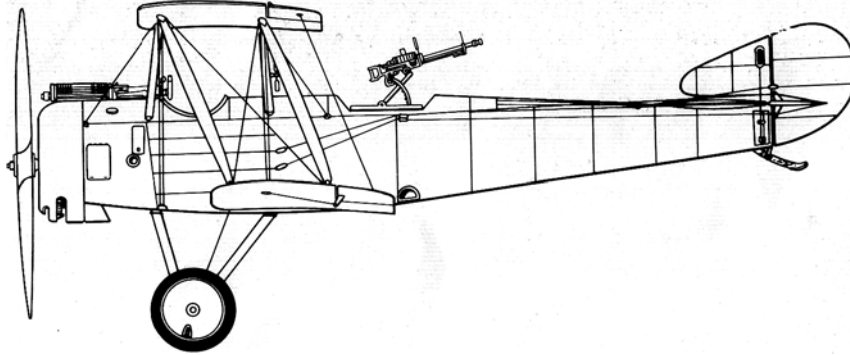


# *The Sopwith 1½ Strutter*

## *An Appreciation Of A British Two-Seat Fighter*



**By Derek White**

In 1915 the Vickers FB.5 'Gunbus' had proved reasonably successful despite lack of speed and a temperamental engine. The F.E. series continued the progress of pusher fighters but they were so vulnerable when attacked from the rear and below. A manoeuvrable tractor aeroplane with a fixed, synchronised gun, firing through the airscrew disc and one or two flexible guns for the observer-gunner, was to be the pattern for many years to come.

At the opportune moment, the end of 1915, the Sopwith designer Herbert Smith's latest creation, the prototype Admiralty Sopwith Type 9400, rolled out of the Kingston Works. The pushers and the Nieuport *Bébé* had proved to be capable of dealing with the Fokker and Pfalz *eindekkers*, as later the D.H.2 single-seat pusher did, but the new fighters, soon to be known as the '1½ Strutter', was markedly superior to any current German aeroplanes due principally to two features which became available at exactly the right moment. Both were concerned with armament, firstly synchronising systems for the pilot's Vickers machine gun (when these guns became available, for they were in short supply). These were the Vickers-Challenger, the Scarff-Dibovski, the Sopwith-Kauper and the Ross. Secondly, the excellent Scarff No.2 ring for the observer-gunner's Lewis machine gun. Occasionally an extra Lewis was fitted on the top wing. A variable incidence tailplane afforded allowance for the gunner's weight.

With this up-to-date armament, an endurance of up to eight hours, a ceiling of up to 16,000 feet and good flying characteristics, the aeroplane was to prove an excellent fighter, especially an escort fighter. The only problem was a degree of heaviness of control, which led to some lack of manoeuvrability in combat; on the credit side, the 'Strutter' was fitted with air-brake panels at the roots of the lower wings, which must have been very useful, especially when using some of the small and tight landing grounds on the Western Front.

First examples ordered by the Admiralty served from 24 April 1916 with 1, 3 and 5 Wings of the RNAS, in the Dunkirk area. The 'Strutters' of 3 Wing did sterling service as escort fighters to British and French bombers and scored their only victories; on 25 October 1916 FSL Raymond Collishaw had the better of two scouts, probably Fokker D.IIIs, one of which was destroyed and one downed out-of-control. Then on 2 February 1917, FSL J.E. Sharman sent one Fokker down out-of-control. By the time 8 Squadron RNAS was formed, it flew 'Strutters' very briefly – only 21 days in October-November 1916.

Meanwhile, in the Spring of 1916, No.70 Squadron RFC had been the first one to equip with 'Strutter' fighters, between May and July, in response to Major-General Trenchard's appeal for

more strength to cover the demands of the Somme offensive. The source for these was a batch of Sopwiths transferred by the Admiralty from RNAS contracts. These were operational until the end of 1917, when the squadron re-equipped with Sopwith F.1 'Camels'.

On 6 August 1916 W.D.S. Sanday, with his observer-gunner Lt Busk, forced two Albatros C-types to land, and on 6 September the same crew destroyed a Roland C.II 'Walfische' of *Kampfstaffel 1* in flames. These victories were shared with other crews. Eight months later, on 4 May 1917, K.G. Seth-Smith claimed an Albatros D.III out-of-control.

The next squadron to equip with 'Strutters' was No.45, on 15 October 1916. The new Halberstadt and Albatros single-seaters had arrived in increasing numbers but in 1917, 45 Squadron 'Strutter' crews fought with such courage that they achieved the amazing total of at least 50 or more victories, some shared, and most of them over single-seat scouts. Albatros C.IIIs, D.IIIs and D.Vs, a Siemens Schuckert D.I and DFW Cs; all these types are included in the list. This performance made 45 by far the most successful 1½ Strutter equipped squadron before 'Camels' took over at the end of 1917. Well known aces who figured included M.B. Frew, G.H. Cook and Norman MacMillan.

Last on the scene was 43 Squadron, arriving on 17 January 1917. Between that date and September, when 'Camels' succeeded them, the 'Strutters' won at least four victories. The most famous name involved was H.H. Balfour (later Lord Balfour of Inchrye) who, in the Spring of 1917, drove down a Halberstadt D.II out-of-control and destroyed an Albatros D.III in flames. The fact that, from the Autumn of 1916, the German two-seaters were superior fighters, shows what a fine machine was the obsolescent 'Strutter' and how skilled as well as brave its crews, who never faltered as their losses mounted.



Lt Harold H. Balfour of 43 Squadron, later Lord Balfour of Inchrye. Derek White



Sopwith 1½ Strutter serial A993 of 43 Squadron, being inspected by German troops after being brought down behind enemy lines on 28 April 1917. The crew, 2Lt C.M. Reece and his observer, 2AM A. Moulton were engaged on a line patrol between Lens and Neuvireuil and forced to land at Roncy, where they were both taken prisoner.

This raises two interesting questions which, as far as I am aware, have not been posed before. In the middle of the period of the war covered above, a well known event occurred. In the very first patrol of the new Bristol Fighter on 5 April 1917, six F2as of 48 Squadron RFC were met by five

Albatros D.IIIs of *Jasta 11*. Four Bristols were shot down, and more were lost during April and May before the tide was turned. The initial failure was entirely due to tactical mismanagement. Despite training in England and France, including a delay hoping to make an impact by first use of the new type at the opening of the Arras offensive, the F2as had been flown like two-seat reconnaissance or bomber aeroplanes, namely defensively instead of offensively. Richthofen and his men attacked them in the way they always attacked two-seaters, closing rapidly under the tail. The turn around, when the Bristols proved their worth, has often been attributed to the arrival of the F2b. This is not correct; the redemption started as early as 20 days after, on 30 April 1917, when another patrol of F2as fought their way out of a tight situation without loss. In July a substantial order was implemented and improvements suggested by operational experience were subsequently to make the F2b an even more effective fighting machine.

The above prompts my questions. The first of these is:

***Who was responsible for sending a young man who had neither command experience nor service on the Western Front, to lead a patrol of brand new fighters?***

The recently promoted Captain William Leefe Robinson was not the squadron C.O., that position was filled by Major A.V. Bettington. But Robinson had been awarded the Victoria Cross for his first and only victory, over the SL.11 airship, and was a public hero because this occurred in the sight of thousands of Londoners.

The fact that Bettington permitted this extraordinary selection strongly suggests that two possible influences were involved. One was a politician and his false priority of public fancy over professional, military expertise. The fact that this nameless person was able to dictate not only to Bettington, but to Major-General Hugh Trenchard, indicates that he must have been a man of great influence. Another possibility is that Bettington was given orders of which Trenchard was deliberately not made aware, before the squadron left England. Naval and military disasters have often been due to the interference of politicians. Perhaps significantly, neither Maurice Baring (Trenchard's aide) nor Andrew Boyle (Trenchard's biographer) make any reference whatever to 5 April incident in their books *Royal Flying Corps Headquarters* and *Trenchard – Man Of Vision*.

My second question is:

***Would the appointment to 48 Squadron of an experienced 'Strutter' pilot, such as Sanday or Balfour, have made any difference?***

We shall never know, but they could hardly have done any worse!

Although the service of the 'Strutter' as a fighter and bomber ended in 1917, its qualities were such that it continued to serve in many capacities with the Army and Navy, until the end of the war and afterwards. This was particularly so in home defence, and in experiments in launching aircraft from capital ships and cruisers, and especially with the development of the aircraft-carrier.

About 6,000 of the type were built by the British and French, and they were used by five nations' air services – Britain, France, Belgium, Russia and the United States of America. Only one example survived for any length of time post-war, but this was truly a praiseworthy aeroplane with a profound influence on the development of naval and military aviation.

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