



BALLOONS

It may seem odd that the Fleet Air Arm should choose to date the Centenary of Naval Aviation on the ordering of an airship rather than the conventional aircraft that followed, but it represents a truly historic moment - the extension of the battlespace into the third dimension.

Airships out-performed aeroplanes in many respects throughout the First World War; they had greater range, could absorb more damage, and could carry a greater payload. Indeed, in the early days of naval aviation, there were many who believed that airships would remain dominant over the flimsy new biplanes, and although this did not turn out to be the case, airships and blimps have appeared in some surprising roles over the last 100 years.

VICKERS AIRSHIP SSZ 65

Role

Maritime patrol

Entered Service

1916

Weight

Empty: 2200kg

Loaded: 2800kg

Maximum Speed

48mph

Weapons

Lewis Gun

2 x 110lb bombs *or*

1 x 250lb bomb



KEY EVENTS

1909 May:

The admiralty orders its first airship, His Majesty's Airship 1 named the Mayfly. This order marks the birth of naval aviation.

1915:

Tramp steamer SS Manica refitted and despatched to the Dardanelles with an RNAS Balloon Section. The Balloon Section uses kite-balloons to direct heavy naval guns against the Turks, communicating via a telephone cable trailed down to the ship.

World War 1:

Balloons are deployed on patrols in the Mediterranean and prove deadly against U-Boats, almost completely eliminating the threat by the end of the war. On a clear day a balloon could spot a U-boat from 40 miles away and could destroy it with its own bombs.

1918:

HM Airship 23 successfully launches a Sopwith Camel whilst in flight.

1919:

British Airship R34 is the first aircraft to make an East - West crossing of the Atlantic Ocean.

World War 2:

Britain's 'Balloon Navy' operates barrage balloons from barges in the Thames. Aircrew on both sides feared the balloons, whose cables trailed unseen in the sky to snare enemy aircraft.

1982:

In the Falklands, the Royal Navy Task Force deploys tethered balloons as aerial radar platforms to try to detect low-level aircraft and missiles.



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