

# THE BIRTH OF AN AIR SERVICE

## The Serbian Aviation Command

by Boris Ciglić

**A**FTER CENTURIES OF OTTOMAN OCCUPATION, the 19th Century saw the return of the Serbian Kingdom as an independent state, but it was only at the Berlin Congress in 1878 that the country received international recognition. Squeezed between two great powers, the Ottoman Empire and Austria-Hungary, with the majority of its nationals still under foreign rule, rich in natural beauties and fertile land but with almost no industry, burdened with constant tensions, both internal and external, the young Balkan Kingdom began a process of wide modernization. It was slow in the making and suffered many failures, but it still led to some surprising developments, among them the creation of one of the first air forces in the world.

The first attempts to establish military aviation in the Serbian Kingdom date back to 13 August 1893, when a legal act, *Amendments to the Decree on the Composition of the Military*, proposed that each army division should have a balloon detachment at its disposition. This remained wishful thinking as there were no funds for such equipment, which would have to be purchased from abroad. Nevertheless, when the invitation was received, on 12 December 1900, for applications from eight officers to Russian military schools, the Defence Minister, Colonel Miloš Vasić, decided that one place should be allocated to an attendee of the aviation school.

An Engineering Corps first lieutenant, Kosta Miletic was selected from four possible candidates and, on 27 February 1901, he found himself at the Aviation School Park, Volkov Field, near St Petersburg. During his stay in Russia, which lasted until 25 November 1902, Miletic completed the balloonist course and received the title of the aerostat pilot. He also acquired practical and theoretical knowledge of meteorology and the carrier pigeon service and, during the massive manoeuvres held in September 1902, he made a

180km flight in a balloon, reaching the altitude of 1100m.

Upon return to Serbia, Kosta Miletic was assigned to the engineering and technical department of the Ministry of Defence, where he prepared a detailed study, with proposals for the establishment and organization of a carrier pigeon service and the creation of a balloon detachment. Conservative views and suspicion of new ideas in higher circles were too great an obstacle for its realization and the project was put on hold, whilst Miletic took command of 3 Pioneer Company, at Niš, in April 1903. Early in 1904, he became the Ordnance Officer to King Petar. In this new post, he had the opportunity to meet frequently with the Defence Minister, General Radomir Putnik, and continued to pursue the idea of the creation of the air arm. Eventually, in March 1905 a special commission of the general staff adopted a programme for the procurement of new equipment for the Engineering Corps. It included a plan for the establishment of an aviation command with three balloon detachments and a carrier pigeon service. Yet again, other priorities postponed its realisation.

When Austria-Hungary proclaimed the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in October 1908, Serbia found itself on the brink of war. Eventually, unprepared and without the backing of the major powers, the Balkan Kingdom stepped back but the annexation crisis became the catalyst which highlighted the question of aviation equipment, which ultimately propelled the formation of aviation units.

### THE PIGEON SERVICE

The first 'aviation' unit of the Serbian Army was created in unusual circumstances. Early in December 1908, a basket with 17 carrier pigeons, carried by an Austro-Hungarian agent, was seized in Obrenovac. Upon receipt of the news, Defence Minister General Stepa Stepanović ordered Captain Kosta Miletic to urgently print the *Rules for the Carrier Pigeon*

*Two photographs from Lieutenant Kosta Miletic's time in Russia. At the left, he is shown lifting off, with a Russian colleague, during the September 1902 military manoeuvres near Kursk. In the other, he is shown (at the left side of the balloon's basket) with his Russian instructor during training at the Aeronautical School Park near St Petersburg during the summer of 1901. Between 1888 and 1904, 163 balloon pilots graduated in Russia; only eight of them were foreigners, seven Bulgarians and a single Serb.*

