■ Haste has been one serious cause of air accidents.

THE PRICE OF PRESTIGE

In 1930 aviation was just beginning to emerge from its turbulent adolescence. Only a quarter of a century had passed since the first powered aircraft had pulled itself free of the Kittihawk sands for twelve triumphant seconds. The childhood of flying had ended with the Great War when the stimulus of self-preservation had driven the warring nations to accelerate drastically the evolution of the flying machine.

After the breathing spell of the 'twenties the farsighted men in every nation saw that aviation was to be the international public transport of the future and that if claims were to be stalked, now was the time.

But if aircraft were to take over ocean liners, they would have to be stable, comfortable and economical. And to be truly economical they would have to be able to carry large numbers of passengers, far more than within the capacity of the largest airplanes then flying.

Britain, Germany and America had all reached the same conclusion. Each had its eyes on the glittering rewards that waited for the nation that could snatch first place in this new field of transport.

Germany, with its military Zeppelins, had established a lead in airship design during the war, but that had been lost in the chaos of defeat. Now, in 1930, it was known that the Germans were working on a vast new passenger-carrying dirigible.

In America the Goodyear Zeppelin Company had completed the world's largest hangar, an ominous portent of what the United States might produce.

The aviation hopes of Britain's first Socialist government were pinned on a sil-

ver-gleaming, cigar-shaped monster, the R101.

Particularly was it the pride of Ramsay Macdonald's handsome Secretary of State for Air, Lord Thomson. It had cost £1,000,000 of public money and it was going to demonstrate with the maximum of flourish that Britain would remain pre-eminent in international transport.

Inevitably the ambition of the policy-maker clashed with the caution of the technical experts.

The Minister had been largely responsible for the Government's decision to back an airship development program and he was determined that this brainchild should make the greatest possible impact. He conceived the idea of having the R101's maiden flight coincide with the Imperial Conference which was to be held in London in October 1930. The airship would make a round trip from England to Karachi, returning while the Conference was still in session. Thus would be demonstrated how Britain's air supremacy was binding the Empire ever closer together.

Later, Lord Thomson was to tell Wing Commander Colmore, Director of Airship development: "You must not allow my natural anxiety to start to influence you in any way." But during the preparation of R101 that same anxiety was made uncomfortably plain to the men working on the project. When, for instance, he was told that the experts wanted more time to nurse the great craft through its teething troubles, the Minister snapped: "I must insist on the program for the Indian flight being adhered to."

The experts had good reason to be concerned about the deadline that had been set for the airship's maiden flight. After one test flight a network of holes was found in the craft's hydrogen bags. The diesel engines that powered this, the biggest airship in the world, were believed by some to be dangerously heavy.

When Sir Sefton Brancker, Britain's Director of Civil Aviation expressed doubts about the wisdom of press-

ing ahead with the Indian flight, Lord Thomson told him: "If you're afraid to go – don't."

If the Minister himself had any reservations he certainly did not express them publicly. He boasted, indeed, that R101 was "as safe as a house, except for the millionth chance."

But the odds were, in fact, much shorter than that. Right up to the last minute an inspector had refused to give the 777 foot long airship the certificate of airworthiness needed for foreign flight. And when in the early evening of Saturday, October 4, 1930, the shrieking diesel engines lifted the airship's 166 ton bulk into the air at Cardington for the maiden flight, the R101 had been tested in her final form for only 17 hours under calm conditions and never at her full speed of 70 mph.

The man chosen to command the R101's historic flight was Britain's top airship ace, Major G. H. Scott. He had captained the R34 on the first trans-Atlantic flight in 1919 and had taken the R100, sister-ship of the R101, to Canada and back just a few months before the latter's maiden voyage. He had also been in charge of the trials of the R100 and the R101.

From the outset Scott was was left in no doubt about the tremendous importance Lord Thomson attached to the Indian flight and its coinciding with the Imperial Conference.

He was well aware, too, of the history of conflict leading up to the maiden flight, the experts' reservations, the Minister's determination.

He knew that in his hands had been placed the prestige of British aviation – more than that, the future of airship development, dependent as it was on government backing.

These were circumstances hardly conducive to the untroubled state of mind necessary to a man commanding a costly and virtually untried airship on a prestigious maiden voyage.

While the R101 was still over London something happened that contributed nothing to Scott's peace of

mind. Almost immediately after the take-off from Cardington there had been an unaccountabl lack of lift. Then gusting winds had made the airship pitch and roll in a way she had never done before. And now, as craning crowds packed the London streets, one of the after engines sputtered and died. Engineers clambered into the cramped engine gondola to carry out repairs and the R101 boomed sluggishly on towards the Channel.

In the luxurious, 60-foot, white and gold lounge of the airship aperitifs were being served to Lord Thomson. Sir Sefton Brancker and Lieutenant-Colonel V. C. Richmond, the designer of the R101. This was a foretaste of the comfort and elegance that future globe-trotters could expect.

Through the darkness the R101 droned over the southern countries while engineers tried to breathe life into the dead engines.

Even at this stage Scott might have been justify in taking his command back to Cardington.

The weather report that came crackling in over the airship's radio would, in conjunction with the engine defect and the craft's trial history, have certainly vindicated him had he decided to abandon the voyage then.

The distinguished passengers rose from their celebration dinner and went down to the fireproof smoking room to enjoy their cigars.

Now the gale was hammering at the airship. Ahead lay the width of the storm-tossed Channel. Now, if at all, was the time to turn back.

At that moment did Scott recall the words spoken just before take-off by the Air Ministry's airship expert, Wing Commander Colmore: "If she doesn't get back in time for the Imperial Conference, not only will there be no money for further airship work — it just won't be asked for."

The R101 pressed on into the howling darkness.

Over the Channel the engineers managed to restart the dead engine. A few minutes after midnight the R101 crossed the French coast.

At Poix Aerodrome between Abbeville and Beau-

vais, the duty officer heard the thunder of airship engines and rushed to the window. What he saw was frightening. The R101 was crossing the airfield at no more than 300 feet.

At 2 a.m. lights flashed on in the town of Beauvais and people rushed into the streets to see the giant shape roar overhead.

Five minutes later the R101 suddenly angled into an uncontrollable dive and crashed, bursting into flames, near Beauvais Ridge.

Forty-six men were killed outright, including all those responsible for the creation of the R101. Eight emerged from the wreckage. Two of them died from their injuries.

The flames that consumed the R101 destroyed Britain's faith in airships.

With the clarity of hindsight it is easy to say that Scott made the wrong decision, that considerations of politics and prestige should not have weighed with him for an instant. Indeed, the court of inquiry into the crash concluded that, had those responsible been entirely free to choose the time and the weather for the voyage and if the only considerations had been those of metereology and preparation, the R101 would not have started when she did.

The R101 flew when she did because reasons of public policy made it highly desirable that this should be. That the instrument of public policy should have been a man of such dynamism and determination as Lord Thomson made the need to press on all the more compelling. — *David Ettrick, Variety, July* 18, 1965.

ROUTINE

> Routine is the god of every social system; it is the seventh heaven of business, the essential component in the success of every factory, the ideal of every statesman... Unless society is permeated, through and through, with routine, civilization vanishes. — *Alfred North Whitehead* in *Adventures of Ideas.*