



Spotlight

Fairey
Swordfish

Lumbering but Potent

Archaic it may have been, but the Swordfish was a formidable ship-killer. **Air Cdre Graham Pitchfork** describes the exploits of 'Stringbag' crews



SPOT FACT The type's maximum speed was 139mph (224km/h)

Men behind the Swordfish

Largely outdated in September 1939, it seems barely credible that the lumbering Fairey Swordfish, which appeared to be more suited to action in World War One, was still flying operationally as the second conflict ended in Europe in May 1945. Designed in an era when aircraft were made of wood and canvas, this unique machine participated with glory in three of the most famous and daring air actions at sea, immortalising its gallant aircrew.

One of the most courageous was the strike on Taranto. From

the time Italy entered the war in June 1940, that nation's powerful surface fleet had been conspicuous by its absence at sea. Based in the southern Italian port of Taranto, it posed a considerable threat to Allied operations in the Mediterranean and North Africa. In October 1940, Admiral Cunningham, the commander of the British fleet in the Mediterranean, decided to mount a strike against the Italian vessels using torpedo-carrying Swordfish.

The origins of the attack went back five years to the time of the Italian invasion of Abyssinia



Left
John Neale of 815 Squadron.

Below
"Channel Dash Heroes" by Philip West depicts Edgar Lee helping his badly wounded pilot, Brian Rose, from the cockpit of their downed Swordfish on February 12, 1942. PHILIP WEST - <http://aviationfineart.co.uk>



3 RAF units - Nos.8, 119 and 202 - operated the type

SPOT FACT The first FAA unit to re-equip with the Swordfish was 825 Squadron

Right
An 820 Squadron
Swordfish on board
the 'Ark Royal' in
1939. MAP

when a contingency plan was drawn up by the Royal Navy to strike the fleet while it was in port. This was developed to the extent that two squadrons of Blackburn Baffin biplanes started weapons training, but the crisis passed. The scheme was then resurrected and used as the basis for the Fleet Air Arm's most famous action.

The only carrier available was HMS *Illustrious* and six aircraft and crews from HMS *Eagle* augmented her two squadrons. The plan proposed a moonlight torpedo strike against the battleships and cruisers in the outer harbour (Mar Grande) with simultaneous dive-bombing of ships in the inner harbour (Mar Piccolo) augmented by flare-dropping. The attack was planned for the night of November 11 and *Illustrious* steamed to a position 170 miles (273km) to the south of Taranto. Meanwhile, Flt Lt Adrian Warburton in an RAF 69 Squadron Martin Maryland flew a daring daylight reconnaissance sortie over the harbour area to obtain invaluable photographs, which the Royal Navy used for the final briefing of the aircrew.

Among the crews taking part was John Neale, who had joined 815 Naval Air Squadron a few months earlier to be the observer for Sub-Lt 'Spike' Sparke DSC. The pair had flown a number of operations over the North Sea before embarking on *Illustrious* and sailing for the Mediterranean.

Low down in the harbour

On November 11 Sparke and Neale were briefed to take-off in Swordfish 'L4C', in the first wave of torpedo-carriers. They spent the afternoon studying the air photographs and memorising silhouettes of the enemy warships before changing into their best uniforms – they were convinced they would not return and intended to be well dressed should they end up as prisoners!

The first of 815 Squadron's 12 Swordfish took-off at 20:35 to start forming up before setting off for the Italian port. They had been instructed to approach from the south-west and to descend to low level as they crossed the outer harbour in order to surprise the formidable air defences protecting Taranto.

Flare-dropping aircraft timed their attack to the east of the port perfectly, providing both a decoy and excellent illumination of the Italian fleet. Sparke and Neale were flying in the first sub-section, led by the CO, Lt Cdr K Williamson.

Once inside the outer harbour, the torpedo aircraft acted independently, and Sparke took his Swordfish down to 30ft (9.14m) with most of the anti-aircraft fire going overhead. Flying *between* the balloon cables to the south-west of the warship anchorage, he released the torpedo at the battleship *Cavour*. He immediately turned through

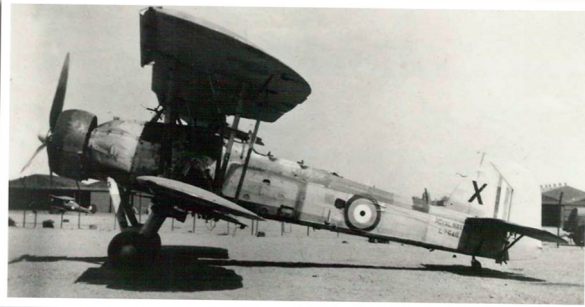


180-degrees to fly out to sea before climbing and returning to the *Illustrious* for a night landing, almost five hours after taking-off. Two of the Swordfish failed to return, including that of 815's CO who, with his observer, spent the rest of the war as prisoners.

Photographs the following morning highlighted the spectacular success of the 20

Swordfish. Three battleships had been put out of action – one never to return to service





— a cruiser had been damaged and shore installations had suffered considerably.

The attack on Taranto had been a

stunning success with the damage caused out of all proportion to the force used. Admiral Cunningham justifiably claimed that it "had a profound effect on the naval situation in the Mediterranean". Perhaps just as important, Taranto was a great morale boost for the success-starved British population.

Leaders were decorated, but there was a great deal of displeasure and anger at the miserly number. Once the full impact of the raid had registered with higher authority, the Admiralty reviewed the scale of awards. The Honours and Awards Committee "carefully considered the claims to recognition of further officers of the Fleet Air Arm for good services in the same

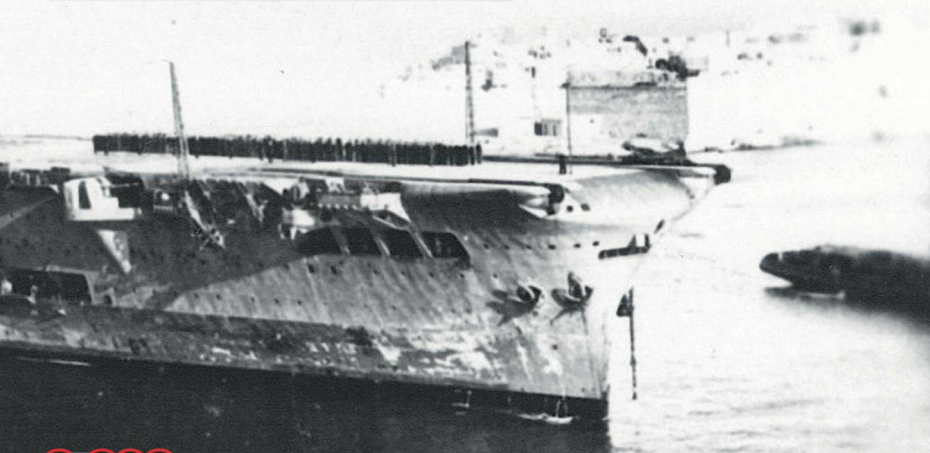
Above
Swordfish L7648 of 815 Squadron.

Below
HMS *Illustrious* entering Valetta harbour.

Action after Taranto

After its triumph at Taranto in November 1940, the carrier HMS *Illustrious* continued intensive operations in the eastern Mediterranean. Observer John Neale went on to fly a wide variety of sorties. On December 17 he attacked targets on Rhodes and flew a series of anti-submarine patrols in the following days.

Four days later, ten Swordfish were tasked to attack a lightly-defended Italian convoy off Tripoli in daylight; attacking from different directions to confuse the air defences. The leader scored a direct hit on a large merchant vessel just as Neale and his pilot released their torpedo, which hit almost amidships. A third torpedo hit and the 10,000-ton ship sank within a few minutes; a second merchant vessel was also sunk. By the end of December, just six months after embarking, Neale and his pilot had made 90 operational sorties from the deck of *Illustrious*, many at night. In the summer of 1942 he joined 841 Squadron as the senior observer on Fairey Albacores. For his services in operations over the English Channel he was awarded the DFC.



[Taranto] action". A further list was submitted, which included two DSOs, eight DSCs and 24 Mentioned in Dispatches (MiD).

On seeing the results of this review, an unidentified senior officer wrote: "I would emphasise that this attack was carried out from HMS *Illustrious* at night. These young men took-off in the dark in a young moon, flew approximately 180 miles, made their attack on the enemy in a harbour whose AA defences I believe to be as strong at least as those at Scapa Flow, achieved a victory which is unique in history [and] returned 180 miles in the dark to find and land on a darkened carrier."

This succinct and outstandingly clear résumé was quite obviously written by someone who understood the magnitude of the strike and the skill and courage needed to carry it out. As a result, a number of the original MiDs were upgraded to DSCs, including John Neale and his pilot, 'Spike' Sparke, who received a Bar to his DSC.

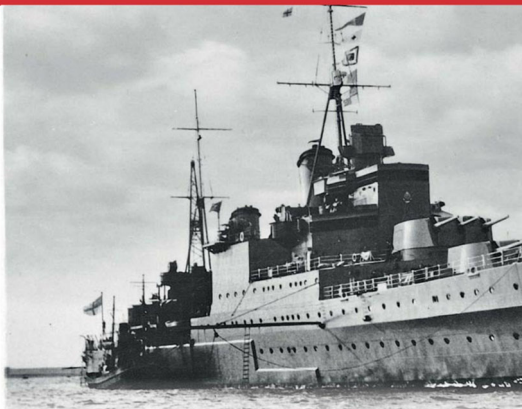
The Admiralty recommendation for John Neale read: "This officer is strongly recommended for valour and exemplary conduct. He was observer of aircraft 'L4C' and shared with his pilot the hazards met in the successful attack on the Italian Fleet at Taranto. After dispersal he was jointly responsible for the correct approach to and despatch from the target under intense AA fire and for the successful return to the carrier."

Maximum effort

During the 1930s, the German Navy began a major shipbuilding programme designed to create an aggressive force at sea capable of destroying merchantmen on the vital trade routes. So emerged a formidable navy and the pride of this modern fleet was the battleship *Bismarck*.

In May 1941 *Bismarck* sailed into the Atlantic. After a devastating gun battle in the Greenland-Iceland gap, resulting in the loss of HMS *Hood*, the German vessel escaped, having sustained some damage which caused a loss of fuel. Anticipating the battleship would head for Brest, France, Admiral Somerville, the commander of Force H, which included the carrier *Ark Royal*, was ordered to sail from Gibraltar and head north.

Meanwhile, the *Bismarck* was located again and Lt Cdr Eugene Esmonde, the CO of 825 Squadron, led nine Swordfish on a gallant



torpedo attack in poor weather. One torpedo found its target but the battleship's heavy armour plate prevented any serious damage.

Once again, contact was lost and not regained until the morning of May 26 when a 209 Squadron Catalina patrol aircraft sighted the *Bismarck* some 700 miles north-west of Brest. The final pursuit was on.

Force H, on its northward passage from Gibraltar, was 70 miles to the east of the *Bismarck* at this point: well within striking distance for the Swordfish. Further north, a large naval force commanded by Admiral Tovey was also in pursuit – but, running out of fuel, it couldn't close the gap with the *Bismarck* before the Germans reached cover provided by the Luftwaffe based near Brest. Tovey's only chance was to slow the enemy down and for this he had to rely on the Swordfish of *Ark Royal*.

After the Catalina sighting, the *Ark's* Swordfish shadowed the *Bismarck* and Somerville detached the cruiser *Sheffield* to direct an air attack.

Sealing Bismarck's fate

Embarked on *Ark Royal* were the Swordfish of 810, 818 and 820 Squadrons. One of 810's pilots was Sub-Lt Ken Pattison who, serving with the squadron for a year, had seen action over Italy and in the Mediterranean. Fourteen Swordfish armed with torpedoes took off at 14:50 and an hour later obtained a radar contact and set up an attack in very poor weather.

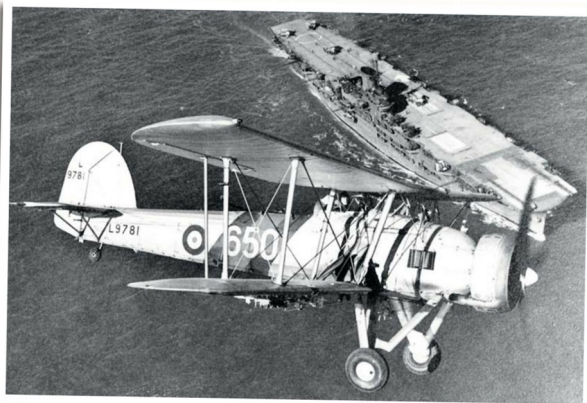


After the torpedoes had been launched the aircrews realised they had attacked the *Sheffield*. The cruiser took drastic avoiding action and all the torpedoes missed or exploded on impact with the sea due to faulty fuses. The Swordfish returned to land on the *Ark Royal's* pitching deck and were prepared for a second strike.

The failure of the magnetic fuses led to their replacement with contact fuses for the next wave of 15 Swordfish, led by Lt Cdr T Goode. They took-off with orders to proceed to the *Sheffield*, which would give final directions to the target. Pattison was flying in the second sub-flight led by Lt D F Godfrey-Faussett. The weather was very poor and darkness was descending when the first biplanes attacked at 20:47. Thick cloud had forced some sub-flights to break up but Pattison managed to

Right
HMS 'Sheffield',
which was attacked
by the 'Bismarck'
hunters in error.

Right
Ken Pattison,
one of the pilots
that attacked the
'Bismarck'.



Lumbering but Long-serving

- Mar 21, 1933 Private venture Fairey TSR.I (torpedo, spotter, reconnaissance) biplane first flown.
- Apr 17, 1934 More-developed TSR.II maiden flight.
- Apr 1935 Air Ministry places first order, for 86, aircraft named Swordfish.
- Jul 1936 Type entered operational service with 825 Squadron.
- Nov 1943 Fairey Albacore - the type intended to replace the Swordfish - retired from frontline service.
- Aug 18, 1944 Last Swordfish - out of a total of 2,391 built - Mk.III NS204, delivered.
- May 21, 1945 Last Fleet Air Arm operational Swordfish unit, 836 Squadron, stood down.
- Mar 1953 Mk.III NF389 retired from the Air Torpedo Development Unit, Gosport, and transferred to 781 Squadron at Lee-on-Solent for historic flight purposes - still with the Royal Navy Historic Flight at Yeovilton.

hang on to his leader as they climbed in snow-laden skies.

The force's aircraft began to ice-up just as a large target was detected on their primitive anti-surface vessel radar. Still in cloud, Godfrey-Faussett dived to set up an attack. Breaking through the cloud base at 900ft, Pattison saw the *Bismarck* on his starboard side. He had to fly straight and level towards the battleship, making his biplane an easy target. It was supposed to have been a co-ordinated section attack with several flights of Swordfish coming in from different directions, splitting the enemy's fire. To

Above
A Swordfish from 820 Squadron over the 'Ark Royal'.

Below
An unarmed Swordfish takes off on a training flight. **KEY**



SPOT FACT Swordfish first dropped torpedoes operationally off Norway on April 11, 1940



Pattison it seemed that his aircraft was alone and "being fired at by everything they had including the main armament". Shrapnel struck his aircraft, tearing the flimsy canvas which covered the wooden airframe. At 90ft above the waves and at a top speed of 90 knots, Pattison dropped his torpedo at 900 yards range, and only then began jinking wildly to put the German gunners off their aim. Large columns of water rose around him from shells but he was not hit again.

Pattison was not out of danger. In the dusk he had to find *Ark Royal* with the wind blowing harder and the seas huge. When he did find her, she was pitching 50ft and rising and falling as much. Pattison and his colleagues all landed safely.

All the aircraft had faced intense flak, but two torpedoes hit the *Bismarck*. One impacted amidships on the armour belt but the second exploded right aft, damaging the steering gear and jamming the rudders. The vessel's fate had been sealed.

The attack prevented the *Bismarck* from reaching the protection of the Luftwaffe and the safety of France. As she was steering in circles during the night, the pursuing taskforce caught up. At dawn, 810 Squadron was launched again, but were told to hold

off while the Allied ships pounded her with guns and torpedoes. From the air Pattison saw the pride of Hitler's navy "heavily on fire, listing to port with her main guns at all angles; and eventually she capsized".

A piece of shrapnel that had lodged in Pattison's aircraft became a prized souvenir but, returning to Britain as a passenger in Convoy HG73, he lost all his possessions when the ship he was travelling in was sunk by U-boats. On this occasion he broke three ribs while jumping onto the deck of the corvette *Jasmine* – his only injury in 20 years' naval service.

Pattison was awarded the DSC and later served with the Pacific Fleet. During the Korean War he commanded a Firefly squadron and was mentioned in dispatches.

Suicidal mission

At the end of December 1941, naval intelligence had strong evidence that the German battle fleet comprising of the *Germania*, *Gneisenau* and *Prinz Eugen* were likely to break out of their ports on the Brest Peninsula. By the beginning of February, it was assessed that their departure was imminent – and likely that the ships would make a fast passage up the English Channel

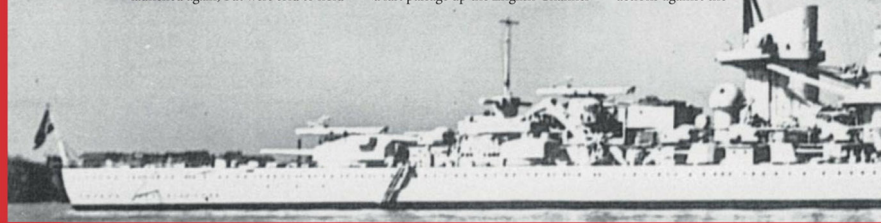
en route to ports in Germany.

Despite constant surveillance and intercepted radio signals, an unfortunate catalogue of missed opportunities, poor inter-service co-operation and other blunders meant the three ships departed unnoticed from Brest at 22:45 on February 11. It was not until late morning on the following day that two Spitfires spotted the large naval force travelling up the Channel at speed.

The convoy soon came under attack from aircraft of Bomber and Coastal Commands and Royal Navy E-boats. A combination of poor weather, inadequate intelligence and bad luck thwarted these attempts to destroy the flotilla.

At RAF Manston in Kent were six Swordfish of 825 Squadron, which had arrived two weeks earlier to get ready for an operational deployment.

The unit was commanded by Lt Cdr Eugene Esmonde who had just returned from Buckingham Palace after receiving the DSO from HM George VI for his actions against the





“...the station commander, Wg Cdr Tom Gleave, appalled at the suicidal nature of the mission, stood on the tarmac giving a farewell salute”

Bismarck in May 1941.

With the enemy ships approaching the Dover Strait, the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Dudley Pound, ordered: “The navy will attack the enemy whenever and wherever he is to be found.” Esmonde was detailed to make a torpedo attack. Fighter cover was deemed essential for the six lumbering *Swordfish*. As they took off at 12:25, the station commander, Wg Cdr Tom Gleave, appalled at the suicidal nature of the mission, stood on the tarmac giving a farewell salute.

The six circled overhead waiting for the four Spitfire squadrons tasked to protect them. Only ten fighters appeared, a totally inadequate number for the task, but Esmonde decided he could wait no longer and headed for the enemy.

Flying as the observer in the second *Swordfish* was Sub-Lt Edgar Lee. The flimsy biplanes flew into an intense

barrage of anti-aircraft fire as the few Spitfires tried to engage the strong German fighter forces giving cover to the convoy. As Lee’s pilot, Sub-Lt Brian Rose, levelled for his torpedo drop he saw Esmonde’s aircraft hit and catch fire before crashing into the sea.

Rose pressed on through heavy flak until he was about a mile from *Gneisenau*. His main fuel tank was hit and he was wounded in the back by splinters, but he held onto the controls, not realising that their torpedo had fallen off when the aircraft was hit.

As the engine spluttered, Rose switched to an emergency gravity tank but the *Swordfish* continued to lose height. At last he swerved round the stern of *Gneisenau* and out of the murderous flak; Lee turned to look for their torpedo, which “seemed to be running well”, but he did not see a hit. Their gunner, ‘Ginger’ Johnson, was slumped over, and as Lee tried



to shift his body, Rose managed a barely controlled ditching in the cold sea. The *Swordfish* floated long enough for Lee to launch a dinghy and manhandle Rose into it, but when he returned to the sinking aircraft to rescue Johnson, he was too firmly wedged to be shifted before it sank. Lee nursed Rose for about an hour-and-a-half until a British motor torpedo boat, attracted by his flares, picked them up.

Among honours given to many of the crews, Lee was awarded the DSO. Eugene Esmonde was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross. Of the 18 airmen who flew on this most gallant attack, just five survived.

Once the route of the German naval force had been predicted, the RAF dropped aerial mines – and on the night of February 12, both *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* were badly damaged when they sailed into the mines. The German ships made their home ports, but two weeks later the *Gneisenau* was badly damaged during a bombing raid while being repaired in a dry dock, and her rest was abandoned.

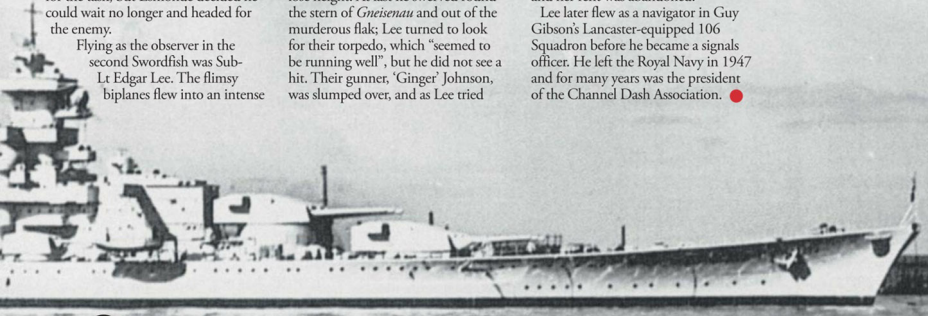
Lee later flew as a navigator in Guy Gibson’s Lancaster-equipped 106 Squadron before he became a signals officer. He left the Royal Navy in 1947 and for many years was the president of the Channel Dash Association. ●

Clockwise from top right
Swordfish V4719 on a test flight on June 1, 1942. KEY

The ‘Scharnhorst’, one of the German warships that took part in the ‘Channel Dash’.

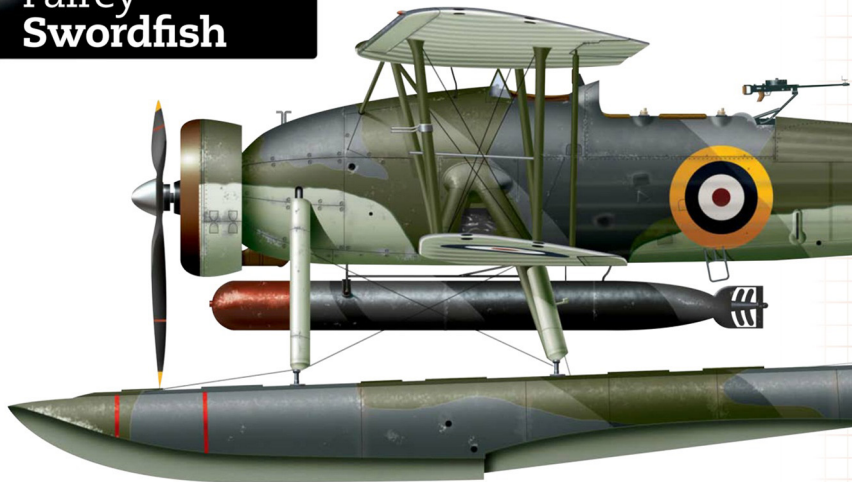
‘Channel Dash’ veteran Edgar Lee.

The ‘Gneisenau’, which was damaged by aerial mines on the night of February 12. ALL VIA AUTHOR UNLESS NOTED



Spotlight

Fairey Swordfish



Defender o

Artwork
Fairey Swordfish
Mk.I V4367 of 701
Catapult Flight,
HMS 'Malaya', 1940.
PETE WEST-2013

Right
An FAA floatplane
coming ashore after
a practice flight.



What the Fairey Swordfish lacked in speed and manoeuvrability, it made up for in versatility. Alongside the standard Swordfish, a floatplane version was developed to operate from catapult-equipped battleships and cruisers. A few also served with

the RAF in Gibraltar.

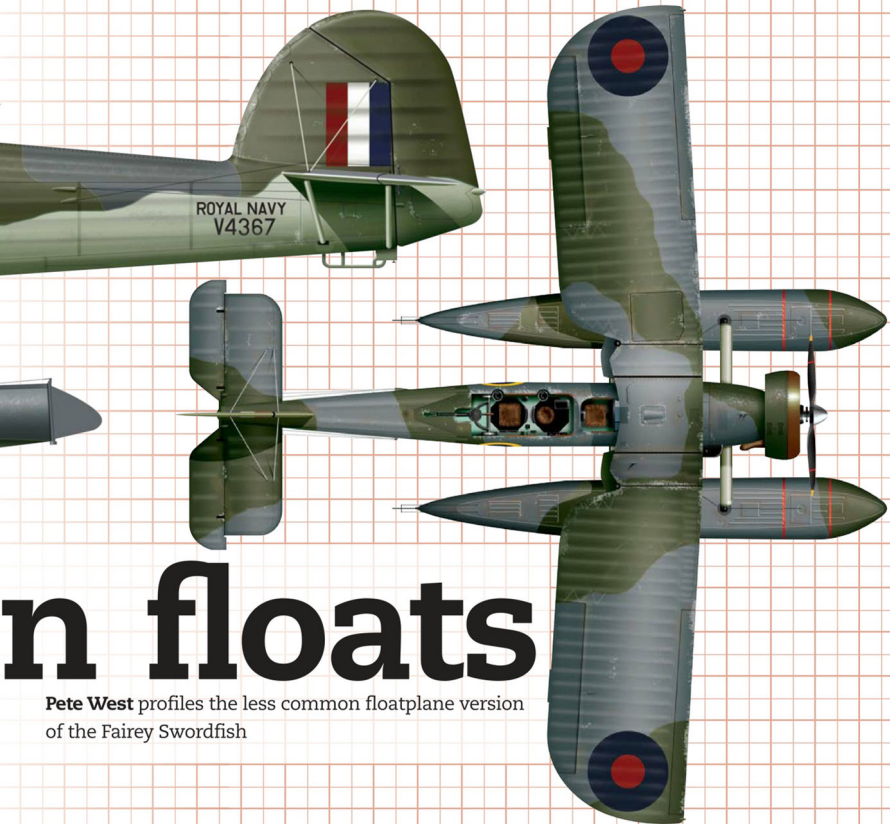
The float-equipped Swordfish flew for the first time from Hamble, near Southampton, on November 10, 1934. Catapult trials then took place from HMS *Repulse*, a veteran of the Great War. The aircraft could easily be converted from wheeled undercarriage to floats, and vice versa.

By the time World War Two broke out, 13 Fleet Air Arm squadrons were equipped with 'Stringbags' (the pilot's nickname for the Swordfish) and all except one were based on aircraft carriers. Two floatplane units – Catapult Flights 701 and 702 – were then assigned to Royal Navy battleships. Swordfish Mk.I V4367 flew from HMS *Malaya*. During 1940, the warship was operating with the Home Fleet alongside aircraft carriers tasked with defending the UK from German naval threats in the North Sea.

Despite being even slower than the 'landplane' equivalent, with a top speed of just 136mph (219km/h), the Swordfish floatplane could carry a similar 1,500lb (680kg) bomb load and proved worthy of its task. More enemy ships were sunk (in terms of tonnage) by Swordfish than any other aircraft acting in the same role during the war.

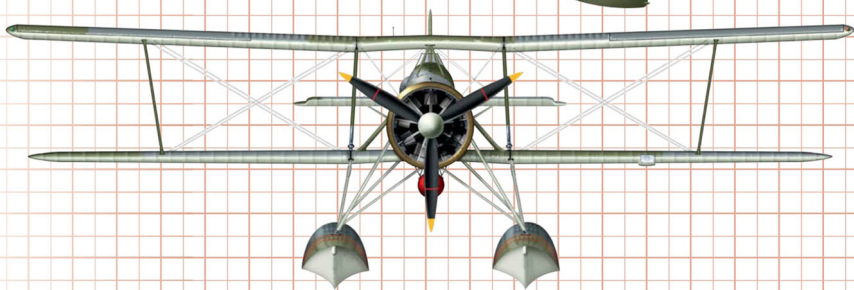
SPOT FACT Swordfish began to equip the Fleet Air Arm in July 1936

**Swordfish
in profile**



n floats

Pete West profiles the less common floatplane version of the Fairey Swordfish



60 lb rockets could be carried by the Mk.II and III

Fairey
Swordfish

Mark Barber talks to Lt Cdr Bruce Vibert about his time flying the Swordfish with the Royal Navy

King of the Small Deck

Often overshadowed by more 'glamorous' or fast-paced campaigns, the Battle of the Atlantic was no less vital to the survival of Great Britain than any other of the crucial events of World War Two. Winston Churchill later claimed, "the only thing that ever really frightened me during the war was the U-boat peril."

While the Allies struggled to pit every weapon at their disposal against the German Navy's U-boats

and surface warships, aircraft ultimately proved to be one of the greatest direct threats and certainly the most effective deterrent. Of these, only one operated in direct action against U-boats for the entire duration of the war: the Fairey Swordfish.

It is no exaggeration to describe the Swordfish as one of the most iconic naval aircraft in history. Yet, despite its qualities, the big biplane was often seen as archaic; an aircraft from a bygone era struggling

to compete in the age of high-performance monoplanes. The truth was that while it incorporated many older features it was a relatively modern airframe, having entered service only two years earlier than the Spitfire.

Originally developed from the Fairey TSR.I of 1933, the Swordfish was a response to the Air Ministry's call for a carrier-based Torpedo Spotter Reconnaissance type, as detailed in Specification S15/33. In April 1935 the first contract for



SPOT FACT The last example built was completed on August 18, 1944

Swordfish in combat

86 aircraft was placed by the Air Ministry. The Swordfish went on to serve for the entire duration of World War Two, from the tiny, frozen decks of Merchant Aircraft Carriers in the Atlantic, through to improvised airstrips behind enemy lines in the deserts of North Africa. The Swordfish even outlasted its intended successor, the Fairey Albacore.

The reason for this incredible career, as described by pilot Bruce Vibert, was simple: "The Swordfish was the most capable of any in the anti-submarine role when operating from a small deck in bad weather conditions."

A determined carrier pilot

Vibert joined the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (RNVR) – the standard entry route for naval aircrew for the majority of the war – in 1941. He recalls: "My interest in the Fleet Air Arm began when, aged

17 and 13 days after we declared war, I was returning to the UK from the Balkans. I had to change trains in Milan. While waiting I saw on a newsagent's board the front page of a newspaper and a lurid depiction of an aircraft carrier sinking, biplanes toppling off her flight deck. This was HMS *Courageous*, torpedoed by a U-boat two days before, off Ireland. There and then I determined to join the Fleet Air Arm and to fly those same aircraft. I achieved both aims."

Initially joining as a Naval Airman 2nd Class, Vibert's instruction started with seven weeks of naval general training at HMS *Sr Vincent*, Gosport. Promoted to Leading Airman, he moved on to elementary flying training, initially courtesy of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan in Canada, on Tiger Moths before proceeding to Harvards. Selected for the Torpedo Spotter-Reconnaissance role and commissioned as an officer in the

RNVR, he was introduced to the Swordfish.

Vibert's first impressions were positive, to say the least: "I'd flown the Blackburn Shark, which handled like a grand piano with wings. The Swordfish was entirely different. Some history books have remembered the Swordfish as ponderous and that simply was not the case. [It] could turn on a pinhead. It was anything but cumbersome.

"No aircraft is easier to land on a pitching and rolling deck [than a Swordfish]. Its qualities made it uniquely suitable in those conditions which, at their worst, kept more modern aircraft in the hangar. Performance was agile – it had not one single vice. In my mind only the Japanese 'Zero' was capable of our-turning a Swordfish." While fighter evasion was a part of Vibert's training in Scotland, fortunately he would never have to practice it in anger. ➤

Below
"On A Wing and a Prayer", showing a Swordfish taking off in bad weather during World War Two. PHILIP E WEST-SWA FINE ART PUBLISHERS

Far left
Bruce Vibert during his time in uniform.



1,700 Swordfish were built by Blackburn Aircraft in Yorkshire

SPOT FACT Swordfish pilot Eugene Esmonde was posthumously awarded the VC after the 'Channel Dash' raid

Unexciting, but useful

The perils of Vibert's war would take a different form entirely; joining 842 Squadron on completion of training. He was to spend his Swordfish years guarding vital convoy routes in both the Atlantic and the Arctic.

Formed at Lee-on-Solent in March 1943, 842 Squadron had Taranto veteran Lt Cdr Charles Lamb as CO. After working up, 842 embarked in August aboard the escort carrier HMS *Fencer*.

Vibert described the monotony of long, often uneventful anti-submarine patrols: "One did a boring job, unexciting, unglamorous, but useful. Throughout each run, each lasting several weeks, one never saw land. But we were saving the lives of merchantmen and whilst our aircraft is best known for Taranto, *Bismarck* and the 'Channel Dash', I suggest that it was against boats threatening our convoys that it made its greatest contribution to our war effort."

While the flying may have been mundane for long periods, life on board the carrier was far from dull. If the constant and very real threat of being torpedoed by U-boats was not enough, the ship's company also had to survive the elements.

"I remember one storm where a ship roll of 44-degrees was recorded. Those in their bunks had to tie themselves in. Welded down wardroom fittings such as tables broke adrift. [There was] similar chaos in other spaces. The ship's hull developed a short split at hangar level. There all aircraft and other gear was triple-lashed with bottle screw lashings. Nothing shifted."

Crew of three

With just shy of 2,000 hours logged in his career, more than half of which were on the *Swordfish*, Vibert describes his wartime flying as of "average experience" for a naval aviator. In his time guarding the merchant fleets, which were the lifeblood of the UK and Soviet Russia, Vibert and his crew executed attacks on four U-boats, with one certified as destroyed. He described how the crew of three worked together to protect their vital convoys: "Starting before



“One did a boring job, unexciting, unglamorous, but useful. ...But we were saving the lives of merchantmen...”

dawn, until after dusk, patrols of two or three aircraft were flown. Carrying either depth charges or rocket projectiles, these were made ahead of the convoy at no more than 3,000ft and lasted up to three hours. Equipment was the 'Mk.1 eyeball' and air-to-surface radar with very limited range. W/T [wireless telegraphy] silence was kept and communication with the ship or another aircraft was by Aldis lamp or hand waving.

“One watched the wave tops for that which did not break and for white water in the distance which could be a U-boat on the surface. The dusk patrol was far astern of the convoy, to detect any U-boats aiming to catch

up with the convoy overnight. The convoy showed no lights and kept W/T silence.”

Vibert went on to describe the roles of his observer and Telegraphist Air Gunner (TAG): “Apart from local wind and weather at time of departure the observer had little more than a blank sheet of paper, dividers and rule. Hopefully, also, a pilot could fly an accurate compass course. The TAG kept a listening brief on his W/T set and watched the waves. In their bath-sized cockpit he and the observer were more exposed to the elements than the pilot. There was no heater in the aircraft. However, this open cockpit

Far left and left
A Swordfish in trouble while landing on HMS 'Fencer' in 1944.



Above
HMS 'Fencer' during a storm in the mid-Atlantic on December 22, 1943. The ship rolled to a 24-degree angle.

was a contributory factor in us having markedly the best chances of survival in a Swordfish, whether in action or accident. That open cockpit was far easier to vacate in a hurry.”

On the attack

On May 2, 1944 Vibert and his crew changed from operating as a deterrent to direct action against the enemy. While on patrol, the observer detected a U-boat on his air-to-surface-vessel radar set. Vibert was given headings to steer to intercept and guided through cloud before given the instruction to dive.

“We came out of cloud expecting to see a U-boat, but found *two*. They were sailing in company, signalling to each other - no doubt enquiring as to the location of our convoy. After stalking through the cloud we had emerged in a dive at some 25/30-degrees. Correct drill then required to aim short and ahead, releasing rockets in pairs. On entering the water the projectile levels out and gives the best strike angle. Actually, any hit, by this drill or direct, was usually final.” Vibert's rockets proved just that, and sank U-674. ➤

Versatile Fencer

Built for the US Navy as the USS *Croatan*, the 14,400-ton carrier with a 450 x 120ft flight deck was accepted for service in February 1943. As one of eight Attacker class escort carriers, it transferred to the Royal Navy as HMS *Fencer* in the following month. *Fencer* was returned to the US Navy in December 1946.

It returned to merchantman status as SS *Sydney* in 1948. Later it became, in turn, SS *Roma* (1967), *Galaxy Queen* (also 1967), *Lady Dina* (1972) and *Cariba II* (1973). She was scrapped in 1975.

SPOT FACT Mk.III Swordfish were fitted with an ASV (air-to-surface vessel) scanner



"I remember one storm where a ship roll of 44-degrees was recorded. Those in their bunks had to tie themselves in. Welded down wardroom fittings such as tables broke adrift



Top and above HMS 'Pursuer' during the storm of December 22, 1943. The photo was taken from HMS 'Fencer'.

Often the Swordfish would launch carrying a payload of depth charges. This weapon was potentially more hazardous and required a difficult method of attack.

"If you are downwind, it is tricky. The U-boat will be steaming away from you with everything she's got." Closing slowly in from astern and presenting the U-boat's anti-aircraft gunners with a zero deflection shot was a risky tactic – for all its qualities, the Swordfish was not fast and flying into wind only amplified the problem.

Vibert credits the U-boat gunners as being "notoriously accurate. Most of the boats we sighted submerged before we could close, but those that didn't fired 20mm shells [at us]." U-boat gunners proved to be

a persistent hazard of the job, with Vibert remembering returning to his carrier at 1,500ft (457m) on one occasion, when the sky was suddenly filled with "ack-ack". While his aircraft was not hit on this occasion, he remembered fellow 842 Squadron pilot Leslie Cooper – credited with two U-boat 'kills' with depth charges – returning to the carrier to find an unexploded 20mm shell lodged in the cloth wing of his Swordfish. "One of the benefits of the Swordfish was canvas," Vibert remembers fondly.

Runs to Murmansk presented an entirely new problem to the crews of 842 – the environment. While embarked operations in the Atlantic were highly dangerous, to say the least,



the Arctic Circle was an entirely new theatre.

After a long sortie in freezing conditions, the pilots were given a Benzdrine tablet to take just before landing. "The cold would hit between the goggles and helmet, and numbed the senses. The pilot took a little blue pill for returning to the carrier, to concentrate the mind for landing. It worked."

After a successful career on Swordfish and Albacores, Vibert embarked onboard HMS *Glory* as a Deck Landing Control Officer to see out the remainder of the war in the Pacific Theatre. Post-war he served two short service commissions with the Royal Canadian Navy, finishing his flying career on helicopters and retiring as a Lieutenant Commander in 1958.

He recalls with justifiable pride that his crew flew



together for almost the entire time with 842 Squadron. To the best of his knowledge they are the only Swordfish crew who are all still alive. Even though separated by thousands of miles, they remain in touch to this day. ●



Replacing the Replacement

Bruce Vibert briefly flew the Swordfish's replacement, the Fairey Albacore, but wasn't as impressed by this supposedly superior type: "The Albacore had poor handling qualities and wasn't up to what the Swordfish was capable of doing."

So much was this view shared by the crews of Albacores that this unfortunate aircraft suffered the ignominy of being replaced by the very aircraft it was designed to succeed: the Swordfish.

Centre left
Clearing the deck of Fencer's
deck of snow during
a return convoy from
Russia. ALL BY OR VIA
BRUCE VIBERT UNLESS NOTED

Below
Bruce Vibert flying
Blackburn-built
Swordfish II LS354. It
joined 824 Squadron
in January 1944 and
embarked on HMS
'Fencer'.



Survivors

We close this month's Spotlight by detailing the Swordfish airframes that remain



The very rare sight of two Swordfish 'warbirds' flying together. Both LS326 and WS856 are operated by the Royal Navy Historic Flight. RICHARD PAVER

Spotlight Next Month
McDonnell Douglas
Phantom

Next month's 'Spotlight' shines on a 'Cold War' warrior that proved its worth in conflicts around the world – the McDonnell Douglas Phantom II. We look at its combat record in Vietnam with the USAF, US Navy and Marines, profile a record-breaking Royal Navy FG.1 and much more. Don't miss this bumper issue, which is in the UK shops on **March 28**, or see **page 30** for our very latest money-saving subscription offers.

Serial	Mark	Location and status
'P4139'	II	FAA Museum, Yeovilton, Somerset. Display. Really HS618
WS856	I	RN Historic Flight, Yeovilton, Somerset. About to re-fly
HS469	II	Shearwater Aviation Museum, Nova Scotia, Canada. Display
HS491	II	Malta Aviation Museum, Ta'Qali, Malta. Unrestored. Display
HS503	II	RAF Museum, Stafford. Stored
HS554	II	Vintage Wings of Canada. Airworthy
LS326	II	RN Historic Flight, Yeovilton, Somerset. Airworthy
NF370	III	IWM Duxford, Cambs. On display in RAF 119 Squadron markings
NF389	III	RN Historic Flight, Yeovilton, Somerset. Stored
'NS122'	II	Canada Aviation and Space Museum, Ottawa, Ontario. Display
-	II	Commemorative Air Force museum, Midland, Texas. Display

Notes: Airworthy denotes aircraft that have flown in recent years, but may be undergoing servicing work at the present time. A full-sized Swordfish replica is stored at the Museum of Transport and Technology (MOTAT) in New Zealand. Several Swordfish wrecks were recovered from the late Ernie Simmons' farm in the 1970s – most are thought to have been subsequently used for parts, but it is possible that some have survived.



The Vintage Wings of Canada's HS554 (C-GEVS). ERIC DUMIGAN