

How survey maps originated in South Africa.

*This is an extract from the book **Adrift on the Open Veld**, the **Deneys Reitz trilogy**, edited and introduced by **T. S. Emsile**.*

*Chapter 15 - **No Outspan** pages 491 to 494.*

Deneys Reitz was a member of Parliament for the South African Party.

(Has Deneys Reitz received the recognition, acknowledgement and is he remembered for the role he played in having the survey maps commissioned for South Africa? - Gavin Lawson).

Early in 1936 I returned to Capetown for the approaching session of Parliament. I was under constant fire from the opposition benches. The farmers attacked me because food prices were too low and urban members shot at me because food prices were too high.. I was Public Enemy No.1 and there were numerous complaints against me and my Department.

However, any Minister of Agriculture in South Africa is a scapegoat and as I look on Parliament and politics dispassionately, I was not unduly perturbed. The session petered out at last and by the end of June I was addressing meetings along the coast of Natal in an endeavour to persuade our ultra British friends that our only salvation lay in both races working together. I was not very successful. In Durban and in villages dotting the littoral most of the voters were as jingoistic and racial on their side as were the extreme Afrikaners on the other side. Between these ultimates, English and Dutch moderates have been striving for many years to build up a united nation in this country, and the road is long and stony.

Having stated my creed, I journeyed through Pondoland to Port St John's by lovely country. Thereafter the Swaziland Administration invited me to pay their Protectorate an official visit and I spent some interesting weeks travelling about being lavishly entertained. In the meanwhile my family were camped on Sandringham and I returned down along the Komati River and through the National Park to join them.

On our return from Sandringham I worked in office at Pretoria, attended Cabinet Meetings and helped at by-elections, spoke at agricultural congresses and met irate deputations in the countryside. I went mostly by air. I might be in Port Elizabeth on the south coast of the Cape one week and in Natal or the northern Transvaal the next, for the old leisurely pace of the ox with which I had grown up as a boy has gone for ever and now I hurtle through space like a madman.

And the numberless speeches I delivered! I once saw a cartoon of a deceased politician in Hades. Bound to a chair with ropes, his punishment was to be compelled to endure recitals of gramophone recordings of the speeches he had inflicted during his lifetime. There was a look of excruciating agony on his face - I only hope I shall be spared similar torture in the hereafter.

I had three flying incidents during this year; two nearly ended in tragedy the other was humorous.

I was proceeding from Capetown to the Orange River in a recently acquired twin screw machine (Airspeed Oxford) belonging to the Defence Force. As we approached the river after four hours flying there came an ominous knock in the port engine. I noticed the pilot and his mechanic uneasily watching through the window and I could see that the propeller was revolving erratically.

Searching out a patch of level ground we landed safely. Pilot and mechanic descend and walked forward to investigate. Then the pilot called to me 'Sir come and see what a picnic we have escaped.'

We found that the split pins of the propeller boss had not been wired, with the result that all the nuts had worked forward. Several had already disappeared into space and others were on the verge of following suit. The pilot said another few minutes and the propeller would have broken away. Since then I have listened to many arguments by the Air Force as to what would have happened if the 'prop' had gone. Some hold that it would have shot right forward but others say that with the nuts falling off at different moments the chances are that the propeller would have sheared sideways into the forward cockpit killing its occupants and leaving the passenger (myself) and the plane to nosedive into the earth.

The second incident arose out of my irrigation activities.

The Department of Irrigation was in my charge and of late years I had become increasingly interested in the

subject. I had persuaded the Government to build the Vaal-Harts scheme at a cost of six million pounds and I was dotting the Unoin with other irrigation dams.

At the beginning of the session just ended I was hotly assailed for spending twenty thousand pounds on a certain irrigation survey without parliamentary sanction and the opposition devoted several days to castigating me. I had sometime before inspected a place called Loskop, in the transvaal, where I was determined to build a large dam. I let the Nationalists rave about the 20,000 pounds and towards the end of the session when everyone was tired and jaded I slipped a million and a half onto the estimates for the Loskop project and it was passed without a word of comment.

I put a thousand Europeans at work and as often as I could I motored out to see how things were doing. After a while I instructed them to clear the bush for an aerodrome and as soon as this was ready, Mr Lewis (*his secretary*) and I flew from Pretoria to test its qualities.

After a long journey we reckoned we were on the mark and we climbed lower to what looked to us to be our destination. Smoke fires had been lit to indicate the wind direction but we were puzzled by a large bucksail stretched on the ground bearing in six foot letters the word 'Poksol'. I could not understand the meaning of this banner with a strange device and my pilot, pointing down, shook his head and he passed back a scribbled note to say that we must have missed our bearings. I was doubtful myself, but our fuel was running low I ordered him to land. We did so without mishap and a number of workmen came forward to meet us. When I asked them what place this was, they said it was Loskop, so we had reached the right address after all. When I asked what the inscription on the canvas stood for they explained that, looking from an aeroplane in the sky, all words must necessarily read back to front as in a mirror, so they inverted Loskop into Poksol for our benefit.

I tried to persuade them of their error, but they were only half convinced and some of them went off shaking their heads as if to say I did not know what I was talking about.

The third incident took place soon after. Mr Lewis had repeatedly urged me to have a proper map of the Union compiled but I refused, partly on account of the cost and partly because in my ignorance I thought the existing maps were good enough. I was soon converted to his viewpoint for shortly after the Loskop trip I had to fly down to northern Zululand to visit a survey camp.

Just as we were about to take off my pilot, Captain John Daniel came to me. He said he was rather troubled for the only map he carried was one he had torn from a schoolboys atlas. He said it was pretty inaccurate but it was the best he could lay his hands on. I told him to proceed and after a flight of some hours we were over Zululand.

With a faulty map we lost our bearings and presently while we were flying low over St Lucia lake, our engine developed a popping and knocking that reminded me unpleasantly of a similar occurrence on the Orange River during the floods. But now there was a difference on the former occasion we might at any rate have baled out by parachute with some assurance of a safe landing. Baling out over St Lucia was a tougher proposition.

When the engine trouble started we were almost skimming the water so there was no hope of doing a long glide to the nearest shore which on either hand was about 10 miles away. St Lucia lake, which is tidal teems with both shark and crocodiles and I doubt whether anyone could swim fifty yards without being siezed. Even as the Wapiti engine knocked and spluttered I remember ed the grizzly story I had heard of a young Norwegian missionary who tried to wade a shallow inlet of the lake to visit his fiancee and her parents awaiting him on the far side. Although the water was only knee deep he was attacked by a school of man eaters and he was torn to shreds under the eyes of the horrified onlookers.



photographer unknown.

Westland Wapiti airplanes similar to the reference above.

However, to the immense relief of Captain John and myself the engine defect suddenly rectified itself and we were able to continue our journey and after a longish search we located the survey camp. Having completed the business I had come on I flew back to Pretoria.

I had had enough of faulty maps by now. The crocs and sharks of St Lucia converted me and first thing I did on my return was to tell Mr Lewis to go ahead. We enlisted the co-operation of nearly every land surveyor in the Union and they responded with enthusiasm. Thanks to their field notes the Irrigation Department built up the present topographical sheets without which, no airman goes aloft. It cost 85,000 pounds, but today with British air training centres all over the country, flying by day and night, I like to think that Mr Lewis and I between us, with our map, have prevented many a crash and that we have saved many lives. Had it not been for his representations and for those uneasy moments over St Lucia lake our airmen and the British pilots would still be flying by charts torn out of a schoolboy's atlas.

In December an Empire Exhibition was opened in Johannesburg which cost a million of money and drew hundreds of thousands of people. My chief recollection of the event was a dinner in the Exhibition grounds at which Jim Mollison and the famous flying man was the guest of honour. He and a Frenchman had tried to break the London - to - Capetown record and had just missed doing so.