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# Australian Pilot Apologizes to Turkey: Sir Charles Kingsford Smith

## Turkish-British Diplomacy before the MacRobertson Air Race (1934)

The 1930s stand out as a time period in which long-distance flights and record attempts took place as aviation became popular in international circles and attracted not only the military but also civilian interest as well. Turkey, geographically located on this route, has been a haunt for many foreign pilots and has often appeared in the press as a country selected to be a passage point on flight routes that set various new world records in aviation.<sup>1</sup> According to procedure, the names of pilots who were scheduled to conduct transcontinental flights were given to countries whose airspace would be used through diplomatic channels, providing officials with the estimated time, and then the subsequent flight programs were prepared

upon approval. There are some examples of pilots who, according to their flight plans, had passed through Turkish airspace in some cases, or they had landed at previously designated runways and then continued their flight after some rest and refueling.

Elly Beinhorn, who had broken the flight record of covering two continents with a route from Germany to Istanbul and turning back in a day on August 13, 1935, has been referred to as a British pilot who made an unauthorized landing, while sharing her impressions about Turkey, where she had been before, during her record attempts.<sup>2</sup> Passing through Turkish airspace, Jim Mollison landed in Konya without the permission of the Turkish authorities and was detained for five days in a hotel by Turkish



Figure 1: Australian Pilot Sir Charles Kingsford Smith (1897-1935)<sup>6</sup>

security forces, according to Beinhorn's claims. Stating that Turkey took a firm stand against the fait accompli approaches, Beinhorn said that Mollison was deported by train.<sup>3</sup> The clue hinting that Mollison was not the only pilot to have made an unauthorized landing in Turkey is noticeable in a study that was completed regarding the MacRobertson Air Race between London and Melbourne conducted in 1934.<sup>4</sup> Australian pilot Sir Charles Kingsford Smith (**Figure 1**), who served as one of the signal corps during

World War I in the 19th Battalion of ANZAC forces in the Çanakkale frontline, made an unauthorized landing in Turkey in 1931, and this incident appeared as an obstacle for him in attending the competition in 1934.

The Turkish press had reported on October 3, 1931 that an airplane flying from Australia to England landed in Milas, Muğla, and that the pilot was Charles Kingsford Smith.<sup>5</sup> It was stated in the article that the landing was due to a stroke, and it was a health-related incident. (**Figure 2**).

<sup>1</sup> For a nonstop flight record from New York to Istanbul, pls see: Polando, J., *Wings over Istanbul: The Life and Flights of a Pioneer Aviator*, Peter E. Randall Publisher, Portsmouth, NH, 2000, p. 41-61; For Flight Record from Germany to Asia within one day, pls see: Beinhorn, E., *Alleinflug: Mein Leben*, F.A. Herbig Verlagsbuchhandlung, 2007, München, pp. 212-221; Öngüner, E., Elly Beinhorn: Female Pilot Achieved Record Breaking Flight from Germany to Turkey, *Aviation Turkey*, Vol.1, Issue: 3, 2020, pp. 102-108

<sup>2</sup> Beinhorn, a.g.e., p. 82

<sup>3</sup> No information could be found on the fate of this airplane in Konya.

<sup>4</sup> Websdale-Morrissey, D., *On a Wing and a Prayer: The Race that Stopped the World*, Text Publishing Company, 2019, Melbourne, p. 35

<sup>5</sup> "Australian Pilot Lands in Milas", *Cumhuriyet*, 03.10.1931, p. 2

<sup>6</sup> Image Library of State Library of New South Wales, Sydney / Australia

**Avusturalya'lı tayyareci Milâs'a indi**

Milâs 2 (Hususî) — Buraya bir İngiliz tayyaresi indi. Tayyareci Avusturalya'dan geldiğini, güneş çarpmasından yere indiğini söylemiştir. Tayyareci henüz hareket etmemiştir.

**CUMHURİYET** — Bu tayyarecinin Avusturalya'dan İngiltere'ye gelmekte olan Kings Ford Smith olduğu anlaşılmaktadır.

Figure 2: Smith landed in Milas on October 2, 1931.

**AIR REGULATIONS.**

**TROUBLE WITH TURKEY.**

(Australian Press Association.)  
LONDON, September 27.

It is worthy of comment that the only absentions from the International Air Traffic Association's conference, which is now sitting in London, are Turkey and Persia, whose regulations have caused most trouble to aviators.

Neither Mr. J. A. Mollison nor Sir Charles Kingsford Smith is applying to Turkey for a permit to traverse Turkish territory during their pending flights. The "Evening Standard" says both airmen previously were subjected to bother through unavoidable forced landings, for which they were forbidden to cross the Turkish frontier again.

Figure 3: Mollison and Smith are not authorized to fly over Turkish territory (29.09.1933)

**VIVID MEMORIES**

On his next hop, yesterday—from Brindisi to Bagdad—he made a slight detour southwards to avoid flying over Turkey. He probably had vivid memories of what happened to him in October, 1921, when he was forced down by illness at an obscure Turkish town called Milas, in Asia Minor, and was held by the Turks under armed guard for two days. This mishap dashed all "Smithy's" hopes of breaking the record from Australia to England.

So he avoided Asia Minor yesterday. He flew over Greece—possibly over ancient Athens—and then over the island of Rhodes, where once stood the famed Colossus. Next came the deserts of Syria and Iraq, where Assyrian villagers were massacred this year, and at last he landed at Bagdad, where the Iraqi are still in mourning for King Feisal.

Figure 4: Smith landed in Milas without authorization in October 1931 (06.10.1933)

Taking a look at Australia's local press in 1933 and 1934, there is interesting information about Smith's participation in the air race between England and Australia in 1934, and about the conflict between England and the Turkish authorities. It was stated in the International Air Transport Conference, that was held in London in 1933, that Turkey and Iran were the countries that were often laying obstacles on airspace use and it was mentioned that Smith and Mollison were prohibited to use Turkish airspace due to their unauthorized landings<sup>7</sup> (Figure 3). Smith had to make its flight out of Turkish airspace from London to Pakistan's Karachi in October 1933, due to the adverse case that had happened in 1931. He took off from Brindisi, Italy, the first destination in pursuit of London and headed to Baghdad

nonstop, and took off from Baghdad on October 7, 1933 and flew directly to Karachi. In one of the newspaper reports on the related subject, it was stated that he was detained by Turkish security forces for two days due to the incident in 1931.<sup>8</sup> (Figure 4).

Before the MacRobertson Air Race planned to be held in October 1934, the list of the competitors were submitted to the countries that the pilots were to pass through, but Charles Kingsford Smith's name on the list led to tension between the Turkish and British governments. According to the news dated July 26, 1934, the Turkish government implied that Smith had humiliated them by using Turkish airspace without authorization and stated that he would not be he would not be given permission to pass through

Turkish airspace if he joined in the upcoming race. The negotiations between the British Ministry of Aviation and the Turkish government were inconclusive. Smith, however, conveyed that he didn't have any intention to despise Turkey and that he could land in Istanbul during the race and meet with the Turkish government in person, if necessary<sup>9</sup> (Figure 5). In another news report dated August 9, 1934, the British, it was said that Australian and Turkish governments were conducting negotiations and if Mollison and Smith used the airspace without the authorization of Turkey, a diplomatic crisis would be likely to occur. It was also noted that there would be a possibility of applying legal sanctions on the two pilots. Turkey did not accept the inconsistent statements that the pilots had given to the press about the mistreatment

after their unauthorized landing. It was signaled that if Turkey didn't relieve the sanctions imposed on these pilots, the British and Australian governments would prohibit Mollison's and Smith's use of Turkish airspace in order not ruin diplomatic relations<sup>10</sup> (Figure 6).

In the newspaper article dated August 15, 1934, it was stated that the Turkish Embassy in London didn't know about the sanctions imposed on the pilots<sup>11</sup> (Figure 7), and then it was seen as new information that came from the Turkish side 3 weeks later. An important statement made by Şükrü Koçak, Vice President of the Turkish Aviation Association (T.Ta.C. - Türk Tayyare Cemiyeti) was disclosed to the press on September 7, 1934. Koçak stated that if the pilots apply via the Turkish

<sup>7</sup>"Air Regulations", The Courier Mail, 29.09.1933, p. 14

<sup>8</sup>"Crosses Six Countries in Two Days", The News, 06.10.1933, p. 1. Only the relevant part of the news is shown in the figure.

<sup>9</sup>"Kingsford Smith Must Not Fly Over Turkish Territory", The Age, 26.07.1934, p. 12. Only the relevant part of the news is shown in the figure.

<sup>10</sup>"Air Race Ban: 'Smithy'-Mollison?", The Telegraph, 09.08.1934, p. 9. It is not the original page layout of the newspaper. The news columns are rearranged side by side by the author.

<sup>11</sup>"Centenary Air Race: Landing In Turkey", The Inverell Times, 15.08.1934, p. 1

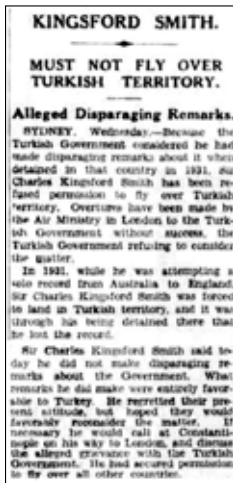


Figure 5: Turkish government's objection of Smith's authorization (26.07.1934)



Figure 6: Diplomatic contacts between Britain and Turkey because of the Smith incident (09.08.1934)

Embassy, the necessary authorization would be given to them by the Turkish government<sup>12</sup> (Figure 8). It is also noteworthy that the Turkish government showed the Vice President of the Turkish Aviation Association as an addressee to the British and Australian governments within diplomatic contacts.

Two important news reports were noticeable on September 21, 1934. The pilots that had considered the call of the VP of the T.Ta.C, contacted with the British Embassy in Ankara, Turkey<sup>13</sup> (Figure 9). On the other hand, the same day another newspaper<sup>14</sup> (Figure 10) reported that Charles Kingsford Smith apologized to Gazi Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, President of the Republic of Turkey via a telegram as follows:

“I most respectfully request permission to fly over your territory during the air race. I am unaware of the reasons for the present ban, but sincerely apologize if I have given unwilling offence.”

In the news the next day, it was stated that Turkey would give authorization to Smith after his official apology to Atatürk, but the same would not be applicable to Mollison<sup>15</sup> (Figure 11). An important statement made by Australian Deputy Defense Minister Sir Josiah Francis clarified the issue. Francis stated that according to the news they received from London, the Turkish government would grant the necessary authorization and Smith should go to Ankara during the race to apologize to the Turkish authorities in person<sup>16</sup> (Figure 12). According to

a report dated September 28, 1934, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk had wished to meet with Smith after his landing in Ankara<sup>17</sup> (Figure 13). According to Another report dated September 30, 1934, states that it was stated that Smith's visit to Ankara was not confirmed because the British Ambassador's official application had not been responded to by Turkey yet. If the final decision would have been negative, Smith should then have set a route out of Turkish airspace to go to Britain during the race.<sup>18</sup> (Figure 14).

While the above-mentioned diplomatic contacts between Turkey and Britain and Australia were being held, Smith was trying to get his airplane ready in terms of technical and certification requirements prior to the race. However on October 3, 1934, the Australian press reported that Smith had withdrawn from the MacRobertson Air Race due to technical problems. In the related news, there was no information contained about the problems encountered between the countries and it was reported that the decision was only due to technical reasons<sup>19</sup> (Figure 15). It is also possible that Smith's withdrawal from the race was because of the alleged technical problems, since no news from the Turkish authorities was found in the Australian newspapers later and because Smith's plan to

visit Ankara and to officially apologize to Atatürk was not confirmed.

Smith's flight, which he had started in pursuit of a new record on November 6, 1935 ended in the Andaman Sea of the Indian Ocean, and the dead body of Smith and his co-pilot were never found. After his death, his memoirs were compiled and published and this book provides crucial information about Smith's



Figure 7: The statement of the Turkish Embassy in London (15.08.1934)

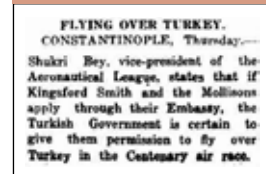


Figure 8: The statement of Turkish Aviation Association (T.Ta.C.) Vice President Şükrü Koçak (07.09.1934)



Figure 9: The attempts of the pilots at the Turkish Embassy in London for contacting the Turkish government (21.09.1934)

<sup>12</sup>“Flying Over Turkey”, The Kyogle Examiner, 07.09.1934, p. 4

<sup>13</sup>“Flight Over Turkey”, The Maitland Daily Mercury, 21.09.1934, p. 10

<sup>14</sup>“Sincerely Apologise: Kingsford Smith's Cable to Turkey”, The Telegraph, 21.09.1934, p. 1

<sup>15</sup>“Permit from Turkey”, The Newcastle Sun, 22.09.1934, p. 1

<sup>16</sup>“Flight Over Turkey”, The Sun, 27.09.1934, p. 19

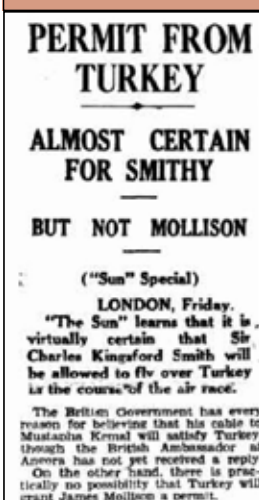
<sup>17</sup>“Kemal Pasha Wants to See Smithy”, The Newcastle Sun, 28.09.1934, p. 8

<sup>18</sup>“Will Smithy Go to Ankara?”, The Sunday Mail, 30.09.1934, p. 1

<sup>19</sup>“Smithy Out of the Air Race”, The Herald, 03.10.1934, p. 1



Figure 10: The apology of Smith to Atatürk, President of the Republic of Turkey (21.09.1934)



Status of flight introduced by Turkish government (22.09.1934)

aviation career<sup>20</sup> (Figure 16). The pages regarding the preparation of the MacRobertson Air Race do not refer to the problems he had encountered with the Turkish government, while the negative comments made about him after his withdrawal from the race are included. Smith noted in his memoirs that he was accused of staying

away from competing against other pilots, losing confidence in himself and his airplane, and of participating only in races that he was sure he could win, and he closed the related chapter with this noteworthy sentence:<sup>21</sup> “A nation's hero may often become a nation's whipping boy overnight.”

In Smith's documented memoirs, it is possible to find detailed information about his unauthorized landing in Milas in 1931, which was the cause of the problem with the Turkish government. Having encountered many difficulties throughout the 9-day Australia-Britain race with the British pilot Jim Mollison, Smith explicitly mentioned that the Turkish authorities were kind to him during the Milas incident and that he was cared for during his sickness<sup>22</sup>

Taking a glance at the relevant part of his memories, it can be seen that Smith searched for an appropriate place to land, in the skies of Antalya Bay when he was about to faint while he was heading to Athens after taking off from Aleppo, the point on the race route. After being in the air for a while feeling dizziness and nausea, he was able to land at in open terrain near Milas, and one of the wheels of the plane was damaged during landing. After getting off the plane, people in the

vicinity came there with curiosity. He tried to communicate with hand gestures and asked one of them to bring him brandy by pressing money into his hand. Smith said that he suddenly fainted and after coming to himself, he saw that there was a very large group of people around him and his plane, including soldiers. As he was heading towards the cockpit, one of the soldiers held Smith's arm, nodded his head negatively and showed his gun. At that moment Smith realized that he was arrested. 3-4 hours later, a Turkish officer and several mounted troops arrived at the scene. The officer understood a little English and was fluent in French. After a while, a Major came to the scene in a Ford automobile. When he told the Major he wanted to repair his plane and fly to Athens, the answer given to him was as follows: “You must first go to Milas and see the Commandant and be interrogated as to the reason for your presence here.”

Whilst all this was going on, Smith also began to worry about the loss of time in the race with the British pilot Jim Mollison. He was taken to the car upon the order of the Major and brought to the headquarters 15 kilometers away. During the questioning, he was asked several questions



Figure 12: The statement of Australian Deputy Defense Minister Sir Josiah Francis (27.09.1934)

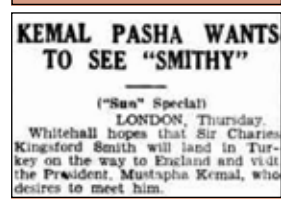


Figure 13: Atatürk's wish to meet Smith (28.09.1934)



A possible visit of Smith to Ankara (30.09.1934)

like “Why did you land here? Why were you sick? Why did you not land somewhere else? Who are you? What do you want?” Stating that he gave short and clear answers to all

<sup>20</sup> Kingsford Smith, Ch., My Flying Life: An authentic biography prepared under the personal supervision of and from the diaries and papers of the late Sir Charles Kingsford Smith, Andrew Melrose Ltd., 1937, London  
<sup>21</sup> ibid, p.249  
<sup>22</sup> ibid, pp.214-218

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Figure 15: Smith's withdrawal from the air race due to technical problems (03.10.1934)

the questions, Smith was unable to be freed. The matter was said to be forwarded to Ankara, and Smith later requested to send a telegram to Ankara on his behalf to be sent to Athens. The request to inform the representatives of the Vacuum Oil Company waiting for him in Athens about his status in the race was accepted. He was put in a room with a comfortable bed to spend the night and he was also given food. Stating that the Commander in Milas was very kind to him and that the plane was also secured, Smith stated in his memoirs that a military doctor took care of him and gave him medicine.

A soldier arriving early the next day woke up Smith and informed him that the Commander would come to meet him. Smith thought that he could reach London on time if he could take off in a little while. After waiting for 3 hours, the Commander came with another officer for additional questioning.

After the questioning, he was told that they were expecting approval from Ankara for the release. Smith stated that he had been told by the Commander in Milas that he would release him if he had the authority, and that he had to explain his rank to the Turkish officers as the Brigadier General to set him free during the process.<sup>23</sup> Later, Lieutenant Irfan, with whom Smith was able to easily communicate in French, was appointed as a companion for him. Smith was then allowed to meet with British and American tobacco merchants, Abrahams and Cockerim, and rest at the residence of these two businessmen, under the supervision of Lieutenant Irfan.

As the time went by, Smith was losing his chance and enthusiasm for breaking the race record. In order to beat Mollison, he must have had already reached London in the afternoon of that day; however, given the current situation, he fully lost his chance to

become a winner in the race. On the other hand, on his last night in Milas, he was very glad for the hospitality shown to him. He was allowed to go to the nearest airport to repair his plane the next day. When Smith returned to Milas at noon, he was informed that the necessary permit was given to depart. After a short lunch, he said goodbye to those who hosted him and to Lieutenant Irfan, who he had described as "very respectful" in his memoirs, and then he left for Athens.

It is noteworthy that Smith, while writing about the Milas incident in 1931, did not use any negative words about Turkey and the Turkish authorities. However, since his memoirs were compiled by other individuals after Smith's death, there is a possibility for a slight alteration in

Smith's account of his reasons for the problems faced in Turkey during his participation in a worldwide known air race in 1934. According to overall documentation Smith expressed that he was treated well and the Turkish side implemented necessary procedures, as required for the circumstances. Considering the inconsistent statement alleged to have been given by Mollison and Smith to the press regarding the period of detention in Turkey, in the Australian newspaper *The Telegraph* dated August 9, 1934, the facts were proven by Smith in his memoirs as stated above. Holding several records in aviation, Smith's effort to make up for his unintentional mistake by apologizing to Atatürk prior to the race in 1934 also reveals his character and respect for the Republic of Turkey 🇹🇷



Figure 16: The book compiled from the memories of Smith after his death: *My Flying Life* (1937)

<sup>23</sup>This honorary rank was granted to him due to his achievements in civil aviation. His military rank was captain.