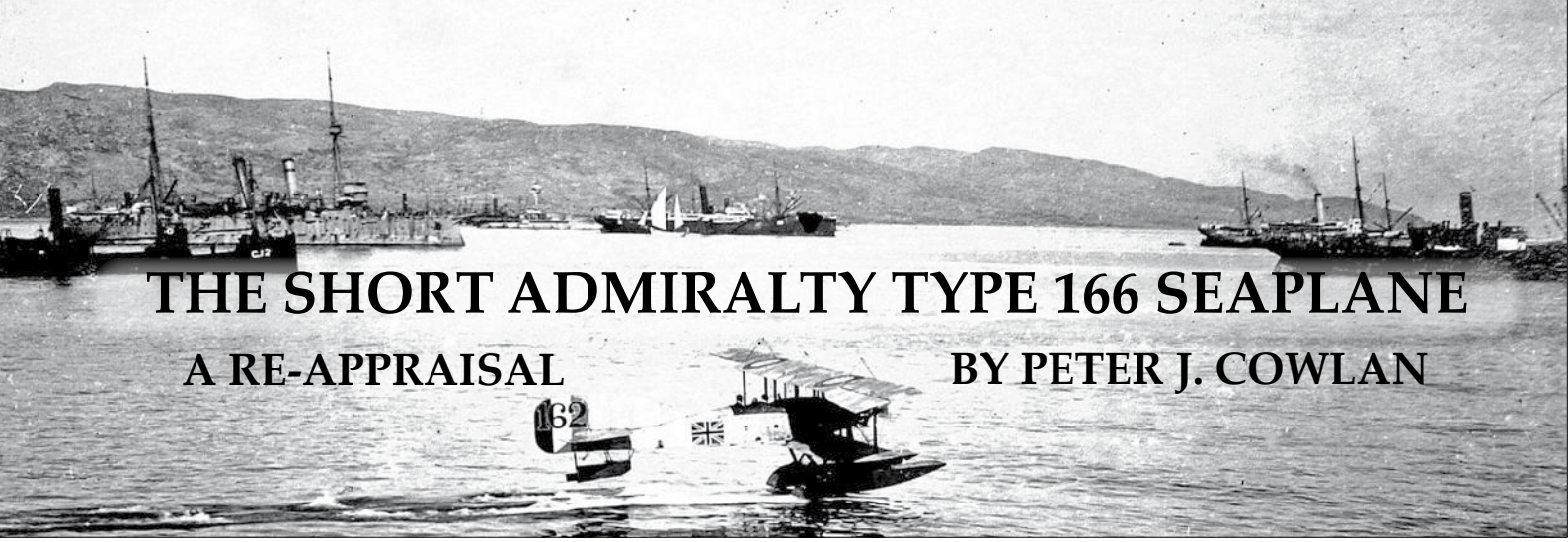

THE SHORT ADMIRALTY TYPE 166 SEAPLANE

A RE-APPRAISAL

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The following is an attempt to shed some light on these aircraft and to correct some inaccuracies that have been perpetuated over the years. I have also tried to clarify the various distinctions between the Type 166 and other similar Short seaplanes of the period. In addition, I have attempted to highlight the type of work these somewhat overlooked aircraft performed throughout the First World War. The designation applied to these aircraft can indeed be somewhat ambiguous, depending on which publication one consults, and this can indeed lead to confusion. Some publications suggest Type A, others, Type C. Sopwith also produced a Type C seaplane, thus introducing another layer of possible confusion. Therefore, throughout this article, I have used the Admiralty system of nomenclature, referring to these aircraft as the Type 166; the construction numbers of the original six Short built machines being S90-S95.

Destined initially to operate from a totally new type of naval vessel, the purpose built seaplane carrier HMS *Ark Royal*, the Short Type 166 can be deemed with some justification a forgotten type, serving mainly in a theatre where the water-borne aeroplane was a victim of conditions it was destined never to completely overcome. History has judged the Dardanelles and Gallipoli campaigns as failures: this, according to some military historians was to a large degree due to the failure of the seaplanes to do their job successfully. Central to this task was *Ark Royal* and her aircraft, the first of the new 166s being delivered in April 1915 in an attempt to reinforce the hard-pressed machines already operating from her. Being equipped with the same 200hp Salmson Canton-Unné 2M7 engine fitted to the best performing aircraft on board at that time – Short *136,* the ex-Cuxhaven machine – it was hoped that this newer type would be able to provide the necessary increase in efficiency; sadly, this was not always to be the case. The mysteries of hydro-dynamics, coupled with the borderline performance of their engines, were both contributory factors in the sometimes less than satisfactory operation of these machines. Curiously, of the descriptions frequently found regarding these aircraft – and not just in contemporary publications – one of the most common is when they are referred to as 'old' or indeed 'ancient' seaplanes. The following quote about the machines operating from *Ark Royal* highlights this oft-held conviction.

Marder [Arthur J. Marder, writing in the 1960s] condemned the seaplanes as *inferior* and *early types*. Of course they were 'early types' – the first British seaplane had flown only four years previously. As to inferiority, one must ask: Inferior to what? These craft were 'state of the art' in early 1915. No superior types existed.[1]

Over the years there has been much time and effort dedicated in attempting to de-cipher various anomalies regarding the identity of early types of Short seaplanes, especially in respect of construction and serial numbers – most notably by Gordon Bruce. It is therefore surprising that inaccuracies concerning just three types of Short seaplane are still propagated. Numbers alone have no doubt helped to ensure the Type 166s relative anonymity; a mere 26 being manufactured against 116 Type 827/830s, (plus another ten if a later variant is included) and over 900 Type 184s. Unfortunately, there is not an overabundance of detailed photographic material to draw on for the purposes of research but there is enough available to be able to highlight the distinctions between the 166 and its contemporaries.

First and foremost, the most commonly found error is mistaking the 166 for its bigger cousin the Type 184. This is on the face of it hard to fathom but, at the same time, somewhat understandable. Both are of course large – some might say clumsy – two seat biplanes equipped with floats, and similarly both feature Shorts iconic box like radiator mounted somewhat incongruously directly in the pilot's eye-line, so to a layperson they could indeed be one and the same. The Short 184 had by far the longest service life of any British seaplane in WWI so therefore is understandably the most well-known. The fact that it was also the first aircraft to successfully attack an enemy ship with a torpedo has further cemented its place in history. However, its slightly smaller cousin the 166 should not be overlooked for although built in fewer numbers it too did important, albeit unglamorous work, both in the Aegean as well as home waters.

The most obvious difference between the two is the fact that the Type 184 – more commonly known as the 225, on account of the horsepower rating of its original engine – was only ever powered by an in-line V12 power-plant (there is the possibility that one 184 was fitted with a Salmson Canton-Unné 2M7 radial). Its wings, of three bay construction, were of equal span – apart from a few variants – whereas the span of the lower wing on the 166 was some fifteen feet shorter overall. The aircraft most often and most easily mistaken for the 166 are the slightly smaller Short Types 827 and 830. This is somewhat easier to understand although the 827, as with the 184, was always fitted with an in-line engine, this time the smaller Sunbeam V8. But it is the Type 830 that is by far the aircraft most commonly misidentified as the 166, and of course, vice versa. This is much more understandable mainly on account of the type also being powered by the Salmson Canton-Unné water cooled radial engine.

Even well-known reference books on the subject can be confusing in their descriptions of Short seaplanes. Owen Thetford's *British Naval Aircraft 1912-58*, correctly describes the 830 as having a *Salmson water-cooled radial as in the Type 166*. This of course is quite correct but it omits one very important fact; the engine fitted to the 830 was a single row nine cylinder – as in the earlier solitary Short 135 – whereas that fitted to the 166 was a two row fourteen cylinder 2M7 unit.

Confusion can of course arise from the fact that all four