

## **Almásy, László Ede**

(August 22, 1895, Borostyánkő - March 22, 1951, Salzburg)

### **Overview of his life in flying**

Casually looking over the course of László Ede Almásy's life, one might come to the conclusion that he was an obstinate adventurer. This view is given considerable credence by Michael Ondaatje's bestselling novel, *The English Patient* and in the identically titled movie based on this book, the latter being awarded with nine Oscars in 1997. Unfortunately the book and the film falsify Almásy's character and the story they present is fictitious. Studying his life more thoroughly, it transpires that the main characteristic for all of his actions and exploits was true professionalism, although he did have an adventurous frame of mind.

Those sides of his life which concern his travels and explorations in North-Africa, as well as his activity during WWII, have been widely discussed in books and on the internet. From these sources it is evident that he was either associated with or just hooked-up with aviation. This article will try to sum up of this side of his life.

The life of "Teddy," as he was called by all of his Hungarian friends, was influenced by his two main fields of interest. The first was his attraction to mechanical devices in general; automobiles and aeroplanes in particular. The second interest was his ambition to be a geographic explorer and to fill in white spots on the map. His life was motivated by the fact that he had to earn his living and find ways to finance and follow his interests, to fulfill his ambitions.

The two vehicle types mentioned were the main instruments which allowed him the opportunity to follow his ambitions in exploration. He was in command of both vehicles from his early years (he drove his father's car at the age of 10 and he started flying in 1911, at the age of 16). Automobiles opened up the route for him to move into the field of expeditions and aircraft widened his opportunities in exploration. His affection for exploration brought results with his cartographic works performed in Africa, and in his geographical as well as archaeological finds during expeditions to the Lybian Desert.

Aeroplanes moved very early into his life and he was bitten by the flying bug proper. One of the outcomes of his love for flying was that he played a leading role in the development of gliding in Egypt.

### **Background**

Teddy was born the second son of a Hungarian noble family, on August 22, 1895. His birthplace, Borostyánkő, is today called Bernstein and is now located in Burgenland, Austria. In his youth, Teddy enjoyed his family's wealth. His father, György, was a noted geographer and explorer of inner Asia, who financed his travels with income from the fairly large family estate.

However, in 1912, his grandfather, the owner of the property, converted the estate under Hungarian law into an entailed property. This meant that the estate would be inherited by the grandfather's first born son and subsequently always by the first born son of his descendants (primogeniture). When Teddy's father, György, died in 1933 the entire estate was inherited by Teddy's elder brother, János.

As a child of a wealthy family Teddy was enrolled to the local primary school as a private student. He liked to play tricks on everybody around him including the schoolteacher. The school was rarely attended by the agile boy, but Borostyánkő's large library was full of books on geography and accounts of journeys, and it was his favourite place. In spite of such behaviour, he earned good grades at the examinations.

He began smoking at his 10<sup>th</sup> year of age. Over the years his lungs were fairly damaged and throughout his life, he suffered from his weak lungs.

From childhood Teddy spoke Hungarian and German equally well. Due to a good governess he also learned French very early. Since his mother was Italian by origin, he made himself master of the Italian language as well, and he communicated frequently with his mother and her relatives in this language. Between 1906 and 1908, young Russian speaking servants were living in Borostyánkő, temporarily brought there from Asia by his father, so Teddy attained some Russian as well.

Completing primary school in 1904, the family sent him to a noted grammar-school in Kőszeg, an atmospheric old town in western Hungary. The school had a well equipped natural science laboratory, which became his favourite place. Among his teachers a more noted researcher could not have been found.

During Teddy's years in Kőszeg, his father made a great expedition to the Tien-San mountain range, in China. Teddy followed with rapt attention the every detail of preparation, particularly the equipment and the organization work.

However his excellent grades of the first years started to deteriorate due to neglect by his parents as their relationship worsened. They finally separated in 1912. After the fourth year in Kőszeg the family sent Teddy to another grammar-school in Graz. The school saw him rarely as he spent his time tinkering with automobiles and motorbikes, and driving them around at break-neck speed.

The first sign of his interest in aviation was in 1909 when he designed and built a glider in Graz on the basis of a picture he found in a newspaper. He tried to fly it by launching himself from the rim of a quarry, but after a couple of seconds, the experiment ended with a crash and he was seriously injured, three of his ribs were broken.

His health deteriorated during his studies at Graz because of his hard smoking. Following medical advice, the family sent him to Arosa in Switzerland, where he spent the year of 1910 in a lung-sanatorium. Notwithstanding he was not able to give up smoking. Here he met a couple of young Englishmen who were recuperating from similar illness. A result

of these encounters was that he began learning English and decided to continue his studies in England.

The family found a good private school in the South of England, at Eastbourne, where he spent the next four years studying mostly mechanical engineering. He even obtained a British driving licence, issued as No. 1865, in 1913. Certain sources state that in 1914, his last year in England, he enrolled in an University in London to study aircraft engineering, but his studies were interrupted by the outbreak of WWI. At any rate, his aviation military registry sheet, originating from 1917, shows that he graduated college as a mechanical engineer specialized in automobiles and that he was an expert on internal combustion engines.

Here in Eastbourne, Teddy first met with the Boy Scout movement and joined it. His commitment for the movement was a dominating factor in his life.

### **First experiences in the air**



*Teddy in 1913*

According to certain sources Teddy had joined a pioneer flying club at Eastbourne during the years he spent there prior to WWI. However according to reliable Hungarian sources, he started flying a Blériot XI 2-bis monoplane in 1911, at Rákosmező, near Budapest, the birthplace of Hungarian aviation. The monoplane's owner was a flying school named "Aero Rt." One way or another, it is known that he was flying solo in 1913.

His father supported him in this activity and bought him an aeroplane in 1914. This Farman III biplane had originally been brought to Hungary by Ágoston Kutassy, dr., who in 1911, sold it to another noted Hungarian pioneer, Antal Lányi. Lányi rebuilt it as a two-seater and flew it frequently, advertising his sponsor, a newspaper. Teddy gained experience with this aeroplane.

It looks as if he travelled a lot as these were the years which he spent in Eastbourne. When war was declared at June, 1914, Teddy volunteered for the Austro-Hungarian Army immediately.

Teddy joined a Hussar regiment with the rank of Ensign. His regiment was subsequently sent to the eastern front where he spent two years participating in violent fighting. He distinguished himself and was decorated for his exploits.

At the end of 1916 Teddy was detailed to the newly formed Army Air Corps and he

served the whole second part of WWI as an observer and aircraft commander flying on Berg III and Berg C-1 type aircraft on the Italian front. His Aviatik Berg III aircraft was exhibited in the Museum of Technology, Vienna, during the 1950s.

In those days, pilots of two-seater reconnaissance aircraft were non-commissioned officers in the Austro-Hungarian Army. However according certain sources, Teddy later served as a pilot as well. Anyway he distinguished himself in this service and he was decorated with the Silver Bravery Medal 1<sup>st</sup> Class. At the end of the war he had the rank of First Lieutenant.

After the war, he served in the Hungarian National Army as an officer in Supply



*Aviatik (Berg) C. I.*

Command, responsible for automobiles. The Army had been formed in 1919 and was later commanded by Admiral Horthy when he took power in Hungary. Through his duty to provide transportation for

the Army Brass, Almásy got to know Horthy and other important leaders personally.

He tried to find his place in the world after he left the Army. For a short time he was the manager of a small airport at Parndorf. Later he went to Szombathely, a city in western Hungary, and became the private secretary of Bishop Mikes, who was one of the central personalities that tried to restore the kingdom in Hungary by putting the Habsburg Charles IV on the throne. During the failed 1921 restoration attempt, Almásy served as aid-de-camp to the King and drove him to Budapest and back.

While in Szombathely, Almásy joined the fledgling Hungarian Boy Scout movement in 1921. He was soon elected into the Scout's national governing body as the foreign affairs representative.

He went back to Eastbourne to finish his studies in November 1921. As a car owner, he again obtained a British driving licence, issued now as No. 8033. He pursued his other interest as well, such a joning the local flying club and earning his pilot licence.

He returned to Szombathely in June 1922. Bernstein, where the family castle was located after the Trianon Treaty, now belonged to Austria. As György Almásy had withdrawn to Graz and led a secluded life after his divorce, his elder boy, János, became the landlord at the castle where many Hungarian and foreign nobilities were entertained.

In the early '20s the forest bordering the large estate was a favoured hunting place for pheasants by the European and Egyptian aristocracy. Prince Youssef Kamal of the Egyptian royal family was a regular among them. Teddy served as the middlemen for the prince on these occasions, and it was through him that the Egyptian prince and his entourage were able to secure the best hunting lodges that money could buy. During these hunting trips, Teddy's connections with Hungarian nobility was augmented as well. How well regarded was he in important circles it was demonstrated in 1931 when the LZ-127 Graf Zeppelin visited Hungary and Teddy was among the twelve distinguished Hungarian passengers invited to the trip from München to Budapest.

At the beginning of the '20s he tried to utilize his knowledge about cars. He entered the Steyr Motor Company's service as a sales agent, test and racing car driver. As such, he traveled around attending races and testing Steyr cars in different conditions.

Following a successful visit to Egypt in 1926, a 1300 km drive along the Nile from Cairo to Khartoum and back with Hungarian Prince Antal Esterházy, Teddy became the agent of the Steyr Company in Egypt. He remained in their service until 1930. This trip in 1926 was the first in a series that he organized for the Hungarian nobility. In the mean time he was working for the British-run Egyptian Desert Survey Department making cartographic trips all over the Sahara.

Having lived in Egypt and traveled widely around in North Africa, Teddy had not only learned Arabic but was even fluent in a couple of dialects.

### **The first attempt to explore the Sahara from the air**

Between 1926 and 1931 Almásy led many expeditions and hunting trips to the eastern part of the Sahara. One of them was an expedition with two Steyr automobiles from Mombasa to Cairo in which he accompanied Prince Ferdinand of Liechtenstein and the English industrialist Anthony Brunner.

From 1929 on, Teddy used Ford cars for his expeditions as he found them more suitable in the desert. Based on his advice, the Ford factory developed low pressure and very wide tyres which became essential in the deserts.

All of his research trips into the Lybian Desert worked to open up the "white spots" and to create reliable maps of that part of the Sahara. Many of the explorers (Hassanein, Kamal El Din, Beadnell, Newbold, Bagnold, and Almásy) had believed that the legendary Zarzura Oasis existed somewhere in this region.

The expeditions of Kamal El Din, between 1926 and 1928, had narrowed down the areas where the oasis might have existed. The race to find it became more and more acute. Almásy, based on his war experiences, came to the conclusion that using an aeroplane might give him an edge over the others in finding the elusive oasis. Prince Kemal el Din became Almásy's patron in his search for Zarzura.

Almásy, after weighing the possibilities, decided in early 1931 to buy a used de Havilland *Gipsy Moth*. His plan was to fly this aircraft to Egypt via Asia Minor and join an expedition that was traveling by car from Cairo to Cape Colony, led by Captain Malins. According to the plan, the rendezvous point would have been at Wadi Halfa on the border of Sudan, and from this point Almásy would explore the desert for six weeks searching for the Zarzura Oasis.

As at that time he was not a holder of an English pilot's licence, he contracted an English pilot to accompany him on the flight. Unfortunately the English pilot died unpredictably in the early summer of 1931.

Almásy then tried to find a Hungarian pilot for the task. He selected Count Nándor Zichy, who was a licenced pilot and was ready to finance his expenditures. Almásy and Zichy traveled to England and Almásy bought the aircraft from Phillips & Powis School of Flying, at Reading. Zichy got his type conversion training at Reading and got his Private Pilot Licence issued by the English aviation authority. Zichy had no long range flying experiences but relied upon Almásy's navigational expertise. The pair took off from Reading on August 15, 1931 with the *Gipsy Moth*, registered as G-AADP.

Their first stop was Nürnberg, then next day they flew to Szombathely, in Hungary. They arrived at Mátyásföld Airport, in Budapest, on the third day. Here the aircraft was prepared for the long flight at the Weiss Manfred Works.

They took off at August 21st for a relatively short flight to Beograd, from where they flew to Sofia, Bulgaria, next day. Due to administrative problems they took off from Sofia in late afternoon and they were not able to reach Istanbul in daylight. They therefore had to land on a meadow roughly 100 km short of Istanbul and the aircraft was slightly damaged. After dismantling the aircraft, it was transported by train to the Yesilköy Airport (today Atatürk International) where Teddy, the mechanical talent, repaired it.

They were able to take off again the next day. Their flight plan called for a flight eastward over the very rugged Black Sea coast. After barely 30 minutes of flight, the engine oil pressure started to drop and they turned to fly back to Istanbul, where they landed successfully.



Almásy and Count Zichy with the Gipsy Moth

Inspecting the engine it was discovered that during refuelling and an oil level check, a mechanic replaced a filler ring incorrectly. After repairing this error Teddy and Zichy took

off again and flew on inspecting the oil pressure in every ten minutes.

They landed at the huge military airport in Eskisehir, Turkey, for refuelling. The pair then took off again in the late afternoon trying to avoid the hottest hours in the air and landed in Konya (Turkey) where they spent the night.

Next day they wanted to cross the mountains in order to reach the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. However due to local problems they took off a bit late. When the engine stopped as they climbed over 2000 meters, they had to make a forced landing. After a thorough inspection Teddy found the engine in good condition. Their problem was that the engine did not like great heights in hot conditions.

The next day they started very early in order to make use of the cool morning air in crossing the mountains. The engine therefore served them well up to 2500 m and they reached the coastal plain at the neighbourhood of Adana, Turkey.



The G-AADP after crashlanding in Syria

Their flight plan called for them to fly eastward, crossing the coastal mountain range on the eastern side of the Iskenderun Bay, and then turn south over the Syrian plain. However, they run into a very severe storm over the coastal

mountain range and the engine, which had been running for a long time at high rpm, stopped. They crash landed on the Syrian side of the mountain. Teddy's hand was slightly injured and Zichy was uninjured, but the fuselage of the aircraft was severely damaged. The aircraft and the crew finally reached Alexandria, Egypt, by truck. The *Gypsy Moth* was sent back to England as the Phillips & Powis School bought it back for half price.

For Teddy this accident was more than just losing the opportunity to search for the Zarzura Oasis from the air in 1931, as his money for the expedition had been deposited in a bank. When they did not arrive at the predicted time and the news agencies reported their deaths in Syria, captain Malins picked up the money and began his expedition. Teddy remained in Cairo penniless and again had to accept cartographic assignments in order to earn money.

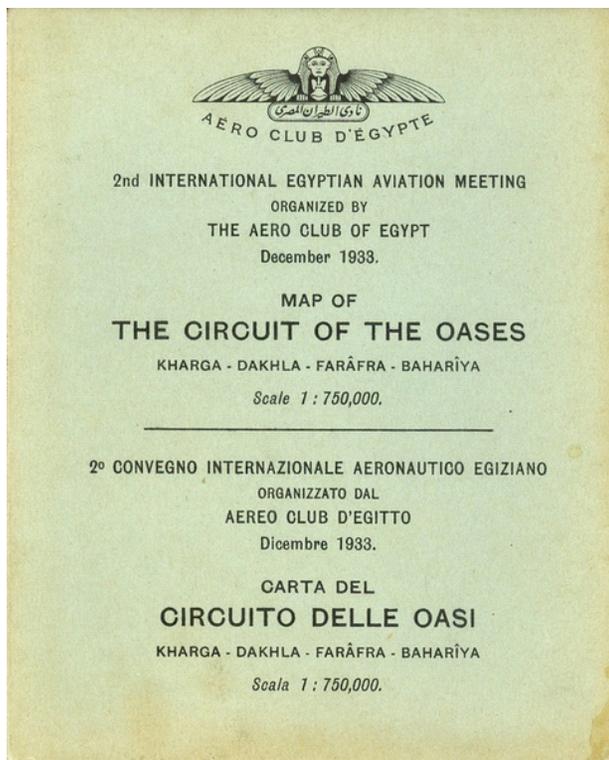
### **Flying over the Sahara**

In Ciaro during 1932, Teddy met a young English baron, Sir Robert Clayton East-Clayton to whom he told his opinion about the existence of the Zarzura Oasis, and expounded upon his ideas about an expedition using cars as a mobile base and aircraft for scouting around. Clayton was taken up by the idea of the combined car-aircraft expedition and they joined to organize an expedition, which used Ford cars and in which Clayton's aircraft, a *Gypsy Moth I*, figured prominently. Wing-Commander Henry G. Penderel, of the Royal Air Force and Patrick A. Clayton, of the Desert Survey (not related to Sir Clayton), both English, also joined the expedition. Their aim was to survey the Gilf Kebir plateau, the supposed location of Zarzura.

The Kharga Oasis was selected as the starting point for the expedition. The first task was to transport the necessary aviation and car fuel, and water to the base of the search, Birr Messaha. A detail consisting of four cars and navigated by Almásy performed this task. They marked the landing strip for the *Gypsy Moth* as well. The aircraft was flown from Cairo to Kharga by Teddy, and from Kharga to Messaha by Sir Clayton and Penderel.

These and subsequent flights were Almásy's first experiences in flying and navigating the Sahara. On every leg, the cars started first and the aircraft followed later. During one of these occasions Almásy, piloting the *Moth*, did not find the cars and had to make a forced landing, even though they were close to one another.

Almásy analysed every experience, his own and those of others. In this way, he became an excellent pilot and navigator over the Sahara.



The expedition located two valleys on the Gilf Kebir plateau from the air, possibly the wadis of Zarzura, but could not reach them in their cars as they ran out of gas and water.

Almásy returned to the area in 1933 with Wing Commander Penderel, Dr. Lászlo Kádár (a young assistant at the Geographical Institute of the University of Budapest), Richard Bermann (a travel writer), Hans Casparius (a photographer), drivers Sabr and Abdu, and cook Mahmud. This expedition used only cars because a forced landing on the plateau it would have meant two or three days long walk.

This time they found the third valley of Zarzura and discovered the prehistoric rock art sites in the

Uweinat. Among the discoveries was the Cave of the Swimmers, painted with swimming figures.

In 1933 Almásy lost both of his patrons as Prince Kamal El Din and Sir Robert Clayton died. As a result, his further expedition plans collapsed.

The Egyptian Aero Club, which in 1933 had hosted the International Aviation Conference in Cairo, invited pilots for a "Circuit of the Oasis" Tour in December the same year. Almásy was one of the organizers of the event. Thirty-two aircraft participated in the 1500 km tour, consisting of six stages: El Maza-Asyut-Kharga-Dakhla-Farafra-Bahariya-El Maza.

Teddy was asked by the Aero Club to fly with a young and inexperienced Egyptian pilot as navigator. His pilot was a wine merchant from Algir flying a Coudron monoplane. Actually five young pilots asked for Almásy and they had to draw lots to decide whom he would join. During the tour Almásy frequently navigated for 4 or 5 aircraft as his pilot's friends found it easier to follow the Caudron when navigation became critical. They were placed 14<sup>th</sup> in the tour.

## **Gliding**

In spite of his attempt to build and fly a glider in 1909, Teddy was not involved in gliding and was not a glider pilot. He was not even a trainee in the early '30s when he visited his friend, Prince Abbas Halim's glider training operation at the Almaza airfield near Cairo, part of the newly established Egyptian Gliding Club. Halim had been an observer in the German air force during WWI and was committed to establish gliding in Egypt. Having purchased an open and a nacelled primary in France, an "Eole" and a "Sulky" respectively, he started flight training for his first two pupils, launching them by autotow. By the spring of 1933 there had been a total of some 208 flights launched in this way.

Teddy was taken aback by the unsafe operation and asked the Prince to abandon the operation immediately. Teddy then offered his help to develop a safer training method. He had no personal experience in gliding, however during one of his trips to Europe he had observed Kronfeld performing winch launches, moreover he was an avid reader of every article on gliding. Teddy therefore carefully worked out a method in principle and together with Egyptian engineer Osman Hamdi, made experiments, and built up a safe training method using winch launches.

The Club applied the new method under the supervision of Teddy. Yet these were the years packed with his most important Sahara expeditions and he had to leave the Club members on their own. Plus, 1933 was the year when he also attended the Boy Scout Jamboree in Hungary. In his absence the primary gliders suffered a lot of damage and finally became useless.

During the 1933 Jamboree, held at Gödöllő, near Budapest, Teddy was instrumental in persuading Hungarian leaders of the importance of gliding in general, and the work of the

newly established Flying Boy Scouts in particular.



Baden-Powell and Almásy at the Jamboree  
Gödöllő, 1933

When he returned to his task in Egypt one of the pilots, Marlia, bought Kronfeld's two-seater glider "*Fasold*," and autotowing using an 800 m long cable, performed many launches.

During one of the launches, the *Fasold* climbed to a 400 m altitude. The resulting 20 minute flight made a great impression on Taher Pasha, the president of the Egyptian Aero Club, who became an avid supporter of gliding in Egypt.

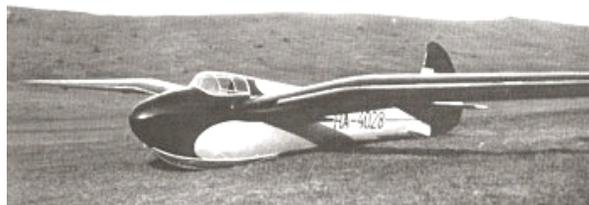
In the spring of 1934, the Egyptian Aero Club purchased the *Fasold* for dual instruction. Yet the Egyptian Gliding Club ceased to exist in 1935. The Egyptian Aero

Club took over the gliding club with its small wooden shed at Almaza airfield and, besides the *Fasold*, the remains of the 2 French gliders.

At this time the Italian colony in Cairo also wanted to establish a Gliding Club. They therefore brought to Cairo from the Bonomi works in Milan, two *Zöglings* and two nacelled gliders called "*Ballerina*." These four machines were later taken over by the Egyptian Aero-Club as well because the Italians did not receive official permission to run a separate club.

Almásy, at the request of Taher Pasha, president of the Egyptian Aero Club, took up the task of organizing a new flying school in 1936. He persuaded Taher Pasha to employ a flying instructor for two years. He recommended the Hungarian Frigyes Hefty, a WWI fighter pilot and one of the pioneers of Hungarian gliding.

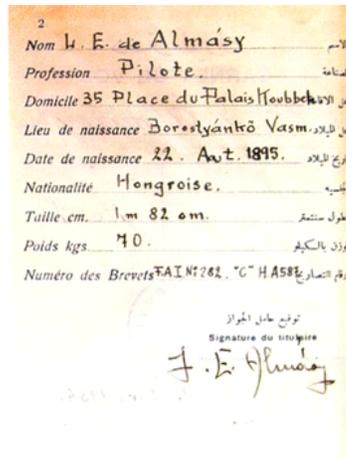
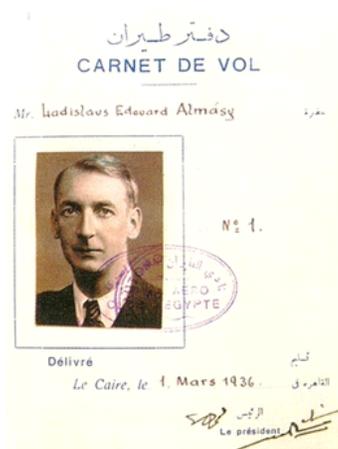
This flying school owned 14 primary, training, and high performance gliders between 1936 and 1939. The fleet consisted of one Eole, one Sulky, two Bonomi-*Zöglings*, two *Ballerinas*, one *Vöcsök*, two *Zöglings*, one *Segel-Zögling*, one *Wolf*, one *Grunau Baby*, one *Fasold*, and one *M-22*. The *Zöglings* were produced in Egypt, the *Vöcsök*, *Segel-Zögling*, and the *M-22*



M-22

were imported from Hungary. The *Wolf* and the *Grünau Baby* were imported from Germany.

Hungarian Ernő Rubik's *Vöcsök* was a modified version of the R-05 prototype *Vöcsök* featuring a rear fuselage tube structure instead of the original wooden open frame one. The 12 m span *Segel-Zögling* was built at Gyöngyös. The 15 m span *M-22* high-performance glider, capable of aerobatics, was the design of the Technical University's Sportflying Association (MSrE). Wolf Hirth's Gö-1 *Wolf* was a 14 m span advanced training glider from 1935 and the 13.5 m span advanced training *Grünau Baby* was Edmund Schneider's design from 1933. All of the Hungarian gliders were purchased on the advice of Almásy.



For the new gliding school a metal hangar was erected in the north-west corner of Almaza Airport. Launching was by winch, using a suitably modified car for this purpose.

Flight training began on March 19, 1936, for the first group of 22 students from the University of Cairo, under the guidance of the Hungarian glider instructor, Frigyes

Hefty. One hundred eighty-one flights were logged up to May 7, with 6 "A" certificates finished. It was at this point that Hefty returned to Europe, and Almásy, although he did not have formal training nor instructor certificate, took over the instruction. At this time a Greek flight instructor, Hermes Celio, joined the school as well. Celio later became the CFI for the school. Four hundred eighty-four flights were completed up to July 4, with a further 14 "A" and 5 "B" certificates being completed. The school was closed down for the the summer months.

The No. 1 Egyptian glider logbook was issued at March 1, 1936, to László Almásy. He had started his formal glider training with the first group in Egypt. However he finished his training in Gödöllő, Hungary, in September, flying *Zögling*, nacelled *Zögling*, and *Segel-Zögling* types at the "Icarus" gliding school, which specialized in winch launches. He finished his "B" badge on September 27, flying a nacelled *Zögling* and performed aerotows as well. On October 25th, he earned his "C" badge at Gödöllő with a 56 minute flight. He became the holder of the 78<sup>th</sup> Hungarian "C" badge.

The second term of the new Egyptian school started in early November 1936 and ran to the end of May 1937. During this time 2456 launches by 82 students had been logged with 42 "A," 15 "B," and three "C" certificates completed. From 1936, the school required at least five gliding flights in a straight line for an "A" certificate. Five flights

were required for the "B" certificate, including two flights with 180 degree turns, two flights with full turns, and a target landing within 25 m of a preset position indicated by a flag.

When the *Wolf* glider arrived in Egypt in 1937, the opportunity of slope and thermal soaring opened up for Egyptian gliding. The first attempts at thermalling were fruitless, but then they did succeed in connecting with dry thermals from winch launches. Using a 1000 m cable, the *Wolf* regularly gained 200-240 m altitude. The first flight was only 7 minutes long, but flights of 15, 20 and 30 minutes soon followed.

As locating blue thermals was difficult, it became a standard process to observe kites. These birds of prey, common in Egypt, were experts in thermal flights and painted the dry thermals for the pilots.

Since in those times civil aircraft was not allowed to be used for aerotowing by the Egyptian authorities, Teddy turned to the British stationed in Egypt. The Royal Air Force personnel were immediately willing to help, and thus it was possible for Teddy to win a trophy offered by the newspaper *Al Ahram* for the first soaring flight from Heliopolis to the Cheops (Khufu) pyramid. This was the first recorded cross-country soaring flight in Egypt. The distance was 31 km and the flight lasted 31 minutes. He started his flight behind an Avro *Tutor* which towed him up to the starting height, and after the flight towed him back to Almaza Airport.

In 1936 Teddy and Hefty planned to ridge soar a pyramid, but the rising air over the pyramid's side proved to be too narrow for practical purposes. As a hillside suitable for slope soaring could not be found in the vicinity of Almaza Airfield, a hill located 16 km west of the pyramids of Giza was the site where some slope soaring was practiced. A temporarily wooden shed was erected at the base of the slope, which was only 30 meters high and 200 m long.

In 1938, efforts were made to find a more suitable slope. More distant territories were searched from the air by Teddy and finally a 300 m high sandstone hill called "Iweibid Mountain" was located 80 km east of Cairo between the railway and the road to Suez. The slope facing north was 10 km wide in east-west direction and in the prevailing north winds in Egypt it was ideal for slope soaring. It was also possible to connect with thermals from the slope as well. A wooden shed was erected and besides the *Wolf*, a *Zögling* and the *Grünau Baby* were transported there.

Launchings were done by winch. Practically unlimited opportunities existed to land so experimenting was order of the day. In a 6-8 m/s (12-18 kt) wind, soaring at 500 m altitude was common. Many hours were flown over the slope and desert thermals made it possible to leave the slope. However the unforgiving desert made true cross country flights dangerous because if a pilot landed out, finding him in the desert would be difficult. The favorable thermal conditions were not truly exploited, however Teddy managed to contact a standing wave behind the hill. Most flight were made east or west direction alongside the road and the railway.

In the mean time, Teddy frequently visited Hungary where he became involved in the development of Hungarian gliding and made efforts to get Hungarian youth acquainted with gliding. He attended aeromodeling contests and Boy Scout groups giving lectures on gliding. His fictional book for young people, entitled *Suhanó Szárnyak* ("Flitting Wings") was intended to promote this goal and was a success.

He concentrated his efforts in creating well organized and adequately financed gliding activities in Hungary. He was a keen supporter of standardized training methods, backed up by well trained instructors and well prepared booklets, guides etc. One of his aspirations was to furnish all gliding clubs with adequate, standardized winches. He used his widespread contacts inform important members of the Hungarian government, and other high officials, about the sport flying and did much to obtain their support.



Almásy at Gödöllő gliderport in front of a Grunau Baby.

When in Hungary he frequently visited the different gliding fields and airfields. This included MSrE's airfield at Érd, south of Budapest, which was the Club's regular aircraft and aerotow training center. He was also involved in the the efforts to make Hungary a tempting target of aero tourism, which had been getting momentum in western Europe. He flew to England in 1936 with a Klemm-35 as part of a promotional program.

Based on his experiences in gliding instruction, Teddy prepared a paper in 1937 setting forth directives for glider training methods which would have been more effective as pre-military training. He gave priority to "flatland" gliding over ridge soaring as the former renders safer operations. Aerotow training would have to follow winch training.

In this paper the importance of publishing technical aviation books and periodicals was emphasized. According to his opinion, well prepared and widely-read young people would have to be drawn into aviation. Opportunities had to be opened up for them to join gliding. Therefore, to allow larger masses join, gliding would have to be available across the whole country.

The paper also dealt with the economic aspects of training as well. In addition to less damage in flatland training, winch cables are cheaper than bungee cords. Consequently a launch by winch is cheaper than a launch with bungee cord. Moreover winch operations are more continuous. Yet at the same time, winch training operations require more proficient instructors since pupils are flying single seater primaries and winch launches involve more intricate control inputs. For initial aerotow training he proposed two-seater trainers and pressed for design competitions to create new, more adequate two-seater trainers. He also pressed for the rules to be published in print!

His paper provoked reactions in governmental circles that came at a good time, as Hungarian gliding was mostly ignored at that time by state agencies.

In 1938 he served in Hungary as an instructor at a course for training gliding instructors. He had the experience of more than 8000 winch launches under his belt.

At the end of the '30s the training of military pilots elicited higher priority, even in Egypt. Almásy had expressed an opinion in 1939 that the length of pre-military pilot training was too short and pupils entered into the system too late as regards their age. He proposed to start preliminary training with gliders at the age of 15, which was the earliest age



2-seater Zögling

Egyptian law permitted. He proposed to organize as an experiment, an eight-week long training camp for a group of high-school students and to train them on *Zöglings*, using winch launches to earn their "A" badge.

At time of this proposal, he discussed the method of this training with his CFI, Hermes Celio, and his assistant instructors. The result of this deliberation was an idea of developing a two-seater version of the *Zögling*. They figured that the boys have 46 kg of body weight as an average, and that the body weights of all the instructors were under 75 kg. Their decision was to modify one of the school's steel-tube Bonomi *Zöglings* and strengthen it from the original 100 kg permissible load up to 130 kg..

The training would be similar to the "one-seater" training as regards the number of take-offs and release heights would be gradually increased to where 30 second long straight glides could be achieved. When a pupil performed 10-15 of these 30 second glides without the intervention of the instructor, he would be ready to make, with ballast on the rear seat, 2-3 shorter, then a couple of longer, and finally "A" grade glides to

earn his badge.

The glider modification was done by Hermes Celio. The main spars were strengthened, the span was increased to 11 m, the original 4 mm bracing wires were changed to 6 mm ones. The related fittings were strengthened as well. The middle (diagonal) spar bracing the fuselage under the A-frame was modified to create space to fit in the rear seat. The rear rudder pedals' bar crossed the fuselage and rods connected it to the front pedal bar. The rear joystick was located on the right, outside of the instructor leg. The front part of the fuselage differed from the original *Zögling* as a double skid was fitted with springs. The release cable was lengthened to reach the rear seat.

The glider was test flown and got its airworthiness certificate. It was a success and during the tests even 3 minutes flight were made with two adults using 1000 m long winch cable.

It was an interesting episode in his life when he was entrusted by the Persian Shah Pahlavi to establish gliding in Persia. He met the Shah at the circles of the Egyptian royal family. Teddy started working on a plan for Persia in 1939. Planning the new gliding school, 5 gliders were ordered at the Aero-Ever, Ltd, a glider factory in Esztergom. Two well known Hungarian sport fliers, Pál Voinits and Pál Kaiser, were employed to serve as instructor and as chief mechanic respectively. Unfortunately this promising venture came to an abrupt end when the war broke out.

## **WWII**

After the outbreak of WWII in 1939 Teddy was not allowed to stay and work in Egypt so he returned to Hungary in 1940. At home the preparation for war was in full swing yet with the foundation of HMNRA (*Horthy Miklós Nemzeti Repülő Alap* - Miklós Horthy National Aviation Fund), an organization which Almásy dreamt about for the development of sport flying, came into existence. He threw himself into the activity to create and run proper training bases all over the country. From 1940 he served as the training supervisor for HMNRA.

In 1940, a Committee was set up to search for suitable areas for gliding in Transylvania (Erdély), which had been reannexed to Hungary by the Second Vienna Award. Teddy was one of the members of the Committee and among his deputy directors were two of his long time friends Fred Hefty Sr. and László Tasnádi, the latter being President of MsrE and the first Hungarian Gold "C" badge glider pilot.

Teddy was a reserve officer of the Royal Hungarian Air Force and as such was drafted to active service in 1941. He was detailed to the German Army by the commanding officer of the Air Force, General Valdemár Kenessey, in February 1941. It looks like he was the only person available to the Germans who had extensive knowledge and experience in North Africa and this way he became the desert expert for General Erwin Rommel. The Germans gave him the rank of a Captain in the Luftwaffe. In the spring of 1941 he served in Derna at the African Center of the Abwehr, the German military intelligence organization. Two important ventures in North Africa were prepared here.

In the first venture, two He-111 aircraft were used to fly and land behind the English lines to pick up El Maszri Pasha, the former and hostile to the British chief of Egyptian general staff, and fly him to German headquarters. The pilots were Almásy and Major Ritter and the time of the rendezvous was fixed by secret radio communications. The two He-111 arrived at the time agreed. However the venture failed as the Egyptian military aircraft transporting the Pasha to the meeting point made a forced landing after observing British fighters in the area, and the rendezvous did not take place. The presence of the fighters were not accidental as the Brits had infiltrated the Egyptian side of the operation.

The second venture was to plant two German agents in Cairo. According to the plan the agents would have been transported by air to the vicinity of Dairut Oasis from where they would use motorbikes to reach Cairo. Again Almásy planned and organized the operation which utilized two He-111 aircraft. The first transporting the agents and the second serving as protection for the operation. Almásy piloted the second He-111 with major Ritter on board as well.

Just before the take-off one of the tires of the aircraft transporting the agents received a puncture and the aircraft was quickly substituted with another He-111. However the pilot of the substitute aircraft was quite an inexperienced one. Because of a late start, when the first aircraft reached the selected area close to sunset, the pilot made two aborted approaches as he judged the terrain to be full of big rocks.

After the second attempt the aircraft turned and headed back to home base, Derna. The other aircraft with Almásy at the controls had been flying a holding pattern over them at



*In desert uniform*

1000 m and due to the radio silence he ordered previously, was not able to help them. Later Almásy, who had selected the landing site alongside the route to the oasis, one which he knew well, came to the conclusion that the inexperienced pilot had erroneously judged the rocks as being too big due to their long shadows in the setting sun.

On their way back they received a radio message that Derna was being bombed by the British. Almásy therefore kept clear of Derna and aimed for Benghazi. They barely reached Benghazi, using up the last drops of fuel in the aircraft's tanks. The other aircraft tried to wait out the bombing over the sea and made a forced landing on heavy seas because of an engine failure. Fortunately the crew members and the two agents escaped using the rubber boat on board.

The Abwher Brass did not give up the plan to plant two agents in Cairo. In the next operation, Almásy again played a leading role although neither flying nor aircraft were involved in this

venture.

The operation codenamed "Salaam" called for planting two German agents into Cairo. In May 1942, Almásy took John Eppler and Hans Stansteade from Lybia to Asyut, Egypt, deep behind the Allied lines after a nearly 3000 km long daring crossing of the Libyan Desert. The group having used 4 vehicles, 2 pickup trucks with supplies and two Ford cars, passed through stretches of desert known only to Almásy.

The group found the water and fuel supply Almásy had planted in 1933 during an expedition, and the water was drinkable! The detail followed the same route back to Tripoli. In the course of this journey they hit upon the water and fuel reserves of the British Long Range Desert Group, from which their own supplies were refreshed and all the remaining water and fuel were emptied to the sand.

His services were recognized by Rommel who awarded him with the Iron Cross 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> Class, and promoted him to Major., Teddy returned to Hungary after the defeat of the Germans in Africa. In a book published in 1943 titled *Rommel seregénél Lybiában* (At Rommel's Army in Lybia) Teddy gave account of his wartime experiences.

### **After the war**

During the siege of Budapest he was staying in his apartment where the Soviet troops arrested him. Because of his mastery of the Russian language he was used as an interpreter and was released six weeks later. In 1945 he was arrested on more occasions as his neighbours reported him to the police.

Finally the People's Court tried him as a war criminal. After months of interrogations and tortures he was found 'not guilty' and was acquitted. This judgement of the Court was influenced by Gyula Germanus, the noted orientalist, who gave a favorable evidence at the trial. At first he was not allowed by the Court to give evidence, however Germanus requested an interview with Mátyás Rákosi, the head of the Communist Party and his former student at the Orient Academy, and Rákosi took measures to let the Court accept Germanus' evidence. Germanus had not forgotten about when his car failed in the Sahara



Almásy in Egypt after WWII.

and he was reported missing, that it was Teddy who organized and led the rescue operation.

Up to his release the NKVD probably did not identify Almásy but later they went after him. Teddy therefore fled Hungary and reached Rome via Vienna–Graz–Triest. From here the British intelligence

helped him to go to Cairo, as one member of the British intelligence staff in Rome, a Hungarian named Dezső Ónodi, happened to be Teddy's old friend.

In Cairo he returned to his old occupation of selling luxury cars, mostly Porsche, to Egyptian aristocrats and testing new Porsche designs in the Sahara. He worked as flying instructor as well. He also renewed contacts with Egyptian sport aviation and this led to a remarkable venture.

An Egyptian glider pilot, Hassan Said Kamil, had participated in the World Gliding Championship at Samaden, Switzerland, in 1948 flying an *Air-100*. After the championship Kamil moved around in Europe and participated in different contests. While he was in France in 1949, Teddy met him in Paris. Kamil had been one of Teddy's favourite pupils before the war and even take him along to Hungary for advanced glider training in 1939.

In Paris Kamil was making preparations to ship the *Air-100* to Egypt. Teddy got the idea that it would give Egyptian gliding a great boost if the glider could be aerotowed to Egypt. He traveled back to Cairo by an airliner and persuaded Taher Pasha to support his idea, and the Pasha let the venture be financed by the Egyptian Aero Club. Teddy flew back to Paris where he rented a twin-engine Miles *Gemini* aircraft and persuaded a Swiss pilot, Ernst Hofstetter, to accompany him as copilot for the trip. Kamil flew the glider.

The details of the flight:

May 14, 1949 Start from Paris. Arrival in Rome in the evening.

May 15, 1949 Start from Rome, landing in Catania, Sicily.

May 16, 1949 Start from Catania, landing in El Aden, near Tripoli

May 17, 1949 The takeoff postponed because of a sand storm.

May 18, 1949 Start from El Aden, afternoon landing at Almaza Airport.

The distance flown was more than 4000 km. Almásy got a laurel wreath and a gold medal for the flight from the Egyptian Aero Club.

His health deteriorated considerably during the last years. Even back in the '30s he had contracted dysentery and malaria while traveling in the desert. When he was in Lybia with Rommel, his service was interrupted by an amoeba infection and he was sent to a German military hospital in Athen for six weeks of medical treatment.



In 1950 he was treated in Salzburg for dysentery and after the treatment he went back to Cairo. In early 1951 he was again in Europe transporting cars back for repairs. However the illness caught up with him and he again entered a Salzburg hospital on February 10, 1951. He was in the hospital when the news came on March 1st that he was appointed to be the Director of the Desert Institute of Cairo. Unfortunately, he had no opportunity to take up his new post as he was operated on for an infection caused liver tumor and died on March 22, 1951. He was buried in the public cemetery in Salzburg.

## Epilogue

Though different opinions exist regarding László Ede Almásy's role in the history of Hungary, he was one of the most successful and noted explorers of the Sahara as well as the most sought after guide for hunting trips and travels in North Africa during the late-20s and '30s.

He was a kind of mechanical wizard whose talent manifested itself around cars and aircraft. His devotion to flying, which started early in his life, made him a great and



successful organizer and supporter of every form of aviation. These same words might be used in the case of his other lifelong devotion, that is his attachment to the Boy Scout movement. His mastery of many languages was his great asset which he used to fulfill his ambitions.

The list of books he had written about his experiences is noteworthy:

*Autóval Szudánba* (By Car to Sudan), Lampel, Budapest, 1929. (its German translation ran into its 3<sup>rd</sup> edition- 1939, 1940, 1942).

*Az ismeretlen Szahara* (The Unknown Sahara), Franklin, Budapest, 1934.

*Die Strasse der Vierzig Tage* (The Forty Days Route), Leipzig, 1944.

*Die Verschollene Oasis* (The Lost Oasis), Arena, Würzburg, 1971. (the 5<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the *Unbekannte Sahara*).

*Levegőben ... Homokon ...* (In the Air .... On the Sand ...) Franklin, Budapest, 1937.

*Recentes explorations dans le Desert Lybique 1932-1936* (Recent Explorations in the Lybian Desert, 1932-1936), Société Royal de Geographic d'Egypte, Le Caire, 1936.

*Rommel seregénél Lybiában* (With Rommel's Army in Lybia), Stádium, Budapest, 1943..

His name was nearly totally forgotten in Hungary between 1948 and 1989 as his books were wiped off the bookstore and library shelves. His grave had likewise been forgotten

until a couple of Hungarian glider pilots found it in 1994 and restored it for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth. Still, his bust in the garden of the Hungarian Geographical Museum in Érd (a city south of Budapest), is the only monument which cherishes the memory of Teddy.

*Gábor Fekecs, 2009*  
*Stylistic editor Raul Blacksten*

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*Author's comment:* This article is the byproduct of a research done by the International Glider Club Historic Group to clear up production of gliders around the world from the outset.