

# JABBERWOCK 102



SOCIETY OF FRIENDS

**FLEET AIR ARM**  
MUSEUM

*The Magazine of the Society of Friends  
of the Fleet Air Arm Museum*

**February  
2021**



## **IN THIS ISSUE**

Taranto 80 - FAAM remembers • RN aircraft carrier losses 1939-1942 - Part Two • Last one home • 71 Degrees North, 19 Degrees East • Book reviews • Jabberwock 100 presentation

*Plus all the usual features etc.*

THE  
NATIONAL  
MUSEUM



# The Society of Friends of the Fleet Air Arm Museum



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## CONTRIBUTIONS

We are extremely grateful to all those who contribute articles and material to the magazine, even though it is not always possible to use every item!

## ADMISSION

Members of SoFFAAM are admitted to the Museum free of charge, on production of a valid membership card. Members may be accompanied by up to three guests (one guest only for junior members)

on any one visit, each at a reduced entrance fee, currently 50% of the standard price. Members are also allowed a 10% discount on goods purchased from the shop.

**Note:** These concessions are provided at the discretion of the General Manager of the Museum and could be removed at any time.

## FLEET AIR ARM MUSEUM

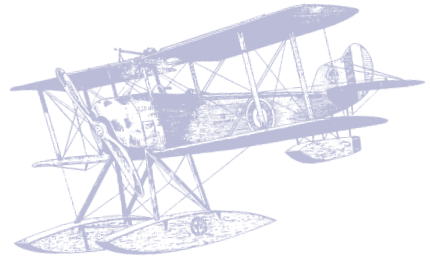
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# Contents



Contents .....	1
Editorial .....	2
Council snippets .....	3
Letters to the Editor .....	4
Talks 2021 .....	6
Membership .....	7
Derek Moxley obituary .....	8
Taranto 80 - FAAM remembers .....	10
RN aircraft carrier losses 1939-1942 - Part Two .....	14
"Last one home" .....	20
71 Degrees North, 19 Degrees East .....	22
Book reviews .....	29
November 2020 Talk, "TAG on Russian Convoys" .....	35
Wildcats sharpen their claws .....	39
Trafalgar Day Celebrations .....	40



Taranto 80, page 10



HMS Nabob, page 22



James Pitts, page 35



Wildcats sharpen their claws, page 39

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## COVER PHOTO

Fairey Swordfish Mkl W5856 is the oldest surviving airworthy type in the world. She served with the Mediterranean Fleet for a year but little is known of her active service at this time.

She is pictured here flying at Yeovilton Air Day 2016. Her paint scheme depicts 820 Naval Air Squadron at the time of the attack on *Bismarck* in 1941.

# Editorial

**We offer all our readers a belated wish for a Happy New Year, in the devout hope that 2021 will see a gradual return to more “normal” times.**

In our case, this means the restoration of our talks evenings in the Museum and (later in the year perhaps) a visit or two to places of interest. In common with the rest of the nation, we have learned to hold virtual talks and meetings and this has had the unexpected benefit of enabling any member to join in via the internet. Your Council is considering ways to continue capitalising on this benefit in future activities.

Members will have noticed various changes introduced by the Council over the past year. We are continuing to expand our presence on Facebook and, as cheques become more and more outdated, we have expanded methods of payment, including by PayPal and BACS. This year we hope to introduce the use of debit and credit cards, so that the process of booking talks and other activities is eased. We also plan to give our website a face-lift and introduce new features. None of these changes affect our Purpose, which is to continue

to support the Museum through good times and bad.

In this issue, we remember the Taranto raid and provide the second and final part of the article on aircraft carrier losses. Life member Bill Reeks provides a lively contribution from his time in HMS *Nabob*, written by his shipmate, Surgeon Lieutenant Charles Read RCN. Bill, an observer who survived the crash of an Avenger in 1945, writes to say that he is looking forward to attending the next talk when the Museum opens. It is contributions of this sort that give our magazine its unique flavour and we encourage all our readers to keep sending them in. We cannot promise to print everything but always enjoy the variety of material.

Finally, we are sorry to note the resignation from the Council of long-standing Council trustee Christopher Shores, the noted author on military aviation themes. We wish him well.



**Malcolm**



# Council snippets

## From the December 2020 Council Meeting

### **The Chairman congratulated the Council members who had organised the recent virtual monthly talk.**

He mentioned the proposed Members' Day, of which a key element would be a visit to Cobham Hall. His preferred date would be in September. The Society was having to evolve by various digitisation initiatives, such as the introduction of PayPal and the use of Zoom for meetings. He looked forward to the time when the Society could return to its usual social activities.

Under the heading of Publicity, Chris Penney said that two press releases were sent to editors on Trafalgar Day. These detailed the handover of a donation of £10,000 to FAAM and a gift of a copy of Jabberwock 100 to the CO of RNAS Yeovilton. This information was repeated on social media, while our virtual November talk night was promoted by Abbey FM radio.

Richard Macauley said we have now established an effective way of delivering the monthly talks by Zoom and this will continue until we can all reconvene in person at the Museum. The benefits of Zoom mean we can reach a larger audience, effectively the whole Membership. Unfortunately, some booked speakers do not wish to present by Zoom so alternative speakers are

being sought.

The Membership Secretary reported that Covid-19 has continued to affect new memberships and we have sadly lost more of our older life and founder members. The appeal to members to switch to electronic Jabberwock continues to work, as requests are still coming through. The cost saving in printing and postage is significant.

The Editor gave a brief update on progress towards the proposed formation of a database of all Jabberwock issues, capable of being accessed by all Society members. Richard Macauley reported that the current website uses an outdated software theme and is no longer supported. If we are to change the design, a new theme should be one that is versatile and responsive to modern devices, i.e., fit on to tablet and phone formats easily. The new theme would also be more secure.



# Letters to the editor



**Dear Malcolm,**

This Post Card was found at a local flea market recently, and depicts several points of interest taken at RNAS Yeovilton.

The Sea Fury line indicates the date as being some point in the 1950s. The photo of the Air Traffic Control Tower caught my eye. This is an interesting and rare view as this was before significant extensions and alterations were added later (1960s?). Of course the whole building was demolished in the mid-

2000s and replaced by a new tower on the south side of the airfield.

The married quarters photo appears to show the recent completion of the Ilchester Taranto Hill site, which again has been demolished and rebuilt in recent years.

I hope this is of interest.

**Regards,  
David Marchant**

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## Dear Malcolm,

My son (who lives in Dorset) sent me this photo and I thought you might be interested.

"While walking Alfie at Kingston Lacy this morning, Wendy and I were distracted by a red wreath somewhat off the beaten track. When we went to look at it more closely it turned out to be a poppy wreath by a small plaque that we'd never noticed before, even though we walk this route frequently".

Not sure if you'll be able to make out what it says, but in essence it marks the site of a Halifax crash on 24th January 1943 where all the crew members were sadly killed. Apparently, she took off from her coastal command base at Holmsley in the New Forest en-route for Haverford West in Wales. The pilot spotted something suspicious on the ground shortly after take off near Wimborne and turned to take a closer look. It was a misty day and for whatever reason she span out of control and hit the ground. There was a suggestion that the Halifax could be a bit of a devil with too much left hand rudder:

"The Mk II Series 1a entered service during June 1943. Earlier versions of the

Halifax had demonstrated a dangerous tendency to spin at low speeds. This was tracked down to the design of the rudder and the entire tail. The response was to replace the original tail design with a new "D" shaped fin, increasing the size of the control surfaces and reducing the danger. The Mk II Series 1a also had an equivalent Mk V Series 1a." [source: [http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/weapons\\_halifax\\_mkII.html](http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/weapons_halifax_mkII.html)]

Very sad - and something to think about on Remembrance Sunday

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## Brian Tiffin

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### Dear Malcolm,

I thought you might be interested in the attached manuscript\*. The author Dr Charles Read, visited me many times from his home in Iowa. The story is very well told from the viewpoint of a ship's surgeon. He was not in *Nabob* during its final voyage to Scapa Flow, as he was transferred to an escorting frigate to tend the wounded. Our CO in 852 (Avenger) Squadron gained his third DSC on the journey home by taking off from the sloping deck of the ship to carry out a four-hour patrol to keep a following U-boat submerged. A second Avenger also did a patrol - Sub Lt Don Jupp - who also got a DSC. Bobby pranged on landing, but Don landed perfectly. He was later wounded on the deck of *Formidable* when a Kamikaze scored a direct hit and later died of burns. I was scheduled to do the third AS patrol from *Nabob* but the arrival of escorts made it unnecessary. After docking at Scapa



we were at last permitted to go below to our cabins to change into fresh clothes.

I was pleased to see that I appeared in Jaberwock 100. What a pity everything is eclipsed by this Covid outbreak. I hope I'm not too old and decrepit when we come off the lockdown to attend a talk.

**Sincerely,  
Bill Reeks**

\*See page 22 for the article by Charles Read.

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**Dear Malcolm,**

There were some intriguing photos in J101. Was it a first appearance for the RAF on the front cover I wonder.

Ian Burns' excellent feature on floatplanes opens with a Short 184 being hoisted overboard at Castellorizo. Was it standard RNAS practice to remove the float's human 'ballast' needed for the craning operation before flight?

Would Ian have any information on the RNAS seaplane base at Stavros, Greece or be able to direct me to a source. My grandfather served in this theatre during WWI and I understand the RNAS supported the British Salonika Army after the failed Gallipoli campaign.

For those wishing to find out more about *Glorious'* loss I recommend the 1997 'Secret History' programme on HMS *Glorious* on Youtube. This explains that the files were subject to a 100-year secrecy rule.

**Kind regards,  
Chris Penney**

## Talks 2021

by **Richard Macauley**

**Our monthly talks programme continue on Zoom very successfully.**

That word Zoom conjures up different responses as many have embraced this technology while others have shunned it. It is very easy to use and we can talk you through setting it up on your computer or iPad or PC Tablet.

Once you have Zoom on your computer, you can join in with our talks, it's a great way to experience some very entertaining and interesting people across a wide range of aviation topics.

**Thurs 25 Feb 2021** at 7:30pm.

**Cobham Aviation UK** and their air assets supporting the UK Military.

**Thurs 25 Mar 2021** at 7:30pm.

**Peter Griffiths** BOAC 707 and Cathay 747 Captain with some very amusing anecdotes on his career.

**Thurs 29 Apr 2021** at 7:30pm.

**Rod Dean** on the Mosquito.

See our website for future speakers.  
**[www.fleetairarmfriends.org.uk](http://www.fleetairarmfriends.org.uk)**

If you want to know about Zoom and getting it onto your computer, just ring me, Richard Macauley **07768 562976**, or email **[soffaam@btinternet.com](mailto:soffaam@btinternet.com)** and I can send you some illustrated details of how to install Zoom. We hope to see you at our next virtual talks night.

# Membership

By Simon Websper

**Standing Order payment membership cards for February, March and April will be sent separately.** (Please note that receipt of a membership card does not confirm receipt of payment).

For those very few members still renewing annually by cheque, please note that to keep costs down, we do not send reminders routinely. Please do let us know if you wish to renew by Standing Order instead. If paying/renewing by cheque, please always enclose a stamped, addressed envelope. This saves us money. Thank you.

Do let us know if you would prefer to receive Jabberwock via your e-mail.

A big **WELCOME** to the new members who have joined us since the last Jabberwock was issued:

3691	<b>Mr G Vinnels</b>	Bridgend
3692	<b>Mr T Datria</b>	Brazil
3693	<b>Mr S Carter</b>	Somerset
3694	<b>Ms J Halford</b>	Somerset
3695	<b>Mr T Vincent</b>	Wiltshire
3696	<b>Mr M Crow</b>	USA
3697	<b>Mr J Hale</b>	West Midlands
3698	<b>Mr R Shirley</b>	Dorset
3699	<b>Lt Col M Norbury</b>	Somerset
3700	<b>Mr E Wagstaff</b>	Somerset
3701	<b>Mr A Scott</b>	Somerset
3702	<b>Mr R Parrott</b>	Northants
3703	<b>Mr D Bows</b>	Dorset
3704	<b>Mr P Payne</b>	Somerset

3705	<b>Mr C Kinghorn</b>	Brazil
3706	<b>Mr R Wilcox</b>	Somerset
3707	<b>Mr G Smeeth</b>	Cornwall

Current total membership: **968**

Members who have made a Gift Aid declaration: **692**.

All funds are donated to FAA Museum projects only. If you haven't yet updated your standing order to reflect the new 2021 membership rates below, please do so as soon as possible. Chasing you costs us money! Thank you.

Annual Membership rates, effective 1 January 2021 - An excellent gift too:

Individual	£14
Family (2 adults, up to 3 children)	£37
Life (UK)	£125
Life (International)	£175
Junior	£9

Payment can be made by: Standing Order, BACS/Internet banking, Cheque or PayPal (using **soffaam.joinup@gmail.com**)

Cheques payable to SoFFAAM and sent to: Membership Secretary, 22 Kings Yard, Bishops Lydeard, Taunton, Somerset TA4 3LE

All membership queries to: **soffaam.mem@gmail.com** or Tel: **07527 707204 /01823 433448**. See inside back cover for Membership Form.



# Derek Moxley obituary

By Graham Mottram



Derek Moxley gives David Kinloch his retirement "gold watch" at the 2013 AGM.

## **With Derek Moxley's death in October 2020 the number of Founder Members of SoFFAAM reduced by one more.**

A long time contributor, Derek had variously been in Group 1 on restoration, a long serving Chairman and then the Society's President. He was a well known and welcome "fixture".

Derek was born in Abertillery in Gwent, where his father ran the family tailors. He showed an early aptitude for technical skills with his hands and had his first workshop in the attic at the age of 11, and his first workbench stayed with him throughout his life. After Abertillery Grammar School, Derek enrolled in the electrical engineering course at the local college and in 1942 joined the RAF Volunteer Reserve, serving as a ground technician until being demobbed in 1947 as a Corporal Fitter. His service

was mainly on Sunderlands and Catalinas, serving around the UK but also in Iceland and Germany. His love of aircraft and the wish to work on them stayed with him for the rest of his life.

Civilian life saw his return to the family business in Abertillery where his manual skills were quickly transferred to tailoring, and maintaining the high standards established by his father.

His sister acted as matchmaker and "set him up" with Anne, whom he married in 1957. The wedding went smoothly until Derek learned that signing the register would cost him five guineas. With no money in the pockets of his new wedding suit the guests had a whip round and came up with the funds so that the marriage could be legally signed and sealed.

Back in Abertillery, Derek gradually

took over the running of the business and became a pillar of the community as a School Governor, Chairman of the Chamber of Trade and in 1967, became a Magistrate. He joined the Freemasons and eventually became Deputy Provincial Grand Master of Monmouthshire, serving in total for 75 years and becoming the oldest member of his county. He never stopped looking for something to do with his hands and succumbed to steam, helping the Great Western Society to restore the King George V to mainline running standard. The lucky devil then got to drive it!

With tailoring gradually declining, he sought a new business, settling on the Post Office in Ilchester in 1979. He claimed he had no idea there was a clutch of historic aircraft just down the road but no one in the family really believed him. In addition to his new business, Derek spent 15 years on the Parish Council, six as Chairman, and was instrumental in granting honorary membership of the parish to HMS Heron, marked by a march through and a (small) civic ceremony.

Despite his claims to the contrary, Derek soon found out about FAAM and joined SoFFAAM, becoming a member of Group 1 under Cyril Tubb, working on the long running Sea Gladiator restoration. When Cyril stood down, Derek took on the leadership, with the next two projects being wings for the Albacore and a general tidy up of the Sea Vampire. In the event, the wings were too difficult but with Maurice Biggs, the Sea Vampire was fit and ready to take its place on the Flight Deck when "Carrier"

opened in 1994.

I had moved to Ilchester in 1983, two doors away from Derek and various bits of museum and SoFFAAM business were done over the PO counter and our gardens over the years. His workshop was established alongside the shop, in a storeroom and his sister Liz's ageing Triumph Spitfire was often seen receiving attention. When Group 1 ceased operations, Derek and some of the group joined the International Helicopter Museum at Weston-super-Mare and stayed there for many years.

Derek chaired SoFFAAM for about ten years and became President for a few more, during which time he and Anne had retired (1992) but continued to live in the house alongside. The workshop was still in regular use, resulting in articles for the Model Engineer and The Woodworker magazines.

By 2017 and in their 90s, Derek and Anne moved to Swindon, to be near their daughter Emily and her family. Anne began to tackle the new garden but Derek never got around to a new workshop and some of his equipment was donated to FAAM in the final clear out from Ilchester. After 62 years of happy married life Derek lost Anne in May 2019 but did his best to keep looking forward, although his own declining health made that a serious challenge, but he faced it as ever with a balanced and even attitude to life.

On behalf of all members of SoFFAAM, I send our commiserations to Emily and her family on the loss of a man who tried to be a friend to all those that he met.

# Taranto 80 - FAAM remembers

By Chris Penney



Battle of Taranto, 1940.

**One of the joys of visiting the Museum is the view from Hall 2's gallery that overlooks part of Royal Naval Air Station Yeovilton's helicopter flight line.**

This 'up close and personal' take on modern naval aviation is provided thanks to the Fleet Air Arm AW159 Wildcat squadrons operating from this corner of the base. In school holiday time space can be at a premium to watch the comings and goings as intrigued children look on fascinated. While the Wildcats entertain FAAM's visitors their natural environment is the pitching deck of a frigate or destroyer somewhere in the North Atlantic or Mediterranean, by day or night. On a November night 80 years

ago Yeovilton's 815 Wildcat Squadron was preparing for a carrier strike mission to southern Italy, the outcome of which ranks alongside Trafalgar in the annals of British naval warfare.

The Fleet Air Arm's famous Taranto raid of 11 November 1940 is usually remembered by formal squadron dinners, but sadly this year commemorations were muted due to the continuing pandemic. Unfortunately, this also scuppered the Museum's own plans to mark the historic 80th Anniversary. However, during the preceding October half term break, the Society helped facilitate a visit by the family of Taranto pilot Lt Michael

Torrens-Spence, who was Deputy CO of 819 Squadron on the raid. He and his Observer Lt Alfie Sutton were part of crews from four Fairey Swordfish squadrons - 813, 815, 819 and 824 - who flew from the heaving deck of HMS *Illustrious* that November night.

Two generations of the Torrens-Spence family were welcomed to FAAM by General Manager Marc Farrance for what was a very special visit. During a three hour tour the family were able to gain a real insight as to the mission Lt Torrens-Spence had flown 80 years before. Senior Curator David Morris first introduced his VIP guests to the 18-inch cutaway torpedo on display in Hall 2. This was the weapon that eleven of the 20 Swordfish crews used at Taranto. Next stop was upstairs in Hall 2 to get a detailed look over the Museum's Fairey Swordfish biplane bomber, similar to aircraft P2405/L5K that Torrens-Spence piloted on the night raid.

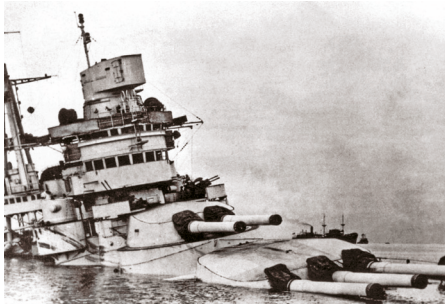
The Curator explained that the daring low-level operation on the Italian Navy's (Regia Marina) main

base had originally been planned for 21 October - Trafalgar Day - but had to be put back following a hangar fire aboard *Illustrious* which activated the carrier's sea water sprinkler system. He recalled that for Operation Judgement, as the Taranto mission was codenamed, the Swordfish's standard three crew operation was abandoned. Instead on the torpedo-carrying aircraft the observer's position was occupied by a portable 60-gallon fuel drum inserted behind the pilot, and the observer (navigator) sat in the Telegraphist Air Gunner (TAG) position. This extended the Swordfish's range and allowed the carrier to approach the target area less conspicuously.

The aircraft launch point near Cephalonia in the Ionian Sea, around 170 miles from Taranto, meant a flight time in excess of 2hrs at an average speed of little over 80mph. At 18.00hrs that evening, after the sun had set, *Illustrious* and her strong escort detached from Admiral Cunningham's task force. As the carrier headed away



Two generations of Captain Torrens-Spence RN family visited FAAM in October as Hall 2's Swordfish crew looked on.



**Cavour beached to prevent her sinking further.**



**Caio Duillo was hit by a single torpedo and played no further part in WWII.**

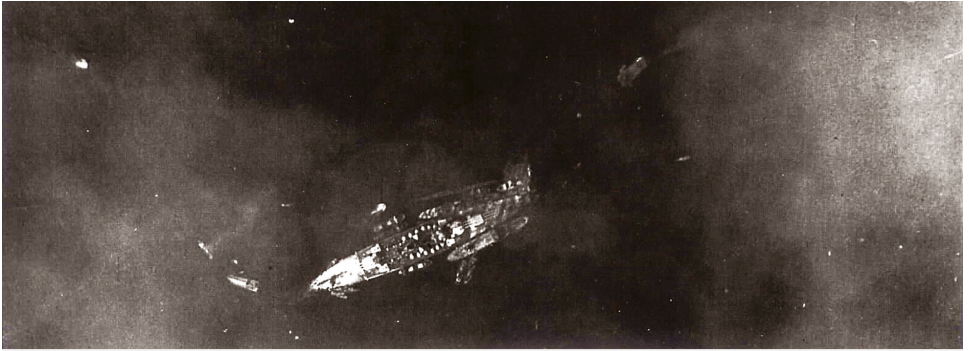
for the predetermined flying-off position the C-in-C sent a final “good-luck” message. There was nothing more he could do but ‘sweat it out’ and let events unfold. Around 23.00 his pilots would begin assaulting the fortified enemy anchorage, which consisted of an outer and inner harbour. It bristled with sound detectors, searchlights, layers of anti-aircraft guns and barrage balloons on three sides. Guard ships, protective anti-torpedo nets and a seaplane base complemented the defences. With no air gunner, the Swordfish crews were defenceless if intercepted and Cunningham must have wondered if any of the airmen would return.

Lt Torrens-Spence was part of the second strike to attack the main Italian battle fleet anchored within the bay’s Mar’ Grande outer harbour where six battleships lay. Comprising eight Swordfish it was led by his boss Lt Commander Hale. Over 30 minutes earlier 12 of *Illustrious’* aircraft had assaulted the harbour and this meant any possible element of surprise was lost. There was a full moon and as the second wave crews approached, they

could see fires caused by the earlier attack like a beacon from more than 50 miles away. Stories are legendary that some tuned to Italian radio and heard opera as they homed onto their target. With the defences alerted losses amongst this second wave were expected to be heavy. But the Fleet Air Arm lost only two Swordfish in the entire action.

Thanks to an archived interview from 2008 with Lt Sutton recording his experience of that 1940 November night, Dave Morris was able to give his distinguished audience a take on what really happened. Lt Sutton had recalled: “We dived down very steeply [over the bay]. As we got on to the water Torrens-Spence said: “The one to port is too close, what is that ahead?” I said here’s the *Littorio* - they had two fine new battleships and *Littorio* was one of them. “Right” he said, “We will take her! We then motored in, just above the water at about 20 feet and Torrens-Spence released the torpedo but it didn’t come off. Still driving in towards our target we could see the *Littorio* opening up with anti-aircraft fire and





ITS *Littorio* with its bow underwater following three torpedo hits.

stabbing flames along the whole of the ship. The cruisers behind were firing at us, the harbour guns were firing at us, the guns on the breakwater were firing at us; we were at the centre of this incredible crossfire. The place stank of sulphur; we had horrible things called 'flaming onions', which were a sort of burning chain shot, floating past us - 'swish!' Then the torpedo came off the second time it was released."

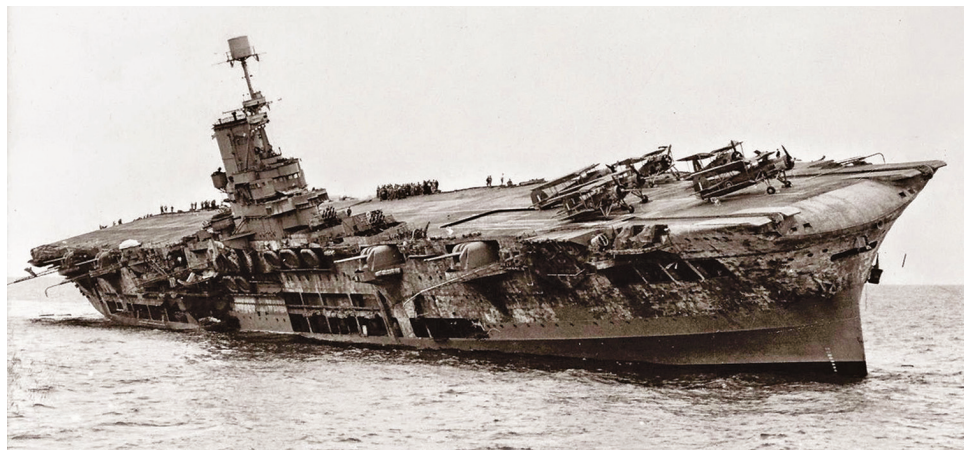
Upon launching their 1,548lb Mark XII torpedo, the Swordfish leapt in the air from release of the weight. The torpedo, containing 388lb of TNT, struck home and it was one of three launched that night to hit the recently commissioned 1940-built battleship. Torrens-Spence flew so low that at one point the biplane's fixed undercarriage touched the water, which could have been a 'brick wall' moment, but they got away with it - just. He made his escape flying between the barrage balloon cables. A D/F fix aided a safe early morning arrival back aboard *Illustrious* after a flight of four hours 55 minutes. According to stories told to the family by Lt (later Captain) Torrens-

Spence DSC, DSO, AFC, DFC (Greece) he always remarked that the Italians were lousy shots!

The 41,000ton *Littorio*, although salvaged, was put out of commission for five months. Of the other five battleships one never put to sea again while another took six months to make fighting fit. As important was the strategic consequence of the raid, which saw the withdrawal of Italy's remaining capital ships to more distant ports. Among the congratulatory signals received by the C-in-C Mediterranean at his Egyptian headquarters following the success of the operation was a message from the King. There was also one from Air Chief Marshal Arthur Longmore, AOC Middle East, who had dropped the first Royal Navy Air Service aerial torpedo at Calshot in 1914. But the final word on Taranto must go to Admiral Cunningham himself. He said: "Taranto and the night of 11/12 November 1940 should be remembered forever as having shown once and for all that in the Fleet Air Arm, the Navy has its most devastating weapon.

# RN aircraft carrier losses 1939-1942 - Part 2

By Jim Humberstone



The tragic sight of HMS *Ark Royal* listing, after a torpedo strike.

**We continue Jim's fascinating article which started in Jabberwock 101.**

## **The loss of HMS *Ark Royal***

When commissioned, *Ark Royal* represented something of a quantum leap in British carrier design and experience, being the RN's first truly modern aircraft carrier, purpose built for the Royal Navy. Launched at Cammell Lairds Birkenhead in 1937, at 27,720 tons and with a capacity for 60 aircraft, she occupied that special reputation reserved for a few exceptional RN warships. Almost held in similar regard to that ill-fated warship HMS *Hood*;

imposing in appearance, having half as much freeboard again as *Illustrious* class vessels, she was the bearer of a legendary name, going back centuries. Perhaps because of this powerful image, German propaganda would proudly boast that she had been sunk several times before this finally took place on the afternoon of 14 November 1941. She had led a charmed life; on at least one occasion before her final fatal torpedo she had been just narrowly missed. This was when in the second week of the war two torpedoes were fired at her by U 39.

Fate finally intervened in the Mediterranean, where *Ark Royal* had

been returning to Gibraltar with Force H, during which deployment she had launched 26 Hurricanes towards Malta. She sustained serious damage from a single torpedo fired by U 81. She remained afloat but eventually sank after two days while under tow. Her assailant was one of four German submarines that had slipped through the Straits of Gibraltar since September. The attack presaged a dangerous turn of events. By year's end there would be upwards of two dozen U Boats operating in the Mediterranean, posing a particular threat to the Royal Navy's carriers and adding to that already being experienced from Italian submarines and surface units, as well as the airborne threat from the Regia Aeronautica and the Luftwaffe.

It has been said that *Ark Royal* was hit by bad luck as much as by the torpedo. The subsequent enquiry heard of the chain of events which lead to the eventual foundering of the carrier. It was revealed that damage control parties were slow to react. This was because Captain Loben Maund RN, the ship's commanding officer, had ordered "abandon ship" when the torpedoes struck, perhaps bearing in mind the

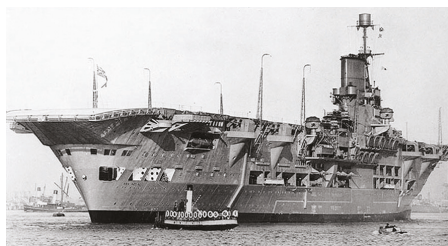
rapidity at which *Courageous* had sunk after being torpedoed. Because of this delay in response, the switchboard room was quickly flooded, leading to an almost complete loss of power. With steam-powered pumps out of action because of boiler failure and with no back up generators, it was not possible to correct the ship's list. Flooding was caused by an enormous hole on the port side, estimated to be some 100 feet long and 30 feet high.

The ship continued to float for two days before capsizing, which at least gave sufficient time to evacuate the ship's company, and only one man was lost. Captain Maund was subsequently court-martialled and found guilty of negligence, although the court accepted that there were many mitigating factors.

### **The loss of HMS Eagle**

As with *Glorious* and *Courageous*, HMS *Eagle* was converted from an existing hull. This was a 28,500 tons *Almirante Cochrane*, which had originally been ordered as one of a pair of battleships for the Chilean Navy during WWI. The vessel was purchased in 1918 and completed for the Royal Navy as an aircraft carrier in 1924.

On 10 August 1942, *Eagle* was participating in Operation Pedestal, helping to escort a convoy whose naval actions have passed into legend. She was one of four RN aircraft carriers accompanying the critical relief convoy sailing eastwards to beleaguered Malta. The waters of the Mediterranean have disadvantages but also benefits for the U-Boat. Clear water aided



**HMS Ark Royal in happier times.**

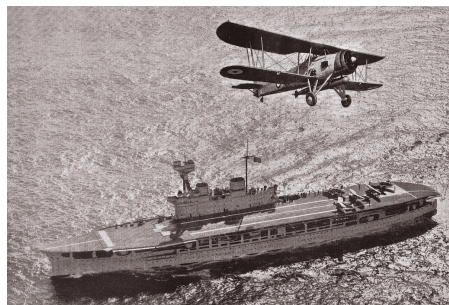


HMS *Eagle* on China Station.

aerial sightings of an underwater threat, but the frequent occurrence of the thermocline (a layer of water at a different temperature from the surrounding ocean) often affected the ability of ASDIC operators to detect a submarine operating below the layer. This characteristic was known to

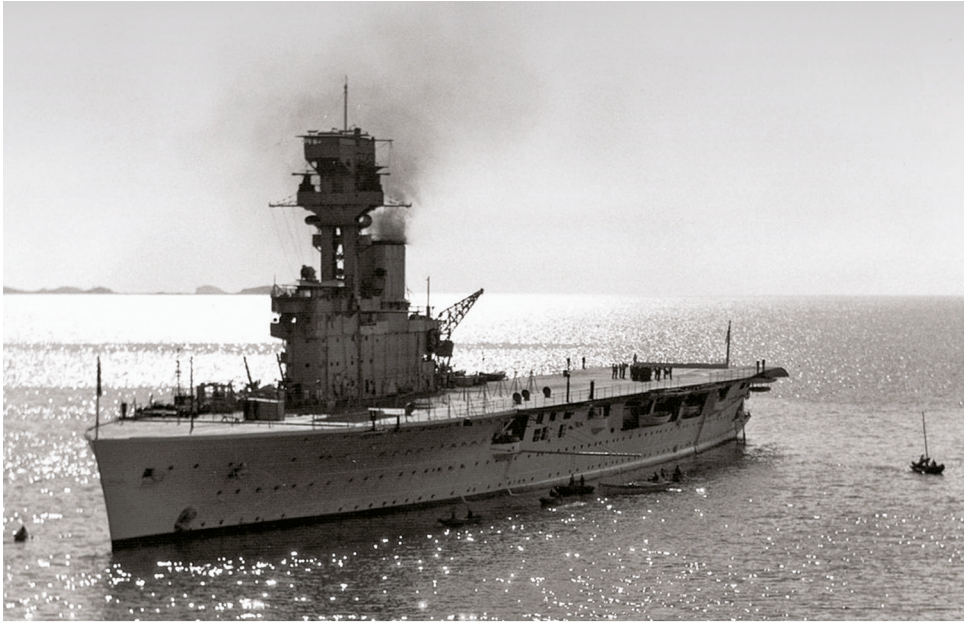
underwater attackers and exploited by them, while being cursed by their hunters. *Eagle* had already experienced a close shave when during the previous month she had managed to evade four torpedoes fired at her by the Italian submarine *Dandolo*.

On the early afternoon of 11 August, *Eagle* was hit by four torpedoes from the U73, commanded by Helmut Rosenbaum, and sank within four minutes. Rosenbaum undoubtedly benefited from the protective layer of ASDIC inhibiting thermocline. Arguably, an even more highly prized target might have fallen victim to his attack since at the time the torpedoes struck home, another carrier, HMS *Furious* to the rear of the convoy, was flying off its deck cargo of Spitfires, destination Malta



HMS *Eagle* and Swordfish aircraft.





**HMS Hermes on China Station c1931**

500 miles to the east, as reinforcement for the island's aerial defence.

The combined explosive effects of the four torpedoes gave little time left for HMS *Eagle*. Eyewitnesses spoke of

the ship continuing on a by now slewed course at around twelve knots with some of her 16 Sea Hurricanes slithering off the flight deck into the sea, before hull uppermost, she disappeared from sight. Considering such a short time had elapsed before this happened - accounts vary from six to eight minutes - the proportion of her crew saved was mercifully high. Again, figures vary but upwards of around 900 were rescued out of a complement of just over 1100 crew, numbers that strained to their limits, the capacities of the three destroyers which rescued them.



**HMS Hermes demonstrating her extremely tall superstructure.**

### **The loss of HMS Hermes**

*Hermes* gained the reputation of being the first purpose-built aircraft carrier in the world. Launched in 1919 and



assigned interwar to the China station, at 10,850 tons normal displacement and with a flight deck less than 600 feet long, she made a very modest contribution to British naval aviation in September 1939, since at best she could only carry 20 aircraft. The early months of 1942 saw Japan in lightning thrusts, rapidly invade and occupy a great swathe of countries while extending its so-called Co-Prosperity Sphere into South East Asia. The presence of the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) in the Indian Ocean in the first week of April 1942, just over four months after their triumph at Pearl Harbour, represented a kind of over-run of the momentum of Japan's initial expansion.

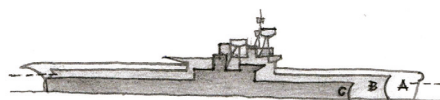
The focus of the IJN in the 1942 foray was Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, with its concentration of British naval bases. An initial air-raid on Colombo on 5 April drew a spirited response from an out numbered force of RAF and Fleet Air Arm fighters, Hurricanes and Fulmars, with less damage than expected to the port. The dangers to ships at sea were reinforced when during the raid, the two County Class cruisers HMS *Dorsetshire* and *Cornwall* were sunk by the marauding Japanese aircraft. The second air attack, this time on Trincomalee on the other coast of the island, took place on 8 April. During this raid, the Japanese caught *Hermes* with its accompanying destroyers HMS *Vampire* and *Hollyhock* south of the island, the ships having cleared the harbour in the hours before the raid. The carrier was overwhelmed, taking some 40 hits before she went

down joined by her two escorts, together with two auxiliaries. Admiral Somerville's fleet away to the south-east was unable to come to the rescue of the carrier squadron and in the event never contacted Nagumo's attacking force throughout the four days of its presence in the Indian Ocean. Nagumo withdrew after the Trincomalee raid, having depleted his aircrew off Ceylon to the extent, it is said, that it seriously affected the outcome for him in his engagement with the USN in the Coral Sea battle, a month later.

## Conclusions

There are a couple of shared factors in the narratives of the five aircraft carrier losses, one of which was that all successful attacks occurred when they were accompanied by escorting destroyers. The threat to the capital ship was three pronged: from surface attack, submarine-launched torpedoes, and aerial bombardment. Two extra destroyer escorts might have saved *Courageous* when she was torpedoed, but destroyers of those days had only a limited ability to defend against all threats. The effectiveness of ASDIC

THE THREE R.N. AIRCRAFT CARRIERS IN PROFILE



Comparative Profiles of the three Aircraft Carriers :

- A. HMS ARK ROYAL      pecked lines at bows and
- B. HMS EAGLE        sports slow lane of flight
- C. HMS HERMES      deck of HMS ILLUSTRIOUS class

Profiles give an indication of relative size of the ships. Neither Eagle nor Hermes could accommodate more than 20 of their own aircraft. Ark Royal however could embark 60 machines.

was at first greatly overrated, while attacking ships had to pass directly over the submarine to attack it with depth charges. A second factor is that all aircraft carriers become vulnerable to submarine attack when turning into wind and maintaining a steady course to launch and recover aircraft.

The *Glorious* incident, a confrontation with capital ships, clearly stretched its escorting destroyers to their limits. Aware that the carrier's armament lacked both the range and the power to deter *Scharnhorst*, her consorts first gave the carrier temporary aid through a smoke screen. Then with a combination of courage and audacity, HMS *Acasta* exploited its only effective weapon in the circumstances, its torpedoes. The destroyer captains acted with tremendous bravery, but the loss of *Courageous* was an expensive way to learn of the futility of risking a major asset in anti-submarine "sweeps".

*Ark Royal* could probably have been saved by more vigorous damage control, and this was a lesson that the RN certainly took to heart. The loss of *Hermes* through aerial attack exposed the inadequacy of the high angle anti-aircraft defences in RN ships of that time. Experience of the Luftwaffe and Regia Aeronautica in the Mediterranean the previous year, especially under dive bombing attack, had highlighted this weakness. The well-loved Vickers pom-pom had rather mediocre performance when compared with the equivalent ordnance from Sweden and Switzerland, namely the Bofors gun and Oerlikon cannon. American experience

of operations in the Pacific later would confirm the need for the massing of multiple AA ordnance if attacks were to be successfully warded off.

*Hermes* was also vulnerable in that she lacked the armoured box construction of the *Illustrious* class. Significantly, during the previous year in the Mediterranean, two of these carriers, *Illustrious* and *Indomitable*, had sustained serious bomb damage but had survived their direct hits and when repaired lived to fight again.

The main conclusion to be drawn from these narratives is that the Admiralty was slow to appreciate the vulnerability of aircraft carriers at the outbreak of war. There was a widely shared mindset that aircraft carriers were no more than a useful adjunct to the battlefleet, and only a far-sighted few could foresee that they would overtake the battleship in their effectiveness against emerging threats. However, the ever-adaptable Royal Navy was quick to learn, so that by the time the British Pacific Fleet joined the war in the Far East, the aircraft carrier had unquestionably become the Navy's capital ship.

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## Note

Member David Gibbins contacted us to comment on the article on aircraft carrier sinkings, although it reminded him that his father was one of those lost in HMS *Courageous* in 1939. "The ships' companies of both *Courageous* and *Glorious* were made up of reservists", he said, called up at the outbreak of war.

# “Last one home”

By Tudor Rees



Last one home, a painting by Gareth Hector.

**The painting “Last One Home” by Gareth Hector, was commissioned in 2015.**

It is a tribute to the Swordfish crews of the Fleet Air Arm who battled both the elements and the U-Boat threat in the North Atlantic during WW2. In particular it commemorates my father’s service as an Observer in 825 Naval Air Squadron during 1943/44. This is the story of the project and how it connected with a serving FAA Squadron and the ‘Fly Navy’ team.

My interest in Art had started from my youth and I followed the work of a number of aviation artists specialising

in WW2 subjects. However, one artist, Gareth Hector had always impressed me, with the accuracy and detail he put into his subjects together with his uncanny ability to capture movement. I contacted Gareth and explained what I wanted the commission to do; to try and capture the bleakness, danger and cold of an anti submarine patrol in a Swordfish, over the vast space of the North Atlantic.

My idea then was to pick a typical sortie from my father’s logbook, which seemed to represent the typical challenge facing Swordfish crews at that crucial time in the Battle of the Atlantic.

As you know, a typical logbook entry confirms details of sorties flown; aircraft types, serials and pilots. To cross check the detail, I undertook a visit to the National Archives at Kew to review and copy the Squadron War Diary for 825 Squadron during that period.

The next challenge was deciding what part of the sortie to represent. Naval aviators of all eras agree, that landing on a carrier is their most difficult challenge. Gareth mocked up a number of ideas for us to discuss and review and suggested the idea of the “golden hour” in lighting the scene.

So the commission was to represent a ‘moment in time’: Jan 9th 1944 at approximately 1740, returning to HMS *Vindex* after A/S patrol. Aircraft was Swordfish LS374, code letter “U” of 825 Squadron FAA. The weather on that day (a Sunday) in 1944 in that part of the North Atlantic, was also confirmed by my research at the Met Office Digital Library and Archive weather website.

As the project progressed, I found myself becoming engrossed (my wife would say obsessed) in the detail of researching the subject. However, the final validation of many crucial details would require a visit to the Fleet Air Arm Museum, Yeovilton, and the airworthy aircraft of the RN Historic Trust.

In July 2015 I got in touch with the Research Team at FAAM, who suggested a contact at RNHF. Both the Museum staff and RNHF team were fantastically helpful and in September, I arranged to visit the Museum in the morning and as luck would have it, the Historic flight team were available

that afternoon. Both visits were productive, discovering new photos of 825 Squadron aboard *Vindex* and that afternoon, doing a walk-round of and photographing W5856.

A discussion with the CO of the RNHF – Lt Cdr Chris Götke – and Swordfish display pilot, helped me identify and photograph the likely control surface positions at this attitude during the approach to the carrier.

The painting was progressing well by the turn of the year and as I reflected on this it seemed only right and proper to donate a couple of prints; one to the RNHF who had been so helpful and the other, if possible, to 825 Squadron. The team at RNHF via Lt. Simon Wilson, contacted 825 Squadron on my behalf. Imagine my excitement when out of the blue came an invitation to attend the 825 Squadron 1/15 Wings Parade at Yeovilton, on May 19 2016. Following the ceremony in Hangar 4, the prints were presented to the CO of 825 in the Wardroom and to the CO RNHF in the Fly Navy Hangar.

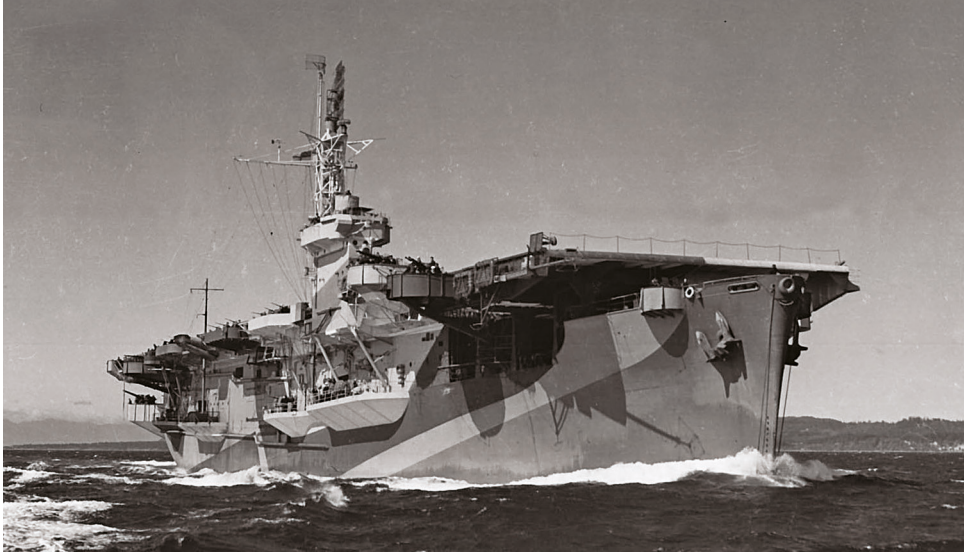
My thanks to: Gareth Hector, FAA Museum Research team, RNHF team, 825 Squadron and the authors of my research sources and books, too many to list here.



Presenting a print to the RNHF team.

# 71 Degrees North, 19 Degrees East

By Surgeon Lieutenant Charles Herbert Read RCN



Escort Carrier HMS Nabob © Canadian DOD

## **Our ship was HMS Nabob, the first Canadian-manned aircraft carrier.**

She was a *Ruler* class escort carrier built in Tacoma, Washington; acquired by the British on lend lease and then lent to the Canadian Navy. The ship's crew was Canadian; all the men but the captain were volunteers. Everyone on board had volunteered for service except the captain; he was career Navy. *Nabob's* flight deck was only 467 feet in length, a scant two thirds of which was available for landings as a wire barrier was raised about opposite the bridge.

This was to prevent an aircraft that failed to catch an arrestor wire ploughing into aircraft parked ahead of it all or going on into the sea. The pilots had to be, and were, highly skilled.

12 Avenger torpedo bombers of 852 Squadron provided our offensive power. The squadron's aircrew were mostly British except six New Zealanders. The squadron's Commanding Officer was Lt Cdr "Bobby" Bradshaw, whose given name was Richard, but even as a child he had insisted on being called Bobby. He was born into an upper-class English



family and his body language reflected his confidence in his social position. His career in the Navy was widely known: two Distinguished Service Crosses (DSC) and two Mentioned in Dispatches for bravery in action.

Our defensive ability came from four, sometimes five, Wildcat fighter aircraft and 16 Bofors 40 mm guns and 27 Oerlikon 20 mm machine guns, which lined both sides of the flight deck. Top speed was 17 knots; we cruised at 15. In our first operation, our aircraft and those from *Trumpeter*, our companion carrier, successfully laid mines in the inland passage on the coast of Norway. By using this passage, German ships were protected from attack by our submarines. The purpose of this operation was to lay acoustic and other "smart" mines in these waters to force their ships out to sea. This was a successful operation; one Avenger, a Firefly and three Seafires from the accompanying fleet carrier, HMS *Furious*, were the only losses.

When we returned to Scapa on 13 August 1944, at least four battleships, five fleet aircraft carriers, a bevy of heavy cruisers and 20 or so destroyers were at anchor; many more than when we were first there. Something big was in the works and I was sure we would be in it. This was an exciting prospect; undoubtedly we would be tested but we had finished a good six weeks of work-up in the Irish Sea, and I was confident we would be able to cope. Although our crew was young and inexperienced, most having never even been to sea before, I had seen they were hard-

working, co-operative and resilient; they had learned their roles quickly.

Everyone in *Nabob* felt we were off to a good start. Now the question was: "what's next?" I put this question to my senior medical officer, Surgeon Lt Cdr Walter Rice. In several months of working together, we had become close friends. A few years older than I, he had joined the Royal Canadian Navy early in the war and almost immediately he was lent to the Royal Navy, which was short of physicians. Now four years later, he was wise in the idiosyncrasies of that service, yet had kept his sense of humour. I realised I was lucky to have him as my senior officer. When I asked him what he thought our next operation would be, the ever-present twinkle in his eyes disappeared. After a long pause he answered. "Well I don't know of course, but with all this power we see around us, I guess it's going to be pretty momentous. What's the most momentous target you can think of?"

"That's easy the *Tirpitz*."

*Tirpitz*, reputedly the most powerful warship ever built, was even more dangerous than its better-known sister ship, *Bismarck*. Now lurking in a fiord near North Cape, Norway, it was wounded but still dangerous. A healthy *Tirpitz* could inflict a lot of damage to the Murmansk convoys carrying supplies to Russia, should it leave its lair and begin to rampage in the Arctic Ocean.

On the second day after we arrived in Scapa, a former Fleet Air Arm pilot, now a "prisoner of war escape specialist", came on board to talk to our squadron. He was slightly built, but his vigour and

especially his intensity alerted all of us. He started by saying:

“Gentlemen, I want to remind you all that if you’re captured, you are duty-bound to try to escape.”

The room became silent. Everyone sat up straight and looked at the speaker. He recounted how he had been held in Stalag Luft III after having been shot down and had escaped through the tunnel dug by the prisoners.

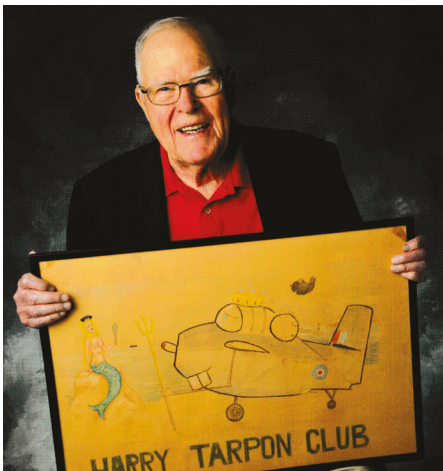
“I had to grope along with the darkness;” he said “It was slow going, but after what seemed a long time I got out. I travelled at night and hid during the day. Finally, I got to Hamburg and managed to slip onto a Swedish ore carrier. After an uncomfortable journey, I landed in Stockholm, went to the British Embassy. A few days later, a Royal Air Force Mosquito picked me up at the airport and flew me back to the UK.”

He finished his talk by distributing survival kits to all of us. Among the items

it contained were hard candy, a map of Norway printed on silk and a razor. “The razor is included”, he said, “because all Norwegian men are clean-shaven. Anyone seen unshaven in a Norwegian village would really stand out.”

There were five groups of ships in the forthcoming operation, operating separately but under one command, all headed for the Arctic north of Norway, several going on to Russia. The Admiral flew his flag in the *Duke of York*. With him were three fleet carriers: *Indefatigable*, *Formidable* and *Furious*; three cruisers: *Devonshire*, *Berwick* and *Kent*; and six destroyers. *Nabob* and *Trumpeter*, protected by the heavy cruiser *Kent* and five destroyers, formed the “assault group”. Everyone maintained radio silence. Reconnaissance photographs showed that the *Tirpitz*, protected by anti-torpedo nets, was anchored near the shore in Kaafjord, the inland end of Altenfjord. Batteries of anti-aircraft guns lined both sides of the fjord and a Messerschmitt 109 fighter squadron was stationed nearby, ready to defend its charge.

On 21 August, we were at 71° north, 19° east, a good 100 miles or more off North Cape. It was about the position from which we were going to launch our attack and approximately 150 miles to Kaafjord and our target, the *Tirpitz*. During the morning, Bobby Bradshaw and the squadron leader of 846 in *Trumpeter* flew to one of the fleet carriers for a briefing on the revised plan for attacking *Tirpitz*. When he returned, I noticed Bobby looked unusually serious as he assembled the squadron



Charles Read with a cartoon drawn by SoFFAAM member Bill Reeks.

for the briefing.

“Now listen carefully, he said. “We are going to fly a circuitous route while aircraft from the fleet carriers cause a diversionary uproar over Altenfjord and Kaafjord to confuse the ack ack gunners. We’re going to cross the coast right here,” pointing to a spot on the map some distance from the target. “We’ll go inland to here, and then fly north east to Kaafjord. We’ll fly across the fjord, so we’ll be over it for only 15 seconds. Look at this photograph. You see the *Tirpitz*, right there? It’s anchored near the side of the fjord and is protected on the far side by those anti-torpedo nets. What we have to do is drop our mines between the side of the fjord and the ship.”

Bobby made no effort to hide the fact that this was a high-risk operation. Flying at night from a blacked-out ship was a hairy experience, even for those of us who only stood by and watched. During the evening, the signals we received from the flagship suggested there was doubt about whether the attack would go forward the next day. We went to bed thinking the operation might be postponed. Finally, about 05.00 a decision came: “Fly off will be at 07.00”.

Even before 07.00, they were in the Ready Room. My action station was nearby, so by going back and forth, I was easily able to keep track of what was going on without being too intrusive. Just before 09.00 came the word we had been waiting for. “Pilots, man your aircraft.” The aircraft, fully fuelled and armed, were ready. Soon all the engines were turning over, the whirl of the

propellers accentuated by a light mist. Other than this the weather was clear. We turned into wind, as did *Trumpeter*. One by one, the aircraft were launched and climbed to altitude. Flying in flights of three in tight vee formations, their wings overlapping, the roar of their powerful Pratt and Whitney 1750 radial engines increasing and decreasing as round and round they flew, now closer, then further away. As I watched, I noticed that no other aircraft had joined them. Why were the fleet carriers so slow getting their planes in the air? Only occasionally did one take off from their expansive decks. An hour went by, then we turned into wind and prepared to receive our aircraft. One after another they came in and landed safely. Why had they come back? At first, I was angry they had been recalled, later I learned that a *Seafire* from *Indefatigable* had overflowed the fjord and reported it obscured by clouds, which was why the Admiral postponed the attack. At 1500, our Wildcats that had been flying fleet patrol landed on and the ship stood down from action stations.



**HMS Nabob 'dragging' her stern while returning back to port after being torpedoed.**

Our group, *Kent*, *Nabob* and *Trumpeter*, withdrew to the west. No one had eaten since early morning because of being at action stations, so the cooks went to the galley to prepare food for the crew. Having been up most of the night, I wanted to get some rest to be prepared for whatever might happen. About 15.30 I went to my cabin, pulled the chair near my bunk and laid my life jacket on it. I had a glass of orange juice and soon I was asleep. An hour and a half later, the combination of a horrendous noise and simultaneously being thrown almost out of my bunk woke me up. The Action Gong sounded. I knew I had to get to my action station. I reached for the flashlight I'd attached to my life jacket, turned it on, pulled my trousers and jacket on over my pyjamas and stepped into my shoes. Using my flashlight to light my way I quickly walked the short distance to the nearest ladder to the deck above. 15 or so of the crew were already waiting there, as were others coming on the companionway from the stern of the ship. There was no evidence of panic.

Reaching the hangar deck, I walked quickly towards my primary action station. I saw the stern was down and the bow up. There was a definite list to starboard that seemed to be increasing while I walked. The aircraft were well tied down and had not budged from their positions, even though it looked as though the hangar deck had an upward bulge. At last, I got to the enclosed ladder leading to my action station and the flight deck. I had the feeling we were starting to capsize and had to get up those steps as fast as I could, expecting at any moment I would be met by a torrent of salt water. I reached the top step and went out on to a catwalk to make sure we were still more or less upright. We were, but not in our usual attitude. The first sailor that I met said, "Jeez, Doc, we're listing 15° to starboard and our stern is 14 feet deeper in the water than usual. We are in big trouble!"

Looking to starboard, I saw one of our escort, the destroyer *Bickerton*, was dead in the water. Clouds of steam and smoke partially obscured her, but it looked like her stern was badly damaged.



Grumman Avenger landing on HMS *Trumpeter*.



HMS *Bickerton*.

Apparently, she was torpedoed a few minutes after we caught our "fish", possibly in an attempt to save *Nabob* from a second one. My action station was a mess. The examining table and other furnishings were overturned. All the supplies stored in cabinets and drawers were strewn across the deck. Surgical instruments, bandages and tape mixed with the contents of smashed bottles of saline, iodine and mercurochrome made a colourful melange. It would be impossible to treat any injured in that place.

My secondary action station was down below on the canteen flat, in the area where the torpedo struck. I knew I had to go down there because it was quite likely that someone would need assistance. More than that, I knew if I didn't go, I would for ever label myself a coward. I crossed to the port side, descended three decks and walked towards the stern until I came to the canteen flat. Usually brightly lit and filled with a good number of the crew talking, eating or just resting, it was now quiet and dark. Not even the emergency

lighting system was working and the only light was from my flashlight. As I expected, it looked as if the water level was higher on the starboard side.

Midway through this inspection, I heard the captain's voice, over the loudspeaker. It seemed to me he said, "prepare to abandon ship," but it was so faint I couldn't be sure. Maybe it was "abandon ship." I wondered what one did to prepare to abandon ship and decided to ignore the order. I decided I would find out if the ship was being abandoned so went topsides. On my way back to the flight deck, I went to the sick bay to see if there might be any injured there. Not a soul, not even any of the sick birth attendants (SBAs) were there. Good, I thought, maybe we don't have any injured. After the announcement from the captain of our preparing to abandon ship, or whatever he said, there had been no further word. From the number of sailors standing round, it was obvious they had not left the ship. I could see that the original order had caused a great confusion, for most of the Carley floats had been lowered and, carelessly



**HMS Kent.**



**HMS Kempthorne.**



tethered, had floated away. This was potentially disastrous for if we now had to abandon the ship, most of us would be in the water and the chance of more than a few minutes survival in the frigid water of the Arctic Ocean was zero.

I walked forward to the very front of the flight deck and surveyed the scene; fortunately, the sea remained relatively calm. Looking aft, it seems the attitude of the ship was about the same, down in the stern and listing to starboard. Nothing seemed to be happening. Even more of the crew than the first time were clustered on the port side, talking quietly and waiting. It seemed only a matter of time before the order to abandon ship would be heard. Just then the captain's voice came from the bridge. "Men, we think there's a chance we might be able to save the ship. We need volunteers to go down below to shore up bulkheads. Anyone that wants to help please step forward." Immediately at least 100 men stepped forward and went below.

A short time later, I was ordered to HMS *Kemphorne* to look after casualties. I got in the ship's boat that took me the short distance to the destroyer. Standing on the gunwhale, I grabbed the scrambling net suspended from *Kemphorne's* deck. It was a lot tougher than I expected. As I neared the deck, helping hands pulled me up the last few inches.

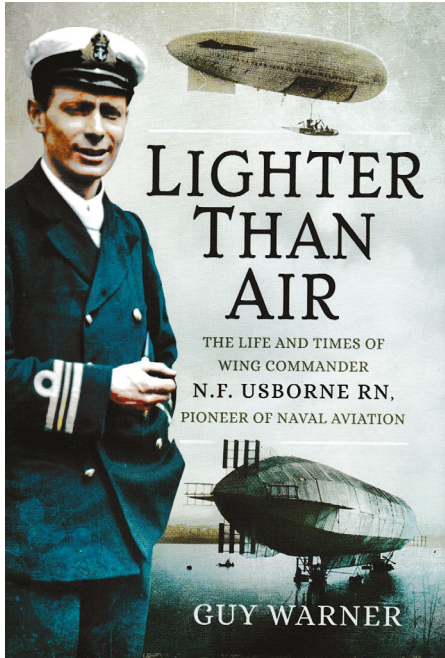
A sailor took me below to where the injured were distributed around the mess. With two or three other SBA's, I began a triage. I had never faced a situation like this before, but I was confident I could cope with it.

No matter how seriously injured they were, none complained. The atrociously poor lighting made the whole process infinitely more difficult, but we did the best we could, separating those who seemed to be in most urgent need for treatment from those I thought could wait until later. Quite a number were unconscious and seemed near death. To those in pain, we gave morphine. I don't know what time it was when we finished. Exhausted, the SBAs and I went up to the quarterdeck. Already the sun was above the horizon. We didn't talk, each of us deep in our own thoughts. When at last we stood up to go back to the sick bay, someone exclaimed, "Look over to port, *Nabob* is underway!" Indeed she was, moving slowly but plowing ahead, her head held high as if proud of her achievement. She had survived!

Later that morning, I attended the naval burial service. Standing on the starboard side of the quarterdeck, I listened to the words read by the ship's captain, heard the ceremonial rifle shots and joined in singing the naval hymn, "For those in peril on the sea". One by one, eight shrouded and weighted bodies were slipped over the side of the ship. For me, the ceremony was very painful. We'd done the best we could, but we had not saved those men. At that moment, our successes, no matter how many or how significant, seemed inconsequential. But as the service came to a close, I began to regain perspective and to realise that I, too, was participating in the same crusade in which they and so many others had given their lives.

# Lighter than air

A book review by Malcolm Smith



**This book is a bit like a plum pudding - full of good things but somewhat indigestible in parts.**

Although the cover gives the impression that it is the biography of Commander Neville Usborne RN, pioneer of naval aviation (and indeed it contains a detailed biographical assessment of this remarkable man) it actually provides a much broader view on the history of ballooning in the Royal Navy; placing it in the broader setting of

lighter-than-air craft in general.

The author opens with an overview of early man-carrying balloons, usually spherical in shape, which could rise into the air and go wherever the wind took them. The British Army established a permanent balloon arm in 1884, which pioneered the military use of balloons. These were the conventional spherical design, used as tethered platforms for surveillance of the surrounding countryside. However, there was an early determination to make the vessel dirigible (from the French *diriger*: to steer). The familiar fish-shaped balloon made an early appearance, in a craft developed by the French Army called the *La France*, of 1884. Powered by an electric motor driving a two-bladed propeller and equipped with a rudder, this craft was able to manoeuvre in the air and make progress up-wind. By 1900, the War Office had established the Balloon Factory at Farnborough, which started on designing dirigible balloons.

Usborne entered the Royal Navy as a cadet in 1897. His was a typical career of a young officer at a time of rapid change in the Royal Navy. He was a bright young man, described as “physically strong, very able and promising”. He was promoted to Lieutenant in 1903 and

qualified as a Torpedo specialist in 1908.

Warner surveys the development of dirigible airships, starting in 1900 with the first Zeppelin, LZ1. This precursor to all subsequent Zeppelins pioneered the rigid design, with vertical rings held in place by horizontal girders. LZ1 was overweight and proved difficult to control and manoeuvre, but its successors provided effective long duration airborne surveillance and pioneered the concept of strategic bombing. In Britain, the Willows company produced several successful airships, while the Balloon Factory produced its own dirigible designs. These relied on internal gas pressure to maintain their shape, but in 1909 the Admiralty announced an order for a rigid airship for the Royal Navy. This was to be built by Vickers at Barrow-in-Furness, while the design was entrusted to a consortium of Vickers engineers and naval officers, led by Captain Murray Sueter RN. Sueter selected Osborne to join his team

The Vickers design, to be known as HM Airship No 1, was ambitious, as large as any of the Zeppelins constructed so far. The lengthy construction time led to its being dubbed "Mayfly" in the press and when it was finally drawn out of the construction shed, it proved to be



**HMA No1 leaving its floating shed at Cavendish Dock, Barrow-in-Furness.**

considerably overweight. On only its second excursion in September 1911, it was caught by a gust of wind and broke its back.

Although the Mayfly was a total loss, Willows continued to produce non-rigid airships, which proved to be a success in the military role. In April 1912, Osborne was appointed to command the newly formed Naval Airship Section of the Royal Flying Corps and in July of that year the Admiralty purchased the Willows No 4 design for use in naval trials. Known as HMA No 2, it was described as a handy little ship, with two or three seats and a 40 hp Renault engine driving a pair of wooden propellers. The establishment of the Naval Wing within the Royal Flying Corps had led to considerable friction and in June 1914 the Admiralty declared that it was to be re-named the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) and become a distinct branch of the RN. The outbreak of war in August 1914 found Osborne, now promoted to Commander, in command of HMA No 3. He reported to the Admiralty that naval airships could carry out valuable operational tasks, including scouting for the fleet, observing enemy movements and spotting the fall of shot from ships' guns.

By 1915, the use by the Germans of unrestricted submarine warfare focused the minds of the RN on anti-submarine warfare. Responding to a specification issued by the Admiralty, Osborne contributed to the design of the small Submarine Scout (SS) airship. He was now stationed at the Naval Air Station at Kingsnorth, near Sheerness,

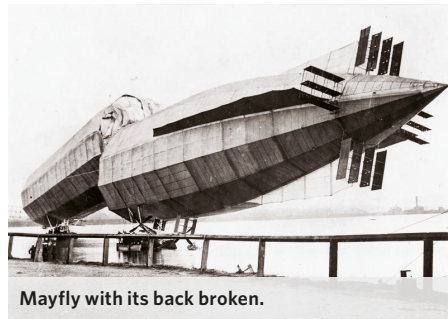
and oversaw its development into a factory to produce these small non-rigids. The SS class was a fairly simple design, capable of carrying a crew of two at airspeeds of 40 to 50 mph. They were equipped with wireless telegraphy and armed with small bombs and a Lewis gun. The design was steadily improved into a twin-engined model and as their numbers increased, they were employed in lengthy anti-submarine patrols over the North Sea, the Western Approaches and around the coasts of Ireland. Warner comments "There is no doubt that Usborne's drive, imagination and technical knowledge were of considerable importance in the development of a useful weapon that helped to win the first U-boat war."

The British public had been profoundly shocked by bombing raids by Zeppelins on towns in the UK. These were militarily insignificant, but the public demanded a visible response. Although an aircraft could shoot down the dirigible, aircraft performance in those days usually precluded a successful mission that included climbing unobserved to the height of the Zeppelin. In October 1915, Usborne submitted a paper on anti-Zeppelin defence, including the suggestion that a fighter aircraft could be suspended beneath a balloon cruising at Zeppelin height, from which the aircraft could be slipped when the enemy was spotted and go on to attack it. He developed this idea into the concept of the Airship Plane - a BE2c carried aloft under a SS balloon envelope. The concept was trialled successfully without a crew

and in February 1916, permission was given to carry out a manned slipping trial of the combination, named AP-1. On 21 February Usborne and Squadron Commander de Courcey Ireland ascended in the AP-1 from Kingsnorth, ascending to a height of about 4,000 feet. The balloon then apparently lost gas pressure and the instability resulted in the premature release of the attachment cables. The aircraft fell to earth, out of control, and turned over, throwing out Ireland, while Usborne remained in the aircraft, which crashed near Strood railway station. Usborne's death brought the Airship Plane experiment to an abrupt conclusion.

Warner summarises Usborne's achievements and legacy in a lengthy chapter and concludes with a summary of later developments in dirigible airships. He adds several interesting appendices, which range over varied airship topics, and includes a comprehensive index, notes and bibliography. The persevering reader will find much to enjoy in this somewhat uneven but extensively researched book.

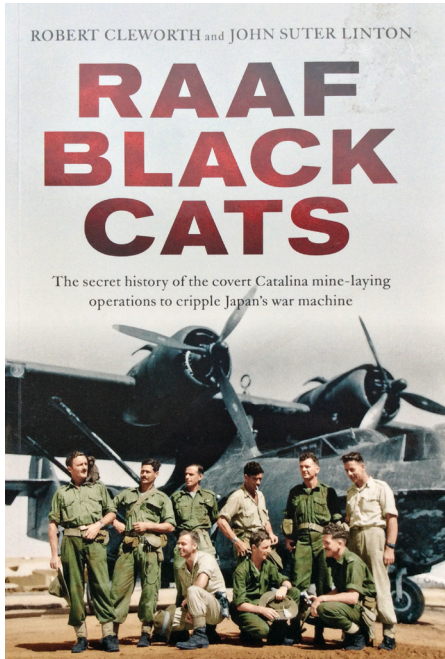
**Lighter-Than-Air, by Guy Warner.  
Pen and Sword. ISBN 978 182 902 2**



**Mayfly with its back broken.**

# RAAF Black Cats

A book review by Chris Penney



**In the centenary of the Royal Australian Air Force comes this recent title on a little-known aspect of war in the Pacific.**

A softback format from Australian publisher Allen & Unwin, it is Cleworth's third book on the lend-lease Consolidated Catalina. The author was Secretary of the NSW Catalina Association and he begins with a moving account of how his brother went missing in action while serving with the RAAF during March

1945 and how, after his parents passed away, he endeavoured to establish his brother's fate. RAAF Black Cats is the result of research which led him to the US National Archives. This revealed a top-secret joint US Australia operation involving the laying of minefields by the RAAF behind Japanese lines.

In setting the story's scene, the authors stress the importance of the overall situation faced by Allied Pacific commanders after 7 December 1941. By early 1942 Imperial Japan had occupied the Dutch East Indies to seize the raw materials needed for its war effort. As a result, the conflict reached Australia's backyard. Japan's subsequent relentless advance towards the strategic prize of Port Moresby meant there were few countermeasures that US Admiral Chester Nimitz could use to aid threatened Australia – but mine warfare was one. After the Japanese were checked at the Battle of Guadalcanal, the US Navy set up mine depots in both Brisbane and Cairns, NE Australia. A local Operational Research Group was also established. The task of US Navy and RAAF planners was to design a mine-laying campaign to hinder the free movement of merchant convoy traffic throughout the south west Pacific. The enemy had concentrated shipping in



the area to transport vital stocks of East Indies oil and this could be bottled up by such mining activity. US naval commanders considered this aerial mining an important measure when viewed against a submarine offensive yet to fully gear up.

The book points out that it was Lt Commander Palgrave Carr DFC of the Royal Australian Navy who suggested using Catalina flying boats for minelaying following Carr's experience serving with the Fleet Air Arm between 1936 and April 1942. Trials proved that RAAF Cats could carry the same payload as a B-17 bomber but had much greater range, while their ability to land on water made them suitable for a whole range of associated maritime warfare tasks. Interestingly the authors' research discovered that such was the unusual nature of the missions flown that RAAF crew members selected for duty were volunteers and the reason would become all too apparent later on. Painted black and operating by night, the RAAF Cats launched their first mine-laying operation on 22 April 1943 when eight aircraft mined Kavieng anchorage on the north-eastern edge of New Guinea's island chain. The flying boats carried two 1,060lb parachute mines under each wing during what was a 3,600 mile (5,800km) 19-hour mission.

In a chapter entitled "Everyone had their jobs to do" veterans explain that such lengthy flights were the norm and that by using pre-positioned support depot ships, operational range could be extended even further. It reveals mining

operations were planned in meticulous detail as harbour and coastal shipping channels had first to be identified before a drop zone could be selected. Operations at night meant that accurate blind navigation would be critical. After experimentation, crews found moonlit flying unsuitable as it only made the Cat itself a target. All navigation was by shipping charts and by astronavigation tablets, sextant and the stars when visible. Pilots aimed to identify a prominent headland for the run to target and radio altimeters were used for the mine drop.

The Cats had a large crew of nine and the book recalls how a clean galley became a source of pride between crews. Just as today's long-haul flights have in-flight catering, so did the RAAF aircrew on those long night missions. Pressure cookers, unheard of in Australia at the time, allowed a hot meal to be served. An autopilot offered the pilot a doze but the rugged flying boat was a noisy beast and with no air conditioning sleep was nearly always impossible. All crew members acted as damage control squads when flak damage meant bullet holed hulls had to be plugged.

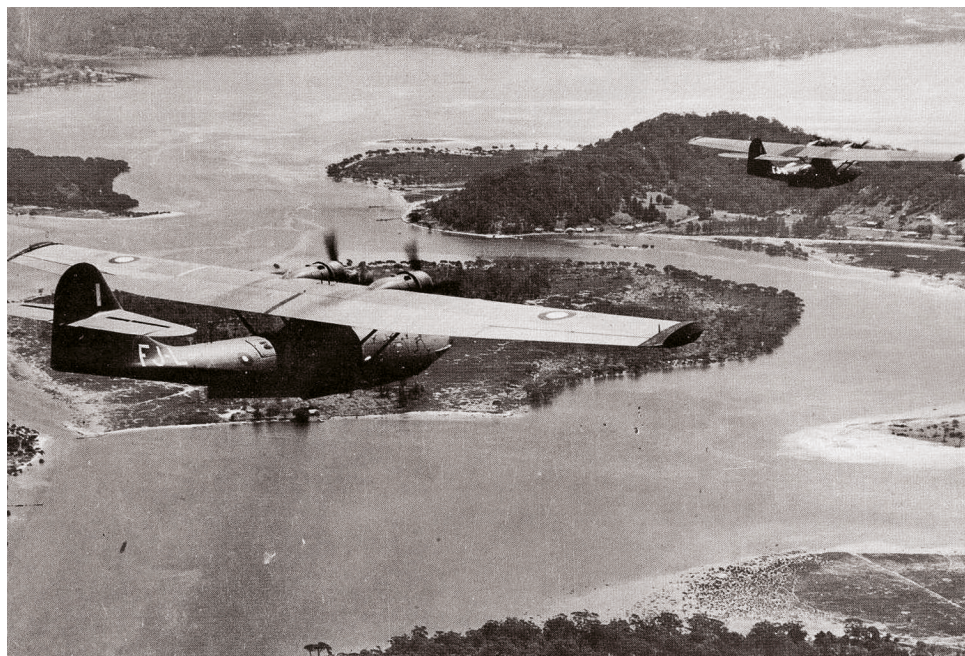
While Australians of Bomber Command were flying Lancasters over Germany, so the Black Cats took the fight to Japan. Four RAAF squadrons were eventually involved in the mine campaign and specific missions are described in some detail. Once the Philippines had been liberated the Aussie Cats were put to work 'sowing' ports in China and Formosa. Everything changed however, once US forces secured island

bases from which USAAF B-29 bombers began mining the shipping lanes around Japan's home islands. This was a situation not dissimilar to the European theatre where mine-laying became the responsibility of RAF bombers. But as the authors proudly point out, this American operation was scattergun compared with the earlier precision targeting of specific anchorages undertaken by the Aussie Cats.

The Appendices provided are fascinating and the results of Black Cat operations are reviewed at length. Official RAAF campaign analysis states that the Catalinas achieved success out of all proportion to the resources expended and losses taken. In addition to ships sunk, Japanese merchant

convoys were constantly rerouted or delayed by as much as two weeks. It also forced shipping into deeper water where Allied submarines waited and damaged ships under tow were easy to pick off. Much enemy effort had also to be diverted for minesweeping duties as a result.

Not a long read given the specialist subject, *Black Cats* nevertheless adds greatly to the knowledge of Australia's often overlooked air war in the Pacific. Various maps ably show the geographic reach of the RAAF Catalina mining campaign and the narrative provides a fine tribute to the 74 Australian aircrew (and one seconded RCAF airman) lost undertaking the secretive missions. Highly recommended.



A24-28 in company with another RAAF Catalina over Lake Macquarie NSW, Australia, late 1944.

# November 2020 Talk, "TAG on Russian Convoys"

by Stephen Pitts, summarised by Robert Heath



James Pitts on the left and his fellow crew members.

**A highlight on my calendar each month has to be popping along to FAA Museum at Yeovilton for a talk evening.**

Government restrictions due to Covid-19 left a blank on my calendar, and a hole in my social life. However, no matter what strictures 'authorities' place on us all, there is always a way round it and thanks to hard work behind the scenes by SoFFAAM's Richard Macauley and his colleagues, the talk season has started again, via Zoom.

Deep joy all round, particularly for the 69 participants.

So, to the subject of the talk: 'TAG on Russian Convoys'. As you will probably know, a TAG is a Telegraphist Air Gunner and the Russian convoys, or Arctic Convoys as they were also known, were undertaken to demonstrate the Allies' commitment to helping the Soviet Union in its share of the fight against the Nazi war machine. It was no milk-run, it was extremely dangerous and definitely

a trifle nippy (-40° for example) at the best of times.

The subject of our talk was the speaker's father, James Pitts, born in 1924 in Barnes, London. By 1942, James knew that he would be called-up and his preference was the Royal Navy. So, on his 18th birthday James volunteered to be a TAG in the Fleet Air Arm. Shortly afterwards, the letter arrived instructing him to report to HMS *Royal Arthur*, a 'stone frigate' reception depot near Skegness, followed by basic training at HMS *St Vincent*, in Gosport, Hampshire, next a dash across the Atlantic to the American naval base Asbury Park, in New Jersey, where he was taught how to shoot, then an even more intensive course at the No.1 Air Gunners School at Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, Canada. On his 19th birthday a short time later, the pilot of the Swordfish he was in, had to make an emergency landing after a hydraulic leak. Unfortunately, the landing was in a bog and the aircraft flipped onto its back. What a birthday treat. That was accident number one. It is a sad fact that accidents were all too frequent and more men were lost in training than by war action. Training continued throughout the winter of course, when temperatures could fall to -23°C, resulting in James' hands freezing to the metal of the gun. One final incident that occurred during his time in Canada was James having a whirlwind romance that led to him and a Canadian girl, Della, becoming engaged. The romance endured for no more than the length of his stay in Canada, but that was not the end of it, as time will tell.

Still completing his training, James

was posted to NAS *Lewiston*, in Maine, USA, then on to Quincy, a suburb of Boston, Massachusetts, where he joined 856 Squadron to fly in Grumman Avenger torpedo/bombers. Finally, James returned to 'Blighty' and was flown to HMS *Landrail*, Macrihanish in Scotland, for a bomb laying course. It was here that James experienced his second crash, this time caused by one landing wheel locking in the up position. Even though a wing was torn off in the landing, James survived again. Two weeks before his 20th birthday, James set off on his first operational posting, to HMS *Premier*. She was a 16,600 ton Lend/Lease Escort Carrier built in the USA in 1943. The flight deck was a modest 440ft long and to familiarise himself with this, James' pilot was detailed to take his Avenger up for practice circuits, solo, without the navigator or James, the TAG. All well and good, except that, before the pilot took off, James had tuned the radio and then climbed out to stand with the navigator and spectate. In a moment of horror, it dawned on James that he had tuned the radio to the wrong channel! Without hesitation he nipped across the flight deck, climbed back into the aircraft without the pilot seeing him and reset the radio, all while the pilot was doing his pre-flight checks. No problem, except before James could scramble out again, the pilot opened the throttle and roared off down the deck on the first of four scheduled familiarisation flights. Not wanting to overstay his part in this process, James jumped out of the aircraft when it touched down and



rushed out of sight - he thought. He was spotted and put on four separate charges, including leaving the ship without permission, unauthorised night flying, and so forth. James was not the only one to be put on a charge by that particular Commander. On another occasion a man was blown overboard by prop-wash and had to be rescued by the cutter. He was put on a charge for leaving the ship without permission and then another charge for joining the ship without permission!

Shortly after this, James had his third crash. The pilot was on finals with the arrester hook down ready to catch a wire. However, at the last moment he decided to go around again and opened the throttle to pass over the deck. Unfortunately, the hook caught a safety barrier and slapped the aircraft down on top of two parked aircraft before ending up hanging perilously over the edge of the flight deck.

The first operational flight for James was mine laying in the Karmsund narrows to the north of Stavanger, Norway. The idea was to close the narrows and force German ships into open waters to be picked-off. Nine Avengers and four Wildcats from HMS *Premier* were joined by Wildcats from HMS *Pursuer* and they flew in sections of three at 150ft above the water to 'lay their eggs'. All went well and everyone returned successfully.

The next mine-laying operation was near Ramsund, this time in conjunction with HMS *Implacable*, *Diadem*, *Trumpeter* and eight destroyers. The Germans were waiting for them. Once

again, the Avengers went in low with the Wildcat fighter escort keeping an eye on them. Flak was being fired down on to the Avengers from the mountains high above and James found it unnerving to be in the middle of a sky full of tracer bullets, any one of which appeared to be about to hit him. He quickly started shooting back - but at what? There was so much of it - where was it coming from? Once again, the mines were successfully deposited. More operations followed in other Norwegian fjords, but the awful, freezing weather conditions often interfered and caused cancellations. Following a similar mine-laying operation near Bergen on 20 March 1945, James learnt that his ship was to be part of Russian convoy JW66, codenamed Operation Roundel. Although Germany was clearly losing the war and in retreat, northern Norway was still a well-armed German stronghold with at least 20 U-boats and 100 land-based aircraft.

On 18 April 1945, *Premier* departed from Scapa Flow in Scotland along with *Vindex* another Escort Carrier, the cruiser *Bellona* and six destroyers, some corvettes and a sloop to escort 26 merchant ships to Murmansk. As they headed into the North Sea, they were joined by a further three destroyers, four corvettes and 16 Russian submarine chasers out of the Faroe Islands - a formidable armada.

The patrolling Avengers undertook four-hour anti-submarine sorties, alternating day and night generally at a height of 5 - 6,000 feet, in temperatures as low as -40°C, to spot any U-boats.



The convoy arrived safely in Murmansk. For the return journey to Britain, 22 merchant ships were mustered. They were soon under attack, although U307 was caught and sunk. Before long, the corvette HMS *Goodall* was torpedoed and sank with the loss of nearly 100 men. All the while the Avengers were awaiting the opportunity to launch, to start hunting the U-boats. On return to the ship the Commander informed the air patrol that while they were away, the ship had managed to avoid six torpedoes fired at it. The next U-boat sunk was U236, which was the last U-boat to be sunk by the Royal Navy. *Goodall* was the last major Royal Navy warship to be sunk by Germany.

*Premier* was still at sea and James was airborne on patrol on 7 May 1945, when word came through that Hitler was dead. It was the last patrol of the Russian convoys in wartime. On 15 June, 856 Squadron was disbanded and James was put on stand-by to fly out to the Far East. Fortunately, before he departed, the USA dropped the A-bomb and that war also came to an end.

James stayed in the Fleet Air Arm, was promoted to Petty Officer and posted to RNAS Arbroath as the senior air-gunner. The Grumman Avengers were now being replaced by Fairey Barracudas, which were regarded as dangerous and crashing too often. In three months, James saw three Barracudas lost with all hands. He decided not to sign on again.

In civilian life James became an engineer and his sons knew little of his war experiences - that is until the

boys took him to a Hyde Park event to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the end of the war. One of the marquees had representatives from different branches of the Forces, where James met some old Navy colleagues. Instantly he became a different, animated man. He joined several ex-service organisations including the Telegraphist Air-Gunners Association. It was here that he met a chum, Dennis, who was on the course in Canada three months ahead of him, where lo-and-behold he became engaged to a girl called Della - does that ring a bell? It did to James. Della was the same girl he was engaged to just three months after Dennis.

In 2005, the National Lottery funded the 'Heroes Return' programme, which enabled James to return to Russia to visit northern ports. He was overwhelmed with the warmth of the welcome by the Russians, who in 1945 had been



James Pitts speaking in Russia.

more subdued and stand-offish to say the least. In 2013 convoy veterans were awarded the Arctic Star medal by Russia. Almost as soon as he received his Star, James was asked if he would generously donate it to the Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Moscow, to which he agreed after some hard, tough, deliberation. James was flown out with colleagues to an enormous ceremony that was organised for the hand-over. It was a big event including full TV coverage.

James returned to Russia several times, culminating in his carrying the

Olympic Torch through the streets of Archangelsk ahead of the 2014 Winter Olympics Russian tour. Having had his interest and memories revived, James played a very deep and conscientious role in keeping alive what had been achieved in those anxious war years.

Thank you to Stephen Pitts, for a very interesting evening talk about his father's experiences as a TAG and thank you also for being the pioneer speaker for the SoFFAAM Zoom talk evening. Do join us for the next meeting. It is easy, entertaining and thumping good value.

## Wildcats sharpen their claws

From Navy News



**Armed with a new missile system, Royal Navy Wildcat helicopters are now ready to be part of HMS Queen Elizabeth's carrier strike group.**

The photo shows a RNAS Yeovilton Wildcat HMA Mk2 helicopter firing a single missile on the Aberporth Range.

In 0.3 seconds, the missile detaches from the aircraft, accelerating to one and a half times the speed of sound. This milestone means Royal Navy helicopter

crews have proved their ability to protect the UK's aircraft carriers.

The Wildcats that deploy as part of HMS *Queen Elizabeth's* maiden operational deployment in 2021 will be armed with this new firepower, bolstering the defence systems of the carrier strike group. The Royal Navy and Army introduced Wildcat helicopters into service five years ago and the firing of the Martlet is a very significant milestone and represents a huge success for the joint industry and MoD team.

"This firing underpins future Royal Navy offensive capability and the defence of the surface fleet" said Commander Matt Boulind.

Managed by the teams at DE&S, and manufactured by Thales, the laser-sensor missile can be used against stationary and moving targets.

Capt. Mark Langrill, DE&S Wildcat Delivery Team Leader, said "It was important these trials went ahead. These firings mark a vital step forward in the integration of the uniquely flexible Martlet missile into an already

outstanding helicopter giving the Royal Navy a world-class capability."

The firing was captured with high-resolution cameras so the teams from Thales and Leonardo Helicopters can analyse the system in minute detail.

***This article first appeared in Navy News, July 2020 and is reproduced here by kind permission of the editor.***

# Trafalgar Day Celebrations

By Chris Penney

**The SoFFAAM Council was approached to make a significant donation to FAAM.**

The Society Treasurer confirmed that £10,000 would be donated with further amounts as and when able.

Discussions started a month before the planned presentation date 21 October - Trafalgar Day. As Jabberwock had reached its 100th edition it was a good opportunity to present this special edition to the base commander, combining the two events.

Trafalgar Day was the original planned date for Admiral Cunningham's carrier strike at Taranto and the Italian Fleet in 1940. That was postponed at the last minute due to a fire aboard HMS *Illustrious*, otherwise 21 October would have held even more significance for today's Royal Navy.

SoFFAAM's double celebration of

achievement saw Chairman Graham Mottram handing a cheque to FAAM General Manager Marc Farrance, while Chris Penney presented Jabberwock 100 to Commodore Griffin.



Graham and Marc in Hall 2, FAAM



Cdre. Niall Griffin and Chris outside FAAM

# Membership Application

I hereby apply for membership of SoFFAAM (the Society) and will pay via:

- Bank Standing Order
- BACS transfer, bank details on standing order form, payment ref. "(your surname) MEMBS"
- PayPal using [soffaam.joinup@gmail.com](mailto:soffaam.joinup@gmail.com)
- Cheque, made payable to SoFFAAM

**Individual Adult Membership** (age 16+) **at £14.00** .....

**Individual Adult International** (age 16+) **at £19.00** .....

**Junior Membership** (age 5-15) **at £9.00** .....   
(must be accompanied by an adult)

**Family Membership at £37.00** .....

**Life Membership UK** (single payment) **at £125.00** .....

**Life Membership International** (single payment) **at £175.00** .....

## INDIVIDUAL MEMBERSHIP (Please also complete Address below)

Name .....

## FAMILY MEMBERSHIP (Two adults and up to 3 children)

Adult 1 .....

Adult 2 .....

Child 1 ..... Age .....

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We have a robust data protection policy. GDPR compliance can be viewed on the Society's Website.

Please complete and return this form to the Membership Secretary:

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mem@gmail.com](mailto:soffaam.mem@gmail.com)



## The Battle of Taranto - 11-12 November 1940.



The crests above are all four squadrons that flew in Operation Judgment and received the TARANTO 1940 Battle Honour.

This painting to the right is by Robert Taylor and commemorates the same event.

Map of Taranto showing the harbour defences and disposition of the Italian fleet.

