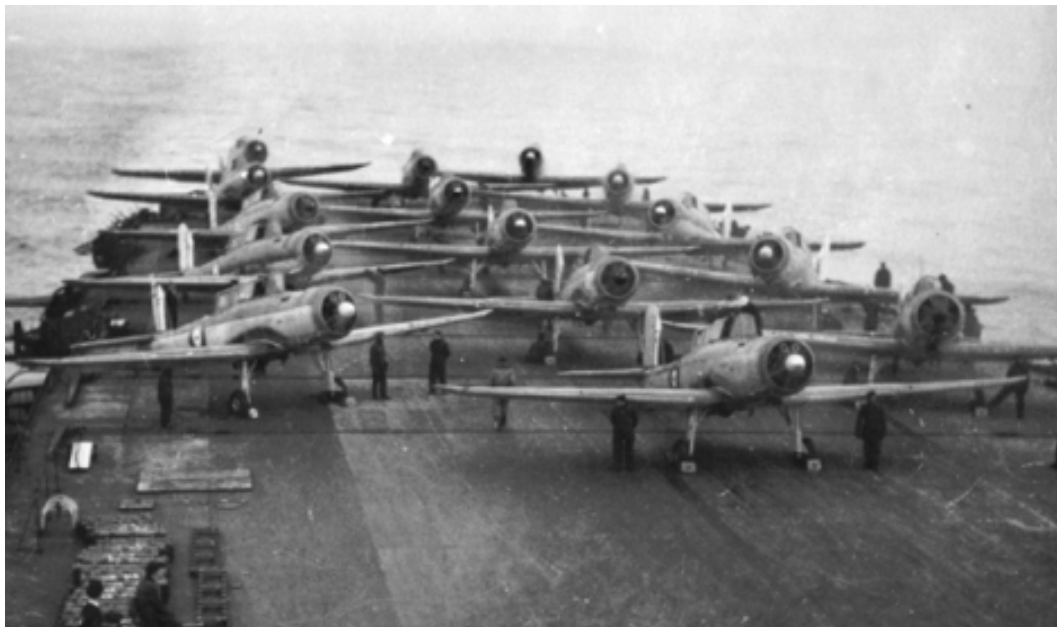


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BLACK THURSDAY – A DISASTROUS FLEET AIR ARM RAID

One of the most disastrous naval air strikes in the Fleet Air Arm's history took place over the night of 12-13 June 1940. It was one of the many attempts by RN and RAF aviators to tackle large German warships – few in number but highly dangerous to Allied shipping – that would take place throughout the war. The raid which soon became known as 'Black Thursday' was an attempt to capitalise on the damage inflicted on the battle cruiser *Scharnhorst* during the battle between the German ship, and its sister *Gneisenau*, and the aircraft carrier HMS *Glorious* and its escort the destroyers *Ardent* and *Acasta*.

The three RN ships had been returning home from Norwegian waters following the evacuation of Allied forces from the country. The Allies had proved unable to prevent German forces from overrunning Norway following their surprise invasion in April. However, *Scharnhorst* had been hit by a torpedo launched by *Acasta*, and had to put into Trondheim for repairs. *Ark Royal* remained off Norway and was ordered by the Admiralty and Admiral Wells (who commanded the aircraft carrier component of the Royal Navy task force fighting the Norwegian campaign) to prepare every available aircraft for a strike.



The Skuas ranged on deck shortly before launching to attack the *Scharnhorst*

The original plan called for 21 Skuas and 22 Swordfish (more aircraft than Ark had available), but at some point this complement was whittled down to fifteen Skuas. Over 60 years later, it is difficult to see how the raid was allowed to take place. The War Cabinet and Air Staff felt that Skuas and Swordfish would have little chance against the many fighter aircraft which were known to be in the area and Churchill himself questioned the wisdom of the plan. Cabinet Office minutes from 10th June state 'the Prime Minister expressed grave doubts as to the wisdom of the operation... It would be a gallant operation, but one which, in his opinion, might prove far too costly'.

Daylight was virtually constant at this time of year so a dawn raid would not be possible. Furthermore Trondheim was inland, at the head of a fjord, which would give plenty of warning of the raid's approach. The port was very well defended with anti-aircraft fire and Vaernes airfield's 80 fighters a few miles away. To give the Skuas some chance of success, a bombing raid on Vaernes by seven Coastal Command Bristol Beauforts was planned to keep the fighters from intercepting the Skuas. In addition, the RAF was to send Bristol Blenheim long range fighters from 254 Squadron to cover the dive bombers over the target.

Fifteen aircraft and crews from 800 and 803 Squadrons were prepared – several of the crews had never dive-bombed before, despite Admiral Wells later claiming that the fifteen pilots were chosen because they had prior experience. In fact, Lieutenant Commander John Casson, commanding 803 Squadron, who would technically be leading the raid, admitted to having 'little or no' experience of dive bombing at all. Some pilots had very little time on the Skua and both squadron commanders were sure the raid would lead to heavy casualties and many of the crews felt they might not return. The atmosphere in the squadrons the evening before the raid was understandably subdued.

The beginning of the raid was not auspicious. Captain Partridge, in command of 800 Squadron, nearly lost his armourer overboard – Ron Jordan, the armourer in question said: 'I used to have to stand by Captain Partridge's plane alongside Lieutenant Bostock [Partridge's observer] in case he needed any last minute alterations. He asked me to get two aluminium sea markers. Meanwhile Captain Partridge was doing his engine tests and I don't think he knew I was back. He revved the engine right up, and the blast from the propeller took me horizontal! I thought I was

going to go over the back'. Fortunately for Jordan, his grip on the Skua was sufficient. The sea-markers were usually quite innocuous devices, used to aid navigation. 'It was a big tin filled with aluminium filings,' explained Jordan. 'When it hit the sea it would spread out with a big radius, then when you saw it on the way back you knew you were in the right place to change course. You could rely on the marker staying in more or less the same place.' However, Jordan harbours suspicions that Bostock might have had quite another use in mind for the markers – one which hints at just how desperate the men were feeling. Jordan suggested Bostock may have asked for the sea markers 'to let them out into his slipstream to blanket the windscreen of the Me109 sitting on his tail!'

Five minutes after midnight on 13th June, the fifteen Skuas took off from *Ark Royal* and climbed to 12,000ft. It was full daylight by the time the squadrons took off as there was no darkness at this time of year, only a brief 'dusk' at the nadir before the sun began to rise again. The 15 Skuas crossed the coast in brilliant sunshine, fifty miles from the target. 'It was going to be the sort of day when flying would be sheer bliss, except that the one thing we all wanted was a nice overcast day,' said Casson. 'The enemy would see us coming with all the time they wanted to get ready for us'. The Blenheims from 254 Squadron failed to arrive on time due to an error in calculating the range, and with time running short 800 and 803 Squadrons left the rendezvous and headed for Trondheim. Though this was a blow, the Blenheim MkIVF was barely faster than the Skuas and in other operations over Norway the fighter Blenheims proved vulnerable to German fighters.

In the van was 803 Squadron, led by Casson, in three flights of three. Following was 800 Squadron, led by Partridge, in two flights of three. The two squadrons divided to make separate attacks, and entered a shallow dive to pick up speed over the target. The RAF Beauforts (of which only four reached the target) had arrived at the appointed time, but the planning of the raid was flawed in this respect. The raid on Vaernes was over by the time the Skuas arrived – minimal damage had been inflicted and fighters which were airborne to defend the airfield were perfectly placed to descend on the dive bombers even before they reached Trondheim. 'We had flown over an island which was about 70 or 80 miles offshore so we were seen clearly by the Germans and they had plenty of warning,' said Derek Martin, who was flying in the final section of 800 Squadron. 'The support there was supposed to be from RAF Blenheims and Beauforts never worked

out and we ran into a hell of a shower of fighters – Me109s and 110s. The flight I was in was Tail End Charlie and they picked us off one by one. We were still around ten miles from the target.’ Martin’s flight had been ‘bounced’ by Bf110s approaching unseen from the dark flanks of the mountains, and before they knew what had hit them they were in serious trouble.

As the Skuas barrelled towards the harbour at 240kts the planned attack was already coming apart at the seams. Martin’s section was all shot down. Midshipman Gallagher and Petty Officer Crawford were both killed after Messerschmitt Bf109s repeatedly attacked the Skua and it crashed into trees near Tempelet, Hermstadheia. ‘Gallagher’s aircraft was found with the pilot, gunner and bomb all lying beside a wrecked aircraft so he didn’t have a chance,’ said Martin. Martin bailed out when enemy bullets entering under his seat destroyed his control column. ‘I immediately lost control of wing and tail plane surfaces and the aircraft went into an increasingly steep dive. With incendiary smoke coming from under my seat I shouted to “jump” three times into the Gosport tube to Tremeer, my TAG, before opening the hood – I then abandoned the aircraft.’ Sadly, Leading Airman W.J. Tremeer had been killed by the gunfire that took away the controls.

Lieutenant ‘Ned’ Finch-Noyes was next, set upon by two Bf110s in a ‘scissor’ attack. The pilot was killed by a volley of bullets from an attacking fighter. Cunningham had time to bail out but was lucky to escape the wrecked aircraft. Monk’s TAG, Petty Officer ‘Dickie’ Rolph, saw Cunningham ensnared in the Skua’s W/T aerial as he tried to bail out (recounted after Dickie’s death by his brother, Denis, to whom the TAG had described the events of 13th June) before freeing himself, only to discover his parachute was damaged by gunfire. Fortunately the parachute stayed intact long enough for Cunningham to make a safe landing.

Monk and Rolph did not escape the attentions of the fighters for long. A Messerschmitt Bf110 attacked their aircraft and, recognising that there was no hope of making the target, Monk jettisoned the bomb and played the Skua pilot’s trump card. ‘P.O. Monk... put down flaps and turned sharply to port,’ says Monk’s combat report after the attack. The Messerschmitt attacked six times and with each attack the Messerschmitt was made to overshoot and Monk was even able to get on its tail and fire off a few bursts. This was no mistake. ‘Dickie and Monk were both Petty Officers and messed together,’ said Denis. ‘Dickie and Monk spent

a lot of time together and they were always discussing what to do if they were attacked.’ When the Bf110 came in to attack, Rolph would give the signal and Monk would use the throttle and flaps to ‘park’ the aircraft and make the Messerschmitt zoom past. Eventually the Bf110, after making its final attack from a distant 1,000 yards, broke off – ‘I suppose he must have run out of ammunition,’ said Denis. Rolph and Monk comprised the only all-Petty Officer crew in the squadron. While other crews were made up entirely of officers, several were made up of officers and enlisted men, and the traditional aloofness between the ranks must have made communication more problematic.

Of 800 Squadron, only the aircraft of Captain Partridge and his Observer Lieutenant Bostock, and Lieutenant Spurway and TAG Petty Officer Hart made it to the target area. ‘Intense anti-aircraft fire of every type was encountered, both from ships and shore,’ said Spurway in his combat report. The fliers were dismayed to see that in addition to the battle cruiser, the heavy cruiser *Admiral Hipper*, another cruiser and a destroyer were anchored in the fjord, each firing a fierce volume of flak. ‘The tracer bullets commenced rising well before we were within striking distance,’ remarked Cecil Filmer who was flying with 803 Squadron. ‘Unexpectedly, there was a grim beauty about them’.

803 Squadron in the van had so far escaped the fighters which had attacked the rear of 800 Squadron’s formation, but not for long. Filmer noted: ‘the trouble was we had to cope with the enemy fighters, 110s and 109s. We were attacked as we were coming in; they were waiting for us when we got there.’

Casson led his squadron into the dive from 5,000ft from the direction of the battlecruiser’s bow, into a storm of AA fire. ‘For a moment I thought I was seeing “liver spots”’, said Casson. ‘It was tracer flak. It was exactly like flying in a hailstorm with the projectiles flying up’. Lieutenant Gibson in the rear of the formation took his flight in the opposite direction. ‘It was not worth while to expose my aircraft to an extra five minutes of anti-aircraft fire’ he said, ‘we attacked from stern to bow being in a perfect position to do so’. Despite the flak and fighters, the pilots were still determined to get their bombs on target. ‘I used the same tactics as when attacking the *Königsberg*,’ said Lieutenant Filmer, ‘so might have hit. I went in at the same angle, 60° which suited me very well. There were reports of only one bomb hitting and that was a dud. I hope mine hit, even if it was a dud’. The squadron was even

attacked by fighters in the midst of the flak as they dive-bombed. 'I myself was subjected to a poor spirited attack by the Me 109s when in my dive,' said Gibson, adding 'one Me 109 was driven off by the Skua it attacked'.

Meanwhile, Partridge led the remaining two aircraft of 800 Squadron round to the stern of the ship and into a steep dive from 7,000ft, giving them the best chance of an accurate bomb run but making them agonisingly open to fighter attack. Lieutenant Spurway, following Partridge down, saw one bomb near-miss off the starboard quarter and then a bright flash just aft of the funnel.

The squadrons had been splintered by the repeated attacks and it was now every man for himself. Some of the Skuas escaped by continuing their dives to sea level and sneaking away along the coast.

Meanwhile, Finch-Noyes' TAG Petty Officer Cunningham had been taken prisoner. During interrogation it was put to him that he had flown from *Ark Royal*. He is reported to have answered 'don't be bloody silly, you sank the *Ark Royal* last year, don't you remember?', referring to the extensive German propaganda claiming that German bombers had sunk the carrier earlier in the war.

Casson and Fanshawe were forced down near Kjora, Geitastrand, after a spirited but fruitless attempt to escape from a Messerschmitt Bf109. 'There is an aerobatic manoeuvre called a "flick roll"', said Casson. 'On that morning I did it accidentally by turning too tightly and we were at 300 feet... I heard a plaintive bleat from the back cockpit, "Jesus Christ!"' Casson put his damaged Skua down in the fjord and he and Fanshawe were taken prisoner.



Skua 2955 flown by Sub Lt Bartlett and NA Richards
after force-landing – courtesy of Oyvind Lamo

Partridge and Bostock were caught by two Bf109s and crashed in the sea by the island of Bessholmen. They survived several attacks, but against two aircraft there was little they could do, and when the Bf109s attacked simultaneously from astern and abeam, Bostock was killed and Partridge bailed out after suffering burns. Sub-Lieutenant R.E. Bartlett and Naval Airman L.G. Richards force landed after a terrifying, barely-controlled flight from the target. 'We went down and down and down,' said TAG Lloyd Richards, unbeknownst to whom at the time, Bartlett had been wounded. 'I think he was nearly gone,' said Richards. 'He blacked out and when he came to we were flying low over trees, very low. The aircraft was all over the place. We shouldn't have survived that'. In the confusion, or in trying to avoid fighters, Bartlett had flown miles south of Trondheim, away from *Ark Royal*. Filmer and McKee were pursued by two Messerschmitt Bf110s. 'All I could immediately think of was to try to deceive them by putting on port rudder and keeping the wings level to cause us to skid as we flew and so upset their aim,' he recalled. Then McKee was hit and for Filmer, enough was enough. He put the Skua down on the sea close to Frøsetskjæret, where both men were captured. Harris and Stevenson, in Skua L2992, crashed into the hillside above the farm at Kjøra. The two aircrew were brought to Orkdal hospital, but Harris died just after arrival. Naval Airman Stevenson died at the hospital a year later on 31st May 1941.

As the seven remaining aircraft made their way back to *Ark Royal*, some pilots asked for a D/F bearing from the carrier. This was unusual as a broadcast from the ship could give away its position to the enemy – in fact the aircrews had been told that they could radio their call-sign once for a D/F bearing, quite a concession particularly so soon after the loss of *Glorious*. However, as the Skuas returned, *Ark Royal* did not break radio silence and the crews were forced to navigate back by taking a fix using the ship's revolving beacon, which was quite a feat of navigation for a TAG not trained in formal navigation. Just after the surviving aircraft made it back to *Ark Royal* the carrier sailed into a patch of fog, meaning any last stragglers would have had no chance of finding the ship. A report to the Cabinet largely blamed the fog for the heavy losses. In fact, there were no more Skuas to find their way back.

The raid had caused no damage to *Scharnhorst*. Due to the withering defensive fire the bombing had not been nearly as accurate as on previous raids and, while one bomb did hit the warship amidships, it failed to explode. Contemporary RAF documents suggested that to penetrate the *Scharnhorst's* horizontal armour, a 2,000lb bomb dropped at 6,800ft would be the minimum necessary.

It would not have been impossible for a properly planned and executed raid by Skuas to have done some damage to the ship's upperworks and kept it in port for longer – a tactic used in Operation Tungsten in 1944, the successful strike against the *Tirpitz*. However, there were too few Skuas with too little cover facing too much opposition and with inadequate coordination. At best the raid was a waste of men and aircraft and at worst it could be argued that dive bombing in the RN took years to fully recover. As Partridge and Casson had been captured, Lieutenant R.M. Smeeton and Lieutenant J.M. Bruen took over 800 and 803 Squadrons respectively. The loss of two squadron commanders, particularly the experienced and battle-hardened Partridge, was a savage blow to the Fleet Air Arm. 'That raid was the ultimate blunder of the Norwegian campaign,' said Derek Martin. 'The penultimate and far more catastrophic blunder was the detaching of *Glorious* and the two destroyers from the fleet to proceed independently to Scapa for a non-operational reason: the sinking of those ships with the loss of over 1,500 lives – and yet to be fully explained – was the cause of the Trondheim disaster.' Few would disagree.