OFFICIALS, COMMERCIAL INTERESTS, AND CIVIL AVIATION POLICY INITIATIVES IN INTER-WAR BRITISH WEST AFRICA

AYODEJI OLUKOJU

ABSTRACT: Relying on previously unexploited archival material, this article examines civil aviation policy initiatives and debates among various stakeholders in London and West Africa—the Colonial Office, the Air Ministry, colonial governments, and civil aviation stakeholders, notably, Sir Alan Cobham and Sir Sefton Brancker, in the inter-war period. The study is situated in the interwoven contexts of the change in use of aircraft from combat to recreation and commerce, inter-departmental rivalry in the colonies, inter-war economic vicissitudes, Anglo-French aviation rivalry in West Africa (the “Second Scramble”) and the administrative interface between London and the colonies. This essay extends the literature on civil aviation in British colonial Africa beyond the settler colonies of Kenya, Rhodesia, and South Africa. It also focuses on the neglected early beginnings of civil aviation development in inter-war West Africa. Ultimately, financial considerations stymied colonial aviation projects till after World War II.

KEYWORDS: Nigeria, West Africa, air services, Air Ministry, seaplanes, civil aviation

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Introduction

The literature on the beginnings of civil aviation in British colonial Africa has been dominated by a focus on the settler colonies of Kenya, Rhodesia and South Africa.¹ The few publications on civil aviation in Nigeria dwell on post-World War II developments.² Relying on previously unused archival sources, this article covers inter-war British West Africa. It highlights the contrasting positions of the Colonial Office, the Air Ministry, West African colonial governments and British civil aviation stakeholders (Sir Alan Cobham, a leading aviation enthusiast and Sir Sefton Brancker, Britain’s Director of Civil Aviation) on aviation development in inter-war British West Africa. This essay is set in the vortex of inter-war economic vicissitudes, Anglo-French imperial rivalry in West Africa, and exchanges between London and British West Africa.

Air transport assumed imperial significance in the immediate aftermath of World War I largely because of the moves made by Britain’s imperial rivals, especially France in West Africa and Belgium in Central Africa, to develop civil aviation in their colonies. The resultant “Second Scramble” for Africa, this time in space rather than on land, is the underlying background to this study.³ Railways, roads, ports, and shipping were indispensable to accessing the raw materials and markets of the colonies, and, therefore, received priority attention in imperial policy from the late nineteenth century. In contrast, air transport, a more recent invention, did not contribute to the extraction and mass haulage of resources from the colonies. It only became important in the inter-war years for strategic rather than purely economic reasons.

Accordingly, Sir Samuel Howe, Secretary of State for Air between 1922 and 1929, drove the vision of Britain’s “air empire” with the declaration that “distance was the great enemy of Imperial solidarity.”⁴ He, therefore, saw civil aviation as the weapon to be used against that enemy and the veritable glue to bind the scattered territories of the British Empire. He had strong allies in Leo Amery, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, and Sefton Brancker, his Director of Civil Aviation. Britain’s priority, in view of moves by rival powers, was the Cairo-Cape Town air corridor.⁵ Moreover, the existence of significant European settlements in East and Southern Africa made that sub-region a top priority for Britain, compared to West Africa. However, there were striking parallels between Nyasaland (Malawi) and Nigeria: Sir Alan Cobham visited both by seaplane in 1928, and debates as to the viability and priority of civil aviation took place among officials with similar outcomes in both colonies.⁶ That said, West Africa came into the picture because of French moves in the region. This was the context in which the schemes discussed in this article assumed great significance.
A pioneering initiative by Nigeria’s Governor Hugh Clifford for a government-run mail and passenger air transport service had ended with his tenure in 1925. From 1927 to 1930, two commercial firms—Alan Cobham and Air Operating Company—reopened the quest for air services with an initial proposal for a commercial enterprise supported by a government guarantee of traffic or an annual subsidy. A second proposal, from 1930 to 1932, was a modified government-commercial partnership to run an air service across the West African colonies with Britain and even with the French colonial air service operating out of its hub at Dakar.

This essay highlights the debates and policy options considered by the Colonial Office, the Air Ministry, and West African colonial governments in the aftermath of World War I. Conflicting perspectives on aviation policy were advanced by various interest groups in West Africa and the UK. In London, the Air Ministry (for reasons of defence) and the Colonial Office (for imperial administrative reasons and in rivalry with the French) promoted air services for different strategic aims. In British West Africa, support for aviation development varied with the personalities involved and the economic circumstances. Thus some governors, such as Nigeria’s Hugh Clifford, were more enthusiastic than others, such as his successors Graeme Thomson and Donald Cameron. In Nigeria, intense inter-departmental rivalry among the Marine, Survey, and Posts and Telegraphs, each of which sought to be the fulcrum of the enterprise, drove the quest for civil aviation. Accordingly, conflicting perspectives and proposals in pursuit of departmental priorities characterized the initial phase of aviation development in Nigeria. Thus, the Marine Department supported the use of seaplanes, which were designed for (coastal) inter-port air service, while the Survey Department preferred aircraft that could cover the hinterland part of the country.

In all, proposals for civil aviation development in British West Africa focused initially on a government, rather than commercial, enterprise, and, later, on a West African air service. That said, economic circumstances, specifically inter-war economic vicissitudes, influenced how different interest groups viewed particular civil aviation schemes. Eventually, the West African colonial governments shelved civil aviation development in the face of the aggravating circumstances of the Great Depression of the early 1930s. It was only after World War II that air services took off as a commercial enterprise, the background to which, until now, had been neglected in the literature.
Private Enterprise and Renewed Quest for Air Services in Nigeria, 1927–1929

After an abortive initiative by Nigeria’s Governor Hugh Clifford in 1919–1920, private enterprise promoted fresh initiatives on air services in British West Africa in the late 1920s. The first firm to re-open the question of air services in Nigeria was Alan Cobham Aviation Limited of New Bond Street, London. The firm took the initiative to market its services to Clifford’s successor, Sir Graeme Thomson, in June 1927. It is not clear what transpired since Clifford foreclosed government participation in the provision of air services. Whatever motivated the company, its eponymous chief executive, Sir Alan Cobham, who pledged to “personally direct operations,” stated his “very wide experience during the past five or six years in all branches of aviation, including commercial air transport, aerial photography, long distance pioneer flights, air racing, survey and exploration”. The company offered to advise the Nigerian government on any scheme it proposed to undertake and to submit tenders informed by its vast knowledge of the industry. The Nigerian government politely acknowledged receipt of the solicitation and promised to contact the firm if the need arose in the future.

A second private initiative came from The Aircraft Operating Company Limited of London (hereafter, AOC), which claimed to have been approached by “a commercial concern in Nigeria” to operate an aerial taxi service. Arguing that the volume of traffic would not justify that venture, it rather proposed to the Nigerian government to run “regular air services along the Southern Coast.” The proposed route would run from Lagos to Victoria, with stops at Forcados, Port Harcourt and Calabar. The experimental service would operate for a year or eighteen months and could be expanded on the basis of results. AOC stated its strong opposition to the granting of subsidies to air service providers unless such schemes also served other purposes, such as imperial defence. It therefore proposed to carry mails provided the government would guarantee “a regular load on every trip” of 150 lbs for a start once every week at the cost of three pence per lb. The government could pay out of its Estimates or introduce a surcharge on mail sent by this means. The proposed rate of 3d per lb, it argued, compared favourably with the charge of 2½d per ounce on the London-Paris route, a distance of 220 miles compared to 450 miles between Lagos and Victoria.

In addition to mail, the service would carry passengers, but that line of business would be “entirely self-supporting” without any assistance from the government. At the rate of two trips, one each way, per week at 150 lbs of mail per trip, the government’s annual contribution would be £6240. As a further incentive, the firm would arrange that one of its aircraft be fitted...
with photographic equipment capable of undertaking small area surveys for the government. This would meet the immediate needs of certain townships at “a reasonable cost” to the government. AOC later corrected “an error” in its initial submission by substituting “6d per ounce” for “3d per ounce” as the cost of the mail contract. The new rate was “little more than double the amount charged on the London-Paris route, a distance of less than half the distance between Victoria and Lagos.” This would make the cost of the contract £6,240 as earlier submitted.  

The Aircraft Operating Company Proposal and Potential for Postal Services

Various Nigerian officials duly scrutinized AOC’s business proposal. The Postmaster General (PMG), whose department was most directly concerned, pledged to collect statistics of correspondence among the various coastal communities to make an informed judgment. In the interim, he volunteered the following facts. First, British shipping transported mails between the United Kingdom and the West African colonies. The Nigerian government paid a subsidy of £2095 for the service, £795 of which was for internal correspondence (excluding parcels which were paid for separately at unit rates) carried across the major coastal settlements. The bulk of the correspondence in that manner was roughly equal to that conveyed to the United Kingdom, but the shorter sea distance along the Nigerian coast reduced the proportional cost. In 1924, the external traffic to the United Kingdom weighed 2226 kilogrammes while the internal traffic weighed 2016 kilogrammes, both measured over 28 days. The bulk of the internal correspondence among Nigerian ports was official correspondence as the commercial firms made their own arrangements. The firms were organized on a Divisional basis, the supervisors in the provinces corresponding direct to the UK headquarters, thus having little direct communication among themselves.

Consequently, the PMG supported an air mail service if it speeded up the UK mails and provided the coastal settlements (Forcados, Burutu, Warri, Port Harcourt, Calabar, and Victoria and neighbouring towns) could post their mail one to three days later than was the case and catch the same steamer from Lagos to the UK. Under Elder Dempster’s prevailing schedule, many important commercial centres were unable to reply to UK correspondence by the same steamer. Hence, an air mail service once a week each way would overcome this difficulty, and “be greatly appreciated by the mercantile community.” Although the PMG could not quantify the volume of correspondence carried from port to port by air mail service, his enquiries convinced him that “such a service would be very popular.” Moreover, the
cost to the government would be “very much less” than the projected figure of £6240 quoted by the prospective air service provider. He submitted that AOC should, therefore, be encouraged to elaborate their scheme.\textsuperscript{14} The PMG subsequently provided statistics of air mail traffic across Nigeria’s major coastal settlements as stated in Table 1.

The PMG explained that, given the demand by AOC for a guaranteed minimum of 150 pounds each way every week, the figures above could not possibly satisfy that minimum requirement. This was because official mail accounted for only 198 pounds of the total. He calculated that if ten percent of the balance of correspondence was considered sufficiently urgent to be sent by air, the volume would not be adequate. He opined that only mail emanating from or destined for the UK would necessitate an arrangement by which such mail would catch up with the departing ship to the UK. However, if the interval was expanded from one to two weeks, a bigger volume of mail would be generated, as indicated in Table 2.

If a tenth of the letters were of sufficient urgency to justify an additional air mail fee of sixpence per ounce (oz.), this would yield approximately 60 pounds of mail per fortnight (the week the steamer arrived from the United Kingdom) from Lagos and approximately 172 pounds of mail to Lagos to catch up with the UK-bound steamer’s voyage. The proposed “Lagos Express Service” to connect air mail service with ship sailings would be sustainable if minimum weights of 100lbs of mail per fortnight from Lagos could be generated. Though this was 50 pounds less than the minimum each way per week (150 pounds) demanded by the AOC, this was considered sufficient to justify the service.\textsuperscript{15}

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\caption{Fourteen-Day Statistics of Nigerian Inland Letter Mails, 1929}
\begin{tabular}{lll}
\hline
S/N & Movement of Mail & Paid (No.) & Official (No.) & Weight (lbs.) \\
\hline
1. & Received at Lagos from Eastern and Central Provinces & 4,179 & 908 & 247 \\
2. & Despatched from Lagos to Eastern and Central Provinces & 3,532 & 996 & 236 \\
3. & Inter-port traffic, Westward (excluding 1) & 500 & 125 & 43 \\
4. & Inter-port traffic, Eastward (excluding 2) & 1,044 & 301 & 72 \\
\hline
Total & & 9,255 & 2,330 & 598 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

\textit{Source: Acting Postmaster General to CSG, 14 January 1929, CSO 26 03137, vol. II, NAI.}
While the proposal from AOC was being considered, the firm of Cobham-Blackburn Air Lines Limited (hereafter, CBAL) submitted a detailed report of a flight from Libreville (Gabon) to Bathurst (The Gambia) and possibilities of developing air transport in British West Africa. Sir Alan Cobham had also visited Nigeria to discuss with Nigerian government officials. The competing proposals were tabled before the Communications Board of the Public Works Department in November 1928. Cobham’s report dated 24 November 1928 consisted of two parts—the first related his journey from Libreville to Bathurst while the second discussed possibilities of developing aviation and air transport along the coast of West Africa. The details of his flight and observations are of no immediate concern. More relevant is the section containing his observations and recommendations in respect of air services in West Africa.

After traversing the four British colonies of Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone and The Gambia by flying boat, Cobham concluded that “an air transport line running the whole length of the West Coast from Bathurst to Nigeria had little chance of success at the present time from a commercial point of view.” Although there was “no actual demand” for an airline serving the region, the route was “ideal for flying boat operations.” The region was endowed with so many sheltered waterways at the wide river mouths and inland lagoons that it was possible to land “almost anywhere along the

### Table 2. Average Volume of Private Mail to and from the United Kingdom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Station</th>
<th>To the United Kingdom</th>
<th>From the United Kingdom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Weight (average 2 oz.) lbs.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forcados</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burutu</td>
<td>530</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warri</td>
<td>2,680</td>
<td>1,353</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Port Harcourt</td>
<td>6,906</td>
<td>3,404</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calabar</td>
<td>1,946</td>
<td>2,699</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>580</td>
<td>1,617</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>12,794</td>
<td>1,599</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Accounts and returns in UK mail cheques from banks.
Source: Acting Postmaster General to CSG, 14 January 1929, CSO 26 03137, vol. II, NAI.

### Cobham-Blackburn Air Lines Proposals, 1928–1929

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entire route.” Though aviation development in West Africa was desirable, a coastal air transport service was “premature.” The best way was for each colony to develop overland, as opposed to coastal, air services operating from the capital towns “as a hire service.” However, in Nigeria, where there were “vast waterways,” seaplanes would be better than conventional aircraft. Cobham recommended that an air hire service be incorporated in three colonies, excluding The Gambia, with guarantees from the government on a number of flying hours per year at a given cost per hour. This would assist the operating company to determine how many aircraft to deploy and thus develop the scheme on a sound commercial basis. Prospective clients would include mining engineers going upcountry, government officials and commercial firms. The service would also be available to the government for survey, forest patrol and crop fumigation. An experiment over a number of years would confirm the foregoing projections.

CBAL made fresh proposals to the West African governments in January 1929 on the strength of three principles. The first was to operate an aircraft in each of the colonies and to establish communication between any two of them, if necessary. Second, each colonial government would derive “an immediate benefit” from the use of the aircraft for the conduct of its business and the development of the territory. Third, the scheme would be self-supporting and careful estimates would be produced to make the air operations commercially successful. Beyond purely civilian uses, the air service would serve the defence needs of Nigeria. As it “occupies an important position on the West Coast,” Nigeria could use the aircraft “in an emergency, to establish communication with other territories and for reconnaissance.”

In addition, the air service would also undertake air survey with affixed camera gear. However, the terrain required the use of seaplanes, which could be converted to a conventional aircraft by substituting a wheel undercarriage for its floats. This could be done for special journeys where a seaplane base existed in proximity to an aerodrome. The firm recommended “a new type” of De Havilland seaplane as “the most efficient machine for the job” as it could carry four passengers and a limited amount of luggage.

CBAL offered to operate 45,000 miles (500 flying hours) per annum at a cost of £9,000, provided that the government could guarantee patronage through transport of officials, reconnaissance and survey, supplemented by private charters by commercial firms and individuals. On its part, the firm would undertake a preliminary survey and provide two seaplanes with sufficient spares and workshop equipment for five years’ work, as well as two pilots and an engineer. The Nigerian government would have two aircraft under its control “which cannot fail to be of utmost value to it.” To enjoy that
benefit, it would have to provide an annual “bond” for £9,000 and collaborate with the other West African governments.\textsuperscript{23}

**Competing Perspectives of Nigerian Government Departments**

Nigeria’s Director of Marine, R. H. W. Hughes, considered CBAL’s offer “attractive” and “an easy way for Government to develop aviation in this country.” However, if the firm could provide the service at £9,000, it meant that the government “could provide it for much less.”\textsuperscript{24} Although he could not determine the extent of patronage by commercial firms and the general public, he opined that the government would have to bear the greater part of the initial cost of £9,000 for the first year at least. Hughes recalled that the same firm had earlier requested government’s guarantee of 500 flying hours at £10 per hour at a total cost of £5,000. So, it was striking that it could now be asking for 500 hours at £18 an hour or £9,000. He also compared the CBAL proposals to that of the AOC, which offered to run a service of seaplanes once a week between Lagos and Victoria, with stopovers at intermediate locations, carrying 150 lbs of mail each way at £6,240 per annum at the rate of 6d per ounce. However, the PMG had shown that the required volume could only be generated at fortnight intervals, requiring the government to make up an annual deficit of over half of the £6,240.

Hughes summarised the competing proposals submitted by CBAL and AOC as follows. The latter offered 26,000 miles for £6,240 while the former offered 45,000 miles for £9,000. While AOC’s offer was specifically for mail service, the aircraft could be put to other uses at an agreed fee, CBAL’s was predicated on a bond to guarantee a certain volume of traffic. Arguing that government commitments would be less in the case of the AOC compared to CBAL, he recommended the former in preference to the latter. However, AOC should be asked to consider a contract for £3,000 per annum at the rate of 6d per ounce. Alternatively, CBAL could be given the contract if it reverted to its original proposal of £5,000 for 500 hours of mail service. Hughes also suggested that the government could procure its own aeroplane with an annual maintenance cost of £1,800 to run its air mail service.\textsuperscript{25}

Another official, Captain J. Pollock, did not support the idea of a government-run air mail service. “The flying and maintenance of an air service,” he warned, “is a very much more complicated matter than the driving of a car or the running of a launch.” In addition to the flying mechanic, the service would require six to ten ground crew comprising riggers, mechanics, greasers and specialist storekeepers. He rather recommended either of the
two commercial firms which had “expert knowledge, fully qualified staffs and large reserves of personnel, machines and equipment. In addition, they have “strong financial backing,” citing the example of Cobham, which was “merged in Imperial Airways.” Pollock opined that the role of the government should be limited to “providing facilities, the Administration of local Regulations and International Conventions and controlling flying and aviation in general, including the activities of flying companies and private individuals.” He recommended that an official from the Air Ministry could be seconded to the Nigerian government to undertake two tours for the purpose of advising the government on issues of seaplane bases, aerodromes, landing grounds, workshops and the general control of civil aviation and international flying.

H. L. Ward-Price shared Pollock’s scepticism about a government-run air service. He asserted that the private companies’ proposals were too expensive for consideration. It would be better, he opined, to harness the expertise “that these companies have already got through the experimental stage, and perhaps paid heavily for their experience ... and pay them a certain sum which is known, and will not be exceeded.” However, while the rate of 4s per mile “may be reasonable now,” it could be excessive in three or four years. Ward-Price identified four competing proposals: CBAL; AOC; a West-African Dakar service and the Nigerian government’s experimental service. He then made the following suggestions. First, citing the example of Germany’s Imperial Airways, it was “the custom to subsidise air services in certain countries ... with the ideal ... that the cost to Government will be repaid many times over when the services get going properly and can fend for themselves.” Second, if the government agreed to the Cobham proposals, it “would be saved a lot of worry, and when Cobham finds himself established he might undertake the service to Dakar.” He noted that the Cobham proposal was contingent on the participation of other West African colonies.

A. C. Burns, the CSG, commented that the private companies submitted proposals which were “too expensive for consideration.” Given the rapid development of air services, it would be a mistake to tie the government up “for five years or more to anyone.” He recommended that the government could operate its service, limiting itself to seaplanes, “comparatively cheaply.” Seaplanes could fly along the Nigerian coastline over sheltered waters from Badagry to Calabar, and Victoria was within easy reach. Such seaplanes could also operate on the rivers Niger and Benue. This would obviate the construction of expensive aerodromes.
Consensus and Dissent on Aviation Policy

In the final analysis, Governor Graeme Thomson and his top officials met on 8 April 1929 to consider the foregoing proposals and arrive at a position on aviation policy in Nigeria. The government declined the two firms’ proposals but did not object if they wished to operate private air services on their own. The Director of Marine was mandated to indent for two small aircraft, one seaplane and one conventional aircraft, the latter if landing grounds were prepared in connection with the Royal Air Force flight from Egypt. If such landing grounds were not prepared, the government would acquire two seaplanes rather than one. The meeting resolved that the government would not establish a regular air service. It should rather request the Air Ministry for an expert to advise on landing grounds and routes and the establishment of an air service in Nigeria. Given their shared aspirations, the Gold Coast government would be invited to share the cost of hiring the aviation expert. The government’s decision was duly conveyed to the two firms. 

The official consensus arrived at in April 1929 did not go unchallenged. Brigadier H. St. J. L. Winterbotham, Chairman of Nigeria’s Air Survey Committee, disagreed with the decision to acquire a “Moth” aircraft while rejecting tenders that two commercial firms submitted. He then raised certain objections, based upon his seven-year experience as Chairman of the Air Survey Committee and his knowledge of the use of aircraft “for engineering and general development purposes, in England, Canada and indeed throughout the world both in peace and war.” Noting that two major purposes served by aircraft were defence and inter-communication, he argued that the “Moth” did not satisfy either purpose. While it was “most useful at spreading the air sense and providing for personal voyages,” it could not provide “a safe and fast service of information or passenger traffic.”

Winterbotham explained that only the air services concerned with reconnaissance of the natural resources of Nigeria deserved priority attention. The areas of need were forest, soil, mineral resources, town planning and engineering, road and railway alignment, water catchment areas and statistical information on sundry subjects. He argued that much progress had been made but a combination of overoptimism and professional ignorance hindered development. Engaging greenhorns and the “Moth” would amount to losing the advantage already gained over the years. Winterbotham stated that he was not being critical of the decision to establish a colonial air service but felt that it was premature to do so. Arguing that “flying is not cheap,” he stated that it was best to take “the broadest view” of the subject. While “it would not be economical to employ aircraft for the sole purpose of mapping such country as the Jos Plateau (at a small scale) from air photographs,” it
would be economical to utilize photographs taken during flights for transport or other purposes.34

In terms of a combined air mail and passenger service, Winterbotham asserted that “here again ‘Moths’ are not the correct answer.” The same applied to their use for defence purposes given the vastness of the Nigerian hinterland and the wide dispersal of the military forces. “When the time is ripe for the inauguration of the Colonial (Air) Service,” he asserted, “it will be time enough to discuss where it should be located and who is to father it.”35 Hence, both seaplanes and aeroplanes would be needed. He opined that stations of the West African Frontier Force along the air route would afford the service access to labour, aerodromes, landing grounds and quarters, and both services (military and aviation) would benefit from it. For the seaplane, the Nigerian Marine would provide the necessary facilities. A coordinating committee, he suggested, should include representatives of Defence, Marine, Survey and Land Departments. In the final analysis, Winterbotham “strongly advocate(d) the claims of Aircraft Operating Company” for two reasons. First, unlike Cobham, it was “really experienced in the reconnaissance and survey side.” Second, its representatives had already studied the country and its problems.36

From the foregoing, there was a clear division between the Survey and Marine Departments on the issue of aviation in inter-war Nigeria. In addition to the usual inter-departmental rivalry for which the colonial service was known, there was the divergence in the special needs of each department. In reaction to Winterbotham’s submission, the acting Director of the Marine admitted that the former was “an acknowledged expert on aerial surveying and it would be presumption on my part to attempt to criticise his opinions.”37 Hence, his arguments in support of aerial land surveys could not be faulted. However, the same could not apply to the issue of aerial hydrographic surveys which, “though extremely useful for outlining a difficult coast-line or the banks of a river, give very little indication of the depth of water, which after all is a factor of supreme importance to the navigator.” He confirmed that an indent had been submitted for two light aeroplanes of the “Gipsy Moth” model and suitable hangers for them. “My personal opinion,” he stated, “is that the respective merits of the aviation policy adopted by Government and that advocated by Brigadier Winterbotham is a matter which should be investigated by the most competent experts that can be obtained.”38

Winterbotham’s position was buttressed by the Surveyor-General, who stated that “I understand Government is already committed to the purchase of a Moth Aeroplane which will be quite useless for the purpose of carrying out survey work.” Based upon his five-year “close study of the methods
and progress of aircraft and instruments in relation to survey,” he strongly recommended the AOC as the company with “the best experience, the most expert staff and [which knew] . . . more about the practical side of survey than any other firm.”

During a visit to the United Kingdom in the summer of 1929, Captain R. H. W. Hughes, the Director of Marine discussed the issues arising from aviation policy in Nigeria with various stakeholders. In June, he explained to Sir Sefton Brancker of the AOC that “the best thing to do is what we originally intended, that is, proceed with the acquisition of a Moth seaplane, and experiment ourselves this year to the extent of the funds provided.” The AOC could make another proposal for “a wider service” before the next year’s budget was prepared. Hughes declared that he was “anxious to do something at once to create an ‘air sense’ in Nigeria” and that could best be done as he had proposed “in view of the financial restrictions.” He reiterated his recommendation that the Nigerian government should acquire a Moth seaplane and operate it for one year to obtain experience which would justify the retention or abandonment of the scheme. The Air Ministry duly supported the position.

After considering fresh offers from AOC and coupled with the position of both the Marine and Survey Departments, the Nigerian government finally decided on its aviation policy in August 1929. “Both Air Ministry and Winterbotham,” Governor Thomson declared, “consider that better results (were) likely to be obtained by contract with (an) experienced firm than by Government service and I accept that view.” He stated that such a contract had to be “elastic” and that expert advice was required as to its terms and duration. This would be provided by a visiting Air Ministry expert to the West African colonies “on whose advice endorsed by Air Ministry a definite policy could be framed.” The Governor “fully appreciated[d] Captain Hughes’ desire to get something done at once” but could “not help feeling that it will be cheaper in the long run to act as above.”

Attempts to Establish a West African Air Service, 1929–1931

The decision of the Nigerian government to discontinue attempts to establish its own air service in spite of the enthusiasm of the Director of Marine was not the final word on the matter. In January 1929, the firm of Alan Cobham Aviation Limited had made a fresh bid to promote a pan-West African line. This became the next line of development in the context of the prevailing economic depression. A critical meeting of representatives of the Air Ministry and the Colonial Office chaired by the Director of Civil Aviation in London
in September 1929 considered a memorandum “summarising the proposals for air development in the British West African Colonies.” The meeting agreed on the following points.

The first was “the necessity for air communications being established by British interests as early as possible within and to our West African Colonies particularly in view of French activities in that region.” Second, it was resolved to send an Air Ministry representative to West Africa “in the near future . . . to study conditions on the spot and to report on the air requirements of the various Colonies.” Third, the cost of the expert’s visit, which was expected to extend over four or five months, would be prepared by the Air Ministry for consideration by the Colonial Office and the Treasury. The colonial governments would be asked to contribute towards the cost of the exercise. Fourth, the Air Ministry was mandated to prepare a scheme for air services across the West African colonies; local services in each colony; connections with the French air service to Dakar; possible future connections with the proposed French Trans-Sahara air service; and a central organization for air survey. The meeting was informed of a scheme being prepared by Walford Lines Limited, a shipping firm, in conjunction with AOC for the establishment of an air service along the West African coast.

By December 1929, the Air Ministry and the Colonial Office had agreed to send an Air Ministry expert to report on the air requirements of the West African colonies. Each host colony was required to bear the cost of the expert’s pay and allowances while his expenses and allowances would be shared in proportion to the time he spent in each colony. Arrangements were subsequently made for the visit of Mr. A. W. Campbell of the Directorate of Civil Aviation of the Air Ministry to undertake the mission to West Africa. In addition to the responsibilities imposed on the host colonial governments, the Foreign Office was mandated to approach the governments of France, Portugal and Liberia for facilities for Campbell’s visit to Dahomey, Ivory Coast, French Guinea, Portuguese Guinea and Liberia, respectively. A comprehensive itinerary was prepared for Campbell as follows: Nigeria (18 June–17 July, including a visit to Zinder in French West Africa, north of Nigeria); Dahomey (18–21 July); the Gold Coast (22 July–14 August); Ivory Coast (15–19 August); Liberia (20–23 August); Sierra Leone (24 August–7 September); French Guinea (8–10 September); Portuguese Guinea (11–13 September); and the Gambia (14–27 September), including a probable visit to Dakar. Arriving in Lagos on 18 June by steamer from Liverpool, Campbell was scheduled to depart Bathurst by sea on 28 September 1930.
The Challenge of Funding

In all these discussions, various government officials advanced positions influenced by the underlying issue of funding. This was especially critical in the prevailing conditions of a global depression which curtailed government expenditure. A lifeline appeared to have been offered by the Colonial Development Fund (CDF), which was passed into law in 1929. Initially, given the limitation of funding—£1 million being devoted to the “development” of the empire—colonial governments appeared not to have taken full advantage of it. Nigeria’s chief secretary had quoted the Secretary of State as stating that colonial governments were “not making full use of the opportunities now offered to them” by the CDF. He explained that the object of the CDF was “not governed by the narrow view of unemployment in England.”47

The Advisory Committee administering the CDF was now “prepared to give liberal assistance towards schemes of public health and research.” Specifically, funding was now available to support “in suitable cases . . . not only the preliminary investigation (such as the visit of an expert) but the actual research work itself.” The memorandum also listed projects submitted to the CDF for funding across the Empire. Significantly, the application from Northern Rhodesia sought support for “aerial surveys.”48

In response to the possibility offered by the CDF, Nigeria’s Postmaster General opined that an air mail service was feasible as it “would be extensively used and prove attractive to the public.” In view of the “new policy” regarding the CDF, he suggested that assistance should be sought for the project. Though the scheme would not be immediately remunerative either as a passenger or an air mail service, it would “undoubtedly develop rapidly and greatly assist in promoting the development of Nigeria.”49 The Director of Marine regretted the missed opportunity of abandoning the decision to establish a Nigerian air service in January 1929. Had that not happened, Nigeria “should have been some light distance upon the road towards aerial development.” He therefore suggested that a free grant of £10,000 should be requested from the CDF to purchase two “suitable seaplanes or flying boats and equipment, for service in the Delta and for collecting the English mails (and limited passengers) at Takoradi.”50 An interest-free loan of £20,000 should also be obtained to operate the service for three years “as an experiment.” If his proposal did not win approval, he suggested that some money be paid to secure a contract with a private aviation company to provide such a service. He admitted, however, that the second option would be “less economical.”51

No reference exists in available records to any decision taken with regard to approaching the CDF for funding the civil aviation scheme in Nigeria or
elsewhere in British West Africa. As indicated above, the funds were too paltry to support any major project. Accordingly, there were no further developments for the rest of the year and the issue of aviation policy in Nigeria remained in abeyance. “It seems about time,” the Director of Marine commented in January 1931, “we heard something from the Air Ministry regarding the aviation policy which they recommend for Nigeria.”52 The Nigerian government stated that it did “not desire to press the question of an aviation policy which must of necessity lead to additional expenditure.”53 It is clear from that statement that Nigerian officials were unwilling to burden the budget with any expenditure that was deemed unnecessary during the Great Depression.54

**Campbell’s Report on Civil Aviation in British West Africa**

A. W. Campbell submitted the report on the possibilities of civil aviation in the British West African Colonies in June 1931. Characteristically, Nigerian colonial officials analyzed it from their respective department’s perspectives. “The sole obstacle to organizing an Air Service in Nigeria,” the Administrator of the Lagos Colony asserted, “is the question of finance.”55 He added that “considerable expenditure” would be incurred and even if a private company was engaged, it “would have to be subsidized in some form or other at least for a period.” He criticized aspects of the report, especially the issues that it failed to cover.

For example, it did not consider the fact that, in a colony without hotels, only a few Europeans would be willing to travel without luggage and servants. Moreover, the cost of air travel was beyond the means of all but a few Africans, restricting the clientele to a few officials touring at public expense and company officials at the expense of shareholders. He also opined that the initial euphoria about air travel would be short-lived. Air mail service would attract patronage, but the accruing revenue would not compensate for the service. He therefore recommended deploying seaplanes to connect coastal ports. These would be cheaper to operate and would earn more revenue than a fleet of aeroplanes plying an overland route. He opposed paying a government subsidy to a private company. Instead, a private firm could be asked to operate weekly air services connecting the coastal ports, subject to the following conditions.

First, the government would provide the sheds, slipways and buoys. Second, the company would use plant and services of staff in government workshops to effect repairs of their seaplanes at no cost. Third, no charges would be made for the services of government officials required to run the air services at the airports, provided no additional staff would be recruited
for that purpose. Fourth, rents would not be charged the company for use of government offices, storage accommodation or housing, provided no new buildings would be constructed for that purpose. Finally, an agreement with the company should not exceed three years. However, Falk conceded that, though the use of aircraft for aerial surveys, preventive work and the like would be of “great value to Nigeria,” the cost would be “prohibitive at the present time.” The Acting Lieutenant-Governor of the Southern Provinces of Nigeria also declined to support the scheme as proposed by Campbell: “the present time does not seem suitable to consider expenditure on a scheme of this nature.”

Nigeria’s Director of Marine observed that Campbell did not sufficiently stress the “magnificent series of lagoons and creeks along the Coast, which render this area so eminently suitable for sea-plane work.” He also suggested that the report did not indicate whether flying was feasible seasonally or all year round. Moreover, Campbell’s estimate of revenue from air mail service appeared “unduly optimistic.” The Director of Marine also commented on two options suggested in Campbell’s report: the establishment of an Aviation Department in which air services would be run by the government; and the engagement of a commercial firm, subsidized by the government, to carry out “such services as may be considered necessary.” He dismissed the first option on the grounds that there was no qualified person in Nigeria with sufficient experience to organize and run a successful air service. To venture into it with such a handicap would amount to “wasting a lot of time and money on futile experiments.” He endorsed the second option, which Campbell himself recommended, with the government taking responsibility for all ground organization, such as the provision of aerodromes and hangars, inspections, registration and licensing. He was however sceptical about the feasibility as the government would have to undertake “a large expenditure of money, and in view of the present financial position of Nigeria the question arises as to what practical benefit we are going to get out of it? Things not strictly necessary must be quite definitely considered unnecessary.”

The Director of Marine acknowledged that though an air mail and passenger service would be a convenience, it could hardly be regarded as a necessity in a country beset by economic difficulties. He was also sceptical about the feasibility of linking up the West African colonies with Dakar until air services had been firmly established as a commercial enterprise in the respective colonies. Even so, the French Aeropostale Company was not a passenger carrying service and the French government had had to bail it out of its financial difficulties. The Director of Marine then made an audacious suggestion “with some diffidence” given the military aspect of it. This was that a battalion of troops be retrenched and replaced by a unit of the Royal
Air Force (RAF). The government, he argued, “would then have the benefit of the best expert advice available at no additional expense” while the duties enumerated in Campbell’s report, such as forestry, fishery, locust patrols and mineral surveys could be carried out as required. The presence of RAF aircraft and the facilities provided for them “would undoubtedly tend to promote interest in and stimulate the development of Civil Aviation in due course.”

The PMG also followed a similar line in criticizing Campbell’s report. He opined that “however desirable it may be that this Colony should be provided with air services[,] there is little possibility of such services paying their way in the near future. Indeed, it was most likely that no commercial firm would consider the provision of air services unless Government were prepared to pay a considerable subsidy for a period of years.” Nevertheless, he highlighted three classes of mail that could be conveyed: the inter-port service between Victoria and Lagos; the inter-colonial services among the British West African colonies; and service between Nigeria and the UK. As regards, inter-port mail traffic, he disagreed with Campbell, who had estimated that up to ten percent of such traffic would be considered urgent enough to be air freighted at six pence per ounce. He thought that the estimate was too high and doubted whether up to five percent of the letters could be sent by air mail. The inter-colonial mail that would be in that category would also be “trivial.” The PMG also disputed the estimates of UK-Nigeria mail submitted by Campbell, who mistakenly assumed that the figure of 47,900 kilograms of mail from the four colonies to the UK for one year was generated in four weeks.

West African Governors’ Consensus on Aviation Policy

In the final analysis, the fate of the proposed air service across West Africa hinged upon the resolutions submitted by the governors of the West African colonies. “I shall have to wait till I hear from other West African Governments,” wrote the Governor of Sierra Leone. On whether the Air Ministry should proceed to call for tenders for a marine aircraft, he declared that: “this Government will not be in a financial position to warrant any expenditure during 1932.” The governor later declared that he shared “the opinion of the Governors of Nigeria and the Gold Coast . . . that present and prospective commercial requirements do not justify the expenditure of public funds on the development of civil aviation in West Africa in the near future.” Moreover, Sierra Leone, in particular, did not envisage “any adequate demand for the facilities of a weekly sea-plane service along the coast.”

The Gold Coast government also toed the same line: “I consider that the commercial requirements and the financial circumstances of this Colony
are unlikely to justify any expenditure by this Government upon the development of civil aviation during the next few years; nor is it probable that military or survey exigencies will require any such steps to be taken.”65 The Governor later declared that he shared “the view of Sir Donald Cameron that a weekly seaplane or flying boat service along the coast to link the British West African Colonies with the French Aeropostale Line at Dakar is not in any way urgent. Moreover, the existing financial stringency precludes this Government from contributing towards the cost of any such service.”66

The Nigerian government acknowledged that Campbell’s “recommendations as regards landing grounds and sea plane bases will be of great assistance when the time is ripe for development of air services in this country.” But it rejected his recommendation for the “early inauguration of a weekly seaplane service along the coast,” declaring that the service was “not in any way urgent” and it was “accordingly unable to agree to the provision of public funds even for hangars, slipways and other facilities that may be required.” The government declared that “the possibility of . . . subsidising a company in such an undertaking is at present altogether precluded by the financial situation, especially as the revenue to be expected from the Public would be almost negligible.” It also did not consider that the potential traffic among the West African colonies would justify the establishment of an air service.67

By October 1931, the foregoing consensus of the West African colonial governments effectively ended the campaign for either a state-operated or a subsidised commercial air service in West Africa, which appeared to have been driven by the Air Ministry. The final word came from the Colonial Office, which duly conveyed the consensus to the Air Ministry as follows: “the Governments of the British West African Dependencies are not, at present, financially in a position to undertake any expenditure of public funds upon the development of civil aviation in the territories under their administration.”68

Conclusion

This essay has examined the neglected beginnings of civil aviation in inter-war West Africa. During the governorship of Nigeria’s Hugh Clifford (1919–1925), a colonial initiative to develop aviation for more effective postal services was frustrated by financial and other challenges. This was followed by a metropolitan private enterprise initiative involving two commercial firms. As the proposed schemes also ran into a brick wall, the final phase of the aviation project sought redemption in a pan-British West Africa service involving a possible inter-imperial collaboration with the French. The entire scheme was shelved in the face of the aggravation of the Great Depression of
the early 1930s. It was only after World War II that commercial air services took off as a commercial enterprise, the background to which has until now been neglected in the literature on West Africa.

In all, various interest groups in West Africa and the UK projected conflicting perspectives on aviation development in West Africa. In the UK, both the Air Ministry and the Colonial Office promoted air services for different strategic aims. Within West Africa, support for aviation development varied with the personalities involved. Thus, some governors were more enthusiastic than others, such as Cameron. Some departmental heads, such as Marine Department’s Captain Hughes, supported the use of seaplanes, which were designed for inter-port air service, as contrasted with heads of Surveys, who preferred aircraft that covered the hinterland part of the country. Economic circumstances also influenced how particular schemes (mail and/or passenger; inter-port; inter-colonial; colonial-metropolis air services) were viewed by different interest groups.

The big issue in the entire scheme was funding. While the post-World War I boom and excess capacity of aircraft and pilots in the UK created an atmosphere of optimism, the onset of economic vicissitudes culminating in the Great Depression disrupted the plans laid out by the ardent promoters of air services. For, while some wanted it simply to create an “air sense,” others, for purely financial reasons, were sceptical, arguing that flying was “not cheap.” Ultimately, the enthusiasm and imperial ambitions of the Air Ministry and the Colonial Office were checkmated by the economic realities in West Africa. British imperial parsimony coupled with the adversity of the Great Depression ensured that colonial governors could override the preference of their superiors in London. It took another decade and a half, in the post-World War II years, for civil aviation to become a commercial proposition in British West Africa.

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Notes


3. This is detailed in McCormack, ‘Airlines and Empires.’


11. C. K. Cochran-Patrick to Governor of Nigeria, 29 October 1928, CSO 26 03137, vol. II, NAI.

12. Cochran-Patrick to Governor of Nigeria, 2 November 1928, CSO 26 03137, vol. II, NAI.


15. Acting PMG to CSG, 14 January 1929, CSO 26 03137, vol. II, NAI.

16. Secretary, Communications Board to CSG, 23 November 1928, CSO 26 03137, vol. II, NAI.

17. Enclosure in Cobham-Blackburn Air Lines Limited to CSG, Lagos 1 August 1928, CSO 26 03137, vol. II, NAI.

18. Enclosure in Cobham-Blackburn Air Lines Limited to CSG, Lagos 1 August 1928, CSO 26 03137, vol. II, NAI.
22. Enclosure in Cobham-Blackburn Air Lines Limited to CSG, Lagos 1 August 1928, CSO 26 03137, vol. II, NAI.
23. Charles F. Ward to Colonial Secretary, 3 January 1929, CSO 26 03137, vol. II, NAI.
24. Director of Marine to CSG, 26 February 1929, CSO 26 03137, vol. II, NAI.
25. Director of Marine to CSG, 26 February 1929, CSO 26 03137, vol. II, NAI.
27. Minute by J. Pollock, 5 March 1929, CSO 26 03137, vol. II, NAI.
29. Minute by A. C. Burns, 4 March 1929, CSO 26 03137, vol. II, NAI.
30. Minute by A. C. Burns, 8 April 1929; Burns to Director, Aircraft Operating Company and Alan Cobham Aviation Ltd., 22 April 1929, CSO 26 03137, vol. II, NAI.
32. Winterbotham to CSG, 25 April 1929, CSO 26 03137, vol. II, NAI.
33. Winterbotham to CSG, 25 April 1929, CSO 26 03137, vol. II, NAI.
34. Winterbotham to CSG, 25 April 1929, CSO 26 03137, vol. II, NAI.
35. Winterbotham to CSG, 25 April 1929, CSO 26 03137, vol. II, NAI.
37. Winterbotham to CSG, 25 April 1929, CSO 26 03137, vol. II, NAI.
38. Acting Director of Marine to CSG, 3 May 1929, CSO 26 03137, vol. II, NAI.
40. Hughes (Hove) to Brancker (London), 29 June 1929, CSO 26 03137, vol. II, NAI. For the idea of “spreading the air sense,” see Winterbotham to CSG, 25 April 1929, CSO 26 03137, vol. II, NAI.
41. Telegram, Secretary of State, London to Governor, Lagos, 18 July 1929, CSO 26 03137, vol. II, NAI.
42. Telegram, Governor, Lagos to Secretary of State, 6 August 1929, CSO 26 03137, vol. II, NAI.
43. Minutes of Meeting dated 18 September 1929, CSO 26 03137 vol. III, “Proposed Establishment of Air Service,” NAI.
44. Minutes of Meeting dated 18 September 1929, CSO 26 03137 vol. III, NAI.
45. J. E. W. Flood to Secretary, Air Ministry, 2 December 1929, CSO 26 03137 vol. III, NAI.
46. Air Ministry to Under Secretary, Colonial Office, 29 January 1930; B. E. Holloway, Air Ministry to Under Secretary, Colonial Office, 25 April 1930, CSO 26 03137 vol. III, NAI.
47. The Fund “accomplished very little” in Nigeria when it was terminated in 1940. Of the £330,000 spent on “a limited number of projects,” 34.7 percent was committed to payment of loans for constructing the Minna-Kaduna railway. See Toyin Falola, *Development Planning and Decolonization in Nigeria* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 14–15.

49. G. B. Hebden to CSG, 16 May 1930, CSO 26 03137 vol. III, NAI.
50. Hebden to CSG, 16 May 1930, CSO 26 03137 vol. III, NAI.
51. R. H. W. Hughes to CSG, 20 May 1930, CSO 26 03137 vol. III, NAI.
52. Director of Marine to CSG, 13 January 1931, CSO 26 03137 vol. III, NAI.
53. A. R. A. Dickins to Director of Marine, 17 January 1931, CSO 26 03137 vol. III, NAI.
54. This was also the attitude of the “cautious, economy-minded” Governor Charles Bowring of Nyasaland, who was particularly penny-pinching because he trained as an accountant. See Baker, “Nyasaland at the Aviation Crossroads,” 21–23.
55. E. Falk, AdCol to CSG, 16 June 1931, CSO 26 03137 vol. III, NAI.
56. E. Falk, AdCol to CSG, 16 June 1931, CSO 26 03137 vol. III, NAI.
57. Secretary, Southern Provinces to CSG, 3 August 1931, CSO 26 03137 vol. III, NAI.
58. Director of Marine to CSG, 16 June 1931, CSO 26 03137 vol. III, NAI.
59. Director of Marine to CSG, 16 June 1931, CSO 26 03137 vol. III, NAI.
60. Director of Marine to CSG, 16 June 1931, CSO 26 03137 vol. III, NAI.
61. PMG to CSG, 27 July 1931, CSO 26 03137 vol. III, NAI.
62. PMG to CSG, 27 July 1931, CSO 26 03137 vol. III, NAI.
63. Governor, Sierra Leone to Lord Passfield, 25 July 1931, CSO 26 03137 vol. III, NAI.
64. Governor, Sierra Leone to J. H. Thomas, 19 September 1931, CSO 26 03137 vol. III, NAI.
65. Governor, Accra to Governor, Lagos, 27 August 1931, CSO 26 03137 vol. III, NAI.
67. Donald Cameron to J. H. Thomas, 31 August 1931, CSO 26 03137 vol. III, NAI.
68. CO to Air Ministry, 8 October 1931, CSO 26 03137 vol. III, NAI.