THESE WERE THE FIRST

Pioneers Who May Have Been Forgotten: Some Highlights from Earlier Aviation History

By ROBERT CARLING

EVEN for a person with the most reliable and well-stored memory it is a salutary experience to make an occasional effort to do some historical research. It is certain to produce some interesting surprises—and particularly so in aviation, the pursuit of which tends to give one firm convictions which are the result of wishful rather than objective thinking.

In the matter of aviation history, conversational statements are all too often at variance with the facts, and I have no doubt that one or two of the facts in this article, however carefully checked, will provoke hot denials and corrections.

In truth, it all began a few weeks ago when I read somewhere that the Graf Zeppelin was the first passenger-carrying airship and that the first flight to the Cape was made in a Vickers Vimy. At the time I felt a conviction that there had been some earlier passenger-carrying Zeppelin, and that the Vimy flight had not been quite as straightforward as all that. So the idle research started with the help of a few books which had been written in the earlier days of aviation.

To satisfy curiosity straight away, I may say that I discovered the first "airline" airship to be, in fact, the LZ-7 of 1910. It was used for sightseeing trips and—that I have nothing but a faint memory of back numbers of The Sphere to support the idea—I think it ended its life uncomfortably in an accident, but without loss of life. [With a crew of 12, and 33 passengers, it ran out of fuel after a nine-hour flight and was forced-landed on trees; there were no casualties.—Ed.] The first Cape Town flight (in March, 1920) certainly started and even continued with a Vickers Vimy, but the last stage of the journey was completed in a D.H.9. Two Vimpls were used. The first was written-off in a night forced-landing at Korosko and the second on a high-altitude overload take-off at Bulawayo. No take-off runs for I.C.A.N. plus thirty at four thousand feet were pre-calculated in those days. Sir Pierre van Ryneveld and Maj. Brand (now A.V.M. Sir Christopher Quintin Brand) were thereupon offered the loan of a D.H.9 with which they completed the journey.

But let us begin at the beginning. Disregarding our old friends Icarus, Bladud, Oliver of Malmesbury and the others (who may, or may not, have dashed themselves down, on inadequate supporting surfaces, with an acceleration of thirty-two feet per second per second) the first persons who can decently be said to have travelled without any very obvious means of support were Pilâtre de Rozier