My Flight to India

By Air Vice-Marshall Sir Sefton Brancker, K.C.B., A.E.C.

We feel sure that our readers will be interested in Sir Sefton Brancker's account of his historic flight to India. The machine left England on the 20th November, returning on the 17th March following, and in over four months' active work covered 18,000 miles. During that time they had not a single forced landing through a material defect and the aeroplane totalled over 200 hours in the air.—EDITOR.

TOWARDS the end of the summer of 1924 a series of events gave me an excuse for flying to India. First and foremost, the Government definitely had decided to embark on an experiment in the operation of airships. This policy necessitated a visit by Air Ministry officials to India, amongst whom, naturally, the Directorate of Civil Aviation had to be represented. Further, it was becoming more and more obvious that the time was ripe—indeed, more than ripe—for some commercial organisation to take over the Cairo-Baghdad air route and extend it to India, and there were other factors also which justified the journey.

A very short consideration of the various problems that were in process of development made it obvious to me that the only way I could investigate them efficiently was by an air journey to India, visiting Paris, Berlin, Warsaw, Bucharest, Constantinople, and the Cairo-Karachi air route on the way. Such a break-away from precedent was, of course, more than any Government Department could be expected to accept without some demur! The de Havilland taxi-service offered to take me to India by any desired route for £1,500, and after some discussion, the Air Ministry agreed to grant £700 towards such a journey.

The departure of the de Havilland from Croydon

The selection of pilot and aircraft was not difficult. Cobham stood out as a long-distance air navigator without equal and was himself mad keen to go. I had spent many comfortable and happy hours in a de Havilland 50, behind a Siddeley Puma engine, and was prepared to back that combination for safety and economy anywhere. Our mechanic, Elliot, had done several long trips with Cobham, and knew the D.H. 50 inside out.

We decided at once that we must carry all our spares with us, and must have about eight hours' petrol on board for some of the long jumps we might have to make. For this reason, two of the D.H. 50 seats on the port side were replaced by extra tanks, holding 60 gallons of petrol. A hand pump was fitted in the cabin to raise this extra fuel into the overhead gravity tank and an extra oil tank was fitted, as also was a tropical radiator. A spare propeller was bolted under the fuselage and stream-lined with fabric, and about 50 lbs. of engine spares was stowed under the pilot's cockpit. In addition, we carried ample baggage, for I insisted that, in the interests of air transport, Cobham and I had to be prepared to dress properly for any situation that might arise on the journey. Furthermore, we knew we would have to carry four days' rations and water on some sections of the route.

Our maximum permissible load was 4,200 lbs., which was made up as follows:—Weight of machine empty with water 2,400 lbs. Normal fuel and oil 473 lbs. Weight of pilot 170 lbs.; making a total weight of 3,043 lbs.

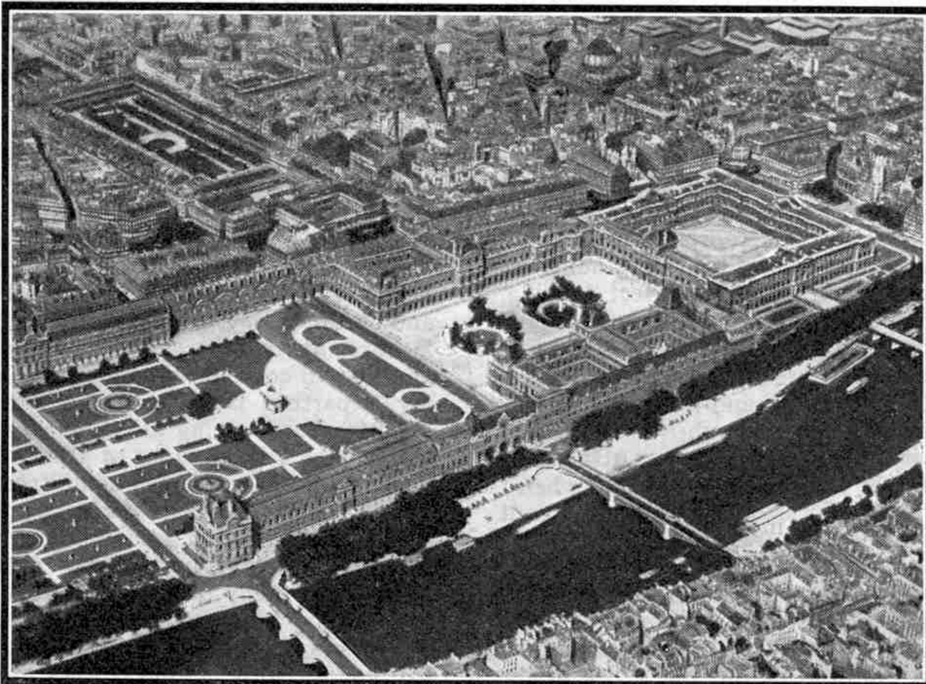
The actual load carried in addition was 1,160 lbs., made up thus:—Weight of passengers 336 lbs. Weight of baggage 200 lbs. Extra petrol and tanks 462 lbs. Emergency rations and water 20 lbs. Engine spares 50 lbs. Engine tools 10 lbs. Extra propeller 30 lbs. Extra weight of large wheels 26 lbs. Extra weight of tropical radiator and water 26 lbs. Giving a total of 1,160 lbs., which, added to the 3,043 lbs. of the machine etc. (as given above) totalled 4,203 lbs.—just over the maximum permissible. As a matter of fact we started without checking these weights very closely. I was of the opinion that it would be better to start with all we thought we required, and then jettison the less necessary articles if we found we were overloaded. We actually "weighed-out" at Berlin, and found that we were practically just within our Airworthiness Certificate weight even with full tanks. Later on we must have been a little overloaded when we had to carry rations.

We started at a peculiarly unpropitious time for regular flying in Europe, and we anticipated plenty of climatic trouble as far as Constantinople. I was therefore anxious to avoid publicity at the start as I realised

that our enterprise, with a little bad luck, might well be seriously delayed by fog and snow on the unorganised route we were to follow. Our departure on November 20th was somewhat of an ordeal; it was extremely cold, and the aerodrome was a sea of mud; we had to wait whilst the compass was swung; and in spite of our desire for privacy, a large number of enthusiastic friends and Press representatives had assembled. As we piled in our baggage and took our seats, I began to have fears as to whether we should unstick at all, so wet was the aerodrome; but the machine rose like a bird, and we plunged straight away into a fog, from which we did not emerge until we were forced to land at Poix, as flying beyond that point was absolutely impossible.

Paris from the Air. The Church of Le Sacre Cœur on the hill and the Eiffel Tower in the distance

From thence our journey via Cologne, Berlin and Warsaw was uneventful. At Berlin we went to see what is likely to be the best air port in the world. The German Government have converted the old Tempelhoferfeld—where the Imperial Military Reviews used to take place—into Berlin's Air Port. It offers a magnificent area, only ten minutes' drive from Unter den Linden, and I doubt if any other city in the world will be able to boast of such a fine aerodrome so close to the centre of its activities. The country round Berlin is extremely flat and should be very suitable for regular night flying in the future.



Paris: The first aero photograph taken of Palais de Louvre

We had an easy flight from Berlin to Warsaw, but I confess to quite a thrill when I first sighted the shallow sandy bed of the Vistula with its tremendous history of military endeavour in the past. We struck the river low down and passed over several of the old frontier forts before reaching Warsaw, where we received a tremendous welcome from the Polish Air Force. The Poles believe wholeheartedly in aviation, and they also believe—perhaps with some reason—that they are one of the most important bulwarks of Europe against the Bolshevik hordes, and that the time will come when they will save Europe, as they did once before. In consequence, they have a huge programme of aviation development, and every officer and man I met seemed to be "all out" to make the Polish Air Force a great success.

From Warsaw we started in beautiful weather, intending to push right through to Bucharest. However, after only about an hour's flight, we ran into exceedingly low cloud, and, as we had no weather reports of the area in front of us, we tried to fly underneath it. It got worse and worse, and, after dodging trees and church-steeples for some time, we had to turn back and landed at a large new military aerodrome at Lublin, which has been constructed as a very large aircraft depot, where all overhauls of both engines and aircraft are carried out. Here we received a telegram from Bucharest urging us to wait as the weather was very bad and the aerodrome under heavy snow. Later we had a good weather report from Lemberg, which is about the highest point between Warsaw and Bucharest, and started off once more. We reached Lemberg just as the fog closed down, and as the weather was so bad I went on

to Bucharest by train.

When the weather cleared, Cobham arrived, after having a most adventurous journey from Lemberg. He had become impatient with the weather, and had started off over the clouds, flying along the edge of the Transylvanian Mountains, the peaks of which he could see. As he got nearer Bucharest, the weather got worse and worse, and eventually, after being more than five hours in the air, he had to land in a small field at the foot of the mountains. The local inhabitants had never seen an aeroplane before, and gave him a great reception—the local school children assembling round the aeroplane and singing hymns in his honour!

The next day he tried to get off from the field in which he had landed, but found it quite impossible, owing to heavy mud. Eventually, a small boy who had been watching his efforts slowly realised what he was trying to do, and had the intelligence to lead him to another field about a mile away. Here a get-off was just possible in one direction, so the machine was manhandled across ploughed fields and ditches to this field, a really muddy operation. Fortunately the next morning the weather was fine, with a nice breeze blowing from the right direction, and Cobham made a successful take-off.

Constantinople, the capital of Turkey, seen from the air

The Roumanian Flying Corps had cleared a track in the snow at the Bucharest Aerodrome, the rest of the aerodrome being quite impossible for landing or taking-off, and here Cobham made a perfect landing. Elliot set to work immediately to remove some of the mud, with which the machine was liberally plastered.

Communications between Constantinople and Bucharest are bad, to say the least of it, and telegrams usually take two or three days to get through. Eventually I got a despairing wire from the Military Attaché in Constantinople, asking me to try to let him know when I was going to arrive, as the Turks had twice already sent out guards of honour to meet me at San Stefano! We left on the morning of 5th December in fine weather, crossing the Danube very soon afterwards. Here we saw thousands of ducks flying round the frozen marshes near the river banks. Half an hour later the snow had vanished, and we began to get glimpses of the Black Sea in the distance. The weather got better and better, and eventually, when we reached Constantinople we had one of the finest views that I have ever seen from the air. The Bosphorus, the Golden Horn, the hills of Stamboul and Pera, and the endless minarets and domes, all combine to make Constantinople one of the most beautiful cities in the world when viewed from an aeroplane.

We had a surprisingly warm welcome from the Turks, and throughout my visit, everyone I met tried to impress on me their great desire to make friends with England. They were most helpful and most hospitable, and I thoroughly enjoyed every minute of my time on Turkish soil.

Here we had our first and practically only serious touch of engine trouble, in the shape of a leaky water jacket, so I had to leave Cobham to get this right, and went on to Angora, the Turkish capital, by train. Angora was exceedingly interesting. It is a very old city that used to boast of about 30,000 to 35,000 inhabitants. I got various estimates of the present population, and they seemed to average out to about 80,000, including some 200 Deputies from every part of the country. Angora is surrounded by a very large marsh, from which emanates a virulent form of malaria. It rained a good deal whilst I was there, and I have seldom seen a more dismal, dirty place.

The Turks are facing their troubles bravely; the Government is working in the most uncomfortable conditions, but they are working very hard and sincerely. As one of them told me, there was nothing else to do but work in a place like Angora! They are faced with many great problems—they are short of ploughing animals and agricultural implements and considerable tracts of the country are plagued with malaria.

The Turkish aviation Headquarters are at Smyrna, and Mazaffar Bey, who commands, started to fly up and meet me at Angora. Unfortunately he crashed en route and had to come on by train, which somewhat delayed my departure from Angora. But this gave me an opportunity of seeing all there was to be seen, and of making the acquaintance of all the Ministers.

On the 16th we started again from San Stefano Aerodrome, across the Sea of Marmora and round near Brusa, over very wild and mountainous country with some beautiful scenery, particularly near Mount Olympus, which towered up on our right. As we progressed east, the country flattened out, and, after passing Afium Karahissar, it became an ideal aviation country: wide, flat valleys with landing places galore, surrounded by ranges of easy hills. The country everywhere from Afium Karahissar right on to the pass beyond Eregli was very desolate, but water was plentiful, and, if only sufficient population and money existed to develop these plains, this would again become a very prosperous part of the world, as it was centuries ago.

(To be continued)