

THE FELIXSTOWE FLYING-BOATS

HISTORIC MILITARY AIRCRAFT, No. 11 (PART 2)

J. M. BRUCE, M.A.

THE production version of the F.2 was designated F.2A. It had more powerful marks of the Rolls-Royce Eagle engine, and incorporated a number of refinements. From the operational point of view, one of its greatest assets was its good defensive armament. The design of the hull was such that two Lewis guns could be fitted, one on each side of the hull behind the wings. Each gun was mounted on a bracket which could be swung outboard through a side hatch; from that position the guns' fire could converge at a point only twenty feet behind the rudder. Further guns were mounted on the bow and upper rear cockpits. A bomb load of 460 lb could be carried, with fuel for eight hours at cruising speed; without bombs, flight endurance could be extended to ten hours.

Production F.2As began to appear late in 1917. Their appearance had been delayed by an official decision to replace the original 23in-diameter gun ring by one of 20in: this necessitated structural changes which held up production. The type was

THIS is the second instalment of Mr. Bruce's article on a famous family of World War I flying-boats. Part I appeared on December 2nd.

One of the many exploits of No. 8666 of Great Yarmouth air station was the destruction of L.22 on May 14th, 1917; and No. 8677 of Felixstowe shot down L.43 exactly one month later.

It seemed reasonable to assume that even more successes might be scored by the F.2As, since they could be flown in sea conditions beyond the capabilities of the H.12s.

In July 1917 the Government decided to double the size of the flying Services. Some two months previously, the estimated number of flying-boats of the Large America type required to carry out the 1918 programme had been set at 180, but that number was increased to 426. The average life of one of the big boats was estimated to be six months. This meant that 852 aircraft would be required to maintain the establishment of 426 throughout a period of twelve months. Not even the simplicity of the Porte system of construction could permit production on that scale in the time available. The situation was relieved when the U.S. Navy Department agreed to equip five seaplane stations; it was also decided that the 60 flying-boats needed for the Mediterranean area should be built at Malta. The establishments of English stations were reduced, whereupon the required number of Large Americas was correspondingly reduced from 426 to 234. (In March 1918, orders for the F.2A had totalled 161; and for the later F.3, 263. Of these, only ten F.2As and one F.3 were in service at that time.)

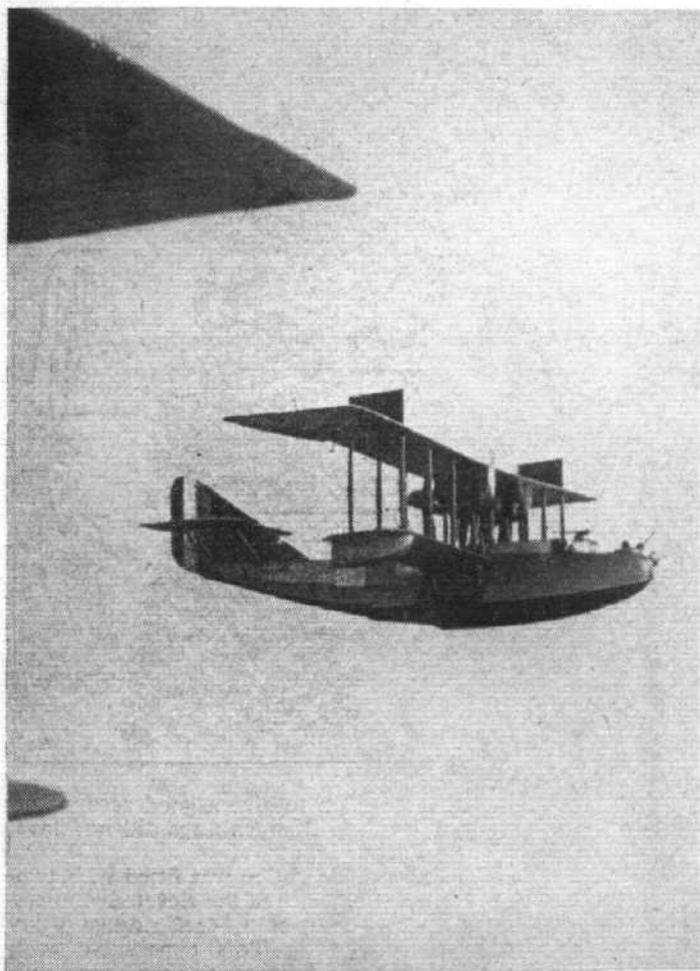
But even the reduced figure of 234 was never realized. Demands for Rolls-Royce engines so far exceeded the supply that it was estimated that only 170 Large Americas could be completed by the end of May 1918. In point of fact, only 104 had been delivered by that date. These difficulties may have been responsible for the rebuilding of several H.12s with Porte-type hulls and F-boat tail units. When modified in this way they were indistinguishable from F.2As and could be identified only by their serial numbers. They were frequently—and officially—described as F.2As.

Despite the fact that F.2As were never very numerous, the type is now the best-remembered of the war-time F-boats. That this is so is probably attributable to the fact that it was a better aircraft than the later F.3, and because the F.5 appeared too late to go into operational use before the Armistice. Furthermore, more than one writer appeared to regard all F-boats as F.2As, and some narratives have consequently to be treated with a certain amount of reserve.

One of the first F.2As to be delivered to the R.N.A.S. station at Great Yarmouth was N.4511, which arrived there in the first week of February 1918. In common with many of its kind, N.4511 had trouble with its fuel system. A partially choked petrol pipe delayed its take-off on February 5th, 1918, for a patrol to Terschelling; when the boat did become airborne, fabric stripped off one of the blades of the starboard airscrew, and the vibration sent the F.2A down to a hurried landing.

The same boat took off on the same patrol on February 16th, but one hour out from base a clogged filter in the gravity tank

"Despite the fact that F.2As were never very numerous, the type is now the best-remembered of the wartime F-boats." In the lower view is an F.2A with open cockpits, sometimes known as the F.2B.



popularly known, like the Curtiss H.12 before it and the F.3 after it, as the Large America. This indiscriminate use of the name makes it difficult to distinguish one type from another in the narratives of the actions in which the big boats participated so gallantly.

Despite its shortcomings, the Curtiss H.12 had clearly established the case for big flying-boats. The famous "Spider Web" patrol flown by the boats of Felixstowe air station was begun by H.12s. On April 13th, 1917, the Curtiss H.12 No. 8661 made the first patrol over the octagonal figure which, centred on the North Hinder Light Vessel, effectively and drastically hampered the depredations of enemy submarines in the four thousand square miles of sea covered by the patrol. By the end of the month the H.12s had made 27 patrols, in the course of which they sighted eight enemy submarines and bombed three, and had an engagement with German destroyers. The patrol's first victim was the submarine U.C.36, which was sunk on May 20th, 1917, by an H.12 (Flt. Sub-Lts. C. R. Morrish and H. G. Boswell).

Zeppelins, too, fell to the attacks of the Curtiss Large Americas.

