

— Channel Dash 11th February 1942 —

EXTRAORDINARY WARTIME BRAVERY AND HEROISM AT SEA OFF DOVER

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On the home front seventy years ago in the darkest days of the Second World War Dover was suffering a bad winter, acute austerity and persistent enemy action.

On Wednesday 11th February 1942, six Swordfish of 825 Squadron RNAS were scrambled from Manston airfield on a hastily planned mission to frustrate the breakout attempt by enemy warships to transit the shorter passage to Germany through the Straits of Dover from Brest where they were under a sea and air blockade.

At 10.45hrs on that day the enemy capital ships SCHARNHORST, GNEISENAU, both battle cruisers and PRINZ EUGEN a heavy cruiser, were reported departing Brest roads with substantial destroyer and air support.

Well after 11.00hrs Admiral Bertram Ramsay Flag Officer Dover received this report and initiated a response. Time was very short indeed. 825 Squadron comprised two flights, each of three bi-plane torpedo bombers with a maximum speed of about 90 knots when fully armed. They had flown into Manston from RN air station Lee-on-Solent under the command of Lt Cdr Eugene Esmonde Royal Navy.

Regardless of the unfavourable odds, an immediate strike was essential if the enemy warships were to be stopped. The strike was set for 12.45hrs the enemy

having already reached the Calais area.

Esmonde's flight led the attack coming under withering fire from the target ships, destroyer screen and Luftwaffe. After a period of relentless gunfire and aerial combat all three aircraft were lost with no survivors. The second flight also failed to reach its target all three aircraft being destroyed.



Swordfish Torpedo Bombers

Painted By John Owen

Five of the gallant aircrew however were rescued by Dover based motor torpedo boats returning from the same operation. All aircrew were decorated for their bravery and devotion to duty. Esmonde was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross.

A record of the occasion and memorial to their gallantry can be seen locally in the RAF museum at Manston.

PRINZ EUGEN survived the war, the RAF reduced GNEISENAU to a hulk at Kiel and SCHARNHORST was sunk by the Home Fleet off North Cape.