

The Remarkable Sopwith 1^{1/2} Strutter

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Fred Sigrist was said to have chalked out the outlines of the prototype Sigrist Bus on the floor at the Sopwith workshop in Kingston in late 1914. The initial design featured unequal length top and bottom wings and was a radical departure from the draggy designs common at the time. By December of that year, the machine was airworthy, powered by the familiar 80 hp Gnome Rotary engine used in many early WWI British and French fighters. The aircraft was used by Harry Hawker to set a new British altitude record of 18393 feet on June 6, 1915. The descendants of this aircraft were to be known as the Sopwith 1 1/2 Strutter, a remarkable aircraft produced in numbers second only to the famed Sopwith Camel. The design would be a harbinger of things to come from Sopwith and be used until the end of the war.

A year, almost to the day later, from the initial introduction,



Sopwith approved a new version called the LCT. The aircraft was completed four days later on December 16, 1915. The initials LCT are not known with certainty but they are believed to stand for Landing Clerget Tractor. The reason for this is that prior to this time, Sopwith's seaplanes were of the tractor variety and the 110 hp Clerget rotary was larger than the typical 80 hp Gnome variant in most other Sopwith types extant at the time.



The LCT differed from the Sigrist Bus in that it had equal length wings top and bottom with a lower center section with horizontal spars extending through bottom of the fuselage. Other differences were the introduction of the now familiar closed circular cowl featured in later Sopwith designs (such as the Pup, Triplane and Camel) with the V shaped exhaust channel at the bottom of the fuselage behind the engine. Further the cowling was faired gently into the fuselage making the airframe of an exceptionally clean design. This resulted in a remarkably lower drag which translated into higher landing speeds. Initially, it was felt that pilots would have difficulty in adapting to these higher speeds so air brakes were introduced in the center section but they added considerable vibration in flight. Pilots learned quickly how to land the LCT without them and they were subsequently dropped from later variants of the type.

In stark contrast to the B.E. Series two seat aircraft, the observer was seated in the rear cockpit where he

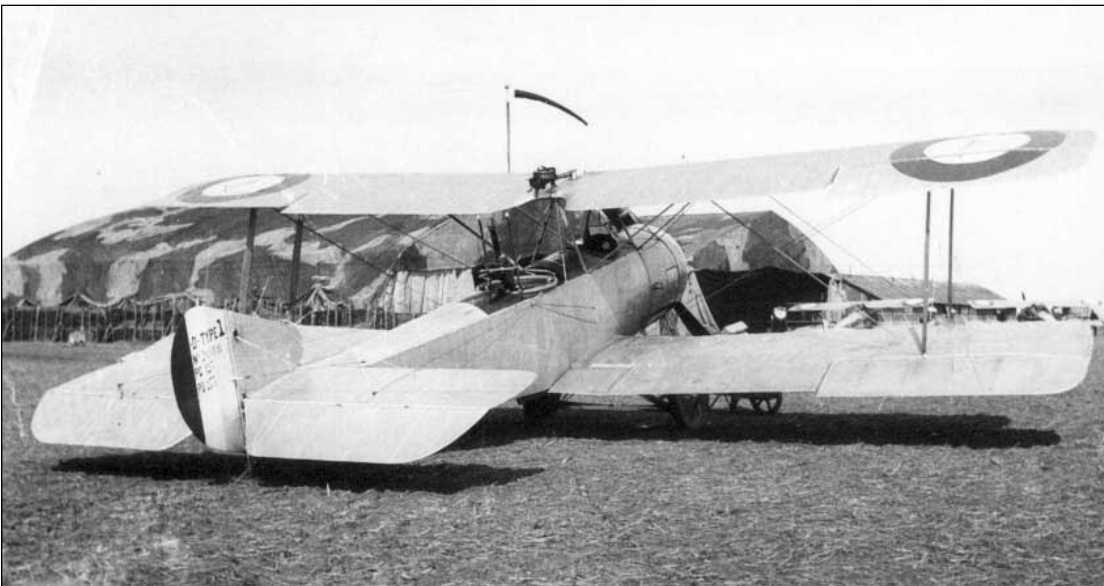
would have the ability to also operate a machine gun mounted on a Scarff ring. This gave the LCT a much greater ability to defend itself from enemy fighter attack. This feature alone was responsible for the type to be shot down significantly less often during the infamous "Bloody April" of 1917.

It was the pilots who gave the LCT the name 1 1/2 Strutter due to its unique W shaped cabane strut arrangement. Fitted with a forward firing Vickers machine gun, they found the aircraft to be sturdy and reliable but not agile enough to take on enemy fighter aircraft on their own terms. Instead, they were forced to adopt defensive maneuvers. Pilots found that the aircraft did have some control shortcomings which prompted a request from the field to substitute the smaller Pup tail. The response from Sopwith was that the modification was approved but that it had been tried and proved to be ineffective.



Sopwith for this aircraft. By the end of the war, the French built three times as many Strutters and equipped six times as many squadrons with them flying them a year longer than the British on the Western Front.

The American Expeditionary Force bought over 500 of the Strutters from the French for training American pilots and even the British had to purchase Strutters from the French for modification in the shipboard role in 1918.



The Sopwith Bomber was a single seat version of the Strutter containing an internal bomb bay in place of the rear passenger. Initially, they were used to attack German warships and shipping along the Belgian and French coasts near the harbors at Bruges. For the British, the aircraft was eventually sidelined to a training role or relegated to storage due to availability of the superior DeHavilland D.H. 4. However, the French found the Sopwith superior to their Breguet, Farman and Voisin pusher types. These single seat bombers were used to attack the German Krupp Works factory at Essen in September of 1916 with some success.

The French requested to license build Strutters. They modified their machines to suit and also fitted them with the best Clerget engines, leaving only the rejects to go to British Strutter production. In tests, the French Strutters outperformed their British counterparts. In particular, the French modified the strength of the airframe to withstand steep dives, an operation that was not recommended by

fighter. Considering that it was designed in 1914, compared to anything at that time, it truly was a major advance in the development of WWI aviation. Without the genius of Sigris's contribution, the air war would have been very different indeed.

Finally, the French used their Strutters in the Italy late in the war and one Escadrille of Strutters, SOP 582, was prepared for the Russian Front. In the end, the Strutter made a name for itself in many roles for the duration of the conflict. Its design advances paved the way for the Sopwith Pup, Triplane and the famed Camel, the most famous Allied

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