

# WINGS OVER SUEZ



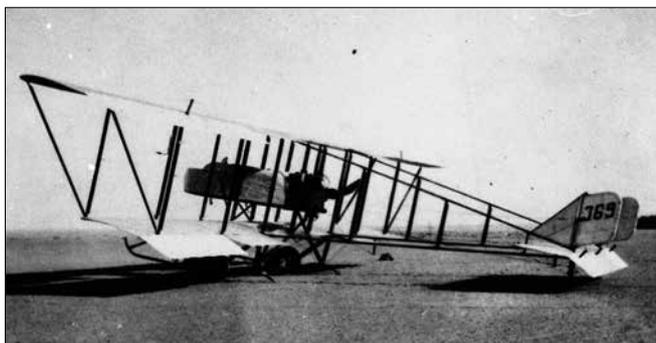
## *The History of RFC/RAF Training in Egypt 1916-1919* by Ray Vann and Mike O'Connor

*all photographs via Ray Vann/Mike O'Connor Palestine Collection*

ON 6 JANUARY 1915, Major C.C. Marindin, an officer on the staff of the Military Aeronautics Directorate, wrote to OC Administrative Wing, Lt Col E.B. Ashmore, at Farnborough. Ashmore was informed that sanction had been given for the formation of thirty additional squadrons for the RFC. On 15 January that total had been raised to fifty. Six months previously, in August 1914, Major General Sir David Henderson, the Director General of Military Aeronautics, had elected to travel to France as Officer Commanding the Royal Flying Corps. Remaining in the UK was Henderson's deputy, Lt Colonel William Sefton Brancker, left behind to be in sole charge of the supply and equipment to expand the RFC as the situation required. In December 1914, Brancker had submitted proposals to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, and subsequently Lord Kitchener, and Sir David Henderson, for an increase of RFC squadrons, to thirty, plus an increase in training reserve units. That approval was forthcoming by the end of December 1914.

Brancker laid down three main, urgent requirements; firstly the design and production of aircraft and aero engines and secondly the recruitment and training of pilots, observers, and air mechanics, and the expansion of an administrative branch. The third urgent requirement set out by Brancker was the establishment of training aerodromes and airfields the length and breadth of the United Kingdom, plus the acquisition of suitable buildings and sites that could be used for the initial courses in aerial gunnery, photography, rigging, engine repair etc. As the expansion began, RFC HQ were fully aware that one element, totally outside of their control, could

*Maurice Farman Se.11 369 had a long and varied RFC career. It was initially taken on Military Wing charge in April 1914 and issued to 6 Sqn. It formed part of the 'Egypt Detachment' and reached that country in November 1914. The detachment became the nucleus of 30 Sqn in July 1915, by which time 369 had been severely damaged. Re-built, the aeroplane saw service with 14 Sqn before transfer to 21 RS in July 1916, as part of that unit's initial equipment. It lasted for a further two months, being stuck off charge on 13 September.*



delay or even halt progress and that was the British weather, especially during the winter months from October to March. A solution would have to be found and, in the first instance, that suggested solution was Egypt.

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 gave Great Britain an invaluable line of communication to its Indian Empire and its colonial possessions in the Far East. The British Government also realised that this vital artery would have to be protected at all costs in the event of a global conflict. The Canal's integrity and security became a cornerstone of Imperial policy resulting in an embroilment in Egyptian affairs from 1882 to 1898. The conclusion of the Protective Powers operations gave Britain's Consul General a premier position in Egyptian foreign policy and defence. As the world situation deteriorated, and war with Germany seemed inevitable, the security of the Canal became an urgent priority. In the pre-war German press, the Suez Canal had been spoken of as Britain's 'jugular' and intelligence reports indicated that a major Turkish advance across the Sinai desert from the Ottoman's eastern empire would be attempted, in an effort to destroy or blockade the Canal.

By January 1915 the total British force in Egypt, commanded by Sir John Maxwell, numbered some 70000 troops, made up of British, Australian, New Zealand and Indian regiments. The one hundred miles of the Canal from Port Said to Suez had been divided into three sectors and Maxwell also had a small RFC contingent for reconnaissance, and hopefully early detection of Turkish forces attempting a crossing of the desert from the east.

The RFC 'Egypt Detachment' had arrived at Alexandria on 17 November 1914 with three Maurice Farmans, and acquired two Henri Farmans from an Italian firm in Cairo, before moving to a site at Ismailia centrally situated to detect any Turkish force. Additional aerodromes were to be established at Aboukir, 14 miles north-east of Alexandria and at Heliopolis and Kantara. Ismailia had originally been a small French town, headquarters of the Canal organisation, and an oasis of shade and tropical luxury laid out by the French. It and Heliopolis would, over the next four years, expand into the RFC's principal training centres. The aerodrome was situated to the north-west of the town and about a mile from it.

Winter weather conditions in Egypt (especially in the northern half of the country and the Mediterranean coast) were, in the main, ideal for flying, with excellent visibility being reported from 4000/5000 feet. Although more rainfall than normal could be expected on occasion, plus early morning mist and occasional sandstorms, average temperatures ranged from 10°C in winter to a summer average high of 32°C. Average yearly sunshine hours in the northern and coastal areas totalled over 3300.