

Scout C No. 1255, first landplane to be deck-launched, being hoisted on to the flying deck of H.M.S. "Vindex."

THE BRISTOL SCOUT . . .

The first British landplane to fly from the deck of a carrier vessel was the Bristol Scout No. 1255. In the hands of Flt. Lt. H. F. Towler, it took off from the flying deck of H.M.S. *Vindex* on November 3, 1915. This vessel, of 2,900 tons and capable of 22 kt, was the modified and renamed Isle of Man passenger steamer *Viking*; she was commissioned in September 1915. *Vindex* could accommodate one small and four large seaplanes aft, and two single-seat landplane scouts forward. A flying-off deck and hangar were provided for the scouts, but space was so limited that they had to be carried dismantled in the hangar. H.M.S. *Vindex* was the first of the smaller aircraft carriers to be fitted with a flying deck.

The only visible modification to the Bristol Scout was the addition of slinging gear above the centre section. This was necessary not only for possible retrieval of the aircraft, but also because the hangar on *Vindex* was at a lower level than the flying deck, and the Scouts had to be hoisted up to the deck by one of the ship's derricks. The Scout which Towler flew on November 3 had been one of the first to be delivered, some six months earlier, to No. 2 Wing, R.N.A.S., Eastchurch.

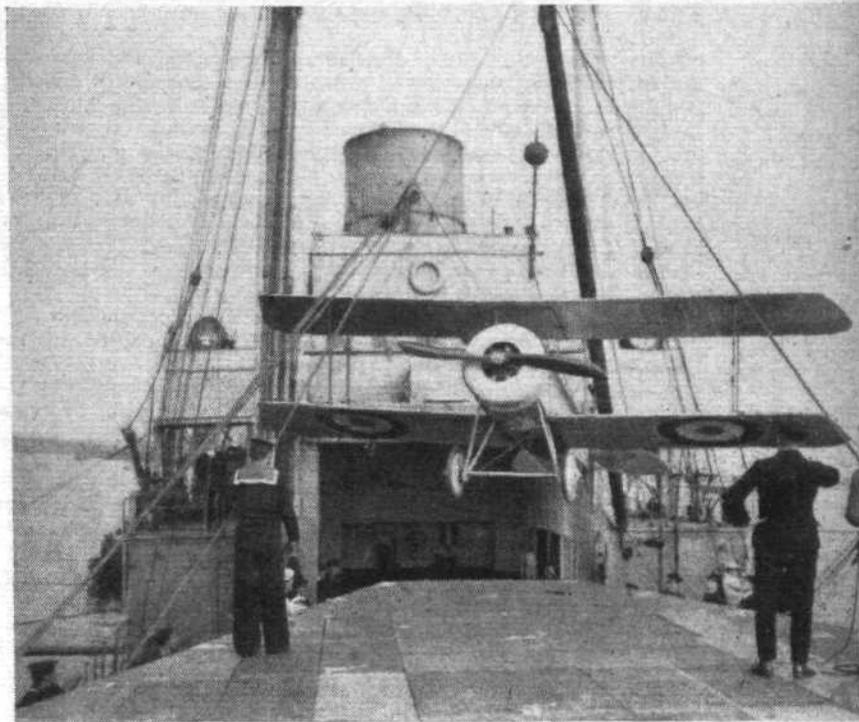
The proven ability of the Bristol Scout to take off from a carrier vessel at sea immediately increased its potential efficacy as an anti-Zeppelin aircraft. That capability was not put to the test until August 2, 1916, however. After Jutland it was obvious that the German fleet would be unable to put to sea again for some time. It was therefore expected that naval Zeppelins, having reduced fleet-reconnaissance commitments, would resume their attacks on British cities. H.M.S. *Vindex* was ordered on July 29 to be ready to put to sea at one hour's notice during the hours of darkness, so that her aircraft might have an opportunity of attacking raiding airships.

When news was received that an attack was expected on August 2, *Vindex* put out from Harwich. A Zeppelin was sighted, and just before 7 p.m. Flt. Lt. C. T. Freeman took off from *Vindex* in a Bristol Scout. Whilst seeking his quarry, he saw two other Zeppelins, one ten miles and the other twenty miles away. He flew towards the nearer, succeeded in getting into position 500ft above the airship, and emptied a container of Ranken darts on to it. The darts missed. Freeman again attacked, dropping half a container of darts, which were successfully avoided by the Zeppelin. Although under fire from a machine-gun on top of the airship, Freeman made a third attack with his remaining Ranken darts. At least one of the missiles struck the Zeppelin, which emitted a puff of smoke, dropped 3,000ft, but failed to catch fire. It made off eastwards, and Freeman set course for *Vindex*.

The Bristol's engine refused to pick up, and Freeman was obliged to come down on the sea near the North Hinder light-vessel. His Scout was fitted with air-bags, which kept it afloat, but the weight of the engine gradually pulled the nose down, and Freeman was fortunate to be rescued by a Belgian ship. It is believed that he was flying a Scout D, the development of which will be discussed later, and that his enforced descent was caused by loss of fuel.

The Ranken dart was briefly described in Part IV of the history of the Sopwith Tabloid, Schneider and Baby (*Flight*, November 29, 1957, p. 845). The darts were stowed in canisters which held 24 and could be released three at a time. Those R.N.A.S. Bristol Scouts which were armed with Ranken darts had two canisters mounted directly under the pilot's seat.

Freeman's experience did nothing to promote confidence in the effectiveness of the Ranken dart as an anti-airship weapon. The immediate consequence of his action was that all the aircraft carried by H.M.S. *Vindex* were forthwith fitted with machine-guns. Of greater significance, however, was Freeman's proof of the potential usefulness of the carrier-borne aeroplane as an anti-Zeppelin weapon. It would not be too much to say that his abortive combat sealed the fates of the Zeppelins L.23 and L.53, shot



down on August 21, 1917, and August 11, 1918, respectively, by aeroplanes which took off from seaborne platforms.

Some months before Freeman's combat, one of *Vindex*'s Bristol Scouts C (No. 3028) had participated in a remarkable R.N.A.S. experiment which aimed at providing an effective means of combating enemy airships. As described in the history of the Felixstowe flying-boats (*Flight*, December 2, 1955, p. 845) the Bristol was mounted above the upper wing of a Porte Baby flying-boat. Its wheels rested in crutches attached to the Porte's central engine; its tailskid was held by a quick-release catch operated by its own pilot. Superficially the combination resembled the Short-Mayo Composite Aircraft of twenty years later. It was totally different in principle, however, for the Scout's rôle was purely passive: it was carried into the air with engine off by the flying-boat, contributing no power and probably little lift to the combination. With Flt. Lt. M. J. Day at the controls of the Scout and Sqn. Cdr. Porte himself flying the Baby, a successful separation was made at 1,000ft over Felixstowe.

It is not known why the experiment was never repeated. Possibly the weight of the Scout deprived the flying-boat of so much fuel that it would not have a worthwhile range and would therefore be unable to transport its Scout to areas where Zeppelins would be most likely to be found.

British output of aeroplanes increased steadily throughout 1915: total production from August 1914 to June 30, 1915, amounted to 902 aircraft; in the next three months 692 were built, and in the final quarter of 1915 output totalled 948. Production of engines increased in similar fashion, but was beset with difficulties. Britain was making Gnome engines, both the 80 h.p. and the 100 h.p. Monosoupape, in 1914, but looked to France for certain supplies, notably aircraft and engines. In June 1915, France threatened to stop these supplies because Britain had failed to maintain her deliveries to France of 15 per cent of the total British output of Lewis guns. Fortunately the British government was able to give an adequate reassurance to our ally, and deliveries of the 108 complete aeroplanes and 176 engines then outstanding from British orders placed in France were not delayed.

Deliveries of the 80 h.p. Le Rhône engine did not commence until the early summer of 1915. By the end of June that year, 23 had been delivered, but only 30 more arrived during the next three months. The 80 h.p. Gnome powered a number of the early British aircraft, but by the end of June 1915 output of that

(Left) Scout C with fairing in front of cockpit, seen at Isle of Grain. The fairing might have housed a machine-gun. (Right) Scout C. No. 3028 mounted on upper wing of Porte Baby flying boat. A successful separation was achieved.

