

Chapter 12

Disaster at Trondheim

The sinking of *Glorious* and her escorting destroyers was a terrible blow to all of us. We were depressed by the dreadful loss of life and many of us lost numerous personal friends. Back in the corridors of power an immediate decision must have been made that the loss of *Glorious* should be instantly avenged, and my guess is that somebody recalled the success of the Skua dive-bombing on the *Konigsberg* in Bergen harbour.

The next thing that happened to me was that I was summoned by Commander (Flying) and taken to see the Admiral. The Admiral told me briefly and succinctly that he intended to send both Skua squadrons into Trondheim harbour to attack the German Fleet and asked for my comments. Now had I been able to say truly what my immediate reaction was I might have said something like: 'Whoever thought this one up must be absolutely bonkers, I'm not going and neither are any of my squadron!' But of course one doesn't and can't say that sort of thing, although with hindsight perhaps one should have. But I did say that I hoped nobody was comparing this with the *Konigsberg* raid for the following reasons: there were now 24 hours of daylight and thus no night cover, clear skies and no cloud cover; and furthermore Trondheim lay 45 miles up-fjord or, if the islands Froya and Hitra were counted as mainland (from which we might be observed) then it was 80 miles inland, and there was no chance of getting there undetected, intelligence reports having made it absolutely clear that the target was well protected by German Messerschmitt Me 109s and 110s.

I paused in my appreciation of this proposed operation as I observed that the Admiral was looking pretty grim, and wondered if at any moment he would charge me with 'lack of moral fibre', the Services' wonderful euphemism for cowardice: but he said nothing and I finished up by adding that unless we could have fighter cover or diversionary air action of some sort the operation could not succeed and he would have unacceptable losses. He smiled and said he agreed with me, then revealed that a diversionary attack on Vaernes airfield by Bristol Beauforts had been arranged, and that he had decided both Skua squadrons should take off at midnight, with a view to attacking at 0200 hours. I felt I could say no more.

Commander (F) told me to work out plans for the attack with Lieutenant Commander John Casson, the commanding officer of 803 Squadron, who as the senior squadron commander would be leading the attack, and for us both to arrange for the briefing of air and ground crews. I found a grim-looking John in the wardroom and apparently the Admiral had seen him before me. We compared notes and found that we had each told the Admiral roughly the same, except that John had said losses of at least 50 per cent should be expected, to which the Admiral replied that he thought this was being a little pessimistic.

It was approaching midday when John and I went in to lunch and had rather a subdued meal. Afterwards we set about planning, being joined by my observer, Robin Bostock, and John's observer. As soon as we got our heads together and considered the problem it became clear that there was not really much planning that could be done. We would have liked to approach the target unseen, but with no cloud or darkness the only way this was possible was at ground level. Such an approach would then require a slow climb to dive-bombing height near the target, for the Skua's rate of climb with a full load was indeed slow and we would be easy meat for marauding enemy fighters. No, the only chance was to go in high, hope the Beauforts would be there, and in the confusion slip through and carry out

our attack. We also decided that if there was no diversion and we were being attacked we would break formation and all aircraft would act individually, selecting the best and biggest targets available. There was to be no rendezvous point, all aircraft would be given a course back to the ship from Trondheim and if necessary would have to find their own way. We decided to cross the coast at 12,000 feet, losing height from there on to arrive at Trondheim at about 8000 feet. Not a very brilliant plan but there seemed to be no alternative. We had a preliminary briefing of aircrews at 1630 that afternoon, with final briefing to be at 2300 hours. Checking aircraft and aircrew availability John and I decided to take nine aircraft from his squadron and eight from mine, making a total of 17.

Now began a very long and very demoralizing wait. Commander (F) had told me that if for any reason the Beauforts were unavailable the Admiral had given orders that our operation was to be cancelled. So there was still hope! I went round the hangars and chatted to the ground crews preparing our machines, trying to appear nonchalant and unperturbed. They were obviously doing their usual excellent job and I returned to the wardroom for a cup of tea, and had only that, having little appetite. Common sense told me that I ought to get some sleep, or at least a rest, so I went down to my cabin only to find that sleep was out of the question and that lying on my bunk just 'resting' wasn't exactly a soothing occupation either. I then thought of writing a sort of last letter to home and girl-friend but decided that his was a bit melodramatic and perhaps even courting disaster by anticipation. I ended up by returning to the wardroom and chatting to others who I assume were as apprehensive as myself but concealing it remarkably well; there were even a few who appeared genuinely belligerent and raring to go. When the bar opened I must admit that there was a temptation to have a few quick strong ones, but I was determined to resist for three very good reasons: drink and flying don't mix; as squadron commander I obviously had an example to set; and lastly I reckoned that any 'Dutch courage' taken on board would more than have evaporated after a two hour flight to Trondheim. So I went to the bar and ostentatiously ordered a large lemon squash.

Time, however, was passing painfully slowly. It was now 2000 hours, and I insisted that all my aircrew, including myself, had a light meal whether they felt like it or not. The time gap between lunch and our return to the ship at about 0415 was a long one and it would have been absurd to try to do an arduous and testing job on an empty turn. Actually I ate more than I expected and quite enjoyed it. Some good strong coffee followed and I think we all felt much better and were getting in the right sort of mood to do our very best.

At 2300 hours all aircrews were assembled for final briefing. The operations room informed us that the diversionary bombing raid had been arranged and confirmed, so we would just have to do the best we could and get on with it. Everybody was very calm and efficient and I don't think any casual observer could have detected the slightest sign of apprehension or doubt. After briefing John and I sent the aircrews down to the hangar to supervise final preparations on their own aircraft and to accompany them to the flight deck when they were ranged up.

It was at 2350 that the first of my aircraft sprang into life with a roar, quickly followed by the others. I was airborne at 0001 hours on the 13th June 1940 (rather an ominous date), the last of my squadron to take off, so that those already in the air could form up on me as I climbed away from the carrier. We circled in formation waiting for John Casson, the last off, to be joined by his squadron, then both squadrons swung round on a course for the Norwegian coast and Trondheim. We climbed steadily in open formation until we reached a height of 12,000 feet. The weather was good, too good, with a completely clear sky, and maximum visibility. We now settled down to our most economic cruising speed of 140/150 knots which would only be varied later by John Casson's observer's

navigation requiring a higher or lower speed to arrive over the target at exactly 0200. At that moment I liked to think that there were also a dozen or so Beauforts well on their way from Scotland and also navigating to arrive precisely at that time.

We had been airborne now for well over an hour and ahead of us I could see the first land which Robin told me was the northern end of the island of Froya. All aircraft were nicely in position and so far we had seen nothing, neither ship nor plane. As we passed over the island, in this very clear visibility, I could see a lighthouse and thought it highly probable that the Germans would have an observation post there to give good warning of any attack by sea or air. Now we were crossing over the mainland coast proper and there, confound it, was another lighthouse or coastguard station. I couldn't help but believe that the wires back to Trondheim were humming with the news that an enemy bombing force was approaching, and I could imagine the alarm being sounded at the aerodrome with Me 109s and 110s being scrambled one after another.

John Casson now started to go into a shallow dive, our speed building up to about 200 knots, and I asked Robin how far there was to go. He said he reckoned we were about 25 miles from Trondheim and that we should arrive there in about 10 minutes almost exactly at 0200. So far, so good. I was looking anxiously ahead for AA bursts in the air which would mean that the Beauforts were there and I hoped creating havoc with the Messerschmitts at Vaernes airfield. But as yet the air was as clear and still as ever. Speed was now building up to 240 knots, height 9000 feet, as John Casson manoeuvred to arrive over target on time and at the pre-arranged height.

I looked at my watch — it was three minutes to our deadline. There ahead of us I could see quite clearly the town of Trondheim and lying in the fjord the German fleet. I call it a fleet because it appeared to me that there were dozens of ships, including two larger ones that I assumed to be *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, which were obviously to be our targets if we could reach them. There was still no sign of the Beauforts and I think it was at that moment that John Casson and I knew we would have to go it alone, as we had always suspected.

Then the German AA fire opened up. I think only those who have experienced it can appreciate the volume of fire that a concentration of warships, supported by a considerable number of shore batteries, can put up, and can understand when I describe this barrage as intense with tracer bullets floating upwards and past us in thick showers. John Casson swung away to port putting his aircraft in open line astern and I did the same to starboard. As I did so I saw a twin-engined Me 110 flash past us heading for the other squadron and shortly afterwards a Skua spiralling downwards in flames. We were going to be sitting ducks for these Messerschmitts and I wondered how many of us were ever going to be able to get into a proper dive-bombing position to drop an accurate bomb. Robin suddenly said 'Me 109 port quarter', and I took violent evasive action so that he shot past and under us. As I pulled round in a very tight turn I could see that all the Skuas of both squadrons were scattered and acting independently and that there were 109s and 110s all over the place. I saw one Skua carrying out what appeared to be a beautifully controlled dive-bombing attack on the further large ship but also had a fleeting glance of his dive getting lower and lower until he hit the water at full power with a horrible crash.

I asked Robin if there was anything on our tail and he replied 'No'. I decided that it was now or never and that if I was going to get into position to attack I must sacrifice some height in order to build up my speed on the run in. I put the nose down into a medium dive and headed at 260 knots towards the nearest pocket battleship. At just under 6000 feet I was in a position to attack, pulled up to lose speed and came off a stall turn with flaps down into a dive. This dive was started lower than I would have

liked and the AA fire coming from the ship was indescribable. At 1700 feet I released my bomb and, veering violently to port, flaps now raised, continued on down to sea level and headed away across the fjord. Poor old Robin, who must have been having kittens in the rear cockpit whilst all this was going on, now reported that we had had a near miss ahead of the enemy ship and also that at the moment there was nobody on our tail though he had seen two more Skuas crash into the water. After five minutes of flying at zero feet we were well clear of the target area but by no means out of danger. Robin and I had often discussed what to do in this sort of situation. Flying at water or ground level offered the best chance of concealment but little chance of survival if we were attacked by superior forces and the aircraft was hit. Flying at any height from 1000 feet upwards offered less chance of concealment but an obvious chance of baling out. We had both agreed to opt for the chance of baling out and so I was now beginning to climb to gain height. We had reached 3000 feet when Robin said, 'Aircraft slightly above — port bow', and a quick glance showed a single engined seaplane of all things about to cross in front of and slightly above us. I eased back gently on the stick to raise my nose and as he passed in front of me and slightly above I got in a quick burst with my front guns. This may have been a big mistake on my part; either he hadn't seen me or he had mistaken me for an Me 109. At any rate his reaction to my burst of fire was a violent diving turn back towards Trondheim and that was a direction in which I was not going to chase him although even a Skua could have overtaken such an aircraft without too much trouble. But not only did he turn towards Trondheim, he also fired a four-star white Very light similar to the one fired by the submarine we had caught on the surface at Larvik. This could either have been the German recognition signal of the day or it could equally well have been a signal indicating the presence of hostile aircraft.

After this little incident we were at 4000 feet, about 20 minutes flying away from Trondheim and not all that far from the coast. I was just beginning to think that we had got away with it when over the intercom Robin said quietly, 'Two 109s coming up fast astern.' This was the dreaded situation we had often anticipated and had been frightened even to imagine, it scared us so much. We both knew that, barring some sort of miracle, we had really had it this time. Inexplicably, as far as I was concerned, I felt no fear or panic, merely my usual fatalistic calm and a determination to give them a run for their money. Had it been only one Messerschmitt we were dealing with it is just possible we might have got away with it, but two gave us no chance at all. The Me 109 was at least 80 mph faster than we were, was more manoeuvrable and was armed with cannon. In spite of this I had a trick or two up my sleeve and felt that if we could survive long enough and at the same time work our way out to sea we could possibly get rid of them; for I knew that shore-based fighter pilots never relished too much flying over water out of sight of land. If we could somehow remain in one piece till we were 50 miles off shore I felt there was a chance that they might give up the chase.

I felt terribly exposed sitting high up in the Skua's cockpit, with large expanse of windscreen in front of me which was not bullet-proof. Neither was there any armour under my seat or at my back and the large petrol tanks were not even self-sealing if hit. Robin of course was equally unprotected and had the unnerving view of every attack as it came with only a single Vickers K machine gun to defend us from stern attacks. The odds surely were stacked against us!

I have spoken before of the Skua's great, big, strong flaps that helped to make it such a good dive-bomber. I now planned to use these flaps to help avoid the approaching attacks at the same time working my way towards the sea. As soon as Robin shouted they were about to attack in line astern 'Now!' I went into a 45 degree dive and when they opened fire as my speed built up to 250 knots I suddenly put my flaps down. The result was instant, dramatic and very uncomfortable! We decelerated violently and at the same time shot straight up 500 feet or

so and the attacking 109s passed underneath us. It speaks a lot for the ruggedness and strength of the Skua that it could stand this sort of treatment, while I continued to work my way towards the coast. Three times the 109s repeated this type of attack unsuccessfully and I was wondering how long it was going to be before they realized they would have to change their tactics. Unfortunately not very long....

Robin suddenly said 'One attacking from astern and one on starboard beam'. This was decidedly awkward and meant that my 'flap' tactic could make me an easy target if the aircraft on the beam waited until I had avoided the stern attack. So this time I did a really tight turn to starboard and managed to get a quick head-on burst at my beam attacker. Of course this left me more vulnerable to the stern attack and I could see his tracers going past me. I was still working my way towards the coast but our enemies' performance was so superior that they could attack, climb away, circle round and attack again. It couldn't last.

Robin had just said again, 'Attack astern and abeam' when I felt a thud that shook the aircraft and a large piece about the size of a soup plate came away from my starboard wing. It was probably a cannon shell but as it was outboard of the ailerons I still had control of my aircraft. They were circling and climbing ready for another attack — but this time there was no warning of firing from Robin. Suddenly the petrol tank behind my instrument panel, only a foot or two from my lap, went up in a roar of flames. From then on my actions were essentially reflex and must have been carried out at lightning speed.

I can remember slamming back my cockpit hood and the resulting slipstream drawing a great sheet of flame up between my legs, across my face and out of the cockpit; I can remember hitting the quick-release of my fighting harness, and then the next thing I was aware of was a violent and painful yank at my crotch. Inconsequentially I thought: 'That will teach you not to have your parachute harness properly and tightly adjusted!' and there I was at 3500 feet floating down with an Me 109 heading straight for me. As I was bracing myself for him to open fire he swerved to one side and was away. I looked around for another parachute —there was none. What had happened to Robin? Had he been killed in that last attack on us? Had he been unable to get out? Or was he still in the Skua now spiralling downwards and thinking it was brilliant evasive action I was taking? The Skua hit the fjord below and disappeared in a cloud of spray and wreckage. Robin, my observer, friend and good companion in many good and bad times was dead, but exactly how and when he died we shall never know.

I was now at 2000 feet and floating down gently in complete silence. I looked down and saw that I was heading for the centre of a fjord. It wasn't the main Trondheim fjord but an offshoot: even so it appeared to be a mile or two wide. I know the theory of being able to guide a parachute by pulling on the shroud lines, but I tried this with no effect at all other than nearly to collapse the canopy. Gently I drifted down: at 500 feet I was still heading slap for the middle of the fjord. I removed my flying boots and let them drop into the water then, in order to avoid getting tangled up in the parachute, at about 15-20 feet I turned and hit the quick-release buckle and dropped into the water. As I went under I felt a great searing pain as the salt water came into contact with my burnt face. With my Mae West flotation waistcoat on I soon popped spluttering to the surface and surveyed my situation. From eye level a few inches above the water's surface either shore of the fjord appeared to be miles away and I knew I'd never make it swimming. I also knew that with my flotation waistcoat on I wasn't going to drown. God knows why or how, I was still alive but apparently destined to die of exposure in the icy waters of this remote and isolated Norwegian fjord.

I had been swimming for about 20 minutes, getting very weak and the shore I was aiming for appeared as far away as ever. Self-preservation is a great spur and I

guess I was going to go on swimming until I could swim no more. Suddenly I heard noises that sounded very like those made by oars in rowlocks and looking over my shoulder saw the bows of a small rowing boat bearing down on me. I was too far gone to feel any of the things I ought to have felt, like joy and relief at being rescued at last. I was mentally and physically drained and exhausted and I suspect in a state of deep shock as well. The boat was quickly alongside me and I was seized by the arms and seat of my trousers by two men, hauled on board, thrust into the bottom of the boat and covered quickly and completely with a tarpaulin. As I lay there, gasping and shivering in the dark, I was conscious of the boat being rowed rapidly back to the shore. The boat grounded, I was uncovered, helped out and half carried, half dragged to a farmhouse nestling close to the fjord shore. I had been rescued by two Norwegian fishermen from the farm who had rowed out to me, well knowing that anything moving on land or water was inviting machine gun attack from the air. To these two gallant men I undoubtedly owe my life.

My memories of the next forty-eight hours are vague and hazy. I can remember being stripped and rubbed down in the farm kitchen and being dressed in borrowed clothing which included a fine knitted traditional Norwegian cardigan. I can remember being examined in a Norwegian doctor's surgery for broken bones or other injuries but can't remember how I got there. It was he who dressed and bandaged my burnt face and gave me a warm drink from a cup with a spout as my lips were too painful for normal drinking, and I think it must have been this doctor who decided that my presence must be reported to the Germans so that I could get proper medical treatment. Fortunately, when my cockpit went up in flames I had had my goggles down and this protected my eyes and saved me from certain blinding. So, save for a burnt face I was still in remarkably good physical condition and had a long and restful night in the farmhouse.

The next day a car pulled up at the farm with three German NCOs and I was handed over to them and driven away. This was the start of five years, all but one month, as a prisoner of war.