

GÖSTA ANDRÉE AND HIS FLIGHT TO THE CAPE

Translated and adapted from Erik Bratt's *Folk och flyg*. Linköping: Flygföretag HB, 1994.

Surely most aviation enthusiasts have heard of Sweden's Gösta Andrée and his plane *Sandvik*? It's possible that flying buffs know as much – or as little – about this pilot as I did, even though I had the pleasure of talking with him several times, and had also flown one of his planes. What I did know was that he had flown from Sweden to Cape Town, South Africa, and back, in the early years of aviation. I knew little more except that in the late 1950s, Andrée had died in an air crash on the Swedish island of Gotland.

However, some time ago, Andrée's own account of his epic journey, *Sandvik's Journey to the Cape* (Sw. *Sandviks flygning till Kap*; Stockholm: Bonniers, 1930) came into my possession, and I began to scan its pages. I was immediately captivated by the story. I read about his adventure with growing fascination – this was truly amazing! The fact that a Swede had completed such a difficult flight as early as 1929-1930 was quite an accomplishment. Nevertheless, it seems that Andrée faded into history to some degree.

I decided to bring his story back to the present: using Andrée's own excellent book as a foundation, I recount the highlights of his Cape adventure. His piloting skills, accomplishments and efforts to promote aviation in general make him one of the world's true aviation pioneers. I feel like it's important to preserve his place in history.

Following Charles Lindbergh's groundbreaking transatlantic flight in May 1927, numerous flying records were set, both over the Atlantic and on other routes. These daring adventures were a hot topic of discussion at the time, and accounts of them filled the front pages of newspapers around the world. Clearly Andrée was greatly influenced by the general enthusiasm about aviation, but he had no plans to set his own flight record.

In those days, private pilots engaging in long-distance flight navigated using a map, watch, compass and dead reckoning. These were the tools available to Andrée. However, professional aviation companies always ensured a telegrapher was on board, using Morse code to make navigation somewhat more reliable. This was not possible for private enthusiasts; they flew alone, depending solely on their own navigational skills. (The situation is of course entirely different nowadays, given pilots' access to multichannel radio, radio direction finding systems, and satellite navigation.)

Early life and introduction to aviation

Gösta Andrée was born in Stockholm on January 18, 1899, the son of restaurant owner Emil Andrée and his wife Hanna. He grew up in a good home. The family later moved to Växjö, where the young Gösta saw Swedish aviation greats such as Thulin and Sundstedt fly their planes. Gösta first learned to fly at the Nordic Aviation Flight School at Furusund, 1918–1919.

He then trained at the Swedish Royal Navy Flight School at Hägernäs, during 1920–1921 to become a non-commissioned pilot. This meant that Andrée received extensive training as a pilot. It's said that in 1921, he flew a plane underneath Skuru Bridge – a feat demonstrating considerable skill, bravado and enthusiasm.

In 1927, Andrée met with representatives of the Royal Swedish Aeroclub regarding the purchase of touring planes for the club. He received a stipend for travel to England, where he could study private aviation and gather information about suitable planes. During his fact-finding trip, De Havilland's popular *Moth* planes caught his eye. The elegant *Moth* is a celebrity among biplanes after serving as touring and training aircraft in numerous countries.

The Sandvik

The following year, Andrée decided to buy his own plane. He traveled once again to England and bought a used *Cirrus Moth*. The *Cirrus* name designated that the powerplant was from Blackburn Aircraft Company, which had built the engine itself: a 4-cylinder, upright, inline model offering approximately 85 horsepower (also known to some as the Chimney Moth). This biplane had a large wing area – 21.3 square meters (229 sq. ft.) – and a wingspan of 8.8 meters (26.24 ft.), an empty weight of 370 kilograms (815 lbs.) and a maximum takeoff weight of 613 kilograms (1,351 lbs.). Its Swedish call sign was SE-ABS.

This was an excellent aircraft in terms of the technology of the day. It was ideal for flight training; it had a low landing speed; and it required a short takeoff distance. The *Cirrus Moth* also had a relatively low airspeed, approximately 130 kilometers/hour (80.77 mph). Winds could have a significant effect, however, making long-distance flight with a *Cirrus Moth* particularly challenging. But that didn't stop the young and enthusiastic Gösta Andrée.

After he had flown the plane for a time, he began to consider a long-distance flight, as a way to promote Swedish touring aviation. His goal was ambitious: he planned to fly over the continent of Africa to Cape Town. Even now this a very formidable airplane journey for a private pilot. The plane must travel over endless stretches of desert, sea, primeval forests and mountain ranges. Nevertheless, Andrée put his plan into action.

The Central Aircraft Works in Malmslätt inspected the plane. The front cockpit was replaced with an extra fuel tank, which would allow Andrée to fly for up to 10 hours at a time.

He carefully laid out his flight plan. He applied for a passport and visas that were required by the different countries along his route; the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs helped him arrange the paperwork. He obtained many maps and other information from the Air Ministry and Automobile Association in London.

Financing such an undertaking is always a challenge. Andrée doesn't tell us much about this in his book. It's likely that he funded part of the project himself. Nevertheless, Andrée did receive assistance from Sandvikens Jernverk AB, a Swedish mining and steel company with business interests in South Africa. Founded in 1862 by Göran Fredrik Göransson, the company is now an international engineering group in tooling, materials technology, mining and construction, and today the company is called Sandvik.

In honor of his sponsors, Andrée dubbed his plane *Sandvik*, and the company supplied him with the ever-important giveaways which he could distribute to people he would meet along the way: razor blades made of Sandviken steel.

The Shell Oil Company contributed to fuel costs, and arranged for fuel to be available for Andrée at all of his planned stops.

He also agreed to send regular travel reports to the newspaper *Stockholms-Tidningen* to aid in media promotion of the journey, his sponsors and Swedish aviation in general.

A voyage begins

Andrée's adventure became reality on Thursday, September 12, 1929 as he took off from Barkarby Airfield outside Stockholm. A small but exclusive group of aviation enthusiasts was on hand to bid him farewell, including well-known Swedish public figures such as journalist P. G. Peterson and pilot P. O. Herrström. At exactly 05.18 Swedish time, the *Sandvik* rolled elegantly forward, despite her heavy load, and lifted gracefully into the air.

One thing is certain: if you strike out on such an extraordinary endeavor in the spirit of Gösta Andrée, you don't have to go looking for adventure – it will surely find you.

As we shall see, this was certainly the case for our hero...



Farewell at Barkarby

South over Europe

The weather seemed to be a good omen – the skies were clear over Södermanland for some time – but as clouds built up he was forced to climb above them. His first sight of land thereafter was Scania, at the southern tip of Sweden. He landed at Kastrup Airfield in Denmark, just outside of Copenhagen.

After some minor delays because of the Danish customs officials, he was off to Berlin, where he landed at Tempelhof's enormous circular airfield. Excellent hospitality and poor weather conditions convinced Andrée to stay an extra day. Then, he flew to Vienna by way of Prague. At Vienna he requested an inspection of *Sandvik* to make sure all was well. That

Tuesday he took off for Klagenfurt, in Austria's mountainous province of Kärnten. Poor weather compelled him to "tunnel" through the Alps, dipping into the valleys between steep, craggy mountain faces. This was followed by a somewhat bumpy ride down to the Po Valley, and then he landed in Milan's Tagliero military airfield. He was forced to spend an extra day there because the Italian customs officials required a customs deposit. They insisted that Andrée's papers were not in order. The problem was cleared up by the local Swedish consul. Andrée continued, over Genoa and south along the coast toward Rome, where another Swedish consul awaited him. After a quick stop for a meal and fuel, he flew on to Napoli. Here, customs officials again demanded a deposition, and Gösta was not at all prepared to give in; Consul Richter in Napoli soon arrived to settle the matter, and the customs officials let Andrée journey onward.

At Catania, on the eastern coast of Sicily, Andrée's customs problems continued. Because it was a Sunday, the local officials refused to clear him through customs. He had to stay overnight, and the next morning at 6 a.m. Gösta was already waiting at the customs office for an official who claimed he would arrive at 7 a.m. The man finally arrived at ten o'clock, lugging several heavy law books which he said he needed to consult so as to ensure proper handling of Gösta's case.

Malta was the next stop. This leg involved a 100-kilometer stretch (62 miles) along the coast, and then another 100 kilometers over the Mediterranean to arrive at Valetta, Malta's capital. In Malta, Gösta received a warm welcome from locally stationed English air force officers. The next day he flew 350 kilometers (217 miles) over the sea. The officers in Malta gave him a life jacket, and arranged an escort of two large seaplanes that would give him the exact compass course he needed for the first part of the journey.

On to Africa

After about half an hour, his escort turned back. The low clouds forced Andrée to fly at altitudes of 75 to 100 meters (250-325 ft.). He had an excellent compass, so now the trick was just to keep on course, and hope that the engine didn't fail. His trusty *Sandvik* flew on, unaware of the dangerous waters below. Would he arrive west or east of Tripoli? It was tricky: if he ended up arriving to the east of Tripoli, but believing that he was to the west, or vice versa, he could have some serious problems.

It turned out that he was right on course. He soon spotted the airfield and its surrounding palm trees, just east of the city. It felt wonderful to touch down in a part of the world that was new for him. Here, there was little formality; he was well-received by local air force officers, who took him to a first-class hotel in Tripoli.

His next stop would be Benghazi, which entailed a flight of 650 kilometers (400 miles) over water. He was advised to follow the coast to Sirte and then fly toward Benghazi. He reached Sirte after three and half hours. Unfortunately, Andrée didn't feel well. He had a headache but he was eager to continue the journey. Ignoring both the heat and his nausea, Andrée started off for Benghazi. The endless stretches of desert seemed to make pain in his head worse. In addition, there was no Benghazi! The sun was setting. He spied flaming points of light and wondered whether he was imagining things, but the dancing points of light were nomad campfires. In the rapidly gathering darkness he had great difficulty finding the town. Finally, a bright red flare flashed directly beneath the plane. That must be Benghazi's airfield, he thought. He decided to take the chance. He really needed to land.

So that's what he did – it was a bit bumpier than usual, but *Sandvik* was made to withstand that kind of punishment. Fortunately for Andrée, he had found the right airfield. A car equipped with a spotlight came out to lead him to the air station and then he was taken by horse and cart to the hotel. At this point Andrée really didn't feel well at all. The driver's snap of the whip echoed like gunshots in Gösta's head.



Sandvik in good company in Africa

Following the Nile

Andrée didn't stay long in Benghazi. His next stop: Tobruk. He followed the coastline in an arc to the north to avoid flying over the desert. The hard tailwind was a stroke of luck; he covered 550 kilometers (340 miles) in three hours, with an average speed of 183 kilometers/hour (113 mph). Because he still didn't feel well, Andrée didn't dare to continue the next day. He found a place to store *Sandvik* and then rented a room in a rustic hotel. When he awoke the next morning, he found he had several hundred more mosquito bites than the day before! The officer who had escorted him to the hotel apologized for not ensuring that Andrée had a mosquito net.

Abukir in northern Egypt was next. There he underwent a medical examination; the doctor said Andrée was suffering from sunstroke. Von Gerber, the Swedish consul in Egypt, treated Andrée to a pleasant dinner, and immediately afterward the aviator went directly to his hotel and rested in bed for three days. On the fourth day, he felt quite well again. He changed his flying clothes; now he wore a khaki overall and even got himself a pith helmet.

He flew over the pyramids and took photos from the cockpit. He then landed in Assiut after a three-and-a-half-hour trip. After an overnight stay, Andrée arrived in Wadi Haifa, one day earlier than planned. He now found himself in the (former) British colony of Sudan. He was treated to a visit to the local bazaar and then overnighted on a Nile steamer.

He was up early to continue his journey. As he took off, he saw how the Nile swung gently away to the west, but there was a railway heading south as well. He used the rail line as a guide. Then, as the Nile came back into view, he again used the river to navigate. The midday heat was suffocating as he landed at Attbara.

He took off again after a few hours, using the Nile as an orientation guide. He climbed to 2,000 meters (6,500 ft.) to escape the worst of the heat. He had to be quick to steer away from a flock of eagles soaring on their great wings; then he heard how something smattered against the fuselage. It was a thick swarm of Egyptian grasshoppers! He had no

idea that these insects could fly at such high altitudes. He arrived at Khartoum, and discovered that *Sandvik* was covered in a thick layer of sand, which was in turn stuck to the gooey remains of the grasshoppers he had encountered.

In Khartoum, the Blue Nile flows from the east to unite with the White Nile coming from the west. The Blue Nile has a swift current, while the White Nile flows calm and still. Here in Khartoum, Andrée was once again met by English air force officers, who insisted upon inspecting *Sandvik* before he took flight over the difficult terrain ahead. They said that even a small equipment problem could mean a tragic end for him. The officers immediately assigned personnel to ensure that the plane was in perfect condition.

As always, Andrée was very grateful for his reception; he was invited to a formal dinner, where the diners first toasted, "For the King!" and upon that, "For the King of Sweden!". The British aviators had extensive experience of the risks involved in flying over the jungle to the south. They knew that if a plane went down, a pilot could disappear without a trace in the dense foliage and difficult terrain. For this reason, they had developed specific routes and a system for reporting arrivals in larger towns and villages. Andrée received all this information the day before his departure. The aviators also took him to a gun shop and recommended that he buy a revolver for self-defense, in case he found himself in a threatening situation.

The next stop was Malakal, which meant a flight of 725 kilometers (450 miles). Despite a strong headwind, he finished this stretch without incident in six hours and 20 minutes. Malakal was a traditional African tribal village of the colonial era, with a small garrison of troops under the command of a captain. Andrée gave out the razor blades he'd brought with him as an advertising gift. On the packets, along with a picture of his airplane, was the slogan: "Souvenir from the visit of the aeroplane *Sandvik*". He had distributed these razor blades at other stops along the way, but in Malakal they were particularly coveted. He asked the captain if it would be possible to persuade the villagers to perform a war dance. The captain replied that it was doubtful. However, when given the opportunity to receive more razor blades, the villagers were more than happy to oblige. They danced as night fell, clad in little more than brightly colored loincloths, and headdresses with buffalo or ox horns.

The next day he flew to Mongoalla, a trip of more than five hours. This village was much the same as Malakal. The landing strip was woefully short. As he took off, *Sandvik* barely cleared the treetops.

The Nile ended here, and the next geographical feature was a mountain range. After that came swamplands and Mount Elgon, an extinct volcano on the border of Uganda and Kenya. Here he encountered bad weather and had little choice but to land at Tororo. His only alternative for a landing was a field that was covered in high grass, which slapped alarmingly against *Sandvik's* wings. Fortunately, the plane did not suffer any damage. A native accompanied him to the local commandant, Captain Maitland, who ordered the villagers to chop down grass in a field and make a runway for Andrée. When it was time to take off again, the wind had shifted 90 degrees, and as a result, Andrée's first takeoff attempt put the plane in the grass at the side of the makeshift runway. There was nothing for it but to cut down more grass and make a new runway, so Andrée had to stay one more day.

That evening, Captain Maitland had much to tell him. He revealed that the renowned American adventurers Martin and Osa Johnson had made *Simba: King of the Beasts* – one of their famous films – in the area. The captain had a collection of photographs that Martin Johnson had taken when on safari expeditions with him.

The next morning, Maitland and Andrée made their way to the landing field and found *Sandvik* surrounded by natives. Maitland explained to Andrée that the plane had become an object of worship for the natives, and that their admiration likely extended to Andrée himself. Andrée showed his gratitude by handing out more razor blades, which the natives used as amulets and treasured as mementos of the “Magnificent Bird”.

Passing the Equator

Andrée took off at 0850 hours on October 10, 1929, and at 0928 hours he passed the Equator. Just afterward he saw Lake Victoria ahead and landed at Kisumu at 0950 hours.



Victoria Falls

Once again Andrée received the best imaginable hospitality. He went on an excursion to Lake Victoria, and the next day he set off for Tabora. This trip involved flying over difficult, featureless terrain, and he found it a challenge to navigate. A rail line from the Tanganyika Territory (now part of modern-day Tanzania) helped him find his way to Tabora. At the time, the town had 25,000 inhabitants, of which 150 were white.

His nearest goal was Abercorn (modern-day Mbala, Zambia), which lies at the southern tip of Lake Tanganyika.

This was a stretch of 525 kilometers (325 miles). The area consisted of a high plateau – which corresponded to *Sandvik's* highest altitude before Lake Tanganyika – which is 1,500 meters (4,900 ft.) above sea level. After that came Abercorn, at an altitude of 1,600 meters (5,300 ft.).

The most difficult leg began here. His goal was to reach Broken Hill – a 740-kilometer (450-mile) journey. Vast primeval forests reached up to skies filled with mists and haze. He had no landmarks, so he was completely dependent on his compass. At last he spied the Bangweolo Swamps. Suddenly a fierce forest fire appeared and the smoke compelled him to deviate from his course. He identified the rail line to N'Dola and was able to continue to Broken Hill, which at the time was a settlers' post close to the railway.

The next day he continued, following the landmark of the rail line, to Livingstone. The landscape was not very exciting, but that made it all the more thrilling to see the world's largest waterfall, Victoria Falls. The falls are formed by waters of the Chambeshi River, which at a width of almost 2 kilometers (1.25 miles) falls more than 100 meters (325 ft.) to an 80-meter (260-ft.) wide gorge. Thereafter the river rushes along a zigzag path through almost vertical banks, for about 65 kilometers (40 miles). A railway bridge was built near the falls, with a length of 198 meters (650 ft.).

Andrée took off again the next day, following the stick-straight rail line 410 kilometers (250 miles) to Bulawayo (in modern-day Zimbabwe), which at the time was already a fairly large city with American-style street networks and city blocks. Andrée found Bulawayo's shops and modern business districts to be comparable to those in European cities.

He started off again the next morning, at 07.35. Here, the rail line curved to the north, and Andrée wanted to avoid that route. He set a compass course first toward Gwanda and then West Nicholson (both in modern-day Zimbabwe). He remained right on course. By the compass he flew south toward Messina (now Musina, in South Africa), and far ahead he caught a glimpse of the enormous new railway bridge over the Limpopo River.

The high plains stretched to the Zoutpan Mountains, which are skirted by the rail line. Andrée wanted to fly straight ahead, just over the summit. The plains were blocked by low cloud cover and yet another summit. He searched in vain for a valley that would allow him to slink under the clouds. Not a chance! He pondered turning back, but the clouds had closed over his trail.

What to do? After flying half an hour back and forth, he spotted a valley where he could circumvent the clouds. The weather improved somewhat. He passed the hot-springs city of Warmbaths (now Bela-Bela, which means "boiling-boiling" in local language) in South Africa, and soon arrived at his destination: Pretoria. He landed at Zwartopf Airfield, seven kilometers (4.3 miles) south of the city. His journey covered 720 kilometers (450 miles) in six and a half hours. His average speed was 110 km/h (68 mph).

Nearing the goal

At the airfield, a large group of Swedes greeted him on his arrival. For Andrée this was an especially warm welcome. Of course, the Swedes were eager to hear news from home. The South African Air Force had its main base in Pretoria. As a result, Sandvik received a thorough inspection. The group that met Andrée included Swedish consul Gunnar Bergström and his wife; the couple had traveled from nearby Johannesburg to welcome Gösta. Sandviken's local representative, Mr. Davids, was also on hand. Such a kind

reception meant that Andrée needed to stay at least a few days to show his gratitude. This was the first time during his adventure that he had rested up without having to hurry away on the next leg of his voyage.

The next day, Mr. Davids took Andrée to the civilian airfield, where Johannesburg Aviation Club was preparing for an air day on the following Sunday, October 19. Gösta was introduced to the club's members, and learned more about the surprisingly large organization of 355 members (considering that the year was 1929). The South African Union had no less than eight aviation clubs, all part of the central organization Aeroclub of South Africa. This setup was similar to Sweden's aviation organization at the time. The clubs did not receive any support from the state; all activities and work were done by volunteers. At the time, there was a relatively large number of women in the club. This impressed Andrée. Many already had their pilot's license and even more were taking flying lessons.

Gösta enjoyed his visit to the airfield and it turned out to be a very successful air day for the club. From his perspective on the ground, Gösta could take in the aerobatic demonstrations. The air day included all that could be expected: advanced flying with a variety of aerobatics and competitions, as well as parachuting.

The following Monday, Gösta flew his plane to the club's field in Johannesburg. He was treated to lunch and speeches, and he also received a large bouquet of flowers from the consul's little girl Anna-Brita. He would remember this day with fondness.

The next day he left for Kimberley, a trip expected to take six hours and twenty minutes. Kimberley was an old diamond town. Here, he was met by Mr. T. Ericson, a Norwegian, who was disappointed that Andrée couldn't stay longer. Andrée promised to stop by again on his return journey.

Beaufort West was his next stop, but was difficult to find the airfield. After a while he saw a wet area with a large gas pump, so he landed there. An hour passed before a car came into view, with a smoking radiator and tires equipped with snow chains to navigate in the mud. By afternoon the rain was pouring down and it continued to do so through the night. The locals claimed it that it was the first time it had rained there in more than eight years.

The next day, the sun warmed up the wet landscape and fog hung over the countryside. It was irritating, but there was no way Gösta would be able to take off in the fog. It's understandable that he found it frustrating; this was his last leg before arriving at his goal, Cape Town. His hosts told him that if the sun continue to shine, the ground would be dry the next day – and they were right.

October 24, 1929: Cape Town

Andrée continued his journey over deserted country. The high mountains made for difficult piloting. He attempted to find a pass to cut through the mountain range. Hard, gusty winds bounced around *Sandvik* like a rubber ball. At times it seemed to Andrée that the safety harness barely kept him in place. These moments made him wonder whether he would ever reach the Cape, or even see Sweden again. But Andrée knew he could trust his skills as an aviator and adventurer. He swung in a new direction to find another, wider pass. He located the town of Ceres, and then the rail line. But another mountain remained in his way, at a height of 4,500 meters (14,700 ft.). Nevertheless, he could see his goal of the Cape Province in the distance. He descended rapidly to 50 meters (164 ft.) of altitude above the plains. Soon he spotted the southernmost city on the African continent: Cape Town.

Wynberg, as the airfield was called, was easy to locate. At ten past three in the afternoon, local time, on October 24, 1929, Gösta Andrée touched down.

He had completed the long journey from Stockholm to the Cape.

Even today this journey is an amazing feat, considering the fact that the aircraft and navigation technology of the time were still relatively primitive; in addition, the route could not have been easy. In truth, Andrée's adventure went quite smoothly despite all the difficulties along the way. Flying is sensitive to all kinds of conditions – especially in planes like *Sandvik*. Piloting a plane in 1929 without modern navigational devices was a triumph. But even if we take all these factors into account, perhaps the most important thing to remember is that Andrée had one special trait that helped him triumph over all the potential barriers: he was determined to succeed in everything he did. Imagine sitting alone in a fragile airplane made of wood and cloth, with a weak engine and flying at very low speed. The slightest change in wind and weather could be devastating. Flying over long stretches of water held its own dangers, as did negotiating mountain passes and valleys. Orientation and navigation were almost impossible when passing over unending forests.

Then there are numerous human factors that could spell disaster, especially in the 1920s. Insect bites, sunstroke, illness and fatigue were all part of the hardships of the journey. With great skill, Gösta Andrée succeeded in making one of the most arduous flying journeys attempted by any Swede. Still, the adventure was not over.

As one might expect, Andrée received a grand reception in Cape Town. He wrote in his book that the days he spent in Cape Town passed as if he were in a dream. The entire Swedish contingent in Cape Town was there to meet him when he landed. Consul General Halmar Rosenlund led the welcoming party and gave a speech. Gösta was extremely grateful, but after having just completed such a difficult journey, he was cold to the bone from his exposure at high altitudes. He found himself unable to respond to Rosenlund's words. A cup of hot tea in the flying club's station revived his good spirits. His joy over having arrived was immense, and he was tremendously proud of his trusty *Sandvik*.

On Tuesday, October 29, the city held a luncheon for Andrée. The occasion was presided over by the Mayor, Reverend A.J.S. Lewis. Gösta was greeted as an ambassador for his country. This adventure was not just a private endeavor for Andrée's own benefit; his feat was very important because of the many Swedish business interests in South Africa. He remained in Cape Town a few weeks, and during his entire stay he was treated with what he considered to be unparalleled hospitality and kindness.