

# THE PORTE BABY



by Colin Owers

**T**here was the boat called the *Porte Baby*, a bigger machine than any built and flown in this country until 1918, and this boat was produced in 1915 and flown in 1916. Although it did little useful active service work, it set other designers to thinking, and was the father and mother of all big British aeroplanes and seaplanes. When fully loaded it weighed about eight and a half tons, but no scales big enough to weigh it were obtainable in the service<sup>1</sup>... so Squadron Leader Theodore D. Hallam or *Pix*, described the *Porte Baby*.

According to Cdre Murray F. Sueter RNAS, the building of this large experimental flying boat...was carried out during the same period as the three series of experimental modifications on the Curtiss machines, and the experience obtained thereby was both incorporated and confirmed by the 'Porte' flying boat.<sup>2</sup> The experiments referred to were made by Cdr John Cyril Porte at Felixstowe with various types of hulls fitted with Curtiss wings and tail units, the first tested being a modified Curtiss America, serial 950, from the first batch purchased by the Admiralty. While the experience gained from these hulls (950 and 3545/3569) was incorporated in the *Baby's* hull, it was not possible to take advantage of the results from the *Porte I*<sup>3</sup> (later designated F.1 3580). This latter hull was to be developed into the successful Felixstowe series of flying boats. At the time Porte was carrying out his experiments he was also building the *Baby* [9800] and it was completed before the results of the F.1 experiments were known.<sup>4</sup>

Two views of *Baby* 9800 showing the two tractor motors with two-bladed airscrews and the pusher motor with a four-bladed propeller. A cockade is painted only under the starboard upper wing and extends over the aileron.

## GENESIS

The origin of the *Baby* is not as clear cut as this would suggest, as photographs which appeared in the journal *Flight* for 21 September 1916, and *Janes All the World's Aircraft* for 1917, depict what appears to be the *Porte* machine but is identified as a Curtiss 'Super-America' flying boat that was capable of rising from and alighting on, very rough seas. The boat was equipped with three high-powered Curtiss motors that were installed in pusher configuration.<sup>5</sup> No mention of this boat as a Curtiss product is found in Bowers' *Curtiss Aircraft 1907-1947*, however a drawing of a three engine pusher flying boat labelled the Curtiss three-engine Cruiser was published in a contemporary book.<sup>6</sup> So many features of this 'Curtiss' boat were common to the *Baby* that it is probably the *Baby* in its original form. Notwithstanding the origin of this flying boat, it was an important step in the development of the large flying boat as a weapon of war.<sup>7</sup>

According to Major W.F. Vernon 'H.M.S. *Baby*' was designed in 1914 and launched in 1915, while the Felixstowe Daily Reports for 19 November 1915, records that the 'triple-engined America' was launched but no flight attempted owing to trouble with Sunbeam motors.<sup>8</sup> The flying boat that emerged was the largest built to that time in the UK, and perhaps the world, so it was automatically dubbed the *Porte 'Baby'* although referred to as the *Porte Flying Boat* in the official publication *Types of British Seaplanes*. The serial

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