have had requests here for the exploration of the great rivers and forests of Brazil by flying-boat, and we in this Society are extremely interested in having the neighbourhood of Mount Everest in India, the highest mountain in the world, reconnoitred, if possible, by aeroplane. So there are many ways in which the Air Service can help geographers, and we in this Society are anxious to come into close alliance with that Service. We have had interesting afternoon discussions at our Society's house on the use of air-photography for the purpose of making maps. We have another meeting of the same kind next week. We especially asked Sir Frederick Sykes to give us this paper as a kind of introduction to other lectures we propose to have on this question of connecting up the various parts of the Empire. We have also decided at the Council meeting this afternoon to invite Sir Frederick Sykes to join our Society and to serve on the Council. We hope to be able to work out together what will be the great main routes by which we shall be able to reach the different parts of the Empire by air, and we wish to determine also the Liverpools, the Portsmouths, and Singapores and Maltas of the Air Service; the great strategic points, ports and dockyards, of the air. We hope to get that done and to get the public thoroughly interested in this question of quick communication by air, for we realize its immense importance to the Empire. We recognize that really quick communication can now only be by the air, and we hope to get this question thoroughly discussed and threshed out so that the public may be well informed and take a keen interest in it. For we know that unless the public is really interested in it, there will never be a thoroughly efficient and working Air Service. We hope that this Society, in combination with the Air Service, may be of very great use to the Empire upon this all-important question of rapid communication.

Major-General Sir Frederick Sykes then read the paper printed above, and a discussion followed.

H.R.H. THE PRINCE OF WALES: I am very grateful to you indeed for having let me off making a speech. You, my Lords, Ladies, and Gentlemen, should be grateful too. I should like to tell you, Mr. President, what a great privilege I consider it is to be made Vice-Patron of the Royal Geographical Society, and it is a great pleasure to have been here this evening. I join my thanks and your thanks to Sir Frederick Sykes for his very interesting lecture. There is no doubt that geography is going to help aviation, and aviation help geography in the same way. The importance to the Empire of the development of aviation is obvious. I cannot pretend to be an aviator or to know much about aviation, although I have flown a little and know what it is to be in the air. It is certainly very tantalizing to me to have seen all those red lines on the maps, and to think that later on it may be possible for me to be able to fly round the Empire instead of going by sea. On account of the gallant and untiring efforts of the Royal Air Force we have established a great lead in aviation, and from what Sir Frederick Sykes has told us this evening—he told us a lot of wonderful things we did not know before—every effort is being made to maintain that great lead.

THE PRESIDENT: Air Vice-Marshal Sir Geoffrey Salmond was with the first to fly to India, and we shall be very grateful if he will speak.

AIR VICE-MARSHAL SIR GEOFFREY SALMOND: Such an opportunity has seldom fallen to any one as was mine on the conclusion of the Armistice. In

the Middle East I had command of a large force of officers and men of the Royal Air Force on whom the curtain of a great inactivity suddenly fell. Our energies were abundant, but our outlets suddenly became exceedingly few. During the war, as part of our work of preparation, various air route questions had been studied, and certain action had been taken, with the result that preparations had been made to complete an air-route to Aden, as well as one to Baghdad, and from Baghdad to India. The route to Khartoum had also been taken in hand. It only remained for some galvanizing cable from the Air Ministry to arrive; and it did arrive. On November 12 I received a cable stating that a Handley-Page was shortly starting from England to fly to India, and that a giant Handley-Page would start to fly from England to the Cape.

Now the route to India was practically ready, whereas nothing had been done to develop the route to the Cape. Here was the necessary outlet for our energies, and within five days survey parties had been assembled, the route had been planned, and within ten days of the receipt of the cable those survey parties had started. The first party's duty was to prepare the route to the upper waters of the Nile. The second party was to enter East Africa by Mombasa, and take the central section stretching from Victoria Nyanza to the southern part of Tanganyika. The third was to enter East Africa *viâ* Beira, establish its headquarters at Pretoria, and extend the route from Tanganyika to Cape Town.

I must say here that these survey parties received the greatest assistance from the various Governor-Generals and Governors they met, with the result that within a year a route had been carved out through the centre of Africa, which I trust, in the next month, will culminate in a successful flight from Cairo to the Cape.

The survey parties having been started, I decided to prove our air connection with Baghdad, the Royal Air Force in Mesopotamia being under my command. A start was made on the morning of November 15 at 7 a.m., and flying *viâ* Tadmor and Damascus we arrived at Baghdad at 5 p.m. on the following day. At Baghdad it was impossible to persuade the people that we had had breakfast at Cairo on the previous day; but the fact remained. Such an event seemed impossible to people who had hitherto looked on Cairo as at least twenty-one days from Baghdad. If ever a striking instance is wanted to prove what the air can do, I think this instance proves it.

Arrived at Baghdad, and having completed various inspections of the R.A.F., it somehow occurred to us that we were practically halfway to India. Once more the cables flashed to England, and, sanction being granted, we started for India, travelling *viâ* Basra, Bushire, Bundar Abbas and Charbar, where aerodromes had been prepared. My pilots on this occasion were General Borton, commanding the Palestine Brigade, and Sir Macpherson Ross Smith. Our mechanics were Sergeant Shires and Sergeant Bennett. Now all this crew—except General Borton—were the crew which recently flew to Australia, and so it is not surprising that our journey to India was so successful.

I cannot omit paying a tribute to the well-known machine and engines that made our flight possible. In both cases they were excellent. The engines, turned out by a well-known firm, did six million revolutions between Cairo and Calcutta and never uttered a sob. Among the many interesting things which we experienced perhaps the following were the most striking: Firstly, the immensity of the desert between Cairo and India; except for the great rivers Euphrates and Tigris, the country is practically waterless until the Ganges is

reached. I remember thinking at the time how much we owed our civilization in Europe to water, and what a tremendous handicap the inhabitants of these regions were under, when their first thought by day must be to find enough food and water.

Secondly, the grandeur of the mountains between Bushire and Bunder Abbas.

Thirdly, the fact that the Persians at Bundar Abbas already had ideas of air-transport, for they brought their falcons with them to see the great machine, as much as to say they also knew something about it.

Fourthly, the enormous interest displayed by the Indians when we arrived at our various destinations in India, and how they marvelled at our punctuality ; though to tell the truth, of course we always had something up our sleeve and always telegraphed our probable time of arrival beforehand, allowing us half an hour in hand in case of delays. We sighted Delhi fully three-quarters of an hour before Delhi saw us, and lay off until the scheduled time for our arrival, when we made our usual punctual landing.

Arrived in India we realized that we were actually halfway to Australia, and so once more the cables flashed, and once more by the Air Ministry being true to their salt, was a further reconnaissance of the route from India to Australia undertaken. It was, of course, impossible to proceed by air at this stage, since no preparation of landing-grounds had been made. General Borton and Sir Macpherson Ross Smith therefore undertook the ground reconnaissance, and we are immensely indebted to those two officers for the preparation of the route. In particular are we indebted to General Borton for the great success which has marked all the stages of the opening up of an air route between England and Australia. It was General Borton who first flew a machine, a Handley-Page, from England to Egypt. It was General Borton who flew from Egypt to India. It was General Borton who by his unfailing tact and courtesy carried out such excellent work in the preparation of the route from India to Australia,

In August 1919, a party of Royal Air Force officers left Damascus in eight Ford cars to survey the route across the Arabian desert. They disappeared for eight days, and eventually arrived at Abu Kamal on the Euphrates, having surveyed the desert from one end to the other and planted landing-grounds at intervals of 40 miles which can be identified from the air. This reconnaissance across the Arabian desert of over 300 miles established a record. All these things have been done by officers and men of the Royal Air Force because they were, and are, inspired by one great ideal—their absolute confidence and belief in the future of the air.

So much for what has been done, and now it is fitting that we should turn to the future. It is no good thinking of air routes unless we think of the organizations by which they are to be linked up. And it is no good thinking of these organizations unless we thoroughly understand the fundamental principles upon which successful commercial aviation must rest. These principles are :

- (a) Mails are the most convenient load for air transport.
- (b) An adequate load to find a satisfactory paying return for each flight is essential.
- (c) A clear realization of the high cost of maintenance if reliability is to be secured.

As regards mails, all Governments possess one priceless lever for ensuring the success or otherwise of air transport in their inherent right of controlling

mails. It has been practically established that efficient maintenance for a twin-engined machine on a given route, and providing for a commercial rate of interest, works out at 10s. a ton each mile flown. This means that on 1000-mile flight an aeroplane must earn £500. The load necessary to create this money will primarily consist of mails, and mails depend upon industrial centres. Now in India, industrial centres are few and far between. Calcutta is 1000 miles from Bombay and 750 miles from Rangoon, and yet this stretches from one end of India to the other. Between these centres a very small load would be picked up, consequently India has decided that only one air-transport organization will be given the mails, in order that it should have every chance of success. Mails are the paying cargo for air transport. By granting a monopoly of mails for the whole country, India has recognized this feature, as well as the high cost of maintenance, and has shown her determination to lay her air policy on a sure and sound foundation. Adequate safeguards for the Government of India are provided by a Government Director on the board of the company, who is responsible to the Indian Air Board.

Now the conditions in India apply equally to the other great areas linked up by air routes, discussed to-night. We may therefore see Australia, South Africa, and Egypt proceed on these principles ; I might include Canada also. The central organization based on Egypt may hold the monopoly of air-transport mails with an arm stretching from Cairo to Basra on the one hand, and from Cairo to Tanganyika on the other hand. Although this seems a large area, it must be remembered that a strong organization is necessary, and that mails on a paying basis are few and far between in these places.

The Indian organization would include all air mails in India and Burma with an arm stretching to Burma on the one hand and to Rangoon and possibly Singapore on the other hand. The Australian organization might be responsible for all air mails in Australia and stretching up from Australia to Singapore, where it meets the Indian organization. The South African organization might be responsible for all mails in the union of South Africa, and meet the Egyptian organization on the southern boundary of Tanganyika.

If this policy were adopted we should have four great air-transport organizations, Egypt, India, Australia, South Africa, all possessing a monopoly of mails in their own areas, and thus possessing the essential means of paying their way, and all, except the Central, based on their own Governments, and thus being fostered and developed in unison with the requirements of the respective countries over which they operate.

As regards the connection between England and Egypt, this, as the lecturer has said, will probably develop on an airship basis centred in England. If this were done the chain would be complete, and it would not be long before Australia, India, and South Africa would be linked up direct with England by an all-British air route.

It may be said that the conception of air organization I have sketched would take no account of the difficult question as to the respective merits of airships and aeroplanes. I wish to make it clear that these organizations are of course at liberty to adopt whatever aircraft proves to be commercially the most suitable for their service requirements. In any case the aerodromes, and a very large proportion of the maintenance services necessary for aeroplanes, are suitable for the maintenance of airships.

I have often thought the British Empire, in so far as Egypt, India, Australia, Africa and South Africa are concerned, is like some great giant whose head is in England, whose enormous limbs stretch from Cairo to

Australia and Cairo to the Cape, whose veins are these air routes, whose arteries are these great air organizations described. If this is so, our policy must be bold and large and not fragmentary. We must view the problem as a whole. Only by such means shall we link up the Empire by air on a sound and healthy system. By such means shall we confer on our kinsmen overseas the priceless gift of close inter-communication which is the bed-rock of Imperial affection and commercial prosperity.

Mr. WINSTON CHURCHILL : I think we have had a very interesting and very valuable experience to-night in listening to the admirable speeches delivered by the two officers of the Air Force who have been before us this evening. We have had from General Sykes a complete survey of the present position of the development of the air routes throughout the British Empire, and we have had from General Salmond one or two references (I wish they had been more numerous) to his own brilliant flight from Cairo to India. This gathering, this great and distinguished company, and the presence of His Royal Highness here to dignify the proceedings, constitute an event of real help and value to all those who have the interests of the air at heart. They will need all the help that they can get in the years immediately before them. There is no doubt whatever that the war gave to aviation an impulse altogether out of proportion to what can be expected in the ordinary times of peace. Aeroplanes were fanned into the air on the fierce wind of a great struggle, when money and danger hardly counted at all in human calculations, and now we come back to the prosaic times of peace when risk exercises its deterrent effect upon the ordinary traveller, and when money invariably makes its appeal not only to the Chancellor of the Exchequer but to the taxpayer. Therefore the years which immediately follow the great struggle must be years of exceptional difficulty. It is a desert area like those described to us by General Salmond which we have to fly across for the next few years before we reach a development in aviation which will enable the world to catch up on a normal basis to the development it had attained during the extraordinary period of war ; and therefore, speaking on behalf of the Air Ministry, I express my gratitude to all who have attended to-night, and who, by their presence and interest, are tending to make this difficult period of the aftermath of the war one which will be swiftly and safely traversed by the Air Force and by the air interests of our country. Unless we keep the lead in the air, commercial and military, we cannot possibly enjoy that safety which during so many centuries our Navy has hitherto bestowed upon us. I am sure you are entitled to feel when you go home that you have not only been having a pleasurable experience, but have been discharging an important public duty.

Colonel AMERY : I think we shall all go home with a very vivid impression in our minds of a great Imperial system of trunk air routes radiating eastward and southward from Cairo and westward from this country across the Atlantic to Vancouver, with just this interesting feature, that the link between the two centres, London and Cairo, will pass in peace across foreign countries, but in time of war would have to be maintained by sea or by air stations, like Gibraltar and Malta, which will themselves be dependent upon our naval supremacy. That does bring home to us the fact that, however important the position of the air may be in the future, our position as a great air-power will still rest largely on our position as masters of the sea. But I do not propose to be tempted into the fascinating field of the higher strategy of the future. I should like to say one or two things about those aspects of this great question which interest the Department that I have the honour temporarily to represent

in the absence of Lord Milner, who I know takes the very keenest interest in the development of aviation. Sir Frederick Sykes has already indicated at several points during his lecture the immense importance that aviation can have in some of those great undeveloped and almost unexplored regions of the world for which the Colonial Office is responsible. There are great regions there, unsurveyed, and extremely difficult to survey because of dense forests, swamps, or deserts. There is a problem with regard to which aviation may be of immense help. We have problems of policing, of keeping order, where mobility and immediate action, omnipresence, in fact, are essential. There again a small air force may be of infinitely greater value than a much larger military force by its power of acting quickly. We have great problems in getting our officers to and from their posts, great administrative difficulties caused by the necessity for frequent and long periods of leave to get them away from unhealthy stations. A system of aeroplanes that could easily get officers to and from their stations may be of incalculable benefit to our whole administrative system in the future. The advantages in this respect to the administration may also be paralleled by similar advantages to civil economic development. It will obviously be much easier in future to develop tropical regions if those concerned in their development can easily get from the scene of their work to healthy upland stations. What I have said about the tropical regions of the Empire applies equally to the great Dominions ; I need not add to what Sir Frederick Sykes has said with regard to the scope they afford for the development of aviation.

But the advantage which aviation can be to each part of the Empire is nothing to what it can be in promoting the unity of the whole. The great problem before our generation is how to combine the principle of equality between the different self-governing portions of the Empire with the object of maintaining its unity unimpaired. Personally I am confident that the solution of that problem is to be found not so much in devising new constitutional schemes as in making possible the personal human touch and intercourse between the men on whose co-operation, whose agreement, whose mutual sympathy and confidence and understanding can alone enable our great Commonwealth to work as one. It is obvious how much the development of civil aviation can make that intercourse easier for busy statesmen in the future. What applies to the leaders in the field of politics applies to leaders in every field, in journalism, in education, in business, and in science, not least of all in that very science of aviation which is the subject of our meeting to-night. And I may say, in passing, that I know of no one more capable of promoting that intercourse, that fruitful exchange of ideas on the development of aviation, between the communities of the Empire than our lecturer to-night, if he can find time, by air or otherwise, to visit the Dominions.

It applies above all to that most democratic of our institutions the Crown. And it is with a profound understanding of the truth that His Majesty, who has himself visited all the great Dominions and India, has approved of the Prince of Wales's visiting and getting into direct personal touch with every part of our great Commonwealth. His Royal Highness has suggested to-night that what he is doing now by long sea and rail journeys may one of these days be possible to him by the far speedier method of flying through the air. When that time comes, as no doubt it will, then the Crown will indeed be, in fact, what it already is emblematically on the device of the Royal Air Force, a winged Crown—a winged Crown over a United Empire.

The PRESIDENT : Earl Haig had the good sense to join the Royal

Geographical Society twenty-five years ago, and hence his rise to his present pre-eminence.

Earl HAIG: I am not going to make a speech. I have only to ask you all to give a very hearty vote of thanks to General Sykes for his most interesting lecture. I think we must all congratulate him on getting so much information into the brief space of one hour.

Sir HUGH TRENCHARD: You do not want a speech from me, and all I have to do is to associate myself with what Lord Haig says concerning the vote of thanks to General Sykes for his very excellent lecture.

The PRESIDENT: The vote of thanks has been proposed by Lord Haig and seconded by Sir Hugh Trenchard, and is carried unanimously.

IN NORTHERN ANATOLIA, 1917

Captain E. H. Keeling, M.C.

Read at the Meeting of the Society, 15 December 1919

I HAVE named the subject of this paper "*In Northern Anatolia*," because I have no experience of the country as a whole, but only of a small part in which I spent some months during 1916 and 1917, as one of 120 British officers who, after capture (nearly all in Kut), were taken to Kastamuni, in Asia Minor. Fifteen months before the armistice I myself was so fortunate as to escape with two other officers and to get across the Black Sea to the Crimea. It is of our experiences during this journey, which occupied seven weeks, that I shall mainly speak. But first I will give a brief account of our march from Kut to Kastamuni.

The garrison of Kut ate the last ounce of its food supplies on 29 April 1916, and under orders from the Commander-in-Chief surrendered the same day. On account of our weak condition and the difficulty of evacuating us to Asia Minor, the Turkish general, Khalil Pasha, recommended that we be allowed to go to India on parole, but Constantinople refused to listen to this proposal. Thereupon Khalil informed General Townshend that the garrison would be "the most sincere and precious guests" of the Ottoman Government. As is now well known, the Turks so far overwhelmed their captives with hospitality that over 70 per cent. of the British rank and file and at least one-third of the Indians perished under it.

The officers, British and Indian, fared much better, and the Turks quite evidently considered that if they did their best for us the death of a few thousands of the rank and file would be overlooked. We were powerless to help our men, as we were separated from them and sent up into Anatolia forthwith. The journey took us over two months, and covered about 2000 miles—the longest land journey, perhaps, that prisoners of war have travelled since the days of the Roman Empire.

From Kut we were taken on foot to the Turkish camp at Shumran,