

vessels *Ben-My-Chree*, *Manxman* and *Vindex*. The ship purchased before the war had now also been completed, becoming *HMS Ark Royal*. The latter was the first vessel to actually be completed for the task, rather than converted for it. She was 366ft long and displaced 7,020 tons, but had a top speed of only a little over ten knots. At this time typical Fleet speed was well in excess of 20 knots, rendering it effectively impossible for the new vessel to remain with the main body.

The Royal Navy and, indeed, the Government, received a shock on New Year's Day 1915 when a German submarine – a U-boat – torpedoed and sank the battleship *Formidable* in home waters off Devon. RNAS aircraft were at once given the added assignment of undertaking anti-submarine patrols around the coastline. This occurred just before the commencement of the Dardanelles operation far away in the Middle East, and the start of Zeppelin raids on targets in England, all of which brought additional calls on the fledgling Service's slender resources.

By the end of November 1914 floatplane bases had been established at Dover and Dunkirk (Dunkerque) to cover the Channel, but clearly much more was required. At the end of February 1915 the First Sea Lord ordered Wing Commander E.A.D. Masterman and Commander N.F. Osborne to produce a small, fast airship specifically to hunt U-boats, and to do so *at once*. In the incredibly

short period of three weeks the SS (Submarine Scout) Class airship was ready for service. The simple expedient had been employed of hanging the fuselage and empennage of a standard BE 2C aircraft beneath a non-rigid gasbag, which was produced by a raincoat manufacturing company. This remarkable 'lash-up' could fly at 40–50mph, and remain in the air for up to eight hours while carrying both a wireless and 160lb of bombs.

Patrols were at once commenced, both over the Straits of Dover and the northern and southern entries to the Irish Sea. These sorties were typically long, cold and boring. Rarely was anything seen. Whilst in the clear waters of the Mediterranean or Baltic Seas submarines could clearly be seen at depths down to 80ft, that was certainly not the case in the murky North Sea. U-boats could readily be seen on the surface, but once submerged they were much more difficult to spot, even when their periscopes were breaking the surface. However, the very presence of the airships, which could be anticipated to call up surface vessels when a sighting had been made, had the effect of keeping the U-boats submerged, which rendered their movements much slower and substantially reduced their range. By the end of July 1915, airship bases had been added at Folkestone and Polegate in Britain, and at Marquise, near Calais, on the French coast. Within a few weeks a fourth station had opened on the Isle of Anglesey, off north-west Wales.



**ABOVE** The most numerous of the RNAS's floatplanes was the Short 184 which gained fame by achieving the first successful torpedo attack from the air on 12 June 1915. Powered by a variety of engines, the type saw widespread service until the end of the war, much of it on coastal patrol work. This is N2987 which was based at Lee-on-Solent during 1918.

**BELOW** The SS class of non-rigid airship was developed in just three weeks to meet the new menace of German U-boats late in 1914. These aircraft featured the fuselage and engine of a BE 2C aeroplane hung beneath the gasbag. This is SS 14A.



**LEFT** The larger 'C'-Class airship was developed towards the end of 1915. Capable of remaining aloft for 11 hours at a time, C 23A is seen here in its typical escort role.

