



Heroes of the Victoria Cross

JACK MANTLE

The only VC earned in a German air attack was awarded to Leading Seaman Jack Mantle. It was the second VC awarded for action in Britain and the sole one awarded for action on a Royal Navy ship in home waters

WORDS ANDY SAUNDERS

With the capitulation of France and the Low Countries in the early summer of 1940 and the subsequent withdrawal of the BEF from Dunkirk, it became ever clearer that one of Germany's principal war aims was the strangulation of Britain's supplies by attacking ports and shipping. Of course, as an island and seafaring country, the importance of protecting the nation's maritime lifeline was paramount and in the early days of the war some considerable thought was given to the protection of those assets. To that end a large number of merchant vessels were commandeered by the Admiralty for Royal Navy service.

One of them was the 5,582 ton MV Foylebank. Built in 1930 it was requisitioned on the outbreak of war in September 1939 to be converted to an anti-aircraft ship. In its new role, it was fitted out with multiple 0.5 inch machine-guns, two x Quad 2-pounder 'Pom Pom' guns and four x twin high angle 4-inch turrets. Finally commissioned on the 6 June 1940 as HMS Foylebank it made its way to Portland naval base in Dorset three days later to be worked-up for operational duties under the command of Captain H. P. Weir, RN. It was at Portland that HMS Foylebank came under devastating air attack, an assault that also saw extraordinary bravery by one of its crew.

Right: Leading Seaman Jack Mantle who died after the Luftwaffe's Stuka force launched an attack on HMS Foylebank at the Portland naval base in Dorset



With reconnaissance flights having confirmed the presence of Foylebank moored in Portland Harbour, an attack by the Luftwaffe's Stuka force against the port and associated shipping and infrastructure was ordered. On 4 July 1940, with long-range fighter cover provided by Messerschmitt 110s and 109s, the Junkers 87 dive-bombers of III./St G 51 struck shortly after 8.15am. The attackers targeted port installations and shipping in the harbour. In total 26 dive bombers took part in the raid with HMS Foylebank being singled out for particular attention. The Stukas, however, dived on Foylebank before the gun crews had time to properly react to the "Action Stations!" alert, an alert that many of the crew thought to be another drill in the working-up routine.

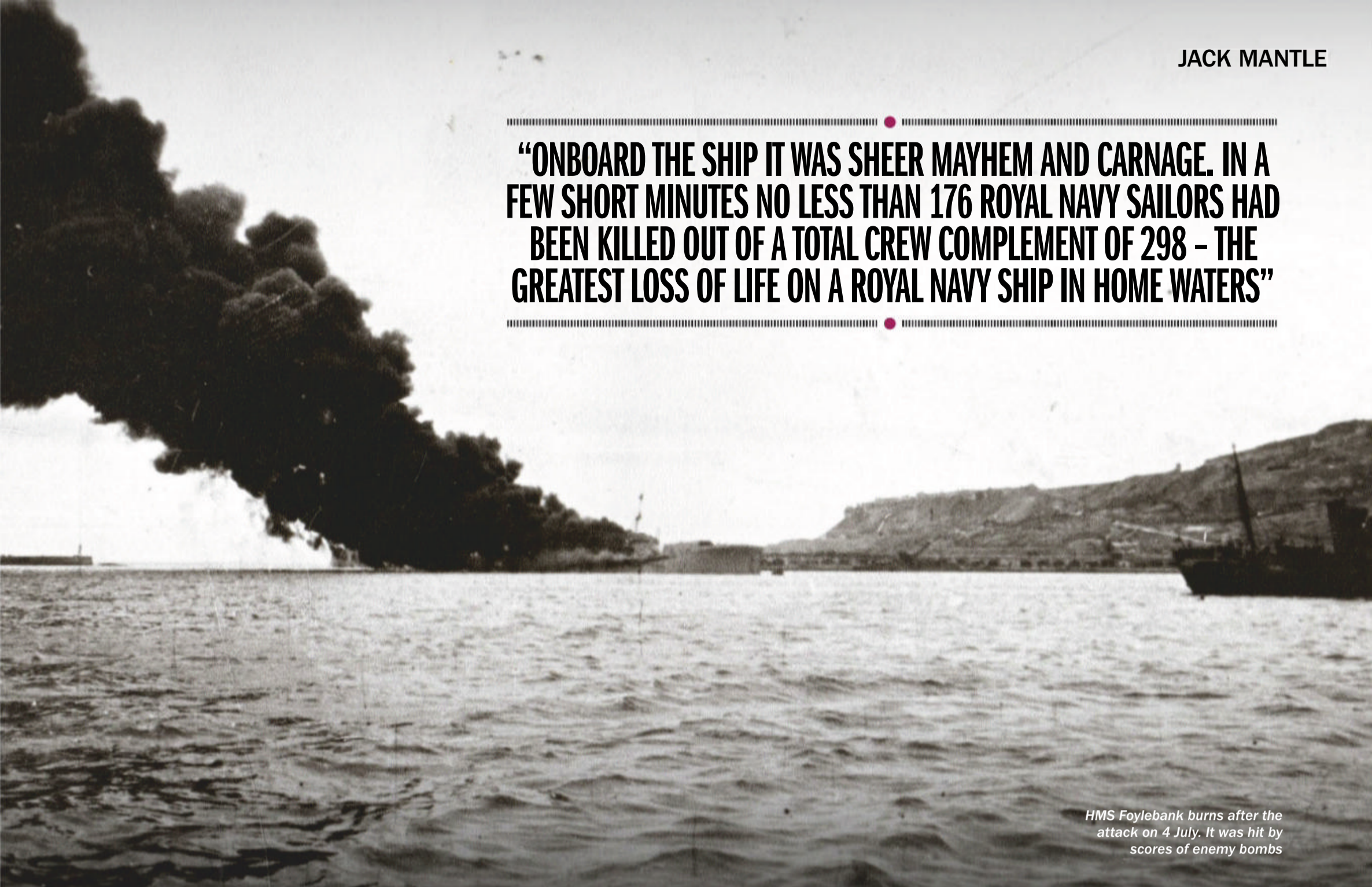
Unlike many of the Stuka's shipping targets in the English Channel, Foylebank was, quite literally, a sitting duck – stationary, and within the harbour. There was no question of being able to take avoiding action, and bombs struck it with a total of 22 direct hits – 250kg and 50kg missiles raining down in salvos – 104 in total being dropped. Other bombs fell close to Foylebank causing blast and splinter damage, one of them scoring a direct hit on Foylebank's tender that had been tied up alongside, blowing it to matchwood.

Onboard the ship it was sheer mayhem and carnage. In a few short minutes no less than 176 Royal Navy sailors had been killed out of a total crew complement of 298 – the greatest loss of life on a Royal Navy ship in home waters. HMS Foylebank was also set on fire

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HMS Foylebank burns after the attack on 4 July. It was hit by scores of enemy bombs



Foylebank was a converted merchant ship, requisitioned in September 1939

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ultimately sinking the following day. In her final moments as an operational vessel, however, some of the gunners got to their stations and readied themselves to fire at the attackers. Such was the surprise of the raid, however, and so quickly was it all over, that, of the main armament, only the ship's "Y" 4-inch gun was able to fire, getting off 27 rounds from the port barrel and 28 from the starboard. Meanwhile a young Leading Seaman, Jack Mantle, was battling with his crew to get their set of Pom-Pom guns to bear on the enemy.

In their attacks the Stuka pilots' adopted method was to dive as steeply as possible, and sometimes at up to 90°, towards the stern of the ship. At around 1,500ft the angle was decreased to 45° and the pilot's gunsight lined up on the target ship's stern as the pilot fired his twin 7.92mm MG 17 machine-guns. Gradually the bullets moved along the length of the ship and when the pilot saw his bullets striking the water ahead of the ship's bow, so the bombs were released. In this way, the gunfire was an aid to sighting as well as keeping the heads of defenders down.

As the Stuka pulled away, the rear gunner took over machine-gunning, so as to suppress anti-aircraft fire and when the Stukas dived on Foylebank they were raking it with high explosives and bullets almost continuously for several minutes – just at the moment gun crews were racing along exposed decks and gangways, and up ladders, to get to their stations. Some were lucky to escape. Others were cut down by machine-gun bullets or splinters, or else caught by direct bomb hits.

Standing in his exposed gun position Jack Mantle was getting his guns to bear on the attackers to defend against yet another attack. However he had already been seriously wounded by bomb splinters and as he opened fire so too did the pilot of a diving Stuka. Unfortunately the heroic sailor fell across his gun, mortally wounded, now having been hit across the chest with machine-gun bullets. Lifted down gently from his bullet and shrapnel-raked station, soaked in blood, Mantle was taken to Portland Hospital where the 23-year-old seaman from Wandsworth died later that day. Of Mantle's actions Captain H. P. Wilson reported to the C-in-C Portsmouth. On receiving Wilson's report, he was moved to record that Mantle had, "... behaved too magnificently for words."

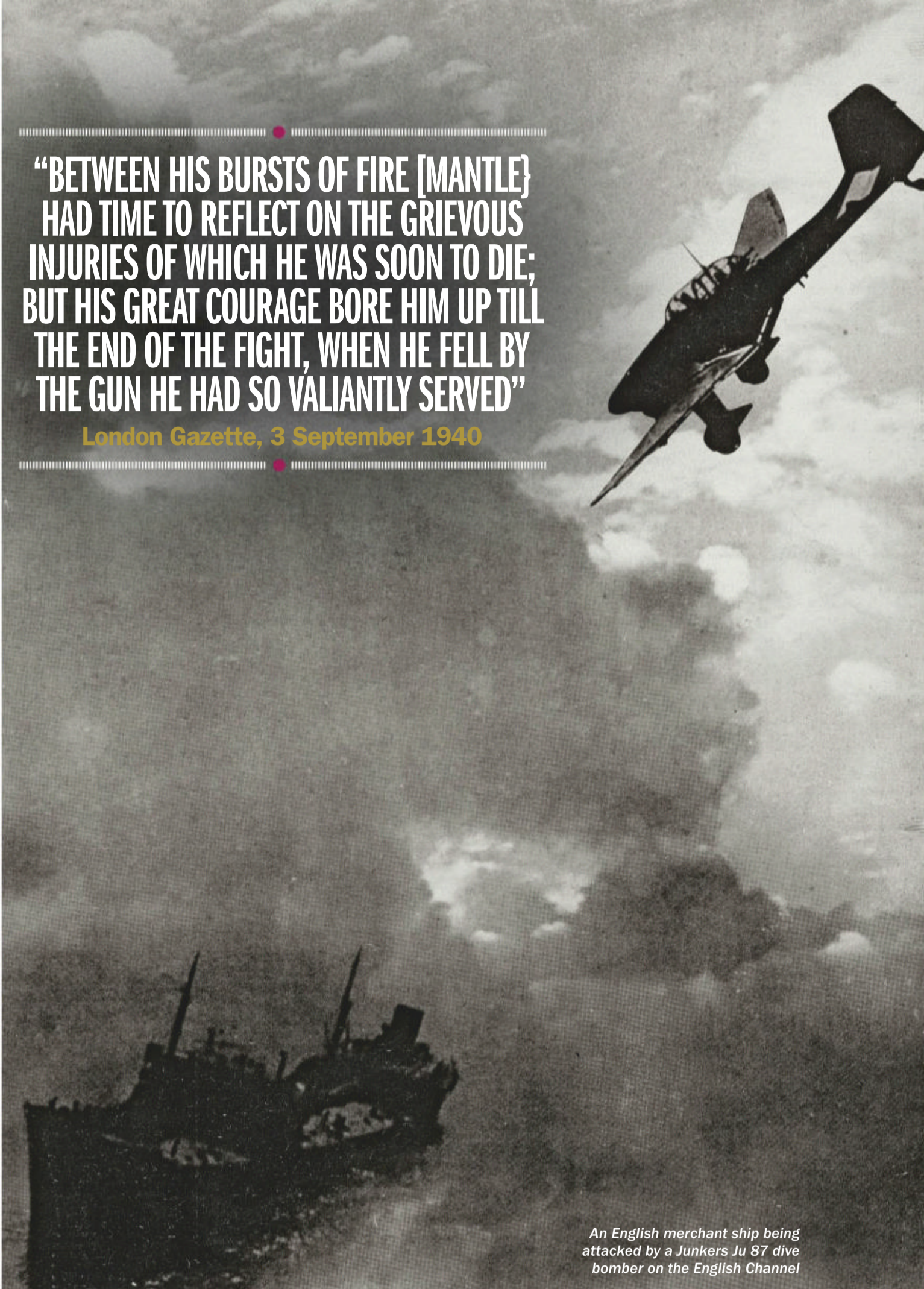
One who was there, Ron Walsh, recalled that magnificent behaviour, "When the attack came, I didn't have time to give it a second thought. So much was still happening. Making my way towards the bows, I reached amidships where the passageway between the engine room bulkhead and starboard guardrail had been reduced to about eight feet in width.

"I stopped as there was a pile of bodies in the way. 'Push your way through them, or walk over them, they're all dead!' said Petty Officer Sansome, the Gunnery PO, who was standing in the gangway just before the starboard Pom Pom mounting. As I came up to him, I saw there were four others waiting and he told me to '... stay with them, Mantle hasn't finished yet. When he has, we'll need to get him down and over the side into one of those boats'.

"A bomb had exploded near Leading Seaman Jack Mantle's gun, killing and injuring some of

"BETWEEN HIS BURSTS OF FIRE [MANTLE] HAD TIME TO REFLECT ON THE GRIEVOUS INJURIES OF WHICH HE WAS SOON TO DIE; BUT HIS GREAT COURAGE BORE HIM UP TILL THE END OF THE FIGHT, WHEN HE FELL BY THE GUN HE HAD SO VALIANTLY SERVED"

London Gazette, 3 September 1940



An English merchant ship being attacked by a Junkers Ju 87 dive bomber on the English Channel



Royal Navy crewmen man an anti-aircraft 'Pom-Pom' gun while in rough seas

his gun crew. He himself had a shattered left leg but had dragged himself up to the gun and prepared to engage the enemy. One raider had dropped his bomb and was now readying to attack again with machine-guns – having turned over the Mole and headed back towards us. Jack Mantle, although in great pain, had the barrels of his guns trained on the incoming enemy. The leading seaman was struggling to pull back the ‘change-over’ lever on top of the gun, so as to move it from ‘electrics’ to ‘hand-firing’. (We’d lost all electrical power when the first bombs hit.) The lever had been slightly bent by blast, and he was cursing as the range rapidly closed. Then, in the last few seconds, the enemy gunner and Mantle both opened fire together. I was uncertain as to what happened next. Had the ‘plane gone by, or had it exploded into pieces?

“Mantle was now slumped over his gun, either due to his former wounds or due to the Stuka’s machine-gun fire. I can’t say which. What I am sure of is that Leading Seaman Mantle was still alive then. He was a bloody hero. No doubt of that!”

Leading Seaman Peter Davies, one of Jack Mantle’s gun crew, was even better placed than Ron Walsh to comment. He also was in no doubt as to his comrade’s bravery, “Our gun crew was in action from almost the start of the attack, but moments after we opened fire a bomb exploded nearby. We were all blasted by the explosion and I couldn’t hear

anything. I’d also been hit by bullets, but only realised this later on. The gun position itself was now tilting outboard at a crazy angle and when I collected my senses a bit, I realised with horror that four of our crew were dead. I’d also been hit by splinters, but one of our crew, Johnny Millen, had lost a leg. Mantle was badly hurt but he went back to his post and started firing again. Then both he and I were

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Able Seaman, Ron Walsh

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again hit by machine-gun bullets from another attacker and Jack was done for. In my state there wasn’t anything else I could do. The ship had been hit by multiple bombs and it was now listing quite badly and burning. I’ll never forget that all along the port side of the ship the bodies were heaped up, six-deep in places. One thing, though, I don’t know how Jack managed to keep going. He’d been badly hit in the leg, was really losing lots of blood and was hit, twice I think, by machine-gun bullets. He deserved that medal alright.”

Notwithstanding Jack’s Mantle’s courage, nothing that might be called a wholly effective defence was put up by HMS Foylebank, purely because the ship was not at battle-station readiness when the attack came without warning. Although it was an anti-aircraft ship it had been sunk by air attack – the very type of attack against which it was designed to defend. However, two Stukas were lost to anti-aircraft fire during the attack. One crew being killed when their Junkers 87 crashed into the English Channel south of Portland and the crew of another being rescued from the sea off the Cotentin Peninsula. The possibility that one or other of these aircraft, or perhaps both, might have fallen victim to Jack Mantle’s gunnery cannot be excluded.

Jack Mantle’s VC is now displayed at the National Museum of the Royal Navy in Portsmouth.



A Luftwaffe crew loads a 250kg bomb onto a Ju 87 before takeoff

Images: Getty