

March 2025 – Pretoria

# The Flying Spirit

The Official National Newsletter of the SAAF Association



*Be Part of our Legacy*



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**BE PART OF  
OUR  
LEGACY!!!!**



**“The Flying Spirit”**

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## **\*\* Blast from the Past \*\***



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## **\*\* Message from the National President \*\***

Warm SAAFA Greetings to our SAAFA Branches, deeply valued SAAFA Members and all friends of our SAAF Association.

By the time you read this March issue of The Flying Spirit we have just six or seven weeks ahead of us before coming together to Celebrate 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Congress and AGM of our esteemed South African Air Force Association.

We salute those who have gone before us over the past 80 years, standing on their mighty shoulders, as we now strive to create a new vision for the future of SAAFA. We certainly have much to be grateful for as we recognise their achievements in creating and growing SAAFA to what we are today, and with pride we will continue that SAAFA Legacy and those SAAFA Pillars of Comradeship, Benevolence, Heritage and Remembrance... characteristics to which we all subscribe and called to uphold.

I also write this note with shock and sadness on seeing, so vividly, the death of ex SAAF Pilot James O'Connell in Impala 479 a few days ago. Our deep condolences go to his family and friends. It's even more poignant for me as I flew 479 on two occasions in January 1972.

When considering the concept of "Leadership" in SAAFA, I believe that EVERY Member of SAAFA is obliged and encouraged to exercise some form of Leadership. Whether it is in Recruiting new Members or simply seeking out past or present SAAF "types"... Inactive SAAFA Members and Branches, Aviation enthusiasts and our friends, inviting them to a Branch Lunch or social outing. Leadership means serving in various SAAFA Portfolios on the Branch Executive... Leadership means serving as Chair and Vice-Chair of a Branch... Serving on the NEC... and importantly reaching out to SAAFA Members in need. As Leaders we would always promote the proud Image of our SAAF Association as an important "Life Style" in all that we do. Our Servant Leadership "Makes things Happen" and we draw others in to joining us in what is essentially the noble SAAFA cause.

On the Thursday afternoon, at the start of Congress, Branch Leaders will come together at the "Presidents Interaction" to share our ideas and concerns on general issues. But we will also focus on what we need to do to take our SAAF Association from this 80<sup>th</sup> Congress to our great Centenary Congress in 2045.

I hope that we will experience an enormous gathering of our Members and families in Pretoria in May 2025, Gwyn and I look forward to meeting you and to enjoy this wonderful SAAFA 80 Celebrating with you all.

Blessings and Peace.

*Trevor Slade.*

National President: South African Air Force Association



## **\*\* From the Desk of the National Vice - President \*\***

Well, a quarter of the year is gone, and when looking back, we have indeed been busy and have enjoyed each other's company at the different Branches in the true spirit of camaraderie.

By now, most of the Branches have had their AGM's and are ready for another year. Congratulations to the members of the different Branch Executive Committees – to those who continue in their positions, as well as to those who have been newly elected or have become members of these Committees.

Just as a reminder, the following are the basic functions and obligations of the Branch Chairs and their executive committee members (as per the MOA):

- *The Committee must know the approximate geographical limits of their Branch areas.*
- *The Committee is to ensure that it is fully informed regarding the activities and functions of the Association.*
- *See that all Branch members are kept informed not only of the activities and functions of the Branch, but also of the Association.*
- *A programme of work and activities covering the forthcoming year should be agreed.*
- *The above programme requires close co-operation with the NEC, other Branches and outside bodies so that the diary of events can be co-ordinated.*
- *Sub-Committees (e.g. Fund Raising, Entertainment, and Relief Assistance) are to be appointed and specific tasks allocated to each. Sub-Committees should pursue their objectives and are to report back at each full committee meeting.*
- *Regular attendance of committee members at committee meetings is to be insisted upon.*
- *For mutual benefit, friendly relationships and liaison should be established and maintained with other organisations having similar interests (e.g. Regimental Associations, Jewish Ex-Servicemen's League, RAF Association, MOTHS, SA Legion, RAF Officers Club, etc.).*
- *All NEC projects of the Association must be given the fullest support by Branches.*

I look forward to working with you all and also to seeing a few of you at the upcoming Congress in May 2025. Remember that we are here to support each other and provide assistance where possible and feasible.

We can also look forward to a wonderful year ahead with the continuation of us celebrating 80 years of SAAFA.

*Bill De Pinho.*

National Vice President: South African Air Force Association



## **\*\* SAAF Association Membership \*\***

As stated in the September 2024 issue of The Flying Spirit the success of the SAAF Association is hugely dependent on its members and their participation in the activities of the Association. In support of this it is imperative that the membership of the Association should be dynamic and that new members should be encouraged to join, whilst existing members should be encouraged to remain actively involved, and if not, become actively involved. The ideal would be for every member's status to be that of "Fully paid up active member".

The first quarter of the new calendar and financial year has come and gone and Active Membership numbers of our 15 Active Branches have increased from 881 members at the end of December 2024 to 918 members at the end of March 2025 – an increase of 37 members (4%). This increase can be mainly attributed to previously Non-Active members at the Cape Town and Port Elizabeth Branches renewing their membership in 2025, as well as new members mainly joining at the Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and Weskus Branches.

During the first quarter of the year 710 members settled their members levies for 2025. This represents 77% of Active members. Unfortunately 7 members resigned during this period, whilst 4 members answered the call to higher service.

As previously reported a high level review of the membership information on the National Database was conducted by the NEC Portfolio Coordinator: Membership in conjunction with the Branch Membership Coordinators with the goal of updating the information specifically in respect of Membership Categories, Status of Members and Paid-up Members Levies. The outcome of this review has been successful and membership numbers are now largely reflected accurately on the National Database. Further work still needs to be done to ensure that the detailed information of every member is correctly portrayed on the National Database. This includes contact information, birthdays and in particular RFMCF information of which much is still outstanding. In this regard the Branch Portfolio Coordinators will play an important role going forward.

To improve the information reflected on the National Database further and assist the Branch Membership Coordinators in updating the Members Records on the National Database, the following Standard Operating Procedures have been compiled and will be issued shortly:

- Creating a new members record when he/she joins the SAAF Association.
- Updating an existing member's information when changes are required

Further developments that are envisaged with regard to SAAF Association Membership is establishing a strategy to grow the membership by recruiting new members and re-engaging members who have become non-active over the years. The strategy will also include action plans to attract serving SAAF members to join the SAAF Association

The ultimate goal is for all members to feel valued and appreciated and to share in the benefits of SAAF Association membership. Ultimately members must, at all times, feel free to participate in the activities to support the vision and objectives of the South African Air Force Association to:

- Maintain and foster friendship and camaraderie amongst its members,
- Provide support and assistance to those in need,
- Commemorate and perpetuate the memory of those who gave their lives in the service of their country,
- Continue to promote the interest, image and heritage of the South African Air Force.

*Johan Pentz.*

SAAFA Membership - NEC Portfolio Coordinator.



## **\*\* The VALENTIA incident of August 1940 \*\***

Flight Sergeant Jim Kirkwood's version of the "VALENTIA" incident is far more interesting than its description in the 2nd World War books.

The closest I came to the place where the actual event took place was in November 2001, on my way back from Addis Ababa. I reached Lake Turkana at Loyangalani on the eastern shore of Lake, where I turned southwards. If I had turned north, to the northern end of the Lake, this is where I would have found Lokitaung, on the Ethiopia/Kenya border. At Todenyang, a couple of kilometres into Ethiopia, was an Italian military fort sited on top of a "koppie". It was this fort, known as Fort Namoroputh that found itself at the receiving end of the Valentia's efforts.

The incident is well recorded in James Ambrose Brown's 'A Gathering of Eagles', the official account of the campaigns of the SAAF in Italian East Africa, June 1940 to November 1941. Brown again alludes to it in his later 'The War of a Hundred Days'. Other references are Ken Anderson's 'Nine Flames' and Carl Birkby's 'Springbok Victory'. Kirkwood, however, referred to detail which the official versions were inclined to pass over. During the 2nd World War he served as an armourer in various bomber squadrons, also during the East African campaign where he must have picked up his version of the story.

The records of the Valentia incident refer to it as a top secret Air Force operation. Not a secret for the Italians, but for the SAAF itself. After it had happened, all those in the know were sworn to secrecy, not a word was supposed to be mentioned about it. However, it was when the Intelligence Department picked up a radio broadcast from Rome providing an account of a squadron of RAF bombers attacking an Italian fort and being driven off by anti-aircraft fire that the SAAF started to put the pieces together.



Perhaps it would be useful to explain what a Valentia is. Birkby refers to a Valentia as a 'flying omnibus' or a 'flying hencoop'. In hindsight, it would be an overstatement that the design of the Valentia made no extraordinary contribution to the science of flying. Taken into service by the RAF in 1934, it was a two-engine transport biplane of wood and fabric construction, with two pilots sitting in an open cockpit on top of an enclosed cabin.

With a wingspan of 26.3 metres and an all-up weight of 8,800 kilogrammes, it could carry 22 passengers. In a steep dive – with emphasis on steep – it could manage an actual airspeed of around 90 knots.

Kirkwood adds a few pieces of information, vital in terms of the narrative of the incident at Fort Namoroputh. He explained that the communication between the flying crew in the cockpit and the passengers in the cabin would have been via a long voice tube, which, given the proximity of the two 485 kilowatt radial engines, would have necessitated short, sharp monosyllable instructions shouted at top volume.

## **\*\* The VALENTIA continued \*\***

He added that the passenger door at the rear of the cabin was of a narrow design with a low door sill, not particularly suited to the loading of heavy objects.

It is at this stage that we have to become better acquainted with some of the characters that played a part in the operation. On the ground at Lokitaung was Joe Lentzner, a subaltern in the South African Engineer Corps, who was in charge of a detachment of sappers of 36 Water Supply Company drilling for water.

One late afternoon at Lokitaung arrived a Fairy Battle light bomber of No 11 Squadron, piloted by Captain Jannie de Wet, performing an emergency landing after losing his way returning from a sortie into Ethiopia. For the record, this is the same Jannie de Wet that I refer to in 'In Search of a Fourth Dimension', who led the No 15 Squadron detachment that disappeared in the vicinity of Kufra in the Libyan Desert in April 1942. Contact was eventually made with the higher headquarters, and the decision was made to recover the Fairy Battle that was badly needed for the South African war effort against the Italians.

And so it happened that on August 14, 1940, Lieutenant Oliver Carey of the SAAF landed at Lokitaung with his Valentia, carrying mechanics and spare parts needed to restore the Fairy Battle into an airworthy condition. Carey (in some war records referred to as Charles Kearey) had previously flown for Imperial Airways and before that in Palestine, and his ambition was to become a bomber pilot. Despite this, he had been relegated to flying mail to remote bases across Kenya's notorious Northern Frontier District, on occasion also delivering spare parts for combat squadrons or evacuating casualties.

The aerial postmen on Carey's crew were Sergeants Frank Squares, the radio operator, and Ted Armour, the flight engineer. Accompanying them on this trip was Lieutenant Oscar Coetzee, a No 2 Squadron fighter pilot who was supposed to familiarise himself with the geography of the Turkana area.

Carey's landing at Lokitaung had to be at dusk, considering the closeness of Fort Namoroputh a couple of kilometres away. It was because of the fort, that Joe Lentzner advised Carey to time his departure before first light the following day. Kirkwood's version was that Carey needed no reminder of this situation, as the Italians in the fort had taken pot-shots at his Valentia when he carried out his final approach.

Perhaps it was his silent ambition, or the sight of the broken down Fairy Battle, or the fact that he had as part of his crew a fighter pilot, that made Carey to remark that, if his plane had been equipped with a bomb, he could have bombed the fort when he left the next day. "n Boer maak 'n plan"! Lentzner immediately offered to make him a bomb, on condition that he could accompany Carey on the mission.

An empty 200-litre fuel drum was converted into a bomb casing. Into the casing went an assorted pile of scrap, including bolts and nuts, plough shares, cast iron taken from an old stove, a scale, a sewing machine and a broken differential taken from a truck.

Anderson writes that the bulk of the shrapnel was made up of sewing machine parts that they found in an Indian store.

Primary charges were distributed around the 380 sticks of gelignite weighing about 60 kilogrammes, making up the main exploding charge.

## **\*\* The VALENTIA continued \*\***

To this was connected a 60-second safety fuse, protruding from a hole drilled into the side of the casing.

A 100-metre length of “bloudraad” (fencing wire) was bound around the drum to keep it in one piece upon impact. All of this added to the bomb’s considerable weight.

Whilst Lentzner and his team of sappers were preparing the bomb, Carey was instructed in the intricate procedures of low-level bomb attack by the crew of the Fairy Battle.

Kirkwood refers to the sapper ground crew mustering additional support to assist in the horizontal loading of the bomb through the narrow door, after which it was turned upright and fastened with ropes between the seats. In ‘Nine Flames’ Anderson mentions that ‘...at 4 a.m. the transport pilot was called to inspect this masterpiece of the South African armaments industry’. After a lengthy technical discussion, it was decided to remove the door, and a number of mattresses laid down on the floor of the cabin to protect the crew from enemy fire during the bomb run.

The take-off was uneventful, after which Carey turned east towards the Lake to maintain a holding pattern awaiting first light. By the time the fort became visible; Carey turned towards the land, levelled out in a direct low-level approach, and opened the throttles to its maximum setting. Appropriate to the occasion, he stuck to the formal bomb run procedures having carefully written them down during his impromptu instruction the previous evening.

His first instruction into the voice tube was ‘O-p-e-n B-o-m-b D-o-o-r-s!’ which was superfluous for the reason that the door had been removed before take-off. The command did however prompt the cabin crew, comprising Squares and Armour, with Lentzner temporarily attached as bombardier, to unfasten the ropes and push the bomb closer towards the open door space.

The second instruction was ‘P-r-e-p-a-r-e T-o D-r-o-p B-o-m-b!’ which implied that Lentzner should light the safety fuse. After several attempts when the draught kept blowing the matches out, Lentzner ducked inside the cabin, lit a cigarette, and used this to light the end of the safety fuse.

By now the Italians had become aware of the impending attack, and had turned their machine-guns on the Valentia. Given the maximum speed of the aircraft, the bomb-run was a lengthy affair, presenting the Italian garrison opportune time to put their gunnery skills into practice. In the co-pilot seat Coetzee took a hit in the foot, while a splinter from the instrument panel cut Carey’s forehead.

Eventually came the command ‘D-r-o-p T-h-e B-o-m-b! For a brief moment it appeared that there was no reaction. Then a desperate response from cabin to cockpit via the voice tube ‘T-h-e D-o-o-r I-s N-o-t B-i-g E-n-o-u-g-h!’ The upright drum was too high to squeeze through the low doorframe, and too heavy for the three crew to lower on its side.



## **\*\* The VALENTIA continued \*\***

Without hesitation came Carey's command 'M-a-k-e T-h-e D-o-o-r B-i-g-g-e-r!' And the door was made bigger. Lentzner attacked the door sill with an axe, and with a concerted shove of all three crew the bomb was pushed out, added by a desperate lateral manoeuvre by Carey to assist in the effort.

Birkby's version of the event refers to the crew singing in chorus 'Roll out the Barrel' as they pushed the bomb clear of the aircraft. I recall Kirkwood pausing with intent at this stage of his narrative. He would then introduce three likely scenarios, and leave it to the audience to decide. The first was that it was a pot-shot hit on the fort, blowing it to smithereens, with great loss of life on the Italian side. The second was that the bomb overshot the target, and detonated harmlessly in the distance. The third, which was the scenario that Kirkwood was inclined to propagate, was that the bomb dropped into the midst of the fort, with all the Italians taking cover.

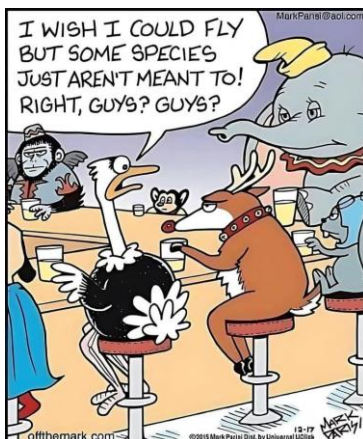
Nothing happened until eventually they raised their heads, and then the bomb detonated, killing a couple of Italians and wounding several others. In Birkby's version the bomb dropped into the courtyard, trundled across until it came to rest against a wall, and then, as a group of enemy troops gathered around in curiosity, blew up with a bang that rocked the Valentia. Birkby accounts for nine dead Italians and 16 Askaris.

Carey landed at Lokitaung to drop Lentzner and to survey the damage to the Valentia.

Ninety-three bullet holes were counted in the wings and fuselage. An Indian doctor bandaged Coetzee's foot, described as a wound resulting from treading on a piece of glass. Typical SAAF ground crew ingenuity was applied to explain the bullet holes and damaged door. Then came the Radio Roma communiqué. By the time the official enquiry had been completed, it was a case of severe reprimands all round for the bombing crew, and, eventually, a transfer for Carey to a bomber squadron. Strangely no medals were awarded for the operation.

Bob Thorsen - Member: South African Air Force Association.

## **\*\* Thought the folks here may enjoy this \*\***



## **\*\* Tribute to Emma Lilian Todd \*\***

**Emma Lilian Todd** (12 June 1865 – 26 September 1937), originally from Washington, DC, and later New York City, was a self-taught inventor who grew up with a love for mechanical devices.



[The New York Times](#) issue of November 28, 1909, identified her as the first woman in the world to design airplanes, which she started in 1906 or earlier. In 1910, her last design flew, test-piloted by [Didier Masson](#).

## **\*\* Final Approach and Shutdown \*\***

Watch your air speed and keep the blue side up..

Roelf Rossouw

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