

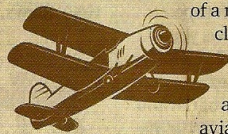
# THE HIGH FLYERS OF FELIXSTOWE

Mike Trippitt uncovers the fascinating story of the vital role this east coast port played in the fight against Germany in two world wars

A weathered headstone stands untended in the shade of a Yew tree in London's vast West Norwood cemetery. The cross and anchor monument, erected by a "sorrowing widow", is barely noticeable in a sea of derelict and overgrown Georgian graves. Yet this last resting place of John Cyril Porte, who died on October 22, 1919, has a strong connection to Felixstowe. Colonel John Porte was, according to his epitaph, "the inventor of the British flying boats".

Born in 1884, Porte joined the Royal Navy at the age of 14. He developed an interest in aviation, designing a two-seater glider and learning to fly. But in 1911 he was retired from the service after contracting pulmonary tuberculosis. It seemed his naval career was over.

Porte used his own talent and aptitude to further a career in flying outside the



Navy. He obtained a flying licence through the Aero Club de France, before moving to the US, following a meeting with American aircraft pioneer Glenn Curtiss. By 1910 Curtiss was experimenting with the idea of launching an aeroplane on floats from water and recruited Porte to work with him. Curtiss produced the 'Flying Fish', a large aircraft known as a flying boat. Porte's idea of a notch in the hull to help it lift clear of the water on take-off was used in the design.

After the Daily Mail offered a prize of £10,000 to the first aviators to cross the Atlantic, Curtiss and Porte began work in 1914 on a larger two-engined flying boat the 'America' to accept the challenge.

Meanwhile, on this side of the Atlantic, less than 10 years since the first manned flight, aviation was gathering pace. The Admiralty had been slow to see the potential of the aeroplane in conflict, but with increasing risk of war it began to realise the value of aerial patrols.

On August 5, 1913, a naval air base,

Photo: Felixstowe Museum Collection







Photos: Norfolk and Suffolk Aviation Museum

**TOP:** The Felixstowe Fury at Felixstowe

**ABOVE:** The restored F5 nose cone

**LEFT:** A Porte Baby with a Bristol Scout atop May 1918

known as Seaplanes – Felixstowe, was commissioned on the River Orwell at Landguard under the command of Captain C E Risk. On July 1, 1914, the Royal Naval Air Service was formed and was charged with the defence of the island. RNAS Felixstowe would become the largest operational seaplane base in the UK.

Upon outbreak of war five weeks later, Curtiss' America transatlantic project was postponed and John Porte left the United States to return to England. He was recommissioned into the Royal Naval Air Service and, after a spell at Hendon, transferred to Felixstowe, eventually taking command of the station in 1915. From Suffolk he persuaded the director of the Admiralty Air Division to order flying boats from the Curtiss Company, and a number of American Curtiss H4s flew from Felixstowe.

Increasingly, the flying boat was seen as the answer to the U-boat threat, but the American design lacked power and the choppy waters of the East coast were often too much for a successful take off or landing. Porte had the answer. Based on the Curtiss design, but with a hull more suited to UK coastal waters, and with bigger engines, Porte created the Felixstowe Porte Baby, the first in a series of flying boats, designed and first built at the Felixstowe station.

Several models followed notably the F2A, F2B and F5 all carrying the Felixstowe name. The Felixstowe flying boats and the air stations at the Isle of Grain, Felixstowe, and Great Yarmouth played a vital role in



## SUFFOLK COAST

the fight against German submarines and Zeppelins. By 1917 flying boats had flown 77,500 miles and bombed 25 U-boats.

The work at RNAS Felixstowe was not limited to hull and aircraft design. Due to the need to find a way of increasing the range of aeroplanes, experiments were carried out to launch and retrieve aircraft from lighters towed behind warships, and to launch from submarine decks out at sea. Plans were laid to carry fighter planes to the enemy on board much larger flying boats. Famously, in May 1916, a Bristol Scout bi-plane separated successfully from the upper wing of an airborne Porte Baby flying boat. Lt-Commander Porte landed the flying boat safely off Felixstowe, while the Bristol touched down on the heath at nearby Martlesham. That Bristol is thought to be the first plane to have landed at what was to become RAF Martlesham Heath.

On April 1, 1918, when the Royal Air Force was formed, the air station became RAF Felixstowe. Although Porte's Felixstowe flying boats continued in service until 1925, their former home became the Seaplanes Experimental Station and then the Marine Aircraft Experimental Establishment, before a spell as HMS Beehive in the Second World War. RAF Felixstowe closed in 1962.

Nothing remains of RAF Felixstowe and of the three hangers built by Norwich engineers Boulton and Paul Ltd, nor of the jetties and slipways that projected into the estuary. But two small pieces of Lt-Commander Porte's legacy, and of the contribution RNAS Felixstowe made to the First World War effort remain within the heart of Suffolk.

**'The Felixstowe flying boats played a vital role in the fight against German submarines and Zeppelins. By 1917 flying boats had bombed 25 U-boats'**

Curator of the Norfolk and Suffolk Aviation Museum Huby Fairhead says the museum has two nose cones from Felixstowe flying boats at its premises at Flixton, Bungay, a 9 inch section of hull from a Felixstowe flying boat, that could be an F2 or F3, acquired by the Royal Air Force Museum from Hadleigh, where reportedly it had been used as a changing room for a tennis club.

"It was beyond restoration by the RAF Museum who stored it outside at Cardington. They donated it to us in 1999 and it's displayed in the condition we received it in," says Huby.

The other nose cone, from an F5, the prototype for which first flew from Felixstowe in 1918, has a remarkable story, though Huby says the museum doesn't know the age of the aircraft from

which it came. The 10 inch nose section was acquired in 1989 from the garden of 49 Seaton Road, Felixstowe, where it had stood nose-up with the bow acting as a roof, and a doorway where the front turret and cockpit would have been. It had been used as a tool shed and potting shed for about 55 years.

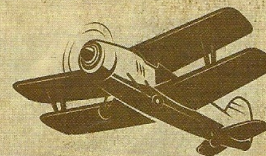
The property was to be demolished to make way for two new houses so building contractors contacted local historians to see if anyone was interested in the cone. The museum was delighted to keep it and members, Derek Small and the late Ken Collison, volunteered to restore it. Derek, now 92, remembers it well.

"Ken Collison was the expert. I was just his assistant. We had no drawings or plans. We gradually got little bits of information.

"The basic shape was there, but most of the wood was pretty crumbly and rotten. It was a just a question of keeping it from falling apart.

"We were about two years doing it – two hours, two or three days a week. It was definitely a labour of love."

For visitors to the Felixstowe port viewing area there is no hint of the remarkable history of the spot where container vessels now moor. But further north, the restored F5 nose cone remains on public display as a fitting tribute to Lt-Commander Porte and the pioneers of RNAS Felixstowe. ♦



Involvement with Glenn Curtiss and commission on the Admiralty orders for the first flying boats led to allegations against John Porte of profiteering. On August 3, 1917, at Bow Street Police Court, he answered a summons alleging breach of the Prevention of Corruption Act 1906 in respect of £48,000 paid to him. The proceedings were eventually withdrawn, but he handed over the money and he was denied the Distinguished Service Order. In December 1919 he was posthumously awarded the American Distinguished Service Medal by US President Woodrow Wilson for "valuable services rendered in connection with the war".