

The Story behind a Photograph

Finding a photo of an airplane with neatly folded wings on board of a steamer. A military man posing in front of it as if it is the most normal thing in the world; an aeroplane as cargo... What is the story of this photo? What is the history of this aeroplane? How much information is still available?

As a volunteer at Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum in Mdina, Malta, I help out in matters concerning photography. In November 2019 I was asked to scan and digitise photos believed to have been made by Olof Frederick Gollcher in the period of World War I. One of those photographs was this one.



-fig. 01

Photograph OFG 182

Scan of original print.

*Apparently a ship at sea in rough weather.
But what is that structure on the deck?*

At first glance it was to me just another photoprint to scan. But once opened in my computer to enlarge and save for digital purposes, I realised this was something odd: A ship's deck, in rough weather conditions and on that deck was a funny structure of lines and rods and cloth. Was that some sort of aircraft? Next thing I wanted to do was scan the negative, to see if it was possible to

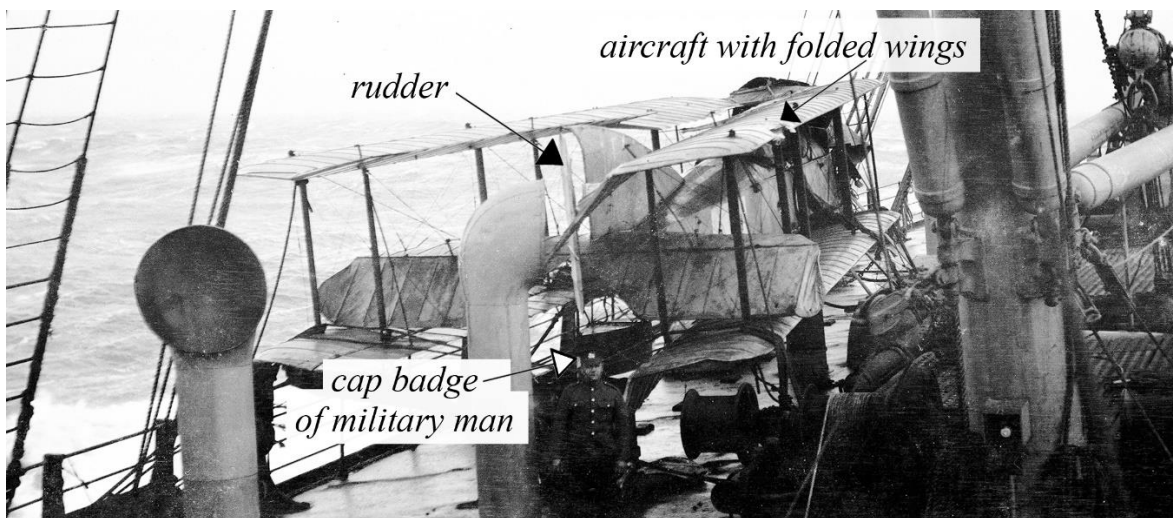
make out more of what was in that photograph. This is the scan made from the negative and now I could alter the exposure to make the image a little lighter.



-fig. 02

Scan from negative, made lighter

In the middle and in the foreground of the picture was now visible a man with an uniform cap on his head. This person gave a better understanding of the size of the aircraft. This airframe was huge. Although I have some knowledge of aircraft and aviation this was something totally new and unknown to me.



-fig. 02A

Details of interest

Then questions came into my mind.

We believe Olof Frederick Gollcher took this picture in December 1915.

1. Why was the photographer travelling on that ship?
2. What is the name of the ship?
3. What was that military man doing on that ship?
4. What is that funny airframe on deck?

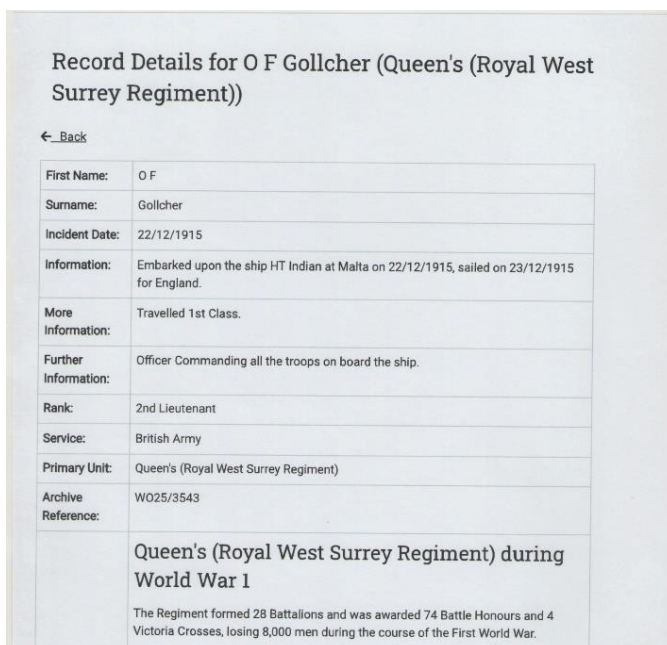
My aim was to link the facts we knew with the evidence in the photograph. And in that way establish the voyage of the aircraft on board to facts that could be traced and verified.

1. Why was O.F. Gollcher travelling on that ship

From letters in the archives of Palazzo Falson between the Gollcher family members we know that Olof Gollcher was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant, in World War I and that he was to accompany a group of soldiers travelling back to Liverpool, England. They were to leave Malta on December 23rd, 1915 on a ship called HT Indian.

I found myself embarking on a research of sorts, trying to find out what that airframe was, travelling from Malta to England in December 1915.

In an attempt to prove Gollcher was indeed on board the HT Indian I found a service record in the archives accessible through the website of “Forces of War” in the UK.



Record Details for O F Gollcher (Queen's (Royal West Surrey Regiment))

[← Back](#)

First Name:	O F
Surname:	Gollcher
Incident Date:	22/12/1915
Information:	Embarked upon the ship HT Indian at Malta on 22/12/1915, sailed on 23/12/1915 for England.
More Information:	Travelled 1st Class.
Further Information:	Officer Commanding all the troops on board the ship.
Rank:	2nd Lieutenant
Service:	British Army
Primary Unit:	Queen's (Royal West Surrey Regiment)
Archive Reference:	W025/3543

Queen's (Royal West Surrey Regiment) during World War 1

The Regiment formed 28 Battalions and was awarded 74 Battle Honours and 4 Victoria Crosses, losing 8,000 men during the course of the First World War.

-Fig. 03

2. The name of the ship

In the National Archives in Rabat, Malta, they referred me to the Customs Records for ships arriving in the harbour of Valletta. I found a record called “Pratique Deposition” for the “INDIAN transport no. 6012” arriving in Valletta on the 22nd of December 1915. The document stated that she had been ordered by the Admiralty and had sailed from Mudros on the island of Lemnos, an island in the Aegean Sea, across from the Gallipoli peninsula. But the only cargo

mentioned were 2 horses and in the passengers on board list there was a mention of a groom. No mention of an airplane. Maybe an order of the Admiralty?

Customs Form No. 43
No. 3974
1915

PRATIQUE DEPOSITION.
DEPOSIZIONE DI PRATICA

MASTERS of Merchant Vessels are hereby notified to observe in writing clearly and legibly the following questions printed in this form being attached to practice, in compliance with the existing laws and Regulations.

1. (a) Original Port and date of Departure.
(b) Where bound to.

2. Date loaded in, and date of departure.

3. Name and address of cargo.

4. Name of consignee.

5. (a) Declare if any specie for this Port, and if not state quantity and name and address of Consignee.
(b) Declare the quantity of explosives, gun powder or inflammable materials you have on board.

6. If you have had any communication with vessels, etc. at sea state when, where, and under what circumstances.

7. Are there crew and passengers in good health?

8. Has any death occurred on any one boat during the voyage? If so give a detailed report in Schedule (A).

9. Do you possess any communication with vessels, etc. at sea state when, where, and under what circumstances.

10. Have you received the list of Articles, Subject to Customs House duty or other Part Regulations?

11. If you have any particular report or declaration to make, fill up Schedule (B) or (C).

I declare to the truth of the above particulars
Dichiaro innanzi a me

Declared before me and admitted to pratique
Dichiarata innanzi a me

Master of the vessel
Capitano del Bastimento

Boarding Officer
UFFICIALE DI PRATICA

DATE: 21/12/15
NAME AND SURNAME: C. Carter.

NATIONALITY: British

OCCUPATION OR TRADE: Pyro. Company

PLACE OF EMBARKATION: Malta

REMARKS: 2 horses, 1 groom

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CUSTOM HOUSE - MALTA.

LIST OF PASSENGERS on board the **INDIAN** TRANSPORT No. 6012

arrived at } MALTA, { from
leaving } { for

Date	Name and Surname	Nationality	Occupation or Trade	Place of embarkation Place of destination	REMARKS
21-12-15	C. Carter.	British	Pyro. Company	Malta	
do	private Bell.	1. Suffolk Reg.	Groom	Malta	

W. J. Harperts.
Master

Notes
C. Carter

-Fig. 04 + 05 + 06

Unfortunately the Customs Records for ships leaving the harbour in 1915 were no longer there as they have been destroyed in the bombing raids on Malta during World War II.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic struck and forced us in a lockdown. Further research was limited to roaming the Internet. Looking for the HT Indian on the world wide web there was very little info. Only this picture I found.

WAR DIARY OF INTELLIGENCE SUMMARY.				Army Form C. 2118.
Date	File	Loc.	Summary of Events and Information	Remarks and references to Appendices
25-4-15			The day of landing. A simultaneous landing made at CAFF HELLES, GABA TEPE and BULLAIR temporarily only by the 29th Div. (1st Aust Div. & A. & N.Z. Div.) and S.B. Div. respectively. H.T. ATLANTIAN proceeded to CAFF HELLES at 0800 for the purpose of disembarking horse boats and remained there until 1200 when sailed for GABA TEPE. H.T. INDIAN AND CARDIGANSHIRE proceeded direct to GABA TEPE. Landing effected and position established at BULL HELLES about 2 miles north of GABA TEPE. Landing made by the 3rd Bde. of Infantry, who were launched in destroyers and followed by 2nd and 1st Bdes. Hostile batteries shelled the transports during the afternoon, and they had to stand out from the shore, to safer anchorage. Artillery fire and masonry on shore were intense and combined with the Naval bombardment made the noise deafening.	
26-4-15			At 0800 one gun and two wagons of the 1st Bty were taken ashore and moved up into position at the top of BULL HELLES. Major Sweetland and Lieut Irwin and detachment of 1st Bty accompanied the gun. At 1200 one section of 3rd Battery was disembarked and moved to the shore, but under instructions for Gaba were returned to the ship and reloaded again at 2200. 2nd Battery (less one section), Co. Christian, Major Lloyd and detail of B.T.C. were sent ashore but were returned to the ship in a similar manner. 1st Battery remained in position the whole day firing upwards of 800 rounds at ranges of about 4000. The gun was withdrawn at night and re embarked on the ATLANTIAN. Lieut Irwin and six (6) men remained on shore to assist in ammunition carrying.	
27-4-15			H.T. INDIAN & CARDIGANSHIRE and six (6) other transports, escorted by two light cruisers and two destroyers left to make joint landings at different places on LEBOS BAY. H.T. ATLANTIAN remained at anchor off GABA TEPE.	
28-4-15			At 0800 a feint attempt was made at point BULLI, but drew no fire and later an attempt was made at ERCS, but owing to the threatening weather this attempt was abandoned. H.T. ATLANTIAN anchored at GABA TEPE.	
29-4-15			A feint landing made at BULLAIR. Turks fired heavily & boats were withdrawn. Lieut Irwin and party returned to the ATLANTIAN.	
30-4-15			Arrived back off GABA TEPE. Col Christian and Capt Lloyd went ashore in obedience to instructions from H.A.M.C. Remaining ships remain at anchor.	

-Fig. 07

This put the spotlight on the “Eastern Mediterranean Theatre” of World War I. Hundreds of thousands of young men from Britain, France and Turkey, but most of all from Australia and New Zealand were killed in the Gallipoli Campaign. The gruesome battle fought on that Turkish peninsula, on the shore of the Dardanelles, the gateway to the Sea of Marmara, Constantinople (now Istanbul) and the Black Sea.

3. The military man

Who is the military man in the OFG 182 photograph? Can we find out? In the collection of photographs that I so far had scanned for the Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum, there were two other pictures that struck me. One photograph had a dedication written on it, showing that Mr. Gollcher was befriended by members of the West Yorkshire Regiment. Note their cap badges.



-Fig. 08

And the other photograph that looked like having been taken on board a ship.



-fig, 09

4. The airframe on the deck

Had this aircraft seen battle in the Gallipoli Campaign in the Aegean Sea, the battle that was fought from April 1915 to January 1916? This aircraft somehow looks so natural in that picture. And yet it is not, when looking closer. The wings are positioned alongside the fuselage and that seems to be the proper position. This does not look like some aircraft parts have been thrown together for transportation.

And take a closer look at the aircraft's rudder. Just above the head of the military man one can see a sort of rod. Made of wood or steel the frame of it was covered with linen painted in "dope", a paint compound that made the linen shrink tightly to the frame and thus the rudder is so strikingly thin. In the picture the rudder is blown by the force of the wind, turned towards and in direct line with the camera lens angle, rendering the rudder (or tail plane) itself "invisible".

Searching for more information on the aircraft on the deck of the HT Indian those folded wings helped to locate the following information at:

- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Folding_wing

Short Brothers, the world's first aircraft manufacturer, developed and patented folding wing mechanisms for biplane ship-borne aircraft like their Short Folder, the first patent being granted in 1913. The Folder's biplane wings were hinged so that they folded back horizontally alongside the fuselage, usually being held in place by latches projecting sideways from the rear of the fuselage.

And more information was to be found at:

- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Short_Folder

Here were about 10 different aircraft types to investigate, to find out if the aircraft in the photograph was a Short Brothers'. I desperately needed help in this.

The people at the Malta Aviation Museum in Ta' Qali, Malta, turned out to be experts who helped me identify the aircraft. They informed me this aircraft was a "Short Admiralty Type 184 Seaplane".

Now the photographer, 2nd lieutenant O.F. Gollcher, the ship, the military man and the aircraft on the deck in the Photograph OFG 182 have been brought together. My 4 questions for linking the facts we knew to the evidence in the photograph have been answered.

Then I became aware of some other interesting facts about this seaplane.

See *-fig. 02* the photograph altered from the negative and look at the fuselage. There is a large white square on it. The experts at the Malta Aviation Museum told me this would imply that the aircraft was an early built one. In the beginning of the Great War the Union Flag was used as identification on the fuselage. The roundels came in use in December 1915.

Following the French identification mark the British roundel had the colours reversed, blue for the outer ring and red for the centre circle.

- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royal_Air_Force_roundels

And there was more to the historical background of this photograph. Many of the Short seaplanes that were built in 1915 came from Eastchurch or Grain, England. The seaplanes were operated from seaplane carriers. One of those seaplane carriers was the HMS “Ben-my-Chree”. (In the language of the Isle of Man it means “Woman of my Heart”)

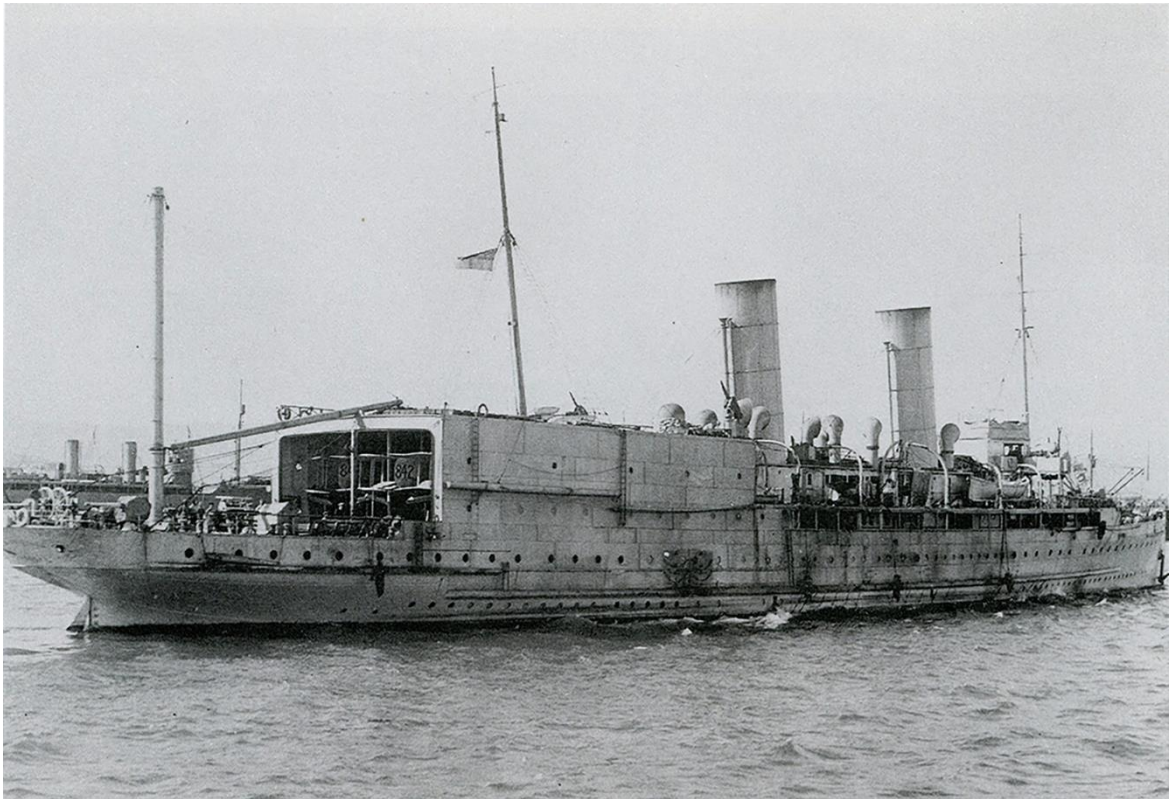
The HMS “Ben-my-Chree” was originally built as a packet steamer in 1907 by Vickers for the “Isle of Man Steam Packet Company” and was intended for use on the England–Isle of Man route.

The Royal Navy took her in use as a seaplane carrier during the Great War.

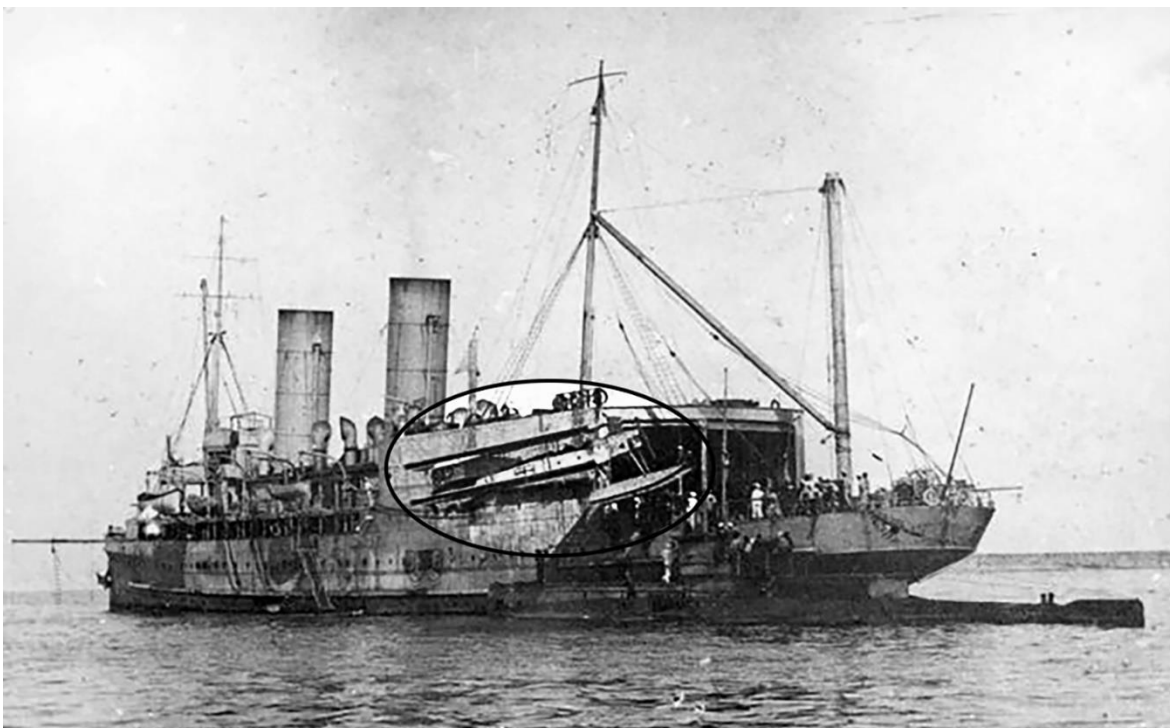
“As a vessel of war, the Ben-my-Chree saw combat action in World War I. Throughout the conflict, she served as a mobile raiding platform, artillery spotter, rescue ship and a direct strike carrier.”

“The forward upper part of the forecastle was fitted with a fly-off ramp for launching her seaplane fighters. A total of six aircraft could be carried aboard, though four was highly ideal considering the space allowed. Initially these aircraft centred around the Sopwith Schneider seaplane, finally giving the Allies an offensive naval airborne punch and threatening the general dominance of the German Zeppelins. Soon to follow would be the Short seaplanes which brought about the advent of the torpedo bomber naval aviation lore.”

(Source: https://www.militaryfactory.com/ships/detail.php?ship_id=HMS-Ben-my-Chree)

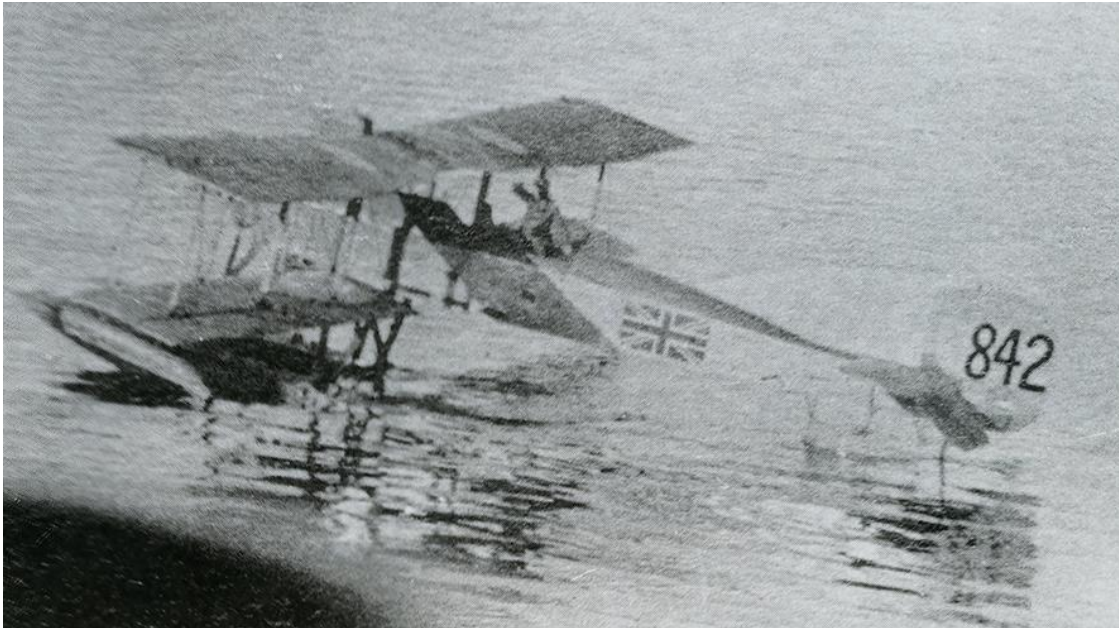


*-fig. 13 Seaplane carrier Ben-my-Chree.
Note the tail planes visible in her hangar.*



*-fig. 14 Seaplane carrier Ben-my-Chree hoisting in
the seaplane No. 842, set in highlight.*

This was how a seaplane looked like on the water.



-Fig. 15

The wings could be folded backwards, alongside the fuselage and it could be hoisted in and out of a war ship. Once put on the water surface, the wings would be folded out to their flight-position and the seaplane could proceed to start and take-off from the water. Upon return the seaplane's wings would be folded back again and hoisted in.

“The aircraft was outfitted with radio equipment (and a message pigeon basket as a fallback communications method).”

(Source: https://www.militaryfactory.com/aircraft/detail.php?aircraft_id=803)

The seaplane's airframe was constructed of wood and metal and a lot of cloth, covered with “dope” to shrink the fabric tight on the wooden frame. This production method made aircraft relatively light, but also vulnerable.

(Source: "Documents Relating to the Naval Air Service-Volume I-1908-1918", Edited by Captain S.W. Roskill, D.S.C., R.N., M.A., Printed for the Navy Records Society – 1969, Pages 201 to 203.

Page 244 – points 8 & 9 - on effects of weather conditions and the practical use of seaplanes)

The surface of the water had to be as flat as possible for the pilots to be able to take-off and land. The wingspan of 19 meters made this type of seaplane the biggest that was built in 1915.

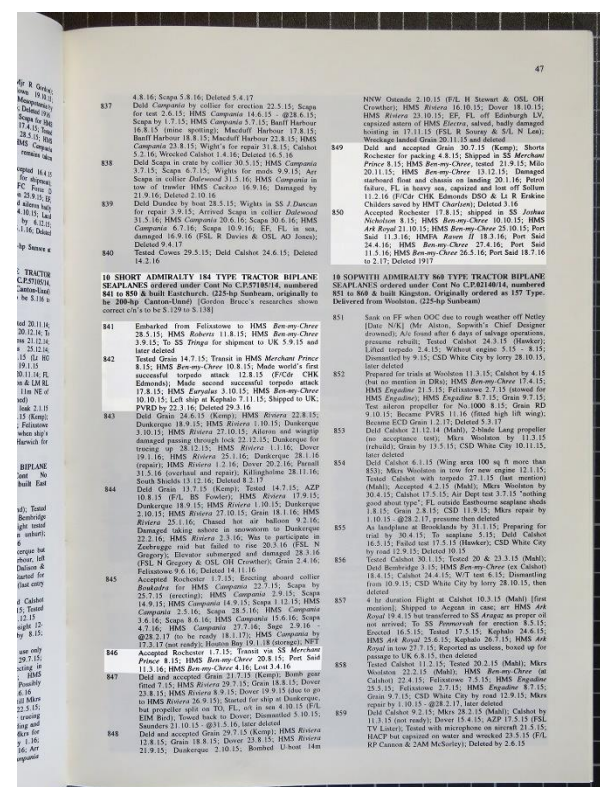
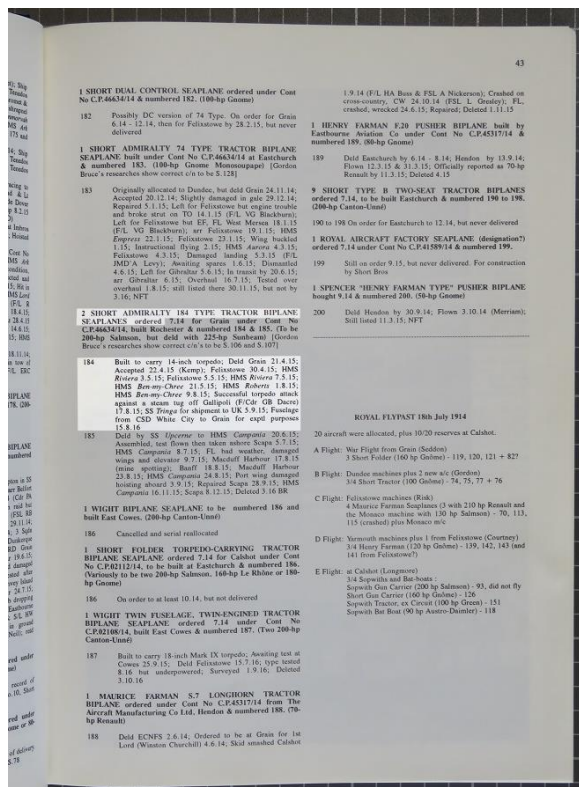
The capacity to carry a torpedo was a requirement for the Admiralty.

Returning the attention to the seaplane in the Photograph OFG 182. Would it be possible at all to identify which Short Admiralty Type 184 this particular aircraft was?

The identity or rather the Tail Number of the aircraft in the Photograph OFG 182.

The Air-Britain Publication "Royal Navy Aircraft Serials and Units 1911-1919" by Ray Sturtivant & Gordon Page is a massive collection of data on aircraft built during WW I, collected from a myriad of sources. It is truly stunning how much information Messrs. Sturtivant and Page have assembled. This presentation is very much indebted to their work.

Considering the time the Photograph OFG 182 was taken, December 1915, I turned specifically to page 43 and page 47 and highlighted the relevant information.



-Fig. 16a + 16b

In the attempt to identify the Serial or Tail Number (as it was called in those days) of this seaplane I looked for seaplanes that were known to have been in operation in the Eastern Mediterranean.

In the two pictures I highlighted the 6 Short Admiralty Type 184 seaplanes of interest:

After that log record there is no further mention of No. 842.

Apparently the seaplane was not destroyed for it is mentioned in the records of Sturtivant & Page as having arrived in PVRD, Port Victoria Repair Depot on the Isle of Grain, where it was declared “deleted 29.3.1916”.

Therefore, given the amount of Short Admiralty Type 184s in use in the last months of 1915 in the Mediterranean, it could well be that the aircraft in the photograph is the evidence for the remark in Sturtivant & Page’s record of No. 842: "Shipped to UK".

Malta, Summer 2022.
Hanneke Jansen

Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum is the former home of Capt. Olof Frederick Gollcher OBE (1889-1962), the son of a prosperous shipping merchant of Swedish descent. Gollcher was an artist, a soldier, a philanthropist, and also a discerning collector of *objets d’art* and historical objects. The original palazzo is from the 13th Century and is located in the medieval “Silent City” Mdina, on the island of Malta. Olof Gollcher made a number of structural changes and re-named the palazzo “The Norman House”. On his death, in 1962, he left the property to the: Captain Olof Frederick Gollcher OBE Art and Archeological Foundation – together with his extensive and varied heritage collection, with the wish they be made accessible to the public. Restoration by Fondazzjoni Patrimonu Malti (Maltese Heritage Foundation) began in 2002, and the historic house museum opened as Palazzo Falson, in May 2007.

Attachment of references to the pictures to go with the story.

Fig. 01.

PF WW1-OFG 182 - scan of the original print

Fig. 02

PF-WW1-OFG 182 – scanned and altered from negative

Fig. 03

Scan of the record found through “Forces of War” of Olof Frederick Gollcher.

Figs. 04 + 05 + 06

Pictures of Arrival Documents of INDIAN transport 6012, taken at the National Archives in Rabat, Malta.

Fig. 07

War Diary account of the 1st Field Artillery Brigade, A.I.F.

(Source: https://alh-research.tripod.com/Light_Horse/index.blog/2006519/the-battle-of-anzac-cove-gallipoli-25-april-1915-1st-field-artillery-brigade-war-diary/)

Fig. 08

PF-WW1-Military-OFG 216 (from the photo archive of Palazzo Falson)

Fig. 09 – PF-WW1-OFG 206 (from the photo archive of Palazzo Falson)

Fig. 09a - West Yorkshire Reg-ap badge_0402-4

(Source: <https://mjlmilitaria.com/west-yorkshire-regiment-cap-badge/>)

Fig. 10

INDIAN off. log book_002.jpg

BT 1651408 – Ships Official Logs_ INDIAN.

TNA, Kew, London.

Note the name used as stamp. The same as in Fig.04

Fig. 11

Port list INDIAN in 1915_003.jpg

BT 1651408 – Ships Official Logs – INDIAN – Voyages ending in 1915

Dates of Arrival at and Departure from each port touched at.

TNA, Kew, London.

The two lines at the bottom show:

Mudros to Malta and Malta to Liverpool.

Fig. 12

INDIAN-Embarkation record 22.12.1915_003.jpg

*WO25/3543 Volume No. 42 – Embarkation between stations abroad Oct. to Dec. 1915
TNA, Kew, London.*

Fig. 13

*Scanned from Air-Britain Publication - "Royal Navy Shipboard Aircraft Developments 1912-1931" -
by Dick Cronin - page 364.*

photo caption: HMS Ben-my-Chree at Mudros in 1915 (...).

*The two Short 184s in her hangar are 841 operated by HMS Roberts in August 1915 and 842 operated
by HMS Euryalis in October 1915.*

Fig. 14 - *Ben-my-Chree + Short 184 in highlight.jpg*

*photo caption: X003-2602/13055: Short Admiralty Type 184, serial 842, suspended from crane of
HMS Ben-my-Chree in the Dardanelles during 1915. An E Class submarine is visible in the
foreground.*

*Source: <https://www.rafmuseum.org.uk/app/uploads/2021/01/X003-2602-13055-Short-184-Ben-my-Chree.jpg> - Blog Post: "A Cuckoo in the Nest" - 22 May 2018. By Julian Hale: Cross & Cockade
Curator in First World War*

Fig. 15 - scanned from:

*Air-Britain Publication - "Royal Navy Shipboard Aircraft Developments 1912-1931" - by Dick Cronin
- page 278.*

*photo caption: Short 184, 842 operated by HMS Euryalis in October 1915 after transfer from HMS
Ben-my-Chree.*

*This is the seaplane that on the 12th August 1915 had delivered the first aerial torpedo attack in
history. (G.S.Leslie/J.M.Bruce collection)*

Fig. 16a + 16b

Seaplanes in Med in 1915_016.jpg + Seaplanes in Med in 1915_017.jpg

*page 43 and page 47 from Air-Britain Publication "Royal Navy Aircraft Serials and Units 1911-1919"
- by Ray Sturtivant and Gordon Page.*

Fig. 17

Ben-my-Chree Log Entry on November 7, 1915_008.jpg

ADM 53 35815 – HMS "Ben-my-Chree"

Copy of Log for Month November 1915.

TNA, Kew, London.

- 0 – 0 – 0 -