

Albert Kimmerling in Natal

by David Lee

The French aviator Albert Kimmerling (1882–1912) is credited with being the first man to make a controlled flight in a powered aircraft in South Africa and indeed in the Southern Hemisphere. In December 1909 he brought his Voisin biplane to South Africa in response to an invitation to participate in a “Gala Week” in East London. His first flight there was on New Year’s Day, 1910. After a few short, low hops the aircraft crashed and the propeller was irreparably damaged. Kimmerling and his entourage then decamped to Johannesburg, where he made more short demonstration flights, and then in April moved to Natal. Kimmerling was killed at Mourmelon in France on 9 June 1912 when a new Sommer monoplane which he was piloting on a test flight broke up in the air and crashed. His passenger, the Sommer factory’s engineer Marcel Tonnet, also died in the crash. David Lee has researched Kimmerling’s life and self-published a booklet on the subject in 2009.¹ This extract deals with Kimmerling’s exploits in Natal.

Moray Comrie

Durban: April to June 1910

ON Wednesday 6 April, Kimmerling visited Pietermaritzburg to assess its suitability and he was impressed with the opportunity afforded by the racecourse at Scottsville. He then went on to Durban and

inspected the site at Clairmont near Jacobs but, although he preferred Pietermaritzburg, the City Fathers would not assist in any way with funds and not enough could be raised by public subscriptions. Kimmerling returned to



However, the damage was quickly repaired and the public display began in the afternoon with a 1,6 km flight. The plane landed, was turned around and returned over the same distance. On the third flight, Kimmerling circled for over 15 minutes, flying at 35 to 40 kph at a height of 17 m.

The public were informed of the intended display by the following advertisement that appeared in the *Natal Mercury*:

Johannesburg on the mail train on 11 April to collect the Voisin and on 18 April the decision was made that his last appearances in South Africa would be in Durban.

Kimmerling and Mr Michael J. Ries, who was named as Kimmerling's manager, travelled down to Durban, arriving on 26 April, and the party, comprising eight people, stayed at the Marine Hotel. Ries had previously been employed by Howard Farrar, Robinson & Co and he was the person nominated to witness the flights made by Kimmerling so that he could be paid.

It was reported that test flights were flown on Thursday 28 April at Jacobs, and the next morning tests were carried out on the 7 cylinder rotary engine and the steering gear. The plane was pushed for about 20 m before the engine took over and lifted the plane to 3 m for a 200 m flight. On landing the right wing touched the ground, and rumours quickly spread around Durban that he would be unable to lift his machine from the ground.

AVIATION

M. Kimmerling will make an ascent in the VOISIN AEROPLANE on Saturday, 30th April, 1910, weather permitting, at the Durban Bay Lands Estate, Clairmont. Between the hours of 3.30 and 6 pm. Special train service: Fare: Return ticket including admission to flying grounds, 3/6d. Flag signals will be shown from the old Town Hall. Code as follows: White flag signifies weather favourable for flight. Red flag signifies flight will take place at advertised time. Black flag signifies weather bad, aviation abandoned for the day.

A newspaper reporter who was assigned to describe the aeroplane wrote in almost poetic terms as follows:

The first thing that strikes the observer is the extreme airiness, one might say flimsiness, of the whole structure. Closer investigation raises admiration of the extraordinary skill with which every ounce of unnecessary weight has been saved, and the utmost rigidity, compatible with the lightness of the whole, secured. The structure is a marvel of delicate balancement

[sic] and adroit strutting and tying. It is well known that the poise of the wing surfaces is a matter of the utmost importance in the art of flying, and though this is necessarily a closed book to the uninitiated, the signs of scientific adjustment were everywhere visible. The result is undoubtedly graceful, and one was well disposed to accept the claim that these Voisin machines are regarded in Europe as a model in this regard.

The structure is really an airy framework of laths, tied together with the thinnest of cross-wires and covered outwardly as to its wings and box frames with the thinnest possible material tightly stretched. The various guiding and steering wings or fins swing easily and are evidently under perfect control from the aviator's chair.

Approximately 1 500 people gathered at Clairmont on the afternoon of Sunday 1 May when Kimmerling made three successful flights, the last of which carried him 10 km. The flying was so successful that Kimmerling described it as "my first real flight in South Africa". He said that in East London his plane had been damaged due to "the bad ground" and in Johannesburg the altitude and bad weather were such that flights there "were only jumps" and it had taken him three months in South Africa "to achieve a mediocre flight".

He said that he regarded Durban as the finest place for aviation in South Africa and that "the ground on the Merebank flats could, at little expense, be made into a splendid aviation ground". Durban International Airport was built on that site 35 years later, showing remarkable foresight by Kimmerling.²

Two sustained flights took place on the next day with the Voisin circling

around Clairmont. Unfortunately these attempts were not publicised using the code of flags, and only about a thousand people were gathered there to watch him. The first was for a distance of over 5 km and the second was over 8 km, both at a speed of 40 kph and climbing to a height of 40 m. This was acclaimed as having been the best display during his tour of South Africa and Kimmerling declared that Natal had everything favourable for aviation. He was particularly pleased to be able to fly at a higher altitude for he strongly believed that it was safer to fly high as this allowed more time to adjust the machine in the event of a problem. This belief was exercised to the full during his flights in 1911.

In a newspaper interview in 1957, Horace Barnes claimed that he was a passenger with Kimmerling on one of these trial flights that went "over Durban Bay" and that the controls were handed over to him and he flew the aeroplane. Despite Barnes's reminiscences, the newspaper reports of the time do not mention Kimmerling taking anyone up with him as either a passenger or a trainee pilot and as these flights were reported in accurate detail, Barnes's claim is doubtful.³

In an interview on 3 May, it was announced that Kimmerling's last flight in South Africa would be held on Saturday 7 May when he hoped to fly around and around Clairmont for between 30 to 50 km at a height of 90 m. An advertisement giving the same information was placed in the *Natal Mercury* to publicise this last flight but with the following addition:

Note: M. Kimmerling will take up a passenger with him and if the weather is favourable, Mr Barnes will make his first ascent unaccompanied by the

aviator. Should weather conditions prevent aviation on Saturday, the flights will be postponed till Sunday, 8th May.

In this interview, Kimmerling said that he would spend a couple of days to train a South African pupil to fly the Voisin and he would probably leave the machine in South Africa. This would indicate that – whatever the position was when he arrived in South Africa – by now he owned the aeroplane. He said that he had chosen Horace Barnes to be his pupil and he hoped he would be good enough to fly the machine on Saturday – again there was no mention that Barnes had flown with him already. He went on to say that on his return to France, he hoped to form his own aviation company so that he could buy up to 10 Farman Biplanes to bring out to South Africa. When asked which plane he preferred, he said they were all good machines.

On Friday 6 May, King Edward VII died and South Africa joined the Empire in mourning the King's death, and as a mark of respect to the mourning period Kimmerling's final public display was postponed for a week. Kimmerling of course was so enthusiastic following his successes in Durban that he just wanted to take his machine up – anyway he was French so the death of the King of England wasn't too serious for him. Accordingly, he arranged to make three flights on the Saturday – ostensibly as exhibition flights for the representative of the *Natal Witness* newspaper. The first was 2.5 km at a height of up to 9 m and return when he landed on a spot chosen by the newspaper representative. In the second flight he circled around at a height of 17 m before landing, but when he took off for the third time it

was found that a portion of the back plane over the steering had torn and the plane was sagging badly.

The following night Kimmerling had to travel up to Johannesburg on the mail train as he was due to attend court on 10 May to answer two claims against him for debts not paid. Central Advertising Agency was suing him for an amount of £7.10.0 in respect of the placing of advertising bills on windows and tramcars during February and March. There was no dispute over the fact that Kimmerling together with his so-called manager Michael J. Ries had ordered advertising to be displayed. It was also agreed that the British company G. Fox & Co were previously responsible for advertising but their contract had been cancelled as they could not or would not pay their accounts.

Evidence was that it was common knowledge that as a result, the displays were being arranged by “some private company in East London” – presumably Howard Farrar, Robinson & Co. Kimmerling argued that he went with Ries to place the advertisements on behalf of Howard Farrar, Robinson & Co, and this could not have been done in Kimmerling's personal capacity as he was simply the pilot who was on a fixed salary of £300 for each 10 days' display. The court accepted that Kimmerling was not liable for the advertising cost. He was less successful in the second case though, and he was found liable at another hearing for £16 in respect of “services rendered” by the Orange Grove Hotel.

Kimmerling returned to Durban and undertook his last flight in South Africa on Saturday 14 May 1910. There were strong gusts of wind but

despite this, Kimmerling resolved to go through with the flights. He took off in front of only 300 to 400 spectators and had covered about 2,5 km in three or four minutes when he was blown off his course by the wind at an altitude of 17 m. With the plane being unstable, he attempted a landing but crashed on the ground.

A full report as published in the *Natal Witness* at the time is given below, and again this has to be considered as far more accurate than the published reminiscences of various people who recounted the events forty or so years later.

**DISASTROUS FLIGHT
Aeroplane Wrecked at Durban
Machine Smashed to Atoms
KIMMERLING'S NARROW
ESCAPE**

Durban, May 14

Quite a large number of people went from Durban by special train to Jacobs this afternoon to witness the flight by Mr Kimmerling, and an equally large number came by road on bicycles, on horseback, in motor cars and by rickshas.

There was practically no wind when the special steamed out of Durban, and everyone was full of hope that the ambitious programme laid down by Mr Kimmerling would be carried out. The wind however had risen, and by the time the train arrived at Jacobs it was quite evident that some danger would exist in any attempts at flight.

Notwithstanding the probability of danger, Mr Kimmerling, with his usual pluck and determination, announced his intention of making an ascent, but he said it was utterly impossible to entertain the idea of taking a passenger or even allowing his pupil, Mr Barnes, to attempt to emulate his trainer.

On this occasion the attempt was made from near the garage, and the

aeroplane rose with its usual gracefulness, but the effect of the wind, evident though it was from the earth, was very much more apparent as the biplane rose. It rocked from side to side and up and down like a wounded bird or a vessel breasting the waves of a heavy sea.

A Dangerous Wind

The difficulties became more apparent, and as the machine was turned to go up the field, the veriest novice recognised the extreme improbability of the flight being really successful.

When the biplane reached the top of the field it was seen that Mr Kimmerling, who was about 50 feet up, was about to descend, and this he did. Owing to the high wind however, he came down too precipitately, the right wing of the biplane striking the earth while the motor was still working and ploughing its way forward. The impact with the earth totally wrecked the biplane which is now nothing but a mass of twisted strips and ribs. The only thing that Mr Kimmerling anticipates being able to use once again is the motor and this he is taking back with him to Paris, so the hopes of any further flights in Durban or Natal for some months at least are dashed to the ground.

The disappointed crowd wended their way back to the station, those of happier disposition gathering flowers along the road to compensate for a spoilt afternoon. But the most disappointed of all was the pupil Barnes, who had been anticipating being able to follow in Kimmerling's footsteps and to organise flights on his own after Kimmerling's departure.

The greatest sympathy is felt locally for Mr Kimmerling himself, whose pluck in attempting to fly so that the crowd would not be disappointed has been rewarded with so serious a disaster. Fortunately, notwithstanding his position was one of extreme peril,

when the aeroplane came to earth Mr Kimmerling was not hurt, though his escape was a narrow one.

How It Happened

I saw him almost immediately after the disaster, and although keenly disappointed, he was still philosophical. He seemed to be more sorry for the disappointed crowd than for himself. "The accident was due," he told me, "to a strong wind freshening up from a slight breeze after the biplane had attained a height of about 50 feet."

Mr Kimmerling, despite the obvious difficulties of flight, had gone about half way round the field when he felt that safety demanded his immediate descent. He came down with great force. One wing of the aeroplane struck the earth, and in almost a second or two the propeller, planes, rudder and frames of the machine were smashed to atoms.

Mr Kimmerling will probably leave for France at once, as there is not the smallest hope of being able to effect the necessary repairs here.

Mr Marucchi, who was interviewed many years after the event, claimed that the consulate had to intervene to save the plane being taken over by various creditors and that he "left South Africa as a disgusted and broken man". Newspaper reports of the time do not corroborate this picture – in fact in his last reported statement he said he was sorry to be leaving Durban where he had enjoyed performing.

Even so, it would seem that he would have had a few questions to answer on his return to France minus a plane – maybe by his father, maybe by some company that financed the display. On Sunday 15 May Kimmerling was seen off at Durban station by a small group of friends as he caught the night mail train to Cape Town where he

boarded the Armadale Castle to return to France. There is no evidence that he recovered the motor and took it with him, and it is more likely that there was some sort of agreement under which this stayed with the wreckage. A group of Durban businessmen had formed themselves into the Durban Aviation Syndicate and there was a newspaper report that they purchased the plane from Kimmerling – this suggests that Kimmerling did not take the motor back to France with him.

On 31 May 1910, the Union of South Africa came into existence, uniting the separate colonies of the Cape, Natal, Transvaal and the Orange Free State, which became provinces of the Union. As a part of the celebrations, the Voisin was put on display in its crashed state in the centre of Durban for a week and funds were raised from the public for repairs. The Durban Aviation Syndicate announced that it intended to establish a permanent aviation ground at Clairmont, from where the plane would be flown by Horace Barnes throughout "the season", and they hoped to acquire another plane with which to train pupils to fly and maintain aircraft.

Once repairs were started it was found that the Voisin was not as badly damaged as first thought and repairs were completed by 6 June after two weeks' work. Mr Michael J. Ries, who now claimed ownership, stated that the plane would be exhibited at the Royal Agricultural Show in Pietermaritzburg between 16 and 18 June 1910. The plane was transported up to Pietermaritzburg on 14 June and was ready for viewing on 17 June, when 750 paying visitors inspected it between 11 am and 6 pm.

There is no evidence that the plane

ever flew again, although Horace Barnes claimed that he did fly it. There are also no reports of the Syndicate, its activities or its demise – nor of the eventual fate of Kimmerling's Voisin. The only surviving relic might have been the original propeller. This also marked the end of aviation in South Africa for almost a year, as it was only on 29 May 1911 that a Belgian aviator, Joseph Christiaens, flew a Bristol Boxkite at the Pretoria race course as a part of the Pretoria Festival. At the fourth attempt, he flew for five minutes at a height of 10 m off the ground.

NOTES

- 1 Permission by David Lee to republish this extract from his booklet *Albert Kimmerling* (February 2009) is gratefully acknowledged.
2. The Durban International Airport referred to is not the current King Shaka Airport (which is north of the city) but the former Louis Botha Airport, originally known as Reunion Airport, which was opened in 1951 on the site referred to here.
3. The difficulty of relying on the reminiscences of those who were associated with Kimmerling's visit to South Africa is that memories become confused as to what was reality and what has been read. For example, interviews in 1957 contained glaring errors concerning dates and even the nationality of Albert Kimmerling. The reports available in the contemporary South African newspapers are therefore invaluable.

SOURCES

- Cailliez, Jean-Claude, *Kimmerling, the Geneva Aviation Pioneer*, website.
- Illsley, John W., *In Southern Skies: A Pictorial History of Early Aviation in Southern Africa, 1816–1940* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2003).
- The Natal Mercury*, 1910.
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