



STRINGBAG



Even towards the very end of World War Two, the biplane had meaningful front-line roles to play. Following last month's feature on the Albacores of No 415 Squadron, we continue the story of RAF biplanes in action near the conclusion of hostilities through the words of some of the men who flew the black Swordfish operated by No 119 Squadron

WORDS: DAVID NICHOLAS



No 119 Squadron became the only RAF squadron to be fully equipped with the Swordfish when it replaced the Albacore in January 1945. This MkIII, NF410/NH-F, has a Donald Duck motif on the nose. It was photographed flying off the Dutch coast during the spring of 1945.

VIA NORMAN WILLIAMSON

S over the SCHELDT

With the Allied invasion of Normandy completed successfully, the promise that had been made to the Canadian government was fulfilled and No 415 Squadron reassigned to Bomber Command. On 19 July 1944 its Albacore Flight at Manston became No 119 Squadron, though in reality little changed. The Canadian who led the Albacore Flight, Sqn Ldr J. I. T. Davis, was given command of the 'new' squadron.

One of 119's first sorties was an unusual daylight mission on 20 July when eight Albacores laid smoke to

protect a convoy in the Channel. Sadly, the next day one of the leading Albacore crews comprising Fg Off Oliver Mennie and the newly commissioned Plt Off Roy Leach went missing over the Channel during an anti-shipping patrol. They were never found.

119 moved out of Manston on 9 August to the nearby advanced landing ground (ALG) at Swingfield. There its 11 Albacores were later joined by the naval-manned Swordfish of 819 Squadron as No 157 (General Reconnaissance) Wing. The then Flt Lt Norman Williamson

recalled: "Because of the overcrowding at Manston the coastal wing was moved a few miles away to a place called Swingfield between Dover and Folkestone. It was simply a grass field and we lived under canvas. For the first couple of weeks, until we had established fuel supplies at Swingfield, we had to operate from Manston. We landed there every night to refuel and bomb up, operated through the night, then returned to Swingfield at dawn.

"I well remember taking off late from Swingfield one evening, having had trouble with the Coffman starter, and finding myself in a melee of ➤



fighters in the Manston circuit, to be told, 'Orbit at angels 18, your turn to land is 107!' Not even St Peter himself could have reached 18,000ft in an Albacore. After a few terse remarks over the VHF I was allowed to sneak in onto the grass, out of everybody's way."

Once a flare path was laid on the strip, nocturnal anti-E-boat patrols recommenced. A convoy of small ships off Gravelines was attacked on the night of the 19th, though one pilot also liked to use the forward-firing gun, leading to a scare for one of the groundcrew.



Norman Williamson recalled: "The Albacore had one fixed forward-firing gun, a Browning, housed in the starboard mainplane. Roy Brown, who had previously flown Beaufighters, felt that during our dive-bombing attacks this gun should be brought to action. We older hands did our best to dissuade him — our only defence, we pointed out, was concealment in the dark until the last possible moment. Roy, however, was not to be deterred and duly tried out his idea. Luckily, his gun jammed after firing a few rounds and after his attack he returned to Manston.

"There we relied on the duty groundcrew, and the poor duty armourer knew nothing about the Albacore's Browning. He carefully sat astride the lower mainplane and struggled in the darkness with the unfamiliar mechanism. At long last he managed to open up the casing, whereupon the breech block slammed forward, detonating the round 'up the spout' — which of course *had* to be a tracer. The terrified armourer watched it curl away from between his legs across the airfield towards flying control. We carefully kept it out of the squadron's operational records. That was the last time Roy Brown tried out his new-fangled theories!"

Now the English Channel was largely filled with Allied shipping, the areas of total bombing restriction increased. These were somewhat resented, as the aircrew thought that the Navy felt it could fire on anything that flew — and usually did!

Albacores co-operated with an RN force to interdict enemy shipping evacuating the garrison at Boulogne on 1 September. The biplanes attacked with bombs, pressed home in the face of heavy fire. It resulted in one of the aircraft being lost off Calais with its crew of Flt Lt Eric Ross and Flt Sgt

Joe Hyams, joined by Flt Lt Claude Slatter who had gone along for some air experience.

At 01.30hrs on the 2nd, the CO and his navigator Fg Off Lundy left Swingfield in Albacore BF730/NH-U. Forty minutes later they were heard to have made an attack on a large convoy off Boulogne. However, they failed to return and have no known grave. Norman Williamson was promoted to take over command.

With the Channel ports neutralised at the beginning of October the No 157 Wing squadrons moved to Bircham Newton, Norfolk, for intensive training in night anti-submarine operations. At the month's end 119's Albacores moved to the continent, initially to the captured airstrip at St Croix near Bruges and then Knokke-le-Zoute, a pre-war airfield close to the port of Zeebrugge.

Still part of No 16 Group, 119 thus became the only Coastal Command squadron to be based in continental Europe, as Williamson remembered. "I flew across to Belgium and, with the help of one of the 2nd Tactical Air Force staff officers

— who was vastly amused at flying around in the back of an Albacore — tried to find a suitable airfield. We had to be as near as possible to the coast, of course, as well as the front line in order to obtain

our best range north of the Scheldt estuary. The trouble was that at this time there was a considerable number of enemy troops held in a pocket in northern Belgium.

"Eventually, we found a tiny grass strip, once used for light aircraft only, cut into the woods at St Croix just east of Bruges, and this I reckoned was just feasible. Accordingly, we laid claim and 2nd TAF HQ started to move in bombs, fuel, flares, tents and the rest of the necessities. There were two snags. The first was that on the north side of the landing strip a battery of field guns had set up home and were busy plastering enemy strongpoints a short distance to the north. The other snag was that the low-scanning radar and control centre we needed to vector us to the vicinity of targets at night was at Ostend, and because of its distance and low-level siting it did not have a great range. This was going to be rectified by siting a new radar on top of the Blankenberge casino, but this was still in enemy hands. Despite these difficulties we managed to start

operating from Maldegem and then St Croix, but major servicing and engine changes still had to be carried out at our rear base at Bircham Newton."

Searches for enemy shipping continued, though there was a paucity of surface targets. Towards the end of the month came another move. "Not long after", said Williamson, "the Army overran the last pocket of resistance in northern Belgium right up to the Scheldt estuary. I went up the next day in a truck to assess the possibility of using the airfield at Knokke-le-Zoute. Knokke was a reasonably sized grass airfield with a couple of hangars and a small flying control building and tower, obviously built pre-war. The location was ideal for our purposes, so a start was quickly made in clearing mines from a strip and taxi track to each end.

"The squadron moved as soon as possible and this increased our sphere of operations well to the north of The Hague. Our quarters were in various commandeered buildings in the town. The officers took over the Memlinc Hotel, which I believe is still

“ We had to be as near as possible to the coast, as well as the front line in order to obtain our best range north of the Scheldt estuary, but there were enemy troops in a pocket in northern Belgium ”

in existence, and we received much hospitality from the local Belgian population."

Towards the end of 1944 the enemy began using midget submarines to disrupt Allied shipping in the northern Channel and the Scheldt estuary. These one or two-man boats generally carried two torpedoes strapped to their side, but had limited range and were somewhat unstable in rough water. Nonetheless, they had the potential to become a serious threat.

The Molch class were single-man boats of eight tonnes with a range of just 40 miles and no ability to recharge batteries at sea. They proved difficult to control and suffered heavy losses during combat operations. The six-and-a-half-tonne Biber-class boats were also single-manned and, once again, design flaws and hasty crew training resulted in heavy losses. The third and largest type of midget submarine was the Seehund class, also known as the Type XXVII, which had

a displacement of 17 tonnes. Carrying a crew of two and with two torpedoes, they had a range of more than 200 miles on the surface or 63 submerged, and could dive to a depth of 160ft. The Kriegsmarine commissioned 137 of them and, with their light weight, they proved relatively immune to depth charge attack. To interdict Allied naval operations around the Dutch and Belgian coasts, having been evacuated from France, K-Flotille 261 — under Korvettenkapitän Hans Bartels, a 35-year-old Knight's Cross holder — had set up forward bases at Poortershaven and Hellevoetsluis on the Maas estuary, though its main base was at Rotterdam.

As the deployment became known to Allied intelligence, hunting these dangerous small targets became the squadron's main task, as Norman Williamson described. "Around this time the German Navy started to use small one-man and two-man submarines — Bibers — and also explosive motor boats to attack Allied shipping using the newly captured port of Antwerp. To offset this new

threat we found ourselves hunting these targets by day around the Dutch islands of Schouen, Walcheren and so on, as well as carrying out the usual night dive-bombing operations. The daytime attacks against such targets

were made at low level using depth charges."

Eighteen Bibers left Poortershaven and Hellevoetsluis on the evening of 22 December, but the operation was a failure. By year's end 31 of them had been lost against the sinking of a single merchant ship. It was not until 23 January 1945 that one of 119's Albacores made the first aerial sighting of a mini-submarine, but in spite of an attack with six depth charges the vessel survived.

This was the last attack that the Albacore made on the enemy. With an increasing paucity of spares it was decided to re-equip the squadron with the type's lineal predecessor, the Fairey Swordfish! This would give commonality with 819 Squadron, which was also at Knokke, though it was withdrawn to Bircham Newton in late February.

Although ordered to convert to a new aircraft, Williamson was instructed to maintain his operational capability. This was achieved by sending several crews at a time back

LEFT:
An Albacore being loaded with 250lb bombs, which proved effective against German shipping.

RCAF

BELOW LEFT:
A Swordfish of 119 is serviced by a mixture of RN and RAF groundcrew.

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ABOVE: Armed with a variety of bombs and flares and showing the ASV radar radome between the undercarriage, the antiquated appearance of the Swordfish III — this is NF374 — belied the type's effectiveness for night inshore patrols.

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BELOW: A tractor pulls a Swordfish out of the hangar. With its engines running in the background is 119's Anson I EG257, which sank a mini-submarine by 'buzzing'.

VIA NORMAN WILLIAMSON



to Bircham Newton. There the Station Flight held a number of Swordfish IIIs for the training task, later formally established as 119's Training Flight.

WO Gilbert Mills remembered the change. "The Swordfish, with its ghastly flywheel starter, fixed-pitch prop and lack of flaps — the angle of all four ailerons were altered instead — was far more elementary than the Albacore. Admittedly, we were given the MkIII version, equipped with a Pegasus XXX engine, but its extra power was more than offset by a large, ungainly bump under the nose housing the new 'hush-hush' MkIX ASV. This proved to be an excellent airborne low-level radar set, but its shape was not calculated to enhance the aerodynamics of the aircraft! We navigators had to get used to the ASV radar, which was excellent for the job of searching for small targets close in-shore. It was rather like AI and we could detect small targets if they were around at about 12 miles' range, though it had a theoretical range of about 25 miles against ships. In good conditions it could also detect a

U-boat snorkel, but only in very calm seas and at distances out to about five miles. The navigation techniques remained the same, however, though the Swordfish was considerably slower — and much windier! Thus, we had to keep a close hold on charts, navigation equipment and the like.

"Perhaps the most depressing thing about the 'Stringbag' from the crew's point of view was its open cockpits instead of the comfortable enclosed cockpits of the Albacore. Believe me, sitting cramped for about three hours at 3,000ft over the North Sea in the small hours of a January night can be cold and miserable beyond imagination. My normal attire was aircrew 'long john' woollen underwear, shirt, thick woollen aircrew sweater, woollen scarf, battledress trousers and blouse, Irvin jacket, two pairs of gloves, two pairs of socks and fleecelined flying boots. As it was, one became so stiff with the cold that one had to be assisted by the groundcrew to climb out of the cockpit after landing."



Williamson also remembered the training period. "The pilots had to practise a new technique for night dive-bombing, as the cockpit was behind the mainplanes as opposed to in front in the Albacore. The new technique was to track the aircraft so that the target appeared to move down the port side between two guidelines on the lower port mainplane. Once the target emerged from beneath the trailing edge between its marker lines, the pilot simply heaved the nose up and kicked in left rudder. The ensuing stall turn

through 90° and the dropping of the nose brought the target — with luck! — on to the nose of the aircraft in the required angle of dive."

Although antiquated in appearance, the ASV MkIX-equipped Swordfish III was in many ways ideal for the squadron's difficult night task. Painted black overall they became known on the squadron as 'Blackfish', and by the end of January 1919 had fully converted.

Action for 119's 'Blackfish' came in early March as the Kriegsmarine continued to despatch its mini-submarines on operations. Few returned, however. For example, on 6 March 11 examples sailed but none made it home. During the night of the 9th Swordfish NF307/NH-G was lost, believed to have been shot down with the loss of Flt Lt Sutton and Fg Off Radford.

Frank Sutton's loss particularly affected the CO, who recalled wistfully: "Though tour-expired, many crews simply carried on, provided they were considered by the MO [medical orderly] and myself as fit to do so. Few left, most wishing to carry on with the last of the 'Stringbags' to the bitter end. One loss, however, grieved me greatly. My senior flight commander at this time was a man named Frank Sutton who, as a sergeant pilot, had flown one of the earliest Swordfish to enter squadron service in early 1935. I always promised him that, God willing, he would fly the last one when the war ended. Sadly, he was shot down in March 1945, some six weeks before the end of the war in Europe."

This was the squadron's only Swordfish to be lost on operations. Searches were flown through the

night looking for the missing crew without success. These continued into the following day, resulting in what was undoubtedly the squadron's most bizarre success.

To ferry crews and spares between Knokke and Bircham, 119 had an Avro Anson I, which was always flown unarmed. On the 11th it was being flown by Flt Lt Campbell, searching for Sutton and Radford. As the unit record states, "Having a keen eye, he spotted something suspicious in the sea 10 miles west of Schouwen, and on flying down to investigate identified the conning tower of a Biber. No RT, no WT, but remembering his early training he switched on his IFF to Stud 3 trusting that it would be picked up and understood, but it wasn't. As the Anson was unarmed there was no possibility of attacking the midget, but a spot of 'beating-up' was attempted without, however, shaking the Jerry sufficiently to make him do anything silly.

"After several attacks it was eventually given up as a bad job, and the aircraft was just making for home when, lo and behold, another little Biber made its appearance about a mile away. Campbell tried out the same tactics, and this time success greeted his efforts for the 'U-boat commander' (as the subsequent newspaper story dubbed him) evidently didn't like the feel of an aircraft roaring over him at 20ft, and on the third dive the pilot and observer glimpsed one large rump disappearing over the side of the U-boat. On the final return a figure was seen trying to struggle into a dinghy, the midget turning turtle and slowly disappearing beneath the waves."

Based on Campbell's report a Swordfish (coded NH-H) flown by Fg Offs Corbel and O'Donnell took off immediately, followed soon afterwards by NF377/NH-R in the hands of the CO and his navigator Fg Off Gardiner, to search for the mini-sub that was still at large. At 18.25hrs, just off the coast north of the island of Schouwen, Corbel and O'Donnell sighted the cupola of a Biber just surfacing, and as they circled it broke cover fully. Diving to attack, Corbel's first depth charge exploded about 30 yards ahead of the vessel. It continued on course, though it turned sharply to port when a second depth charge landed off its starboard bow. A third was dropped, and the fourth exploded very close as its plume completely enveloped the Biber, which disappeared. Soon an oil slick was



spotted. Corbel dropped a flame float and the CO's aircraft was homed in. Williamson dropped his four bombs in two attacks on the oil patch, "to make sure". 119's vintage biplanes had at last encountered their elusive foe. The daily report concluded: "Needless to say there was a great deal of tail-wagging in the mess that night."



These boats must have been among the 15 Biber and 14 Molch-class vessels that had sailed, most of which were lost. At 16.40hrs on the 12th, Swordfish NH-L attacked and sank a Biber just off The Hague, probably after it had left the entrance to the port of Rotterdam. An hour later the crew of NH-R found and sank another Biber off Schouwen. A further claim came the next night, possibly one of the three Seehund vessels lost to aircraft in March.

Patrols continued fairly uneventfully until the end of the war. Norman Williamson recalled: "I flew the last operational sortie of a Swordfish myself on 8 May 1945. The surrender of the German forces was due to come into effect at midnight, but the previous week we had been warned that a number of attacks on Allied shipping might be expected from German Navy fanatics in their midget submarines. I landed back at Knokke at 21.40hrs that evening, having made an attack on a Biber [...] 40 minutes earlier. As I came over the coast from the last Swordfish operational sortie of the war the celebration bonfire was already alight in the square in front of the Memlinc Hotel."

Williamson's attack was the final air attack of any kind during the

war in Europe, thus enabling 119 and its vintage 'Blackfish' to claim a unique niche in RAF history. Patrols looking for possible rogue units were continued until the 11th. The squadron was ordered back to Bircham Newton on 22 May, Williamson recounting: "We left Knokke-le-Zoute in style, the entire squadron in formation, and maintained this over our old group headquarters — No 16 Group at Chatham — on our way to Bircham."

No 119 Squadron was disbanded three days later and the Swordfish ended its career with the 'light blues' of the RAF. It is appropriate that the last words should be from its final commanding officer. "When the squadron was disbanded I myself took the ops records and so forth to the Air Historical Branch. I also took the original of the squadron crest signed by King George VI and J. D. Heaton-Armstrong, the Garter King of Arms. Very few people know that 119 had a crest. It consists of a sword crossing an anchor, both covered half-black and half-white signifying day and night operational roles, and the motto of course is 'By Night, By Day' in English. It was designed for me by one of the ops room squadron leaders on No 157 Wing when we were at Manston, the Hon — later Sir — George Bellow, who prior to the war was Chester Herald at the College of Arms. What better bloke to design a crest for you?"

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ABOVE: Some Belgian civilians help the groundcrew lift a cradle holding a 250lb bomb before loading. On the left under the wing can be seen light series bomb carriers used to carry flame floats and flares.

VIA NORMAN WILLIAMSON

EDITOR'S NOTE:

One Swordfish is preserved in RAF colours: NF370 at IWM Duxford. It is an ex-No 119 Squadron aircraft, and appears in those markings.