



At a reunion of surviving Blackburn Skua pilots and aircrew at the Fleet Air Arm Museum in October 2006, further information was gathered on the disastrous 1940 raid on the *Scharnhorst* at Trondheim. To coincide with the recent discovery in Norway of the lead Skua on the raid, **MATTHEW WILLIS** and **SIMON PARTRIDGE** reassess the whole sad episode, from the flawed planning stages to the loss of eight of the 15 attacking aircraft

# Into the Fjord of

**ABOVE** To coincide with the reunion of veteran *HMS Ark Royal*/Skua pilots and aircrew at the Fleet Air Arm Museum in Yeovilton on October 27, 2006, artist PHILIP WEST painted this dramatic portrait — appropriately named *Supreme Courage* — of a Skua leaving *Ark Royal* in the typically grey North Sea during 1940. For more details about Philip's artwork and SWA Fine Art, see the panel on the opposite page.

**T**HE BLACKBURN SKUA was the Royal Navy's first monoplane, its first purpose-built dive-bomber and, in many ways, a thoroughly modern aircraft. An all-metal two-seater with a navigator/telegraphist/gunner facing rearwards, it was powered by a Bristol Perseus air-cooled radial engine. Sadly it suffered from "too many cooks" during the drafting of its specification and in its design. Consequently too much was asked of it, and its performance as a fighter was sorely lacking. Expected to provide fleet defence in addition to performing its strike role, the Skua was flown by fighter squadrons of the Fleet Air Arm (FAA), Nos 800 and 803 Naval Air Squadrons (NAS) being the first to convert to the type in 1938.

As June 12, 1940, drew to a close under a cloudless sky, 15 Skuas were ranged on the deck of *HMS Ark Royal* off the coast of Norway. The sun hovered just above the horizon, even at mid-

night. "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," recalls Lt-Cdr John Casson, who was to lead 800 and 803 NAS in an attack on the German battle-cruiser *Scharnhorst* in Trondheim Fjord.

Within hours eight Skuas had been lost, with little damage to the cruiser. Both squadron COs and seven aircrew were prisoners of war for the duration. Seven were dead. It had been five days since the *Scharnhorst* had sunk the aircraft carrier *HMS Glorious*, and in that short period Britain had lost an aircraft carrier and its escorts, a squadron each of Hawker Hurricanes, Gloster Gladiators and Fairey Swordfish and more than 1,500 men. Now two front-line Skua squadrons had been decimated. How had the raid gone so wrong; and why had it happened at all?

Early in the morning of Saturday, June 8, a signal was sent from *Glorious* to *Ark Royal* that set



# Death



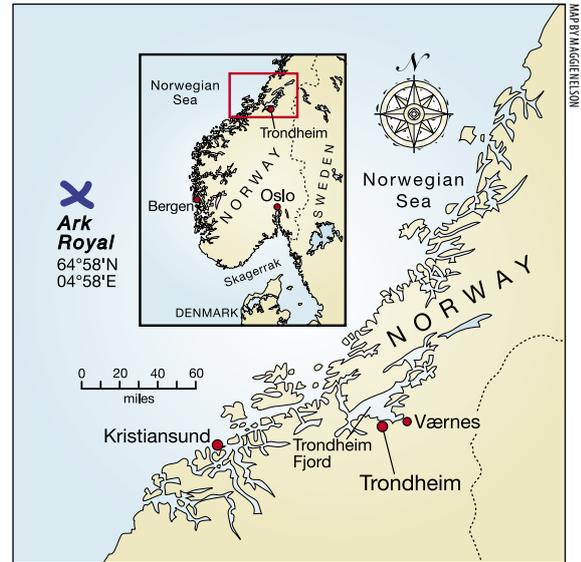
the train of events in motion. *Glorious* requested permission to detach from the task force covering the evacuation from Narvik, "in order to avoid delay over outstanding courts martial". The story of how *Glorious* was caught by the formidable German battlecruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* as it steamed towards the naval base at Scapa Flow is well documented. Aboard *Glorious* were eight RAF Hurricanes and ten RAF Gladiators which had skilfully landed-on the previous day from their bases in Norway.

News of the sinking began to reach the Admiralty on Sunday, June 9, and had reached the War Cabinet by Monday. The warships still covering the evacuation were put on alert and warned to prepare for a retaliatory strike. Coastal Command began air reconnaissance of Norwegian ports, and this revealed the presence of the German vessels sheltering in Trondheim fjord, triggering another fateful series of decisions.

The Admiralty prepared an initial plan to deal with the battlecruisers, calling for 21 Swordfish, escorted by 22 Skuas, to carry out a joint dive-bombing and torpedo attack.

However, Winston Churchill and the Chief of the Air Staff had "grave doubts as to the wisdom of the proposed operation by the FAA", as neither the Swordfish nor the Skuas could match the German aircraft based near Trondheim. They observed that the proposed strike would undoubtedly be a "gallant operation", but might prove far too costly. The Swordfish and Skuas had been pitted against the Luftwaffe over Norway since April, and their shortcomings against modern fighters had been painfully obvious. The Cabinet asked the Admiralty to consider alternatives, but there is no further record of plans to deal with the German ships at Trondheim having been discussed by the Cabinet, by now pre-occupied with the impending fall of France.

■ SWA FINE Art, based in Bath, Somerset, is one of the UK's leading aviation art publishers, and represents a number of the country's finest aviation artists, including Philip West, whose magnificent *Supreme Courage* leads this feature. For more information about autographed proofs and remarques of the painting above or other SWA artists, including Stephen Brown and Simon Atack, contact Sean Whyte on 01225 444929, or visit the website at [www.swafineart.com](http://www.swafineart.com)



“As the Skuas headed towards the harbour in a shallow dive at 240kt,

**ABOVE** Nine Blackburn Skuas of 803 Naval Air Squadron (NAS) line up in front of six Skuas of 800 NAS on the deck of HMS Ark Royal on June 12, 1940. The Skuas, hopelessly outclassed against what the Luftwaffe had to offer in resistance, were each loaded with a 500lb semi-armour-piercing bomb, and took off shortly before midnight.

The implication to the Admiralty was to deal with the battle cruisers quickly, but not to engage in anything too risky. It seems that their Lordships took the expedient course of reducing the number of aeroplanes and focused on the Skuas, although there is evidence that Naval Air Division (NAD), the experts in these matters, were not fully consulted. Captain “Hank” Rotherham, a senior FAA observer in NAD during the Norwegian campaign, claims it was bypassed, and that the decision came from “the hierarchy”. Whatever the case, by the morning of Wednesday, June 12, an order had reached Ark Royal that the two Skua squadrons were to attack the German ships in Trondheim harbour.

The COs of 803 and 800 Sqns, Lt-Cdr John Casson and Capt Dick “Birdie” Partridge DSO, were summoned (separately, which was unusual) by Commander Flying to see the Admiral of Aircraft Carriers, Vice-Admiral Wells, who asked their opinions. Partridge’s first thought was: “Whoever thought this one up must be absolutely bonkers. I’m not going, and neither are any of my squadron!” Needless to say, his answer was rather more diplomatic. Casson told Wells that he thought the chances of survival were only fifty-fifty, and that was verging on the optimistic.

Both COs pointed out that, unlike the sinking by Skuas of the cruiser Königsberg at Bergen in April, there would be no element of surprise. There was no darkness at this time of year, there would be no cloud cover, and Trondheim lay 45 miles inland. Partridge suggested that, unless there was fighter cover or a diversionary attack on nearby Værnes Airfield, where there were some 85 Luftwaffe fighters, there would be

“unacceptable losses”. Wells informed Partridge that RAF Coastal Command had already been called upon to provide Bristol Beauforts to bomb Værnes and Bristol Blenheim long-range fighters to escort the Skuas. The COs were not reassured by this “support”, but had said all they could short of provoking further courts martial.

Unfortunately, the raid started going wrong almost from the outset. The Blenheims of 254 Sqn arrived late owing to an error in calculating the range. With time running short, Nos 800 and 803 Sqns left the rendezvous near Ark Royal and headed for Trondheim alone. In the van was 803 Sqn, led by Casson, in three flights of three, followed by 800 Sqn in two flights of three.

The two squadrons crossed the coast at 10,000ft, right over a lighthouse which the crews felt sure would betray their presence. As they approached Trondheim they entered a shallow dive to gain speed over the target. In a second blow the Beauforts arrived too early, and the Værnes raid was over by the time the Skuas arrived. Only four of the seven Beauforts reached the target, and minimal damage was inflicted. The warning thus provided meant that German fighters were perfectly placed to pounce on the slow, bomb-laden Skuas.

As the Skuas headed towards the harbour in a shallow dive at 240kt (280 m.p.h.), 800 Sqn’s rear-most section was bounced by Messerschmitt Bf 110s, attacking from the cover of the mountains flanking the fjord. Midshipman Gallagher and Petty Officer (PO) Crawford were both killed when Bf 110s repeatedly attacked their Skua and it crashed in a wood. The aircraft was found with its bomb lying beside the wreck.

**BELOW** The battle cruiser Scharnhorst at anchor. The 31,500-ton vessel had recently sunk the aircraft carrier HMS Glorious and put into Trondheim to repair damage caused by a torpedo fired by one of Glorious’s escorting destroyers. The battle cruiser was armed with nine 11in guns and protected by 6in vertical armour and heavy anti-aircraft armament.

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Midshipman Derek Martin's Skua was also crippled in this initial attack, its controls being shot away. After desperately calling his air gunner, Leading Airman W.J. Tremeer, to bale out, Martin just managed to abandon the aircraft as it dived uncontrollably. Tremeer was probably already dead; Martin was picked up by a German air-sea rescue seaplane.

Lieutenant "Ned" Finch-Noyes, flying the leading aircraft in the Flight, was killed instantly by a burst of fire from an attacking fighter. His air gunner, PO Cunningham, later recalled seeing bullets riddling the wing and fuselage, stitching their way to the front cockpit. He baled out, becoming ensnared in the doomed Skua's radio aerial before freeing himself.

Petty Officers Monk and Rolph, the gunner, in the leading 800 Sqn Flight, saw the three aircraft despatched clinically by the fighters and quickly realised they would be next. A Bf 110 attacked their aircraft and, facing almost certain destruction, Monk jettisoned his bomb and played the Skua pilot's trump card.

The Skua had powerful airbrakes under the wings, and lowering them in level flight caused a sudden drop in speed and made the aircraft jump upwards, usually enough to throw a pursuing fighter pilot's aim. The Messerschmitt attacked six times, and was made to overshoot each time. Monk even got on its tail and fired a few bursts. When the Bf 110 came in to attack, Rolph would give the signal and Monk would use the throttle and flaps to "park" the aircraft and make the attacker zoom past. Eventually the Bf 110 pilot, after making his final attack from a distant 1,000yd, broke off.

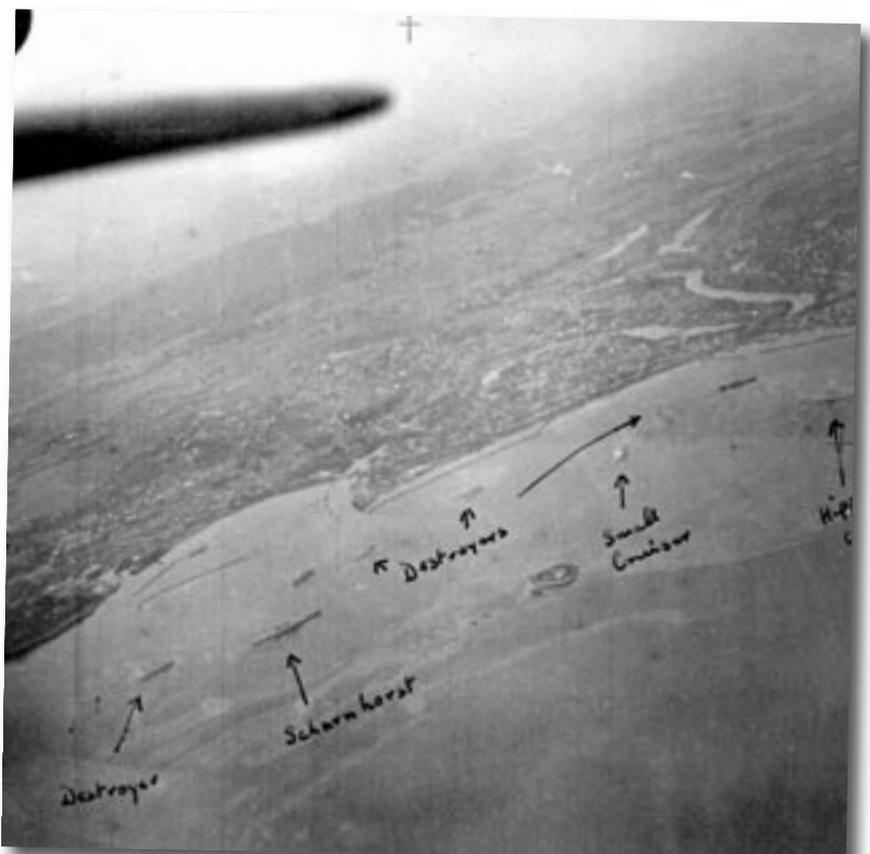
Meanwhile, the two remaining 800 Sqn aircraft, crewed by Capt Partridge and his observer, Lt Bostock, and Lt Spurway and telegraphist air gunner (TAG) PO Hart, were approaching the target. The *Gneisenau* had sailed, but the *Scharnhorst*, damaged in the attack on *Glorious*, was still under repair. Also present was the heavy cruiser *Admiral Hipper* and a number of destroyers and auxiliaries. The ships and shore batteries were pumping out a fierce volume of flak, making the attack even more daunting.

In the van, 803 Sqn had so far escaped the fighters that had attacked the rear of 800 Sqn's formation, but not for long. Casson led his squadron round to the east, then turned into a dive from 5,000ft from the direction of the *Scharnhorst's* bow. Lieutenant Gibson, in the rear of the formation, did not follow him, judging it would expose his Flight to the flak and fighters for too long. Gibson, first in, was attacked by a fighter on his way down but held on long enough to release his bomb. Partridge, also narrowly evading a fighter, followed Gibson with the remaining two aircraft of 800 Sqn to the ship's stern, whereupon they entered a steep dive from 7,000ft. Spurway, following Partridge

**ABOVE LEFT** With a maximum level speed of 225 m.p.h., the Skua was virtually obsolete by the beginning of the Second World War.

**ABOVE** A number of Messerschmitt Bf 110 long-range fighters were already in the air after Coastal Command's earlier bombing raid.

**BELOW** The warships at Trondheim, photographed by PO Hart during the attack. Note also the presence of the heavy cruiser *Admiral Hipper*.





**ABOVE** The Skua of Sub-Lieutenant Bartlett and Naval Airman Richards where it crashed south of Trondheim. Bartlett was wounded and barely managed to put the Skua, badly shot up and on fire, down under control. He and Richards became prisoners of war for the duration.

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**RIGHT** Another photograph of Bartlett and Richards's Skua, this time showing the aircraft burning where it forced-landed. Fire was always a risk in the Skua because of the aircraft's non-self-sealing fuel tanks. Eight of the 15 crews were shot down, including both squadron commanders.

down, saw one bomb just miss off the starboard quarter, and then saw a bright flash just aft of the funnel. Casson now took the rest of his squadron into the attack, but by the time the 803 Sqn aircraft had dropped their bombs the Flights had been broken up 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. Others tried to cling to patches of mist. By contrast, South African Sub-Lt Brokensha circled the area twice to see if any of the other Skuas were in need of assistance! Miraculously he was not attacked and returned safely to *HMS Ark Royal*.

Most were not so lucky. Having fought their way to the target, the Skuas were now required to fight their way out again. Casson and Fanshawe were pursued relentlessly by a Messerschmitt Bf 109, despite Casson's spirited attempts to throw the fighter off. Regulations were not uppermost in Casson's mind at this time, and in his efforts to shake off his attacker he pulled off a high-risk flick roll at 300ft. However, the Luftwaffe pilot was no beginner, and with his main petrol tank holed and Fanshawe wounded, Casson put the damaged Skua down in the fjord near Kjøra. Lieutenant Harris and Naval Airman Stevenson were shot down into a forest just above them, and terribly injured. To Casson's distress they met on a motorboat taking them to the hospital at Orkanger, where Harris died almost immediately and Stevenson

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succumbed more than a year later. Casson and Fanshawe were taken prisoner.

Partridge and Bostock thought they had escaped, but almost ran headlong into a small seaplane. Partridge got in a quick burst, which he instantly regretted, as the seaplane took evasive action and fired warning flares. They were soon set upon by two Bf 109s and survived several attacks by using the "dive brake" tactic, but against two aircraft this could only buy time. Partridge was forced to bale out, his face being badly burnt as the front petrol tank went up. Two fishermen bravely rescued him, but Bostock apparently plunged into a fjord with the stricken aircraft.

Sub-Lieutenant Bartlett and his gunner, Naval Airman Richards, flopped into a field south of Trondheim after a terrifying, barely-controlled flight. Bartlett, badly wounded, had been passing in and out of consciousness, while Richards, his parachute unharnessed, was thrown around in the Skua's sparse rear cockpit as the aircraft climbed and dived wildly. A local quisling armed with a pistol took them captive.

Lieutenant Cecil Filmer and his gunner, Anthony McKee, were pursued by two Messerschmitts away from the target. Filmer threw the Skua into skidding turns to try and throw the fighter off, but to no avail. Then McKee was hit and for Filmer, who had lost one air gunner earlier in the Norwegian campaign, enough was enough. He put the Skua down on the sea close to Frøsetskjæret, and both men were captured.





As the seven remaining aircraft made their way back to *Ark Royal*, some pilots requested a direction-finding (D/F) bearing from the carrier. Unusually, the aircrews had been told that they could radio their callsigns 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. This was quite a feat of navigation for TAGs not trained in such matters. The aircraft of Monk and Spurway were the first two back, followed by the remaining five 803 Sqn aircraft. Just after the surviving aircraft made it back to *Ark Royal* the carrier sailed into a patch of dense fog, negating the chance of any last stragglers finding the ship. In fact there were none.

The raid caused no damage to the *Scharnhorst*. Because of the fighters and the withering defensive fire the bombing was not nearly as accurate as on previous raids. While one bomb did hit the warship amidships, it failed to explode. Contemporary RAF documents reveal that the minimum necessary to penetrate the *Scharnhorst's* 6in horizontal armour was a 2,000lb bomb dropped from 6,800ft, and note that 500lb semi-armour-piercing (SAP) bombs could not penetrate 6in armour from any height.

Almost immediately after the raid the process of explaining the disaster in a palatable way began. The report to the War Cabinet attributed



the heavy losses to the fog, although it soon became clear that none of the aircraft that escaped Trondheim failed to find *Ark Royal*. Wells wrote a report justifying the way the raid had been handled, but some of the information was inaccurate. He claimed that the 15 crews had been handpicked because they had experience of dive-bombing in the Skua. In fact several of the pilots later revealed that they had no dive-bombing experience at all, and even Casson noted that he had "little or no" experience. Some had only a few hours on the Skua, and little combat experience. The NAD retrospectively weighed in, claiming that one or two hits were the maximum that could be expected under the circumstances, with losses of 60 per cent.

It is difficult to see how any success at all could have been expected. None of those who ordered the raid could have thought that 500lb SAP bombs would have inflicted any serious damage on the *Scharnhorst*. In his memoirs Lt Gibson (later vice-admiral) likened the attack to the Charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava, with the proviso: "... had they been attacked by cavalry on their flanks during their approach to the guns because, as well as diving straight at the guns, we were being picked off by fighters on the way down". With War Cabinet minds concentrating on France, the Sea Lords had indeed ordered a "gallant gesture", but it was not they who paid the price on what later became known on the *Ark* as "Black Thursday".

**ABOVE LEFT** The view of Trondheim from the rear of the Skua of Lt Spurway and PO Hart as they make good their escape after the raid. The smoke on the shore was caused by the unsuccessful diversionary raid by RAF Bristol Beauforts.

**ABOVE** Filmer and McKee's Skua shortly after its recovery from the fjord in which Filmer ditched. Designed to be buoyant, the Skuas's airframe floated until it was brought ashore.

**BELOW LEFT** The remains of Gallagher and Crawford's Skua. The rearmost flight of three 800 NAS aircraft was bounced by Messerschmitts as the squadrons approached Trondheim. Of the six aircrew, only two survived.

**BELOW** Seven of the original 15 Skuas on the raid, somewhat battered, found their way back to *HMS Ark Royal* by means of skilful navigation through fog using the ship's beacon.

