

Carrying on up the Khyber

Operating the BE2 on India's NW Frontier

by Paul R. Hare

:C. Huston

THE FIRST BE2 to fly over India's North West Frontier was 4452, built by G & J Weir, which was test flown at Risalpur on 20 January 1916 by Capt C.R. Macdonald of 31 Squadron.¹ Along with four other BE2cs, it had been shipped out to what was then still part of India but is now Pakistan, at the request of the Viceroy of India, Lord Hardinge, who was an enthusiastic supporter of the war in the Middle East,² especially since the entry of Turkey into the war had given the Muslims in his region a renewed desire to rid themselves of the presence of the British. The Viceroy, therefore, wished to ensure that his Frontier, including the infamous Khyber Pass, was as secure as he could make it, especially if any reverses in Mesopotamia afford the enemy an opportunity to advance through neutral Afghanistan and thought that aeroplanes would help.

Although the enemy's *initial schemes to stir up trouble along the Frontier were fortunately frustrated*,³ the Viceroy's request was taken very seriously and, in response, a new unit, designated 31 Squadron (A Flight), was formed with 48 personnel from 1 Reserve Aeroplane Squadron at Farnborough, under the command of Captain MacDonald, and sailed from Liverpool for India. An Aircraft Park was formed at the same time. Both units arrived at Bombay (Mumbai) at the end of December 1915 and proceeded to Nowshera, some 30 miles from the local army headquarters at Peshawar, where erection

of the aeroplanes, including 4355, 4365 and 4366 as well as 4452, began. During February 1916, two of the BE2cs were flown to Peshawar, where a Durbar was taking place and, after performing aerobatics over the gathering, were shown to the native leaders to convince them that, in future, their activities could be observed from the air.

A second detachment, B Flight which was formed from 22 Squadron at Gosport, left England in February with a further six BE2cs and joined A flight, which had now moved to Risalpur. The Risalpur aerodrome had been established at the junction of the Kabul and Kalpani rivers,⁴ although lack of accommodation meant a temporary detachment of A Flight to Muree.

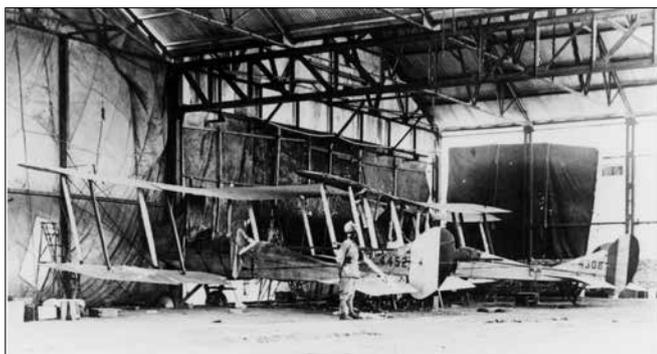
Aircraft shipped to India at this time included 4470 and 4523, both of which were assigned on 15 April 1916 and reached Risalpur, to which A Flight had now returned, by October.

C Flight, which was formed with men from the VI Brigade during April, left England in May, again travelling to Bombay via the Cape, with the Squadron being considered officially complete by the beginning of October 1916. It had, of course, been operational long before that date, suffering a loss on 9 August 1916 when BE2c 4310 crashed in a spin during a practice flight, injuring its pilot, 2Lt L.J. Mann.

4452's initial flight, on 20 January 1916, had been made principally to test that the rigging was correctly adjusted

BE2c 4452, the first of its type to fly in India.

:FAAM JMB/GSL 01537



Soldiers wearing pith helmets ('Bombay bowlers') queuing to peer into the cockpit of an unidentified BE2c whilst crowds of natives look on.

:via author

