

# SOPWITH BABYS IN NORWAY

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Photographs courtesy of Stein Gulli, Ingvald Hansen, Johan E. Høver, Viggo Widerøe

On 29 April 1917 while off Heligoland on its first operational sortie, accompanying a minelaying force, HMS *Manxman* sent off two of its Sopwith Pup land planes on anti-Zeppelin patrol. Neither pilot met with any success; Pup 9920 force-landed in the sea and was picked up by the destroyer HMS *Patrician*, but F/Cdr F.J. Rutland in 9918 lost contact with the vessel and was forced to ditch his aircraft in the sea off the coast of Jutland. F/Cdr Rutland avoided internment via Sweden and Norway and before returning to England was some time later to be found in Oslo as guest of their Majesties King Haakon and Queen Maud. While in Norway F/Cdr Rutland also visited the Naval base at Horten, south of Oslo, to investigate the status of the Norwegian Naval Air Force, *Marinens Flyvevesen* (abbr. MF).

Once back in England F/Cdr Rutland recommended that the MF should be permitted to purchase some modern fighter aircraft (Norway being neutral during the first World War), and to train some of their personnel in England. At that time the MF was equipped mostly with Farman aircraft.

During the early Summer of 1917, the Norwegian Naval officers H. Riiser-Larsen (later to become famous as a Polar pilot and Admiral) and E.A. Horgen visited England to research into the purchase of modern aircraft for the MF and to receive training on modern seaplanes. At the Admiralty the officers met Commodore Godfrey Paine, who made an almost sovereign decision – that Norway should have ten fighter aircraft, they being of more use to the Allied cause in Norway than in England.

Why did the Norwegians receive such a positive reaction for a country that needed all its aircraft for its own war effort? The answer is probably that in moving these fighters to Norway, it would better be prepared to stop German U-boats passing through Norwegian waters unchallenged, and on the inside of the belt of mines that was laid out across the North Sea. Ten Sopwith Babys, equipped with 130hp Clerget engines, were sold to Norway at a price of £2400 each. The first four aircraft arrived not long afterwards, in the late summer of 1917. The remaining six arrived in 1918. They were designated the MF serial numbers F.100 to F.118 (The MF used only even numbers, while the Army Air Force used odd numbers). The Babys were not surprisingly very popular with the pilots who had flown the old Farmans and were used for a lot of aerobatic flying.

On 26 November 1917 three Babys held an air display over Oslo to honour Queen Maud on her birthday.

Most of the Babys operated from the base at Horten; but also for a short while at Haugesund, a strategic port on the West coast of Norway. Unfortunately this was too late to fulfill the aircraft's original purpose of stopping German U-boats. Kristiansand on the South coast of Norway also

was home to one or two Babys for several years. There were also short-term detachments to several other coastal towns.

As early as in September 1918 the first crash involving a Sopwith Baby occurred. In total the Norwegian Sopwith Babys had ten serious accidents, but only one of these resulted in the loss of the pilot's life. One might ask how the MF could crash all ten of its ten aircraft and keep operating. In fact the MF's own aircraft factory made exact drawings of the aircraft with Norwegian text and rebuilt the wrecks. In reality there was sometimes very little of the original aircraft that could be used in the rebuilt model, but it still kept its original F serial number.

In 1923 F.104 participated in an expedition to Spitsbergen. This was to support another expedition in which Roald Amundsen was planning to fly over the North Pole in a Junkers F-13. The expedition was a failure and F.104 made only a few flights over Spitsbergen. In 1928 F.100 and F.102 were sent to Spitsbergen on board the Heavy Cruiser KNM *Tordenskjold* to take part in the search for Amundsen and fellow explorer Lief Dietrichsen who, in a French Latham 47 flying boat with its four man crew had vanished over Arctic waters during their search for Umberto Nobile's airship *Italia*. Several aircraft participated but the result was unsuccessful.

Norwegian Babys were, for experimental purposes, flown with wheeled undercarriage, with floats, and with skis on snow and ice. A very smooth touchdown was found to be absolutely necessary when landing with floats on ice.

All these tests were successful. Additionally, two Babys were for a short time modified as side by side two-seaters and used by the flying school at Horten. In December 1931 the last Sopwith Baby was finally struck off charge. The type flew a total of approximately 1500 hours in Norwegian service. Unfortunately none of the aircraft are in existence today.

Above: An interesting line-up at Horten in 1922 showing the three types of undercarriage used on Sopwith Babys in Norway.

Below: Landing or take-off on ICE! Karljohansvern harbour.

