

AEROVIGNETTES

By D.D. HATFIELD

AFRICAN DESERT TRAGEDIES

The African desert has taken its toll of flyers and aircraft through the years of aeronautical development. Considering the advancement of aircraft range and navigational aids, the area would seem to be a minor challenge. However, numerous instances show that pilots have been seemingly unaware of their chances of survival after landing. Fatal incidents have occurred.

The following is an account of one of the earliest aerial tragedies to occur in the African desert. It follows the same pattern of other similar experiences where the seriousness of the situation did not appear to those involved until the end was evident.

Second Lieutenant Stewart Gordon Ridley, or "Riddles" as he was known to fellow pilots in the Royal Flying Corps in 1916, came from a well-known Northumbrian clan. He lived at Willimoteswick, an old fortified farmhouse in Northumberland where his father, Bishop Ridley, was born.

In early June, 1916, Lieutenant Ridley was transferred to Egypt and was stationed at Meheriq Oasis in the Lybian Desert. It became necessary to have an aerial observation operation far into the desert, which, due to the distance from the oasis, necessitated a base of operations to be established near the observation area. A camel patrol was sent out in advance to prepare a landing place. On Thursday afternoon, 15 June 1916, Lieutenant Gardiner and mechanic J. A. Garside took off to fly to the base and occupy it. Lieutenant Ridley flew escort in another plane.

It was an estimated one-hour flight to reach the base. However, after an hour had passed they had not located the camel patrol nor the airstrip. Continuing another half hour, they landed and camped in the desert.

It was decided the next morning that, Ridley, having the lightest airplane, would look for the camel patrol but his engine would not start, so Gardiner took off to return to the Oasis and determine the exact location of the base. He left his water and provisions and stated he would return to take the others out on two trips.

On reaching the Oasis he found that because the planes had not arrived at the base, the camel patrol had returned, and with the captain of the camel patrol as guide, Gardiner flew to the airstrip and remained overnight.

The next morning, Saturday, Gardiner began a search for Ridley and Garside. After some time he found their previous camp but Ridley, the mechanic and the airplane were gone. No note was found. They returned to the Oasis but the others had not arrived, and thereupon search parties of camel patrols, motor cars and airplanes were sent out.

On Sunday afternoon, a spot was found where the air-

plane had landed, was repaired, and had gone on. This was 25 miles from where the first night was spent. Tuesday afternoon, the airplane was found. Ridley and Garside were dead. Garside left a brief diary of which the following is a copy:

FRIDAY: Mr. Gardiner left for Meheriq and said he would come and pick one of us up. After he went we tried to get the machine going and succeeded in flying for about 25 minutes. Engine then gave out. We tinkered engine up again, succeeded in flying about five miles next day (Saturday) but engine ran short of petrol.

SUNDAY: After trying to get engine started, but could not manage it owing to weakness, water running short — only half a bottle — Mr. Ridley suggested walk-up to the hills.

6 P.M. SUNDAY: Found it was farther than we thought; got there eventually; very done up. No luck. Walked back; hardly any water, about a spoonfull.

Mr. Ridley shot himself at 10:30 on Sunday whilst my back was turned. No water all day; don't know how to go on; got one Very light; dozed all day, feeling very weak; wish someone would come; cannot last much longer.

MONDAY: Thought of water in compass, got half bottle; seems to be some kind of spirit. Can last another day. Fired Lewis gun about four rounds; shall fire my Very light tonight; last hope without help comes. Could last days if had water.

In conjecture as to why Ridley had shot himself, the Captain of the Camel Corps stated that, from the evidence, it was his opinion that Ridley had done this in the hope of saving the other man. The Commanding Officer of the Royal Flying Corps detachment stated "There is no doubt in my mind that he did this act of self-sacrifice in the hope of saving the other man."

A party with a chaplain went out Sunday and buried them in the desert, erecting a cross with their names on it over a heap of stones covering their bodies.

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