

## **Operation Judgement – The Taranto Raid**

by

**Philip E. West**

*A Tribute to all Swordfish Air and Ground Crew*

**Philip E. West** is recognised as one of the world's finest aviation artists. Collectors of his original oil paintings span the globe, many waiting patiently for his next breathtaking canvas to appear. Self taught, Philip has won many accolades for his paintings, not the least of which was the prestigious Duane Whitney Award for Excellence at the 1997 American Society of Aviation Artists Exhibition.

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**Sub Lieut (A) Stanley T. Brand RNVR (Pilot).** Although in a reserved occupation volunteered on his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday to train as pilot in the Fleet Air Arm. He flew open cockpit biplane Swordfish aircraft from Merchant Aircraft Carriers called "Macships". These were 8000 ton grain-ships or oil tankers fitted with a flight deck, carrying their usual cargo and manned by a Merchant Navy Master and crew. They sailed in convoy back and forth across the North Atlantic in all the extreme weather conditions experienced on that ocean. The oil tankers lacked a hangar, so maintenance was carried out on open deck exposing the aircraft, ground crew and aircrew to the fury of the sea, ice and gales. By keeping U-boats submerged instead of allowing them free range on the surface, in 24 months only two merchant ships were sunk by the enemy in convoys protected by Macships. This was in spite of there being greater numbers and more efficient U-boats at sea in this period than at the time of our greatest losses in the Battle of the Atlantic.

**Lieut (A) N C Gillis RNVR (Pilot)** volunteered for training as a pilot in the Fleet Air Arm in 1940. After training he was posted to join HMS Indomitable and sent to the Far East. The posting did not materialise and after some months in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) and Nairobi, Kenya, joined 810 Squadron in HMS Illustrious. 810 was a Swordfish squadron and remained so until HMS Illustrious returned to UK.

The squadron then reformed with Barracuda aircraft and rejoined the Illustrious. After a short spell with the Home Fleet the Illustrious was despatched to serve with the Mediterranean Fleet, subsequently returning to the Home Fleet. 810 Squadron

served in the ship during this time and was retained in the ship when she returned to the Eastern Fleet and was actively engaged in the Burma campaign. During joint operations with the US Carrier Saratoga Lt Gillis was mentioned in Despatches during the operation at Sabang in Malaysia.

Having overspent his time in an operational squadron he was returned to UK where he served as Dive-Bombing Instructor at RNAS Crail, then converted onto twin-engine aircraft and flew in a Mosquito squadron until demobilised in 1946.

**CPO (A) Donald A Bunce CGM (TAG -Telegraphist Air Gunner)** joined FAA in January 1940 and trained as a Telegraphist Air Gunner (TAG). Don was drafted to 825 Squadron and then transferred to HMS Victorious at Scapa Flow, joining HMS Hood and HMS Prince of Wales.

Torpedo attack on “Bismarck” same day as HMS Hood was sunk. His Squadron later transferred to HMS Ark Royal for Malta Convoys etc until she was torpedoed and sunk.

The Squadron reformed at Lee-on-Solent and sent to Manston, Kent where they prepared for the night attack on “Scharnhorst”, “Gneisehau” and “Prinz Eugen”. This turned into a daylight raid on 12<sup>th</sup> February 1942 and all the aircraft were shot down, with only five survivors – four officers and CPO Bunce himself.

From then on Don transferred to training squadrons. He was demobbed in January 1946.

**Lt. Cdr. Edgar Lee DSO (Telegraphist Air Gunner)** joined the Royal Navy in May 1940, two days before his nineteenth birthday and after initial training began a flying course in Trinidad in September 1940.

He qualified as Observer in April 1941 and was commissioned as Midshipman (A) RNVR. Promoted to Sub-Lieutenant (A) RNVR at the age of 20 in May 1941 and appointed to 825 Squadron in HMS Ark Royal in June 1941, flying operationally with 825 Squadron in Swordfish TBR until the Ark Royal was sunk in November 1941.

Edgar returned to England and the squadron reformed at Lee-on-Solent – again in Swordfish in late December 1941, still under the command of Lt Commander E Esmonde DSO, RN. He took part in the Channel attack on the Scharnhorst and Gneisenau on 12<sup>th</sup> February 1942. All the aircraft were shot down, with only five survivors; Edgar and his pilot were rescued from a dingy by MTB.

He joined the new 825 Squadron in March 1942 and flew in that squadron until July 1942, then sent for rest-posting to RNAS St Merryn on Flying Control duties.

At the end of February 1943, Edgar was seconded to 106 Squadron RAF Bomber Command, flying in Lancaster, under the command of Wing Commander Guy Gibson, DSO, DFC, RAF. Six Naval Observers seconded to 5 Group Bomber Command and three returned to naval duties the end of July 1943. He was promoted to Lieutenant (A) RNVR in November 1943.

Instructing in Canada, August 1943 to November 1944 and returned to England to qualify as a Signals Officer in August 1945. From Staff Signals Officer to Rear Admiral reserve Aircraft from September 1945 until demob in July 1947.

Edgar rejoined the Reserve in 1956 and was promoted to Lt Cdr. RNR in November 1961 serving in most NATO and National exercises until 1981 and as Acting Commander RNR in exercises from 1969 until retirement at 60 in 1981.

**Captain Alan William Frank Sutton CBE (Military) DSC and Bar, RN (Observer)** was born 21<sup>st</sup> May 1912 and educated at Christ's Hospital, Horsham. He joined the navy as a Special Entry Cadet in 1930 and trained for one year in HMS Erebus, Devonport and then served in Battle Cruisers, Cruisers and Destroyers, before specialising as Naval Air Observer in 1937. He served in Swordfish Squadrons in Glorious and Illustrious and took part in the raid on Taranto, Italy on 11<sup>th</sup> November 1940 being in the leading aircraft of the last sub-flight of Torpedo attack aircraft, piloted by Lieut FMA Torrens- Spence. Their target was the fine modern battleship Littorio and Captain Sutton was awarded the DSC for this action.

On 10<sup>th</sup> January 1941, Illustrious was badly damaged by German dive-bombers and went to the United States for repairs. Her aircrew remained ashore in Egypt and after a time Captain Sutton became the Senior Observer of 815 Squadron, operating from Greece against Italian shipping in the Adriatic in March and April 1941. The Germans invaded Greece in April 1941 and Alan was moved to Crete and served at the airfield at Maleme, Crete was in turn invaded by the Germans and Maleme was captured by airborne forces on 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> May when Alan found himself the Senior surviving officer from the airfield and formed a unit of Naval and RAF personnel who fought on the left flank of the New Zealand Brigade which was trying to retake the airfield.

They were defeated and Alan escaped with a group of British, New Zealand and Australian personnel over the White Mountains to the south coast. Alan reached Sphakia where the defeated allied forces were being evacuated by the navy and became the beachmaster for the evacuation. He was awarded a Bar to the DSC he had received for Taranto for his actions in Crete. He was also twice mentioned in dispatches for operations in the Mediterranean in 1940/41.

Subsequent to these operations in the Med, Alan was Staff Officer (Air) to the Admiral commanding the Eastern task force (Algiers) in operation Torch, the taking of Algeria and Morocco from the Vichy French in 1942. Then he was Air Staff Officer of the Escort Carrier Ravager in the Battle of the Atlantic, and finished the war in 1944/45 as an Acting Commander, being the operations officer of the Fleet Carrier, Implacable, operating against the Germans in Norway and against the Japanese in the Pacific. He was awarded nine months additional seniority for Meritorious War Service.

Captain Sutton's post war career was as Deputy Director of the joint Anti-submarine School (RN and RAF) Londonderry, 1947-49; Commanding Officer of the Frigate Bigbury Bay 1951-53, including a spell in the Antarctic and as guard ship in the Falkland Islands; Officer in Charge, Observer and Air Signal School, RNAS Culdrose 1954-56. He was promoted to Captain and became the Chief Staff Officer of the

Aircraft Carrier Squadron 1956-58, including operation Musketeer, the action to retake the Suez Canal. He was Captain (Air) Mediterranean and Commanding Officer RNAS Halpar, Malta 1960-62 and finished his Naval career as Director of the Royal Naval Staff College, Greenwich 1962-65. He was Naval ADC to the Queen 1964.

On retirement from the Navy Alan was awarded the CBE (Military) for Distinguished Service. He was a graduate of the Naval Staff College, Joint Services Staff College and Imperial Defence College.

**Petty Officer Leslie Sayer MBE, DSM (Telegraphist Air Gunner)** joined the Navy as Signal Boy in 1931. From 1933 – 1935 he saw service on HMS Exeter (Home Fleet) and HMS Cape Town – two years on China Station. In 1937 Les transferred to the Fleet Air Arm as Telegraphist Air Gunner (TAG) and after training he served in 811 Swordfish Squadron on HMS Furious. In 1941 he joined 825 Squadron on HMS Victorious flying Swordfish, and with Lt. Gick attacked the Bismarck - obtaining a hit, for which Les was awarded the DSM. Later in 1941 he joined HMS Ark Royal on Mediterranean Convoys before she was sunk.

825 Squadron was reformed in 1942 to carry out mine-laying duties in channel ports and to escort HMS Avenger to Russian Convoy PQ18. In 1944 Les commissioned the new light fleet carrier HMS Glory in Belfast as the ship's Chief TAG, before sailing to join the Pacific Fleet. He retired from the navy in 1945 to join British European Airways as a Flight Radio Officer. In 1946 he helped to form the Telegraphist Air Gunners Association, whereupon he was elected Chairman, later to become President and subsequently awarded an MBE.

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