

AIMÉ BEHAEGHE

FIRST PILOT IN CENTRAL AFRICA

BY TILLO BEHAEGHE Translated from the Dutch by Peter Chapman

Belgium suffered all the consequences of invasion and occupation at home, but, like the other combatant powers, still had overseas interests to defend. This is the story of one of the Belgian pilots who, while the British campaigned in the South West and Eastern territories, helped to take the air war into the heart of Africa using British seaplanes.

By the age of 20, before the Great War, Aimé Alexis Behaeghe had already made a name for himself as a constructor of aircraft. He was born in Kachtem (Izegem), Belgium on 16 November 1890, the twelfth and last child of Francis (François) Behaeghe and Emilie Scherpereel. At the time of Aimé's birth, his mother was 47 years old and his father was 58. His father was a tailor in Kachtem, and all of the family's children were born there.

On 3 October 1896 however, when Aimé was five, the family moved, evidently for financial reasons, from Kachtem to Herseaux, first to 44 *Château d'or* and then to 38 *Place d'Herseaux*. Here, besides practising as tailors, his family also ran a café, known as *Le café de la maison communale*, which still exists today, as *Le Provençal*. When Aimé was 11 his father died and his mother when he was 17.

For his schooling, Aimé completed the lower streamed syllabus at the college in Mouscron. Thereafter, he and his brother Joseph¹ became bicycle makers. Aimé also participated in cycle races. At the age of 18 he finished in eighth place in the fifth (Liège-Bastogne-Liège) race, held on 16 May 1909 over a course of 235 kilometres,

in which 82 riders participated. The race was completed at an average speed of 28.1kph², being still an amateur event at that time.

Then, with the advent of petrol-engined motor cars, the brothers also became automobile mechanics, although their real passion was for the new science of flying. Blériot had been the first to fly across the Channel in 1909, and that same year Aimé and Joseph built their first aeroplane, a biplane of their own design powered by a 25hp engine, which they completed in 1910, after 12 months work. Evidently this aircraft had a limited performance but, undeterred, the brothers went on to build other aircraft, some for other pilots. The *Belgian Annual of Industrial and Commercial Aircraft 1912*

lists the brothers as aircraft constructors, with descriptions and photographs of both a Behaeghe biplane and a monoplane.

	Biplane	Monoplane
Span	6.20 metres	7.50 metres
Length	5.40 metres	5.75 metres
Wing Area	18 square metres	12 square metres
Engine	25–30hp 3 cyl. Anzani	50hp 5 cyl. Anzani
Propeller	Behaeghe	Behaeghe
Stabilisation	Wing flaps	'new system'



One of the Behaeghe brothers' aircraft at Camp de Casteau in 1912.





A Behaeghe biplane at Camp de Casteau in 1912. It has a three-cylinder engine, but the wings do not match the description in the press cutting.

However, despairing of getting ahead in Belgium, Aimé and Joseph decided to try their luck overseas, and, around New Year 1913, they emigrated to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Here they had been promised a flying school, but on arrival discovered that powered flight was still in its infancy there, and the Brazilian military, although wanting aircraft, had none at that time. A photograph of Aimé with one of the brothers' aeroplanes appeared in a local newspaper. With no aircraft available, the brothers took up temporary employment as auto mechanics in a garage where they quickly made a reputation as 'tuning specialists from Paris'. Later, Aimé did make a demonstration flight with one of their own aircraft, but broke his landing gear in a hard landing after just the one flight. According to family members, he later made a number of flights for the Brazilian postal service.

Following the invasion of Belgium by Germany on 4 August 1914, Aimé and Joseph returned home and volunteered to serve in their country's armed forces. Joseph had previously done military service, and was accepted as a militiaman. He was to serve a total of six years, in training, at the front and in Germany. During that time he suffered lung damage from poison gas. In 1917 he was employed as an aircraft mechanic at the air force base in Calais. Aimé, however, joined the Belgian Air Force as a volunteer, both brothers going their separate ways.

L'AVIAT. N

Les frères A. et J. Béhaegue, ont construit un biplan

Il y a environ un an, les frères Aimé et Joseph Béhaegue, mécaniciens, constructeurs de vélos, conçurent le projet de construire un aéroplane. Avec beaucoup de patience, et une louable persévérance, ils réunirent toutes les pièces susceptibles de constituer le gigantesque oiseau, et, après douze mois, d'un travail opiniâtre, ils viennent enfin de voir leurs efforts couronnés de succès.

L'appareil, en effet, est maintenant terminé. Cet aéroplane, de forme biplan, est pourvu, à l'avant, d'un moteur à trois cylindres de vingt-cinq chevaux. C'est un biplan d'une forme spéciale, rappelant un peu celui de Blériot, qui a fait la traversée de la Manche. L'hélice, qui est en bois, a 1 m. 90 de diamètre. Les ailes, placées en V, ont les extrémités arrondies. Le stabilisateur est à l'arrière. La longueur totale du biplan est de six mètres, l'envergure est de six mètres cinquante centimètres.

L'appareil est presque à point. Les frères Béhaegue l'ont essayé sur une vaste pâture, près de leur habitation; il roule et évolue à la perfection. Ils vont y mettre la dernière main, et espèrent faire un essai de vol, dès que le temps le permettra.

Nous souhaitons aux deux jeunes et courageux aviateurs, un succès complet. Les habitants d'Herseaux, tout particulièrement, forment des vœux pour la réussite de MM. Aimé et Joseph Béhaegue, dans leur audacieuse entreprise.

Cutting from an unknown newspaper, dated, from the evidence of text on the reverse, some time before 19 March 1910. The aircraft described in this appears to be an older biplane than the ones depicted in the available photographs. :A. Balcaen

MILITARY SERVICE

On 29 October 1914 Aimé was accepted into the very small Belgian Air Force, as a volunteer for the duration of the war. According to his *Feuillet Matricule*, or military record held at the *Centrum voor Historische*



The 'new system' of control mentioned as used on the Behaeghe monoplane in 1912 appears to be wing warping.

Documentatie van de Belgische Krijgsmacht, his promotions followed regularly; to Corporal on 23 November 1914, Sergeant on 17 April 1915 (presumably after he had completed his training at the flying school), First (or Staff) Sergeant on 2 May 1915 and *Adjutant* on 30 May 1915. On 22 November 1915 he was listed as an officer for the duration of the war, with the rank of 2nd Lieutenant.

On 15 December 1915 he was transferred, under the direction of the Ministry for Colonies, to the *Force Publique* in the Belgian Congo. He was to die in the Congo, from sickness, but here his service record is inaccurate, as will be explained at the end of the article.

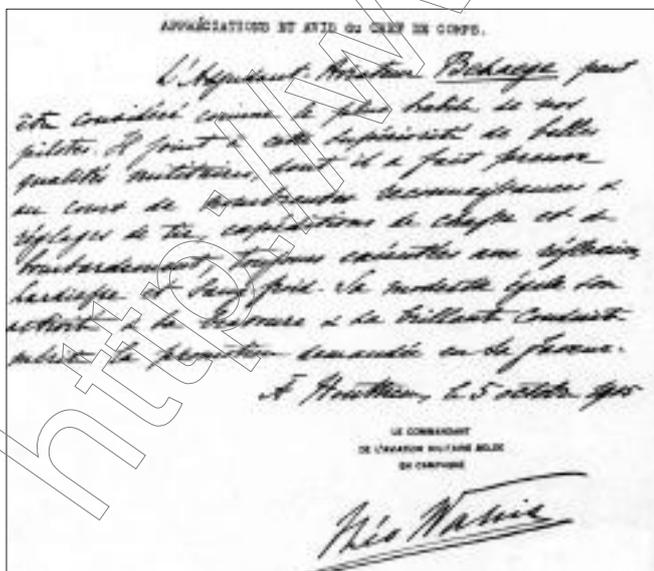
Between his training and his death, he gave great service, both on the Iser Front and over Lake Tanganyika, in the Congo. He is most famous for his service in the latter. He was the first pilot to fly in Central Africa and became known as the Victor of Lake Tanganyika and Kigoma. He was personally mentioned three times in the orders of his Army Group while in the Congo, and was made *Chevalier de l'Ordre de l'Etoile Africaine* (Royal Warrant of 11 September 1916). This was evidently the highest award that could be made to him by the *Force Publique* in the Congo.

FLYING ON THE ISER FRONT

In 1998 Walter Pieters published a first, incomplete study he was undertaking into all flights made by Belgian pilots in World War One. From personal communication with him, it appears that Aimé completed 137 war flights on the Iser Front, between 16 April and 8 December 1915. Half of these appear to have been reconnaissance or artillery observation with the Belgian artillery, and the remainder were offensive patrols. He flew in at least three different aircraft types and was involved in 17 combats with enemy aircraft. Although he flew less than eight months in 1915, his total of 137 was still the second highest by any Belgian pilot in that year, his total surpassed only by *Commandant* Fernand Jacquet, who had been flying since the start of the war.

Aimé's flying career on the Iser Front was divided into two separate phases. During his first period at the front, from 16 April to 6 July, he flew mostly observation and reconnaissance missions. Of these, a flight made on 11 May was particularly memorable. During his second observation sortie that day, he drove two German aircraft back over their lines no fewer than six times.

Recommendation by Commandant Theo Wahis, dated 15 Oct 1915.



Aimé Behaeghe with his Nieuport, while serving with No.1 Squadron on the Iser Front in October 1915. :A. Balcaen

Below: The 'Arrow' or incendiary bomb-used against balloons and anti-aircraft batteries. :drawing by César Battaille, 1914

Throughout June he made 31 front-line flights and on two occasions, 17 and 22 April, he had made three flights each day. During one of his rare offensive patrols on 16 June, together with *Commandant* Jacquet in a second aircraft, they attempted unsuccessfully to intercept an enemy Zeppelin.

After a short break, presumably involving further training, Aimé returned to the front on 29 July 1915. During this second period he was engaged almost entirely on offensive patrols. Of particular note were the many bombing flights he made, dropping hundreds of small incendiary darts.

He received a particularly favourable appraisal from *Commandant* Theo Wahis, commanding officer of the Belgian Air Force, when his promotion to 2nd Lieutenant was first suggested, on 5 November 1915. An edited version of this reads:

Height: 1.74 m

Appearance: correct

Complexion and Health: Very good

National Decorations: None

Intelligence: Open, shows good judgement, self assured.

Character: Resolute and straight forward.

Education: Good

Personal Behaviour: Very good

Attitude: Very military

Service: Very hard-working and very devoted.

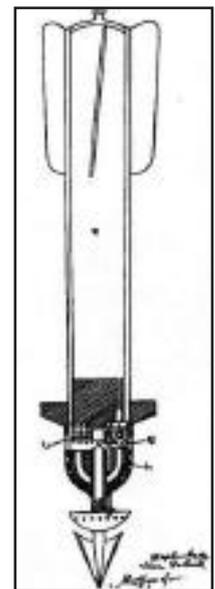
Behaviour towards superiors: Respectful

Behaviour towards inferiors: Considerate and kind.

Knowledge of languages: Reads, writes and speaks French, Flemish, Portuguese, Italian and, more or less, Spanish.

Appraisal and recommendation

Adjutant flyer Behaeghe can be seen as the most skilled of our pilots. He has coupled this superiority with good military qualities, which he has proved in many reconnaissance flights, artillery observations, escorts and bombing flights and is always well-advised, daring and cool-headed in their execution. His discretion is equal to his strength, courage and superb behaviour. Deserves the requested promotion. At Houtem, 5 Oct 1915, Theo Wahis.





Belgian seaplane squadron members and some sailors on board the Anversville, en route to the Belgian Congo in January 1916. Front Row (left to right): Lt Leon Collignon (observer), ship's Captain Dorchain, Capitaine-Commandant Albert de Beuger (Commanding Officer), and 2Lt Roger Castiau (pilot). Middle Row (left to right): Lt F. Russchaert (observer), 2Lt Tony Orta (pilot) and 2Lt Aimé Behaeghe (pilot). Back Row (left to right): Adjutant technicians (mechanics) Teeuwen, Dero (probably navy), Hanon and Poncelet. A. Balcaen

(Houtem, south of De Moeren near Veurne [Furnes], was the location of the Belgian Army Headquarters.)

This confidential appraisal, concerning an individual candidate for whom a promotion had been requested, was made after only a few months wartime service, showing how highly Aimé Behaeghe was already regarded.

THE TANGANYIKA CAMPAIGN

On 12 December 1915 Aimé was placed at the disposal of the Ministry for Colonies, the intention being for him to become one of the pilots in a small squadron of floatplanes to be formed on the banks of Lake Tanganyika, in the Belgian Congo. The idea was to wrest control of the lake from the Germans in German East Africa (currently Tanzania, Burundi and Ruanda), which lay between the eastern border of the Congo and the Indian Ocean. Besides these two countries, Lake Tanganyika also bordered on Northern Rhodesia, then a British colony and now Zambia. This was to be a large campaign, conducted over vast distances with limited resources, and in which Aimé would become a key figure. In order to understand his role in the campaign though, it is necessary to look at an overview of the situation in Africa in late 1915.

SITUATION AT THE BEGINNING OF 1915

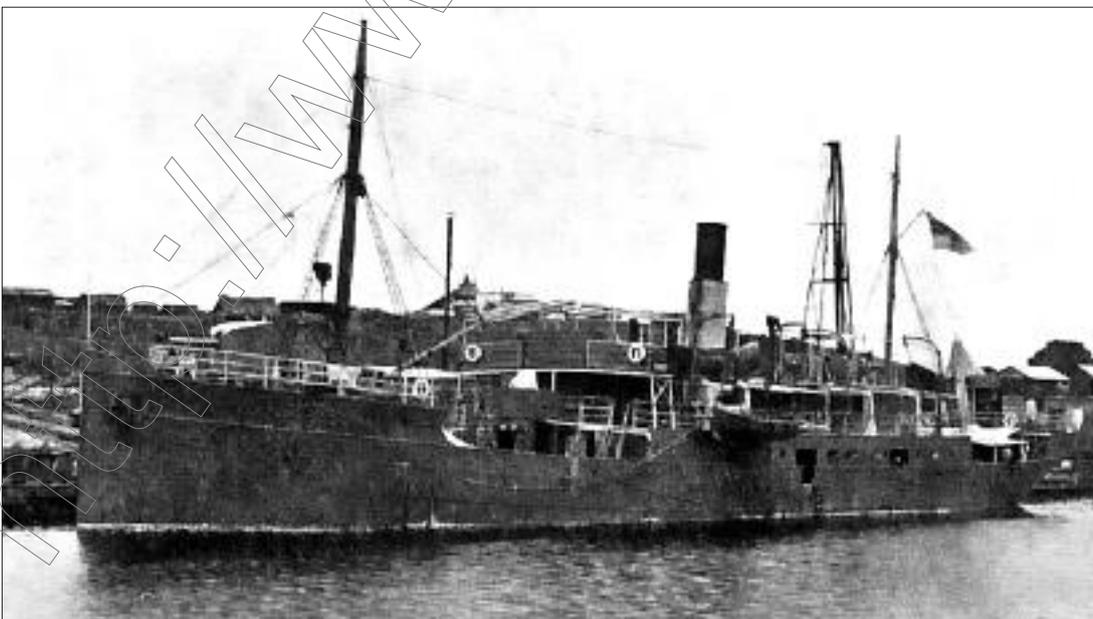
Lake Tanganyika, an inland fresh water 'sea' spanning 32,000 square kilometres, also comprised 700 kilometres of the Congolese border, which extended into the middle of the lake. It is the longest lake in the world and the deepest in Africa (4,700ft), with one outlet, the Lukuga in Congo. Not only was it an important border to a number of colonies, but it was also a major transport route in the heart of Africa, at a time when these were in very short supply. Whoever controlled the lake could threaten all their neighbours with impunity.

The Germans' main port was at Kigoma, near the city of Ujiji, the historic meeting place of Livingstone and Stanley in 1871. They had established the base and port with a direct rail connection (the *Mittellandbahn* or Central Railway) to Dar-es-Salaam and the Indian Ocean, and had also developed a telegraphic link along the lake shore and to Tabora, the site of their military Headquarters, in the middle of German East Africa. In the harbour at Kigoma, in mid 1915, the Germans also had three large ships or boats. These were:

Hedwig von Wissman, of 60 tons displacement. She was armed with four 3.7cm cannon and was capable of attaining speeds of between seven and eight knots.

Kingami, a 25 ton tugboat which was armed with a single cannon and had a top speed of between eight and ten knots.

Largest of all was the *Graf von Götzen*, a large and relatively new ship of 1200 tons, with a top speed of



The Graf von Götzen, dismantled and transported from Germany as a 'kit' for reassembly on Lake Tanganyika.

between eight and ten knots and heavily armed with cannon and machine guns. She also had the ability to transport up to 800 men, and could carry out a large scale landing with these if she so wished.

In addition the Germans had many well-trained naval personnel on these boats and in Kigoma itself, as well as heavy weapons, all taken from the German cruiser *Königsberg* and SMS *Möwe*. The cruiser, attacked in the Indian Ocean by the British, had sought refuge in the Rufiji Delta, on the coast of German East Africa, and was afterwards dismantled. The crew and armament of the *Hedwig* came directly from *Möwe*.

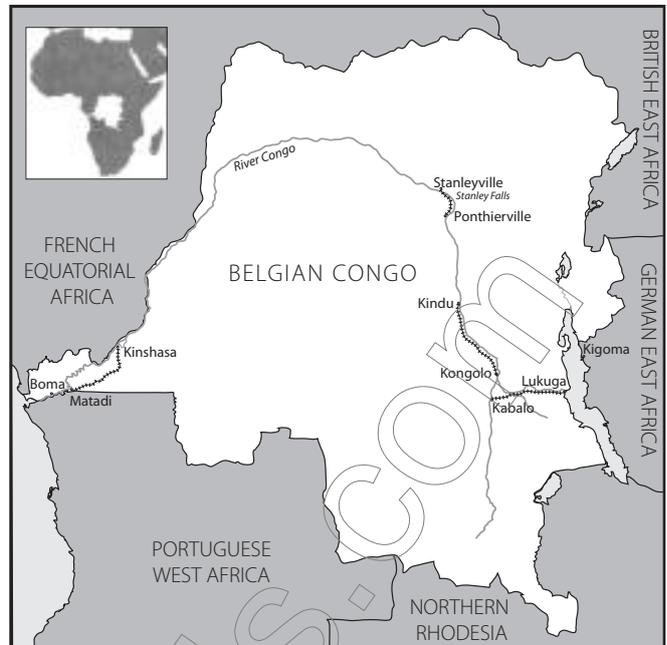
At the beginning of 1915, the Belgians, with supplies urgently needed, were rapidly finishing the railway line between Kabalo and Lukuga (soon to be known as Albertville), close to Kalemie (now collectively known as Kalemie). This completed one continuous rail-river connection between Matadi and Lake Tanganyika, but with seven cargo stops along the way. The route was Matadi to Kinshasa by rail; Kinshasa to Stanleyville by river; Stanleyville to Ponthierville by rail; Ponthierville to Kindu by river; Kindu to Kongolo by railway line; Kongolo to Kabalo by river; Kabalo to Lukuga again by rail. As a result transporting large items to Lake Tanganyika across the Congo, especially boats, was not easy.

The only boat that the Belgians had on Lake Tanganyika in 1914 was the *Alexandre Delcommune*, a slow 70 ton steamer with a top speed of about six and a half knots. First shot up by the Germans on 22 August 1914, this attack was one of the main reasons that Belgium revoked her neutral status in Africa and started to organise the *Force Publique* (Congolese Armed Forces). The boat was repaired by the Belgians but was again attacked by the *Hedwig von Wissmann* on 23 October and sunk near Mtoa on the Belgian coast. The *Graf von Götzen* also boarded the *Cecil Rhodes*, a British boat, in a Rhodesian (Zambian) harbour by night and sank it in deep water: a *Kommando Aktion* according to the Germans, 'piracy' to the British.

The Belgians had no fortress, no real port and no telegraph on the western shores of Lake Tanganyika and so, from November 1914, the Germans had complete mastery over the lake, although they did not use their obvious advantage to launch attacks on neighbouring territories, as had been feared at first. After some landings on the sea coast, with limited success, the British had no offensive intentions, although they could envelop the Germans in a move from the north, through British East Africa (now Uganda and Kenya), from the south, through Rhodesia and from the east, out of Zanzibar. But the British also had problems with obtaining sufficient supplies. Only the Belgians decided to wrest control of Lake Tanganyika from the Germans, to protect their shore and open transport on the lake.

A SMALL SQUADRON OF SEAPLANES

As early as 6 March 1915, General Charles Tombeur³ asked the Minister for Colonies, Jules Renkin,⁴ for a small fleet, a submarine and some seaplanes to operate on Lake Tanganyika. The minister however, in a telegram dated 16 April 1915, stated that he was not prepared to send so much material to the colony. Regarding the seaplanes, he said that although their supply was, in absolute terms, possible, they would probably not produce sufficiently effective results, while arriving too late and costing too much to obtain and transport to the Congo. But, in a subsequent telegram dated 2 June 1915, the minister changed his tune.



'Plucky little Belgium' was a favourite wartime stereotype in the British press – the balance of colonial power in Africa was somewhat different!

The British had just then halted their general offensive against German East Africa, but had promised material support to the Belgians to regain control of Lake Tanganyika. Towards this, the British were prepared to provide boats but in reality this was not to happen, prompting Tombeur to again request a squadron of seaplanes. The British then agreed to provide the latter and Minister Renkin approached Capitaine-Commandant Albert de Beuger⁵ at Le Havre, as he had served previously in Congo and was now in the Belgian Air Service. He was also evidently the only Belgian pilot at that time who had flown a seaplane.

On 21 November it was decided to form a small squadron and de Beuger was given free rein to assemble the crews he needed. Aimé Behaeghe, with his experience of flying under tropical conditions (in Brazil), was a logical candidate and on 12 December 1915 he was transferred to the Ministry of Colonies. In 1933 de Beuger wrote, *I had the good fortune to choose him.*

SEAPLANE OPERATIONS START

The Squadron comprised Capitaine-Commandant Albert de Beuger, pilot 2nd Lieutenants Aimé Behaeghe, Tony Orta⁶ and Roger Castiau, and observer Lieutenants F. Ruyschaert and Leon Collignon. Other personnel included Adjutant technicians Teeuwen, Hanon, Poncelet and possibly Dero. Moolaert clearly mentions two mechanics and one rigger. Dero, seen in the group photograph, is wearing naval uniform and was possibly a member of the ship's crew, although some sources say that this photograph shows four mechanics in the back row. A small squadron of just three pilots was thus sent to Central Africa, where no aircraft had flown before, their mission being to regain control of Lake Tanganyika and attack a well defended enemy harbour almost 100 kilometres from their own base. In reality, the Belgian military would be happy if the small squadron could intimidate the Germans.

The expedition departed on 7 January 1916 (some sources say 1 January) from Falmouth, England, on board the *Anversville*, which belonged to the Belgian Congo Maritime Company. On board they carried four disassembled Short Type 827 (3093, 3094, 3095 and



T. Orta, Russchaert, Behaeghe, Castiau, De Bueger and Collignon.

:A. van Hoorebeeck

8219) seaplanes, each powered by a 150hp Sunbeam engine, but without any armament. One wonders if the pilots and mechanics had time to become familiar with their new aircraft before their hasty departure.

Whilst still in the Gulf of Gascoigne (off the coast of Brittany), the expedition almost suffered a fatal blow, following a fuel explosion and fire on deck. The ship was saved thanks to the bravery and hard work of the crew, with the Belgian pilots also doing their part. Aimé Behaeghe, de Bueger and Castiau, all covered in asbestos and wet linen whilst being constantly sprayed with water, worked in the middle of towering flames to help throw the burning fuel containers overboard into the sea (Raskin 1939). In total, the Belgians lost 70000 litres of fuel in this catastrophic fire, but saved the ship.

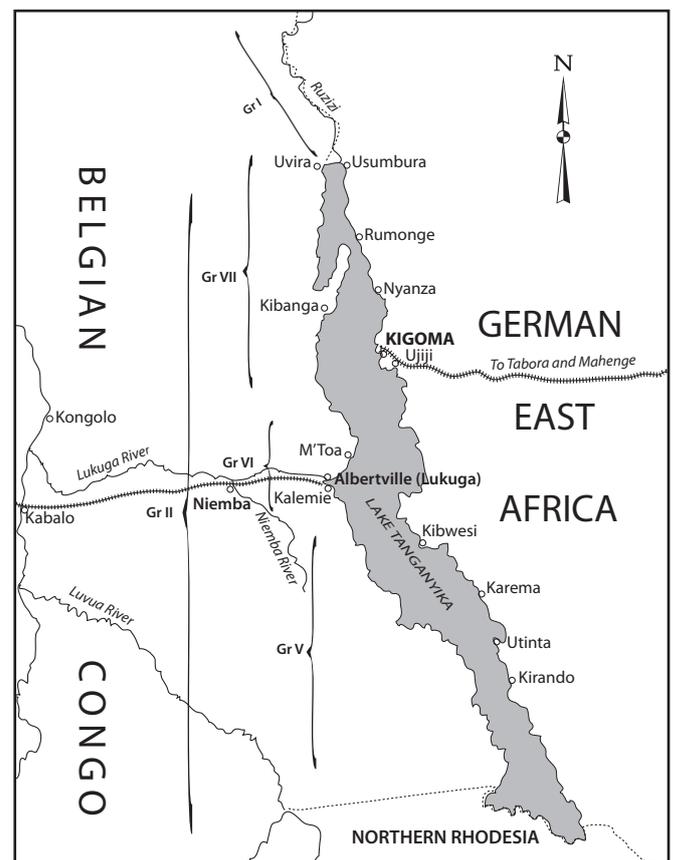
They duly arrived at Matadi (some sources say Boma) on 4 February 1916. Commandant de Bueger, Aimé Behaeghe (who had a good technical knowledge of both automobiles and aircraft) and Poncelet immediately set off for the shores of Lake Tanganyika with part of their precious cargo. The others were to follow later with the rest of the supplies.

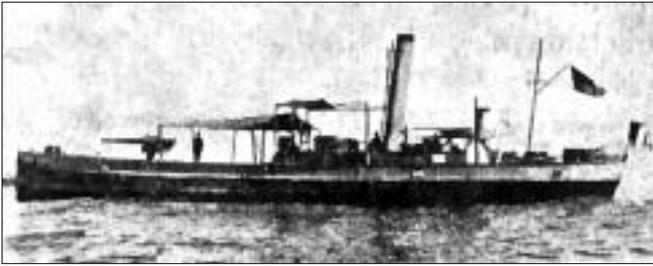
Fuel fire on board the Anversville in January 1916.



The first group reached Lukuga (later renamed Albertville and now Kalemie) on 1 April but immediately discovered that the base that had been prepared for them there was unsuitable, as the water in the open lake was too rough for seaplane operations. They began looking for a more suitable location further north, so that they could also be closer to their target. On 6 April they finally found a suitable small lake, a type of lagoon, named Tongwe, near M'Toa, 32 kilometres north of Lukuga. This was apparently chosen on the advice of Jadot, an engineer officer who knew the area. Here they began to build their new base, but had serious problems transporting equipment and aircraft over the extra 30 kilometres.

Lake Tanganyika and military dispositions in March 1916. **GR I** indicates the area held by the Southern Brigade, commanded by Col Olsen and **GR II** the area held by the Tanganyika Group, under Col Moulaert, to which the seaplane squadron was attached.





The steamer Alexandre Delcommune, raised after sinking and converted to become Vengeur, a Belgian gunboat. :Wéber

The Belgians had, in the interim, hastened to restore their small fleet on the lake. The sunken *Delcommune* was raised, repaired and armed, and renamed the *Vengeur (Avenger)*, but, it remained a slow boat capable of carrying, at most, 14 tons of small cargo. Beside this they had a small motor boat, the *Netta*, armed with a single 37mm cannon and one machine gun. With a top speed of 18 to 19 knots she was fast, but had no cargo carrying capacity. The stability of both boats was improved, to counter the swell on the lake. Both would give valuable service in the coming campaign, but were useless as far as transporting the squadron to their new base was concerned.

Some cases containing aircraft parts were very large, the largest being 10x2.5x2m with a total volume of 500 cubic metres. There was no heavy cargo vessel in Lukuga, but there was a third, small steamboat on which a cannon had been mounted, to make it a gunboat. The cannon and steam equipment were removed, leaving enough room for some of the cases to be loaded and transported to their destination. They had to move them at night, while also towing a pontoon, as the water was calmer then and they could avoid detection by the Germans.

By 13 May all equipment was in place; four unassembled aircraft, 53000 litres of fuel, two spare engines, 250 x 65lb bombs, 750 x 16lb bombs, 4 machine guns, 30000 rounds of ammunition plus wireless signal equipment, electrical and mechanical spares.

On the same day, Aimé and the mechanics completed the assembly of the first aircraft, a task they had begun on 23 April, less than three weeks before, and in an improvised base.

Completing assembly of Short 3094.



African workers manhandle a crated seaplane overland.

A BRITISH CONTRIBUTION

While the Belgians were preparing their seaplane squadron for use, the situation on Lake Tanganyika had in the meantime greatly improved for the Allies, mainly thanks to the British.

Two small 13-metre but fast (19 knots) motor boats, called *Mimi* and *Toutou*, were sent from Britain. These boats captured on 26 December 1915 the slow *Kingani* (armed with one gun forward) by attacking from astern. Refitted and renamed *Fifi*, this boat soon sailed under British colours.

Then, on 9 February 1916, four small British and Belgians boats, combined under the British commander Spicer Simson, intercepted the German vessel *Hedwig von Wissmann*. Outmanoeuvred, the German crew, no doubt remembering the capture of the *Kingani*, scuttled their own ship rather than have it fall into Allied hands.

The Germans soon began to transfer two boats from the sea coast, the *Adjutant* (a captured British steamer of 250 tons) and the *Wami* (sister ship of the *Kingani*) but they had become more cautious and no longer made as many forays to the Congolese shore. This allowed the Belgians to build their new air base at M'Toa and reinforce the port at Lukuga, recently renamed Albertville, almost undisturbed.

On the other hand Simson's arrogant demands to be placed in command of the combined British and Belgian fleet were rebuffed by Colonel Moulaert, Chief of Staff of the Belgian Army Group in Tanganyika. Simson promptly moved his fleet to the south of the lake, effectively marking the end of any co-operation between

:A. van Hoorebeeck





Short 827, 3094, being manoeuvred into the lake prior to the first flight by Aimé Behaeghe, 14 May 1916. :Royal Military Museum, Brussels

the Belgians and British on the Lake. The Belgians had to do the job alone to regain control, and meanwhile had already gone on the offensive on land.

THE LAKE AND THE LAND OFFENSIVE

Between 17 and 19 April 1916 Belgian troops, supplied by the British in Uganda, launched an attack from north of Lake Tanganyika, in the Kivu area, over the Ruzizi, conquering Ruanda and Burundi up to an including Usumbura on Lake Tanganyika. The Belgians also held the town of Uvira, inside Belgian Congo territory, on the northern point of the lake, but it was still impossible to use the water route to link the troops in Uvira and Usumbura with the port at Albertville, with its railway line. To quote from a long note, written by Colonel Moulaert on 13 March 1916:

We do not control the lake. We cannot use transport.

We cannot support our columns. We are constrained by the Graf von Götzen with its superior calibre weapons. The destruction of the Graf von Götzen is the underlying theme of all our offensive actions.

This splendid ship had been built in Papenburg in 1913 as a passenger vessel, and transported from Hamburg to Dar-es-salaam in 5000 cases of 8m³. She was reassembled as a *Kanonenboot und Truppentransporter* at Kigoma and completed on 5 February 1915. The Belgians as well as Simson had been unable to attack the *Graf von Götzen* with their small fleets. Could the newly arrived seaplanes finally stop her? There appear to have been grave doubts. To quote again from Moulaert's note of 13 March:

In the absence of a naval attack on the Graf von Götzen we will chance aerial attacks which, in the [probable] absence of material results, will in any case produce



A view of the Belgian base and surroundings, with a small packing case serving as an extra building.

:Royal Military Museum, Brussels

moral results. And further, The seaplanes cannot be an essential and paramount element [of the attack on the Graf von Götzen], they are an addition...if we can use them at the time of the action, so much the better.

The British (and many Belgians) doubted that the seaplanes could take off in the rarified air of a tropical climate, 800 metres above sea level. The British had undertaken tests on Lake Victoria in 1915 and determined that aircraft operated under local conditions needed to be 60% more powerful than they were under European conditions. Although a rather arbitrary assessment, Colonel Moulaert had been informed of these findings in March 1916, before the arrival of the seaplanes. The Belgians had also experienced negative results before the war at Elizabethville, in 1912 and 1913 (Van Hoorebeeck). Additionally, their base lay 100 kilometres from their target (at that time further than anyone had attempted to fly on a bomb raid on the Iser Front) and they would be flying slow (maximum speed 100kph) seaplanes with large floats and open cockpits. With no defensive armament of their own they would be easy targets for enemy machine guns.

TEST FLIGHTS

On 13 May 1916 the first aircraft was assembled, and the engine tested. On 14 May the first test flight was made.

Aimé Behaeghe made the first test flight alone, both Belgians and black workers as well as Commandant de Bueger watching the spectacle with a mixture of anxiety and elation at this first successful flight. De Bueger later (1933) wrote an account of this first flight:

Today was the first take-off. Our anxiety was immense as we had been told that we would not fly in such a heavy machine at the equator and at 800 metres above sea level. Behaeghe had taxied right around 'Tongwe' without rising. The Negroes smiled, incredulous. They started to laugh. Is that a bird? The Commandant makes fun of us; it is a boat, a little funnier than the others, but only a boat. While passing, Behaeghe gives me a sign, 'I'm off!' A huge smile beams from his stern face. With engine full on and into the wind the plane speeds. A dazzling iridescent trail of foam diminishes with every bounce [on the water] until, just before he reaches the shoreline

that separates us from Tanganyika, the Short leaves the water. It rises, turns, returns to us, passes over our heads in a tumult of joy. Our anxiety is replaced by delirious joy. We shake hands, embrace one another. The Negroes, confused, terrified, hug the ground in a panic and hide themselves in the sand, screaming.

In a second flight that same day, Commandant de Bueger flew with Aimé to the headquarters at Kalemie. Aimé landed on the lake there, which was a big event for the local population. But the following day the swells on the lake were too big to allow them to fly back, and a float on their aircraft was damaged, necessitating repairs. Aimé therefore returned to M'Toa by boat, to complete the assembly of a second aircraft. He test flew it for the first time on 24 May and then collected the repaired first aircraft two days later, on 26 May. That same day he made a second test flight in the second aircraft. On 30 May followed another test flight in which he dropped bombs and that same day he again flew No 2 with 2nd Lieutenant Orta, who would henceforth fly this Short.

An attack on the *Graf von Götzen* was immediately planned, to be carried out with the support of the high-speed motor boat *Netta*. But the *Netta*, fast and difficult to steer, rammed the pier and had another couple of minor accidents, making her temporarily unserviceable. It must be said that she would be very effective later on in the campaign. For now they had to wait for the *Vengeur* which was on a mission along the coast.

But then, on 2 June Orta, flying with Castiau on a test flight, suffered engine failure and crashed into Lake Tongwe and their aircraft sank. Both men escaped unharmed. Aimé Behaeghe had hoped to assemble the two completed aircraft for the attack on the *Graf von Götzen* at Kigoma, this being the minimum number he considered necessary to have any chance of success. This latest mishap meant that they could not proceed with even this basic requirement.

There was now only the first Short remaining, piloted by Aimé, and the slow *Vengeur* to undertake the offensive against the *Graf von Götzen*, an action that involved a flight of 250 kilometres. By objective criteria this was a foolhardy undertaking but Aimé Behaeghe was still prepared to attempt a raid on the *Graf von Götzen* and

Attaching the starboard wings to the second of the Shorts to be assembled, soon to be piloted by Tony Orta. :Royal Military Mus., Brussels





Leon Collignon,
Albert de Bueger and
Aimé Behaeghe; a
photograph taken
in June 1916, after
Collignon and
Behaeghe had
successfully bombed
the Graf von Götzen.
:Royal Military
Museum, Brussels

preparations continued. Together with Lieutenant Collignon, his observer, Aimé made three bomb dropping practice flights on 3, 4 and 5 June.

THE RAID ON THE GRAF VON GÖTZEN

The first attempt was scheduled for 6 June. The *Vengeur* had sailed ahead and waited for the aeroplane at a point midway across the lake, but in vain; the heavily laden aircraft was unable to take off due to a lack of wind.

On 7 June at 17.00 Behaeghe and Collignon took off, their aircraft loaded with two 65lb bombs and fuel for a four hour flight. But just 35km from their target, they suffered engine failure, Behaeghe carrying out a good emergency landing on the lake. They fired some signal flares which were seen by the *Vengeur*, and the latter took the downed Short in tow, back to M'Toa. The engine failure had been caused by one or two broken valves, which had not withstood the long flight.

The next attempt was made on 10 June. At 16.52 the seaplane passed over *Vengeur*, flying to Kigoma and fading away into the mist, and again the *Vengeur* waited anxiously for the aircraft, which did not return. They steamed ahead in search of it. The Short had again suffered an engine failure, but this time *after* they had successfully bombed the *von Götzen*.

They had been spotted by the Germans, and the *von Götzen* began firing at them with long range guns while they were still two miles away from the bay. Aimé piloted through the shell and machine gun fire, reducing altitude to 200 metres – in an unarmed aircraft with a top speed of less than 100kph, cool-headed and lucky! The first bomb they dropped was a direct hit, exploding on the deck and silencing the gunfire directed at them, but the ship remained afloat. Their second and last bomb missed the target by 10 metres. They had covered 25 kilometres on the return flight when their engine again failed, due to the same bronze valves. The lake surface was turbulent and threatened to sink them as they landed safely. Only after hours of bobbing on the swell were they spotted by the *Vengeur*, which had already turned back and only saw Behaeghe's last signal flare when already on the horizon!

The *Vengeur* took the Short in tow once more, arriving

at M'Toa at 06.00 on 11 June, to find 10 bullet holes in the it (some sources say 20), fortunately none in any vital parts. The newly completed wireless telegraph allowed better communication both inland and with Kindu, and a report declaring that Behaeghe and his observer Collignon had disabled the *von Götzen* was dispatched. The great battle for Lake Tanganyika had been fought; the desire to once again navigate the lake freely had been realised. In reality the material damage to the *Graf von Götzen* was unknown but, the following day, the Belgians were already making plans for their land offensive and carried on as if the *Graf von Götzen* had been sunk. Indeed, from this point on the Germans stopped all offensive actions on the lake.

NEW BELGIAN OFFENSIVE PLANS

At this time none of the aircraft was operational, but the boats were immediately used for other tasks, provisionally not dealing with Kigoma.

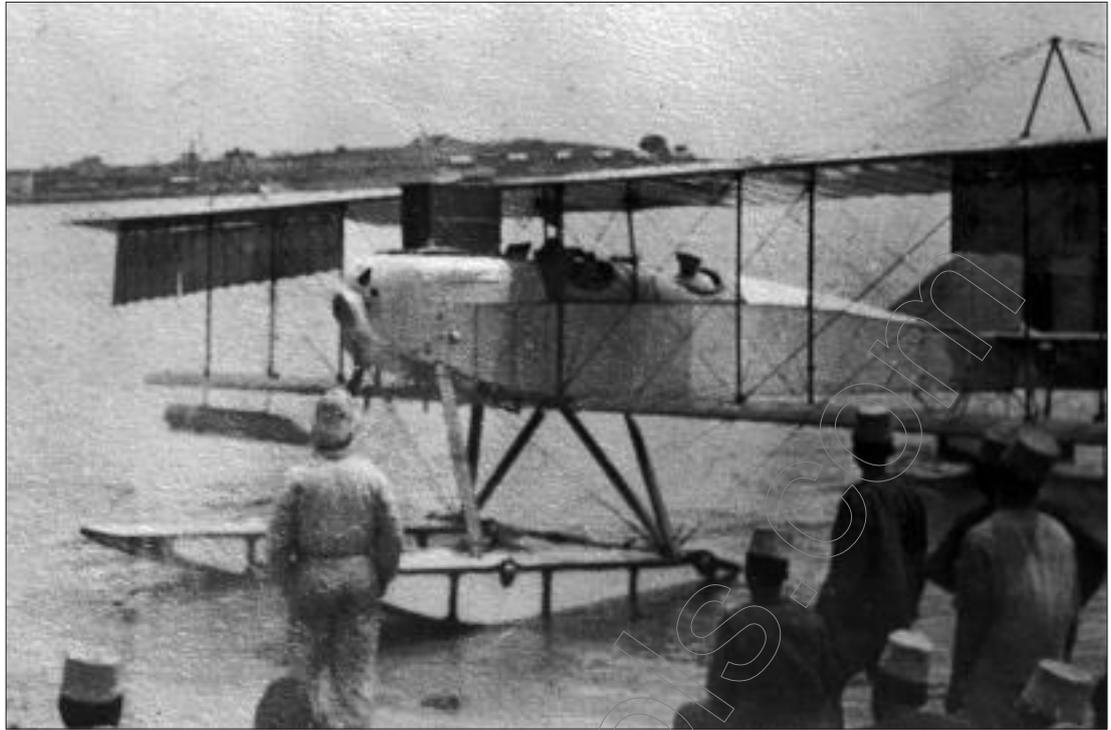
The *Vengeur* was utilised for transport to the north: Usumbura, Uvira and Kibanga. The *Vengeur* also sailed south, to re-establish contact with the British.

The *Netta* was repaired by 21 June and transported Moulart, Army Commander of the Tanganyika Group, to which the aircraft and boats belonged, to Usumbura for a meeting. There the Belgian Chiefs of Staff changed their original offensive plan, after proposals by Moulart. The original plan was that the Belgian Northern Brigade (Col Molitor) would continue to push from Ruanda, south of Lake Victoria, with British support from Uganda and Kenya, over mountainous terrain in the direction of Tabora (the main town and German Headquarters).

But now Lake Tanganyika was free and the supply routes over the lake from Albertville were open to the Belgians. It allowed the Southern Brigade (Col Olsen) to move along the east coast under cover from the lake and capture Kigoma, and from there threaten Tabora via the railway line linking the two. From Albertville it was not only possible to supply the land army, but also to take the offensive against the coastal towns with the planes and boats.

This plan was immediately implemented. The *Netta* sailed quickly along the north-east coast, driving the

One of the Shorts taxis into shore on the Tongwe lagoon, where mechanics and native labourers wait to pull it ashore.
:Queekers-Martens family



Germans out of Rumonge; the Southern Brigade could then move unhindered inland. Thereafter Nyanza was shelled by the *Netta*, on 7 July, and the Germans abandoned this post too, allowing the Belgian land forces to occupy it without a fight.

After the raid on the *Graf von Götzen* the Belgian air force, as has already been stated, did not have a single serviceable aircraft. They first had to make new steel valves at the railway workshops at Kindu to replace the unreliable bronze valves. Aircraft No 2 was raised from the lagoon at Tongwe on 5 June and a third Short was assembled on 15 June. Again it was Aimé Behaeghe who test-flew the new aircraft, the first time alone and then with Castiau who was to take over this aircraft. Castiau made further test flights on 27, 28 and 29 June, together with an observer. Aircraft No 1 was repaired on 1 July. Between 1 and 11 July Behaeghe and Collignon made 11 flights, Castiau and Ruyschaert made four and Orta seven. During these they practiced their bombing and photographic reconnaissance. They were now ready for

a new mission.

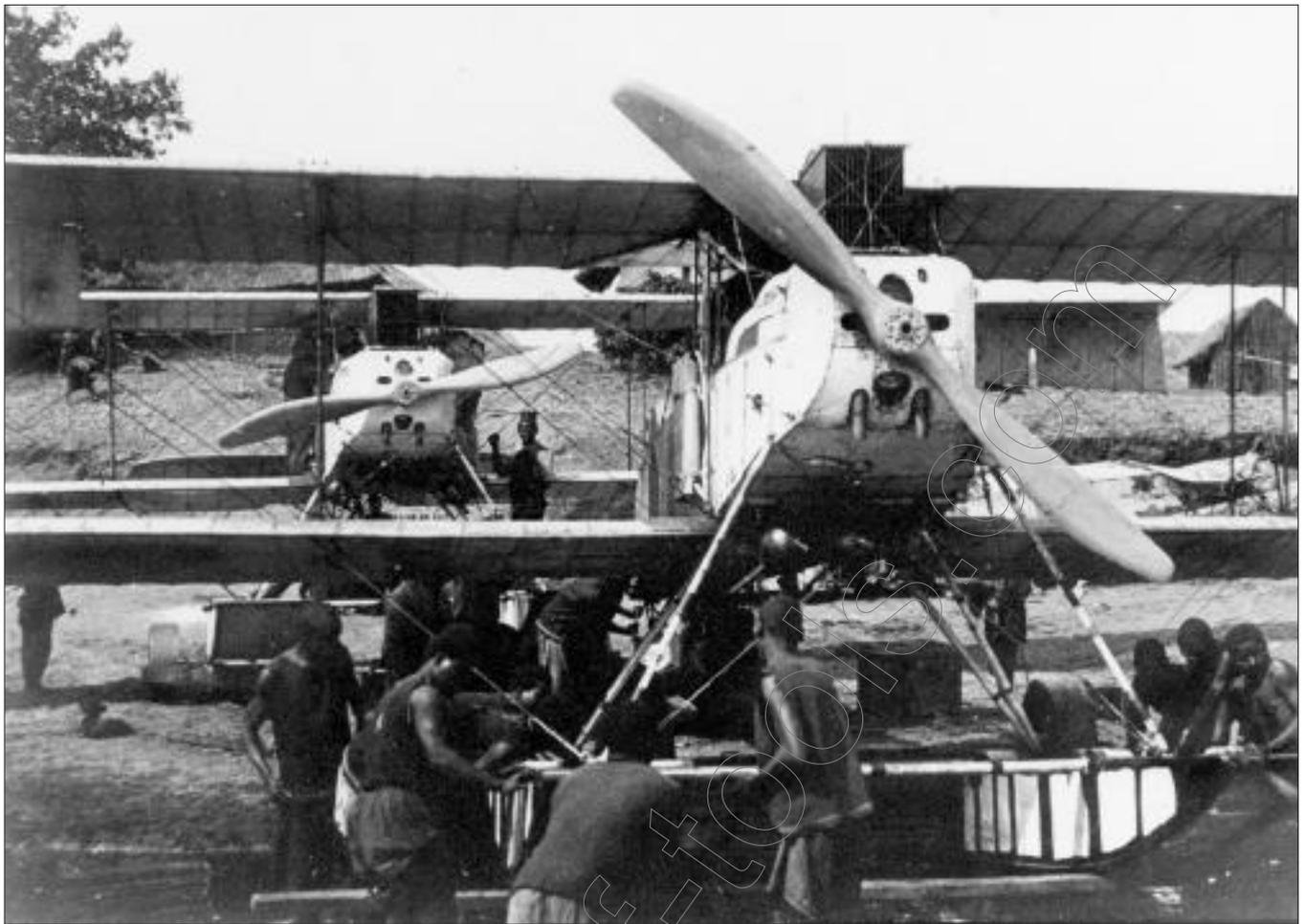
Further good news for the Belgian endeavours was the arrival of a new boat, the *Tanganyika*, with her 60 ton load capacity, giving their fleet a total cargo load of 74 tons, instead of just the *Vengeur* with her 14 tons. The *Tanganyika*'s first voyage was made on 19 June, when Moulaert steamed to Nyanza for another meeting, this time to discuss the capture of Kigoma.

Kigoma, strategically located and with her railway link through Tabora to Dar-es-Salaam, was far and away the most important town held by the Germans in the west of their colony. They were obviously intent on defending it vigorously, and had strengthened the defences with new blockhouses and trench systems.

This was the second task assigned to the small squadron (now at last with three serviceable aircraft and three pilots who could fly); photographic reconnaissance, harassment and bombing of the town, in preparation for the assault by the land army. The *Netta* also assisted by shelling the town.

A Short beached on the shore in the background, while unidentified squadron members deal with something in the foreground. There is a 65lb bomb lying on the beach at bottom right.
:Queekers-Martens family





Two Shorts bombed up for a raid on Kigoma, possibly on 17 July, as there may be wreckage on the right from the crash on 12 July.

AIRCRAFT AND THE CAPTURE OF KIGOMA

Orta (pilot) and Castiau (observer) undertook the first photographic reconnaissance of Kigoma on 9 July, taking a number of interesting photographs and reporting on German defences there. They also reported that the *Graf von Götzen* was in dock, as well as a 'new' boat that the Germans were building, *Adjutant*.

A big air raid was therefore planned for 12 July. The three aircraft involved left that day carrying a total of 12 bombs, ranging from 15lb to 65lb in weight. However, they soon encountered mist and were forced to return early, whereupon Castiau crashed and wrecked his Short when landing back at base, fortunately without harm to himself or his observer. The following day they began to assemble aircraft No 4, a task that would be completed at the end of July.

On 17 July a further raid was flown with the remaining two machines, one loaded with two 65lb bombs and the other with eight 15lb bombs. Above the target they were fired upon by a cannon and both received shrapnel hits in their wings. The quay seemed empty, with both the *Graf von Götzen* and the *Adjutant* now apparently removed or dismantled. However, the blockhouses and other land defences had been fortified further and it was obvious that, although the Germans had given up the mastery on the lake, they were prepared to defend Kigoma.

On 18 July the fortifications at Kigoma were again bombed, and a petrol depot set alight.

On 19 July more photographs were taken and bombs dropped under fire from the ground, and pamphlets, printed in Swahili, were dropped over the old town of Ujiji, just south of Kigoma, to alert the local population of the advancing Belgians and assure them of their

good intentions (and also to discourage the locals from fighting for the Germans). Then, on 23 July a last air raid was carried out on the installations at Kigoma.

On 27 July the *Netta* shelled targets south of the town. Then on 28 July she surprised a German boat unloading troops and supplies in the same vicinity, and after trapping this in the shallows, her German crew blew her up themselves. The *Netta* believed this boat to be the repaired *Graf von Götzen* and this was duly reported to the Belgian government. Later Moulaert would have to retract the statement, as this was in reality the *Wami*, that had been built elsewhere in secret.

From Nyanza the Southern Brigade now moved southwards, capturing a railway bridge near Kigoma on 27 July. The Germans in Kigoma, fearing encirclement, withdrew after sinking the *Graf von Götzen*, which was no longer to be seen in dock.

On 29 July the Belgians marched into Kigoma without any further resistance. Lieutenant Colonel Olsen, commander of the Southern Brigade, later wrote,

During my advance towards Kigoma, I felt the enemy's resistance gradually weaken...each air raid seemed to paralyse them so that, when we arrived near the place and expected to have to fight, we found the nest empty, the enemy having been constrained to give it up, their native soldiers having been unable to withstand the actions of our more effective aviators.

Their aerial photographs, taken from an altitude of 250 metres, were also highly valued by the Belgian military. The battle for Lake Tanganyika and Kigoma was over.

The capture of the German coast south of Kigoma proceeded smoothly; the *Vengeur*, with two platoons of infantry and a machine gun section on board, sailed down the coast and, in two excursions on 5 and 13

Aerial photograph of Kigoma, probably showing the fire started by bombing on 18 July 1916.



August, overran the small garrisons at Kibwesi, Karema, Utinta and Kirando.

The hinterland was also secured after small interventions. Meanwhile it was decided that the Tanganyika Group under Colonel Moulaert would proceed along this shoreline while the Southern Brigade marched inland along the railway.

Any role that could be played by the seaplanes was almost done, as they could not participate in the coming battles over even greater distances inland. On 18 August the three operational aircraft flew to Kigoma, where they made a number of demonstration flights for their troops as well as the local population.

Operations carried out by the aircraft were considered to be a complete success, from both a military and psychological viewpoint; bringing a new form of Belgian

superiority over Lake Tanganyika. Evidently the local population were particularly intimidated, not only by the aircraft but by the bombing too. It was also commonly acknowledged that Aimé Behaeghe played the chief role in this Belgian 'superiority'.

In the following weeks the Belgians continued to advance on Tabora, capturing this following heavy fighting between 10 and 18 September 1916. Kigoma became the most important refuelling base for the Belgians, with its railway to Tabora. The latter was repaired where necessary by Moulaert's engineers, and rolling stock was brought over from Albertville. The Belgians also built their biggest boat yet, the *Baron Dhanis*, which was launched on 24 August 1916.

Evidently, in October 1916 the decision was taken to pack up the small aircraft squadron and return them

Lt Roger Castiau takes his camera to the packing case hut of the Service Photographique. :Royal Military Museum, Brussels





Another view of the second Short being assembled in front of its shelter built from local materials. :Royal Military Museum, Brussels

to Europe. On 1 November 1916 Aimé wrote a postcard from Albertville to his brother Joseph, then serving on the Iser Front, with the message:

We will return about mid January 17.

Evidently troop movements were not military secrets!

BEHAEGHE'S ROLE IN THE CAMPAIGN

Aimé Behaeghe was not only the first person to fly an aircraft in Central Africa, he also played a leading role in the operations that led to the conquest of Lake Tanganyika and Kigoma: firstly, without underestimating the contribution of the mechanics, he took an important part in assembling the aircraft. Given his earlier experience with bicycles, cars and aircraft, this is hardly surprising.

There are at least three first-hand accounts of his significant contribution: Commandant de Beuger wrote briefly and to the point, *He assembled the first aircraft himself*; and Colonel Moulart wrote, *Behaeghe worked*

without pause to speed up the assembly of the two aeroplanes; similarly in his daily orders of 15 June 1916, he not only warmly congratulated Lt Behaeghe on his recent bomb raid, but also for *his keen work and tireless energy, which he displayed during the start up of the seaplanes.*

As each of the Shorts was completed, Behaeghe made the test flights solo, and later with the aircraft's future pilot. These were always completed without problems. The first test flight was, under the circumstances, an enormously risky one. Also, although Aimé made more flights by any pilot in the squadron, he did not have a single accident, unlike others with fewer flights.

With the Shorts operational, the Squadron now had to regain mastery of Lake Tanganyika. This was achieved by a single low-powered, unarmed aircraft, against all expectations and the belief that a minimum of two aircraft would be required.

The seaplane, flown with audacity and precision by



The postcard that Aimé wrote to his brother Joseph from the Belgian Congo, advising that they expected to be home in mid January 1917. The postcard was stamped 17 January upon its arrival in Belgium, but the writer never followed it home.

:A. Balcaen

Aimé Behaeghe, with his observer Lt Collignon, scored a hit with its first bomb, while under fire. Army orders of 15 June 1916 record the success of the mission;

Lt Behaeghe, despite many difficulties and under intense machine gun fire, completed a successful bomb raid on Kigoma.

This citation describes the successful attack on the *Graf von Götzen*, and is repeated in Army General Order No 50, dated 11 July 1916, but the latter is signed by General Tombeur.

The disabling of the *von Götzen* was the biggest turning point in the local war: in military terms it signalled no more and no less than the conquest of Lake Tanganyika, and psychologically it doubtless proved Belgian superiority to the locals, by the unseen way it happened.

After this the second mission assigned to the small squadron was to assist the advancing land forces by bombing and photographic reconnaissance at Kigoma. This was also done with unexpected success, as the Germans withdrew before the Belgian army reached the town. Apparently two aircraft were involved but it is not clear from available documentation just who did what. Orta is mentioned as pilot and Castiau is named as a photographer/observer. Moulaert, however, described Aimé's role in greater detail several times. In Army orders of 26 July 1916 (before the final assault):

Lieutenant aviator Behaeghe, pilot, officer showing great courage. During reconnaissance flights carried out on 17, 18, 19 and 23 July, covered a total of 1000 kilometres and flew for eleven hours, dropping eleven bombs on the boats, port, installations and defences of Kigoma.

He also referred to this action at Kigoma a second time in his Staff Order of 14 February 1917, after Aimé's death:

I pay homage to our dear departed Lieutenant Behaeghe, our most intrepid and competent pilot – conqueror of Kigoma – BEHAEGHE whose name is now inseparable from the field of victory at Kigoma...

and in 1934 Moulaert recalled: *Behaeghe...led all the flights on Kigoma.*

Aimé was also named by the Chief of the Army as 'the victor of Kigoma' and as the principal in the flight operations that led to its capture without a fight, as

explained by Colonel Olsen, commander of the Army Brigade that attacked the town:

... the enemy was constrained to give it up, their native soldiers having been unable to withstand the actions of our more effective aviators.

In his book, *The Campaign in Tanganyika* (1934), Moulaert mentions Behaeghe ten times, more than any other junior officer.

So, remarkably, this two-pronged operation, conquering Lake Tanganyika and Kigoma, was completed without any deaths on the Belgians' side.

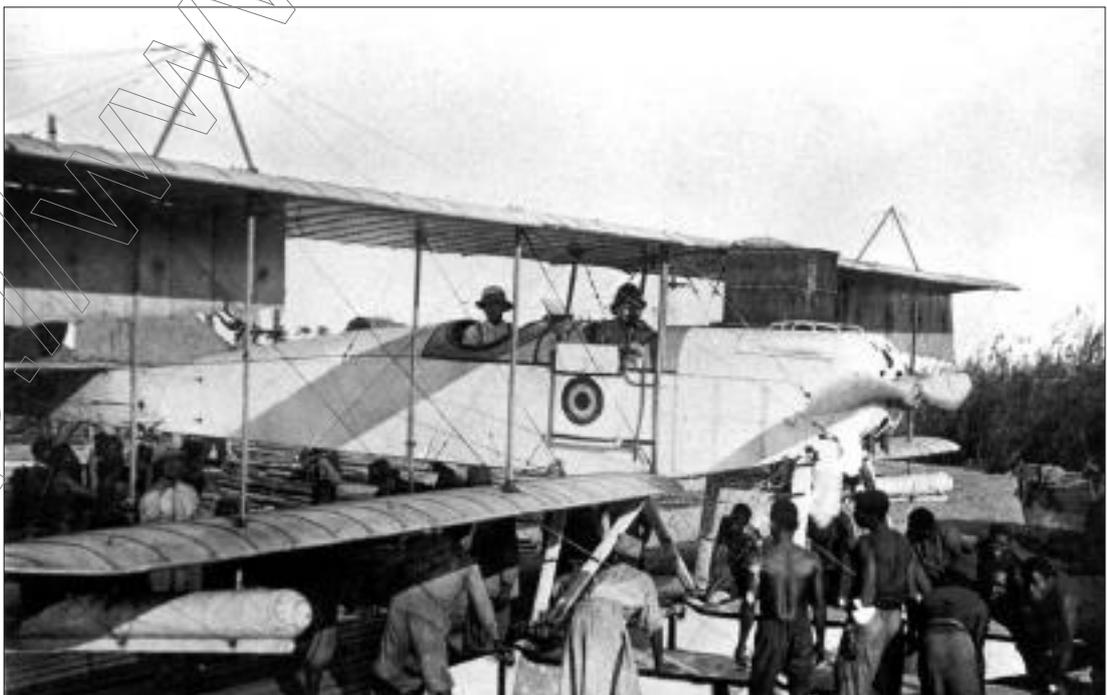
DEATH OF AIMÉ BEHAEGHE

The demonstration of air power over Kigoma in August was the only occasion that three aircraft flew together. But afterwards things at the squadron quietened down. Their military role was apparently over, the new front lying outside their effective range. As a result almost no local information concerning Aimé's death has been found, apart from a daily order dated 17 February 1917, 80 days *after* the event. This order was made at 'Rigonia', a place not yet identified, but possibly an advanced outpost in Tanzania [or a misreading of 'Kigoma' in a defective MS or typescript].

The references concerning his death have therefore all been taken from post-war European sources, which give conflicting details. Six sources were found, the first four official documents from the archives.

- 1: The official report of Aimé's death states *Diemba, 4 Déc. 1916, suite de maladie* (due to disease).
- 2: An exchange of letters in Europe: one of 23 January 1917, from the Belgian Minister for Colonies (then relocated to London), to the War Minister; *I have the honour (sic!) to bring to your attention the death of Behaeghe Aimé, 2nd Lieutenant in the Force Publique, at the hospital in Dumbo, on 4 dec. 1916.* The War Minister sent a copy of this letter to the Air Force commander on 30 December; a copy of this has been preserved.
- 3: Aimé's *Feuillet Matricule* at the Belgian Armed Forces also gives *Dumbo, 4 Dec. 1916*, evidently copied from the document quoted in (2) above.
- 4: A thumbled card on hard coloured paper gives 'à la Niemba' with the date first written as *4 Dec. 1916*,

De Bueger and one of the mechanics prepare for a flight. :Willem Labro



but later corrected to 3 Dec.

- 5: A memorial card, printed after the war but clearly compiled with the aid of Aimé's former military commanders, states *Niamba, 3 Dec. 1916*.
- 6: Moulaert, 1934, names the 'hospital at Niamba' as the place of Aimé's death (the *Niamba* is one of the tributaries of the *Lukuga*, the place where they flow together also being known as *Niamba*.) He repeated this place name in 1947, with the date of *3 December 1916*.

So there is some conflicting evidence as to the date and place of his death, and no information about the location of his grave.

After searching unsuccessfully for a place named *Dumbo*, I have concluded that this is an error, written instead of *Diemba*, (see 1 above), which probably originated in the letter written by the Minister for Colonies in (2) or in another internal document. This is no problem despite the obvious difference as *Diemba* can be tied to *Niamba* (see 4, 5 and 6 above), which may originally have been *Ndiemba* in the local dialect, as nearby towns are *Ndindi* and *Ndoma*. Europeans frequently dropped either the first or second consonants when referring to such African names, thus *Ndiemba* probably became *Diemba* or *Niamba*. [*Ndiemba appears to survive as a surname in the region*]

In Niamba (or 'Diemba'), on the junction of the rivers Niamba and Lukuga, 87 kilometres by rail from Albertville, stood a hospital belonging to the *Chemins de fer des Grands Lacs*, which also served as a military hospital. The substantial yearly reports of 1916 and 1917 from this hospital, written by a Dr Rodhain, survive in the *Force Publique* archives held at the Ministry of External Affairs, and were consulted by the author, but strangely they report no death that can be identified specifically that of Aimé. The reports do mention four Europeans who died in the Tanganyika area, without naming them, but the circumstances of their deaths are recorded, and none of these match what is known about Aimé's.

Death notices and Deroubaix (see references) both state that malaria was the cause of death but Dr Rodhain reports no deaths from malaria among the soldiers in the Congo, although some had to be repatriated after contracting the disease. Quinine had been discovered and was in widespread use by the whites then.

For his part, Walter Pieters states that Aimé's death

occurred because he was ... *exhausted by war strain and climatological conditions*., perhaps relying on a letter written by de Bueger in 1933, in which he said: *exhausted by his stressful work, Behaeghe died*...

There is some difficulty accepting these vague descriptions; that region of the Congo has one of the best climates and Aimé's death happened four months after his last known period of heavy work was completed. Perhaps he was involved in more while dismantling the aircraft, prior to their return home?

Moulaert puts it more plainly at the end of his book, where he gives some details on page 189:

Unfortunately, the last days of my command were saddened by the death of Lieutenant Behaeghe, the courageous aviator, who first flew over the lake and led all the flights on Kigoma. Exhausted by intense and continual labour of more than ten months, our comrade contracted dysentery and died in the hospital at Niamba.

Possibly dysentery was not readily recorded, as it was a sickness with some stigma attached to it, especially in the army.

As far as the dates are concerned, reference (4) and (5) agree, but are different from the other references. Why the correction to the date in (4)? One would normally only correct this if one had real reasons to doubt the previously written date. Also, (5) was compiled by people who served with him, including his immediate commanding officer. Perhaps the military were advised on 4 December and recorded this date in error, as they did in the case of *Dumbo*.

Without definite proof one way or the other, it seems that he died from dysentery (possibly in combination with malaria) in the hospital at Niamba on 3 December 1916, as this is the place and date given on the memorial card and also by Moulaert in 1934 and 1947.

CONCLUSION

It was disappointing when consulting official documents concerning Aimé's death to find these errors, and nowhere a mention of his burial place. Only in the last instance, in Moulaert's 1934 book, was a plausible cause of death suggested. Dysentery, not malaria, would explain why Aimé was not repatriated in time, a lengthy if not too difficult undertaking along the rail and boat route to Matadi. Death by malaria, at least amongst the Europeans at that time, was a slow process; dysentery was, however, faster but was death inevitable from



This scene may show the repair of the second Short to be assembled, following its crash and recovery from the shallow waters of the Tongwe lagoon. Another machine stands with wings folded under its adjacent shelter, necessary to protect dope and fabric from the effects of strong sunlight. :Royal Military Museum, Brussels



Three Shorts with their individual shelters.

:Royal Military Museum, Brussels

this given appropriate care? According to the *Ordre de bataille* dated 1 January 1917 there was a military doctor in Albertville and one in Niemba.

The lack of reliable official information concerning the death and burial place of Aimé Behaeghe was the biggest anti-climax of this research.

However, the praise of his immediate superior was great. De Bueger, his squadron commander, wrote:

I will add, and I do not have a problem with shouting it out loudly: it was to Aimé, only to him, that we owe the success of the difficult mission entrusted to us. Aimé died as a hero for his country, after he had given all he had of his great audacity, intelligence and hard work.

Moulaert, Chief of the Army Group, wrote:

Behaeghe's name is now inseparable from the victorious campaign at Kigoma. He served the army and his country Belgium well.

And yet his country cannot officially say where he died or was buried.

NOTES ON THE CAMPAIGN

In hindsight, it is marvellous that the small seaplane set-up could have been so successful, with so few men, so few resources, in difficult circumstances and with many setbacks. Without making a real analysis, a few points are clear from the reports.

1 Speed

When the first personnel and equipment arrived on 1 April, they were still searching for a suitable base yet less than 10 weeks later they achieved their first but most important military success. The rapid operational deployment was thanks in large part to the personal efforts of Aimé Behaeghe, with his hard, careful, efficient work. The men removed one panel from the biggest case and, after adding a straw roof, this became the first accommodation of the Belgians, which could be rapidly packed up when necessary. Thus they soon established a complete base, measuring 400 metres by 150 metres. Each aircraft was placed on a trolley under its own lean-to, with a ramp leading to the water, allowing for rapid deployment. But it seems that other tasks were also done: sunken boats were raised in short time and repaired or converted.

2 Decision-making

Locally there was consultation between the General Staff, in the form of the Colonel, and the junior officers concerned; feasibility was determined on site and conclusions drawn immediately. Thus the decision to attack the *Graf von Götzen* with only one aircraft instead of the preferred two, was made on the same day that the second aircraft crashed, between de Bueger, Behaeghe and Collignon.

Local workers prepare to retrieve a returning Short from the lagoon at Tongwe. The handling trolley stands ready on the right.



Decision-making was also swift in the sporadic consultations between the different army groups. For example, local tactics were quickly adapted following the neutralising of the *Graf von Götzen*, with little (or no) consultation with the Belgian government, which had delegated all affairs concerning the Congo to the Minister of Colonies. He in turn largely left decision-making to the authorities on the ground. The Belgian military in the Congo had evidently to take their English allies more into account when forming decisions or plans of action.

There were also some military actions that would make any strategist blink, like the successful action against the *Graf von Götzen* and the subsequent Belgian victory celebrations, without any corroborating proof of damage caused to the ship. But fortune favours the brave, and the Germans reacted as if they had been attacked by a force five or ten times bigger than was the case: there are German reports of massive attacks by the Belgians. But if everything was not necessarily orthodox, the action against the *Graf* played heavily on the Africans' psychology. The black soldiers in German service increasingly refused to fight when faced with the aircraft, as mentioned by Olsen, commander of the land assault force.

3 Co-operation

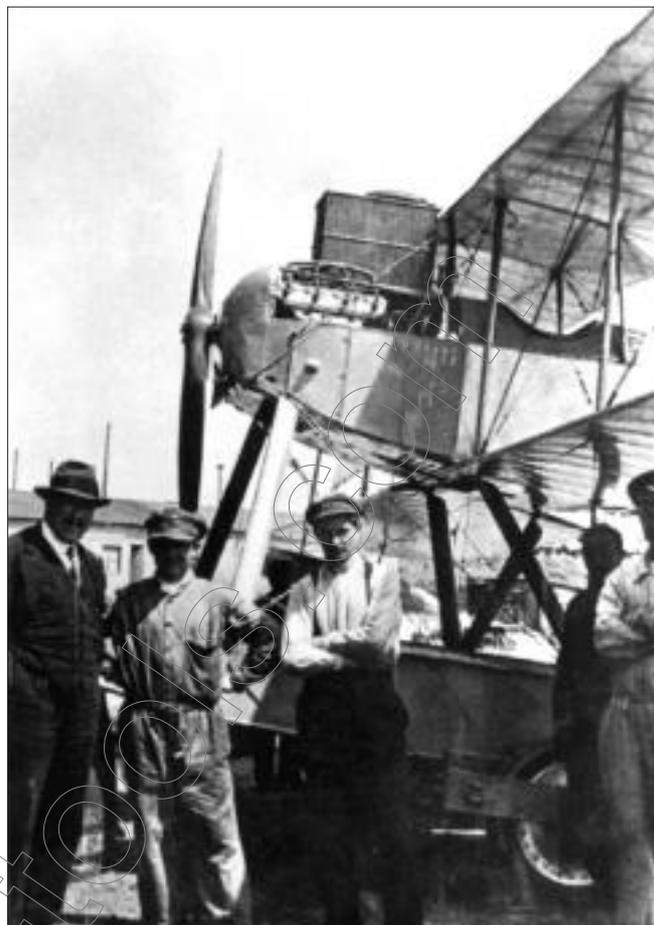
There was a total commitment between all boats and personnel upon the arrival of the seaplane squadron, the boats giving priority to supporting both seaplanes and their forces on land. It seems that together the different arms displayed the colonial pioneer spirit at its best. Without unconditional support and quick decision-making it would probably have been a fiasco.

The war, in the beginning at least, appeared to be a *David v Goliath* struggle. But David's catapult turned out to be Aimé Behaeghe's aircraft. Their mission succeeded, despite handicaps and setbacks, with a subsequent conquest of an enormous area without any Belgian fatal casualties. However, the person who played the chief role ended up dying in a sickbed.

TRIBUTES TO AIMÉ BEHAEGHE

After the war his commanding officers wrote favourably about Aimé. He also received, along with the rest of the small Belgian squadron, the highest Congolese decoration – *Chevalier de l'Ordre de l'Etoile Africaine*, but that was on 12 September 1916, before his death.

After his death Aimé was not given any military



Belgian Short at Calais in September 1917. Joseph Behaeghe is standing in the middle with his hands on hips. Is this perhaps an aircraft that was flown by Aimé?

recognition or awards. In itself this is not so unusual, but it is nevertheless notable when compared to the honours and medals commonly bestowed in the army, and especially on his fellow officers from the seaplane squadron, on their return to Belgium.

Commandant de Bueger, in an unpublished footnote he wrote to a letter in 1933, says that in 1917 he twice wrote to the Belgian High Command, requesting a decent burial for Aimé, but each time did not receive an answer. They evidently paid no attention to events in the Congo, which fell outside of their control.

From the undoubtedly incomplete bibliography



The survivor: Liemba, formerly Graf von Götzen, seen here after her second restoration. She still plies the transport routes of Lake Tanganyika today.

however, it is clear that much has been written on Aimé's personal contribution to the African campaigns of 1916, ranging from 1919 (A. Cayen) to the present (W. Pieters).

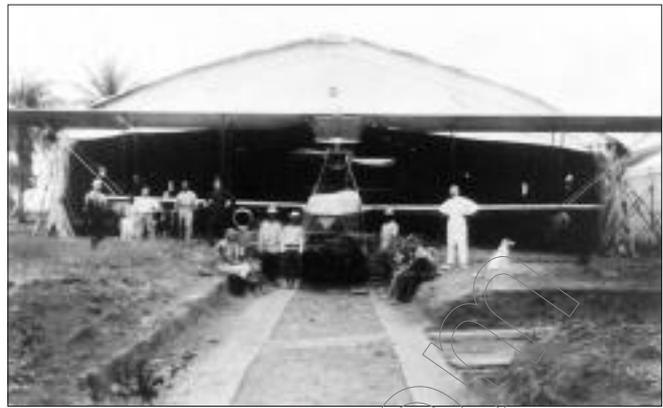
The municipality of Herseaux honoured him in local magazine articles and by naming a street after him, the locally important *Boulevard de l'aviateur Behaeghe*, which was built in 1923 on the meadows where Aimé and his brother Joseph made their first test flights before the war. In 2001 there was a float containing a model aircraft in a procession at Mouscron, in honour of Aimé Behaeghe.

In Albertville a square was named *Aimé Behaeghe* after him. In his birthplace, Izegem in Kachtem, nothing was done until April 2002 when it was decided to name a street after him, but this did not happen till 2004.

WHAT HAPPENED TO...?

The *Graf von Götzen* was sunk by the Germans off the coast of Kigoma on 27 or 28 July 1916, in 20 metres of water. In 1918 the Belgian engineer Wall and his men undertook a dive survey of the wreck. They recovered large quantities of material and fittings from her, gradually raising her to a depth of six metres. The intention was to completely raise the ship and repair her, but this was had not been done when Kigoma and the surrounding area were ceded to the British. In 1926 the latter raised, repaired and refitted the ship, using her once again as a transport and passenger vessel on Lake Tanganyika, under the name *Liemba*, a task she fulfills to this day, from Kigoma to Zambia, 700km. (TV report, NDR3 and Arte, 2003: *The Seven Lives of a Steamboat*). She is still the largest ship on Lake Tanganyika, almost 100 years after her construction in Germany as the first such vessel in 'kit' form.

The small squadron of seaplanes returned to Belgium in March 1917 with their dismantled Short aircraft and was retained in service but reorganised. De Bueger remained in command while Orta, Castiau and Ruyschaert of the original unit were retained, with some new personnel being drafted in. They received new and better performing seaplanes, armed with machine guns, and were stationed at Calais together with a French and an American squadron. Their new role was



A Levy-Le Pen flying boat with which Orta and Nelis began their commercial venture after the war. -Royal Military Museum

to search for enemy submarines in the Channel and to spot floating mines. On 5 July 1918 two of their aircraft flew King Albert (piloted by Orta) and Queen Elizabeth to England, for a meeting with the British Royal Family. This was an early example of foreign travel by air, by a head of state, and an early flight over the Channel by a woman.

Leon Collignon, Aimé's observer, also returned to Belgium, where he became a pilot himself. He received promotion to Captain, but was killed in an accident on 14 September 1918, while making a test flight. He is buried in Namur, his grave still regularly attended to honour his contribution to the Tanganyika expedition.

Colonel G. Moulaert became deputy governor of the Evenaars Province after the war.

Tony Orta, together with another wartime pilot, Nelis, set up the airline SNETA which operated in the Congo and in Belgium. From 1 July 1921 the subsidiary company LARA (*Ligne Aérienne Roi Albert*) began commercial flights between Kinshasa (Leo) and Kisangani (Stanleyville). LARA was thus the first colonial airline in the world. In Belgium SNETA also set up SABCA, an aircraft manufacturing subsidiary. SNETA, including the company personnel and aircraft, was eventually taken over by SABENA, and if one allows that SNETA was established in 1919, then this makes SABENA one of the world's oldest airlines.

A reunion held after the war by the survivors of the small seaplane squadron that served in Africa. From left to right are Roger Castiau, Albert de Bueger, Mme Castiau, Colonel Moulaert, Tony Orta, Victor Boin (the pilot who flew Belgian Queen Elizabeth to England in 1918) and F. Russchaert. Missing from the photograph are Aimé Behaeghe (died 3 December 1916) and Leon Collignon (killed in an accident on 4 September 1918), the two men who crippled the Graf von Götzen on 10 June 1916.



THE WAR IN EAST AFRICA: THE BELGIAN CONTRIBUTION

According to a political agreement, Tabora was transferred by the Belgians to the British on 25 February 1917, and the Belgian troops returned to the Congo; but fighting continued and the Belgians, now commanded by Col Huyghe, returned to assist the British. They drove the Germans out of Ikoma in the north on 25 June 1917, and out of Mahenge, the central position in the south, on 9 October 1917. The Germans, under von Lettow-Vorbeck, were pursued and fled to Mozambique. It was thought that this was the end of the war in Africa and the Belgians returned to the Congo. The Germans did not give up, however, and rallied Rhodesia. Olsen organised security measures to protect Katanga but the armistice in Europe on 11 November 1918 ended the battle in Africa too.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

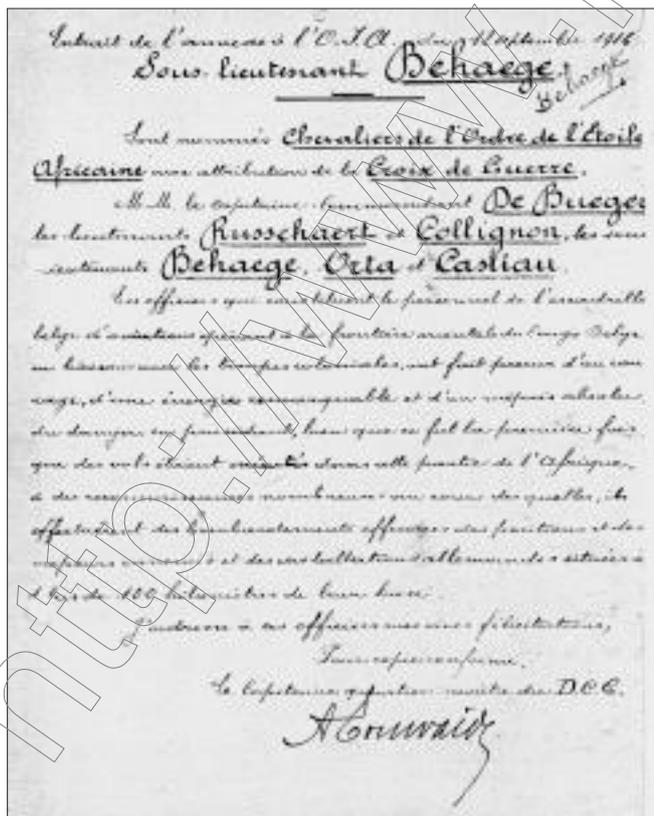
Most of the military information in this article was obtained from the *Centrum voor Historische Documentatie van de Belgische Krijgsmacht*, where I was greatly assisted by Jeroen Huygelier, to whom I extend my thanks, with thanks also to Walter Pieters for information about events on the Iser Front.

Finally, I was very kindly permitted to use the documentation and photographs held by Mrs Augusta Balcaen, daughter-in-law of Aimé's brother, Joseph. She describes Joseph as a very competent man who was gentle and quiet and preferred not to talk about the war.

FOOTNOTES

1. Born on 15 January 1884.
2. http://www.memoire-du-cyclisme.com/cla_liege_bastogne/liege1909.php
3. Charles Henry Marie Ernest Tombeur (1867 - 1947), Baron Tombeur de Tabora. He served as Governor of the Belgian Congo from 22 March 1917 to 2 Sep 1920.

Official record of the award of the Etoile Africaine to members of the seaplane squadron.



4. Jules Laurent Jean Louis Renkin (3 December 1862 – 15 July 1934). Born in Ixelles, Renkin studied and practised law. In 1896 he was elected as a member of the Catholic Party to the Belgian Chamber of Representatives for Brussels, a seat he held until his death. He held several ministerial posts, Justice in 1907–1908, Colonies from 1908 to 1918, the Interior in 1918–1920, and Railway and Posts from 1918 to 1921. In 1920 he was named an honorary Minister of State. In 1931 he became Prime Minister of Belgium, also holding the Interior, Finance, and Health portfolios. His government was unable to deal effectively with the economic crisis facing Belgium at the time and fell in 1932.
5. Born 5 August 1885 and died on 18 October 1940.
6. Born 29 October 1888 in Brussels and died 27 November 1950.

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