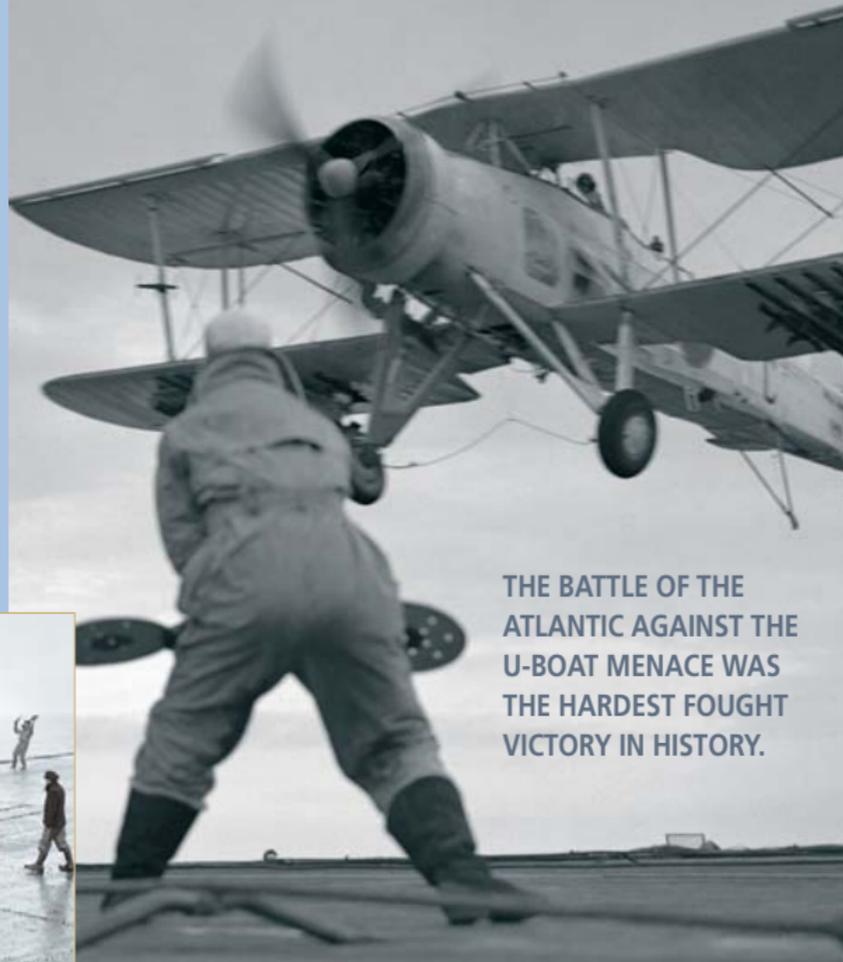
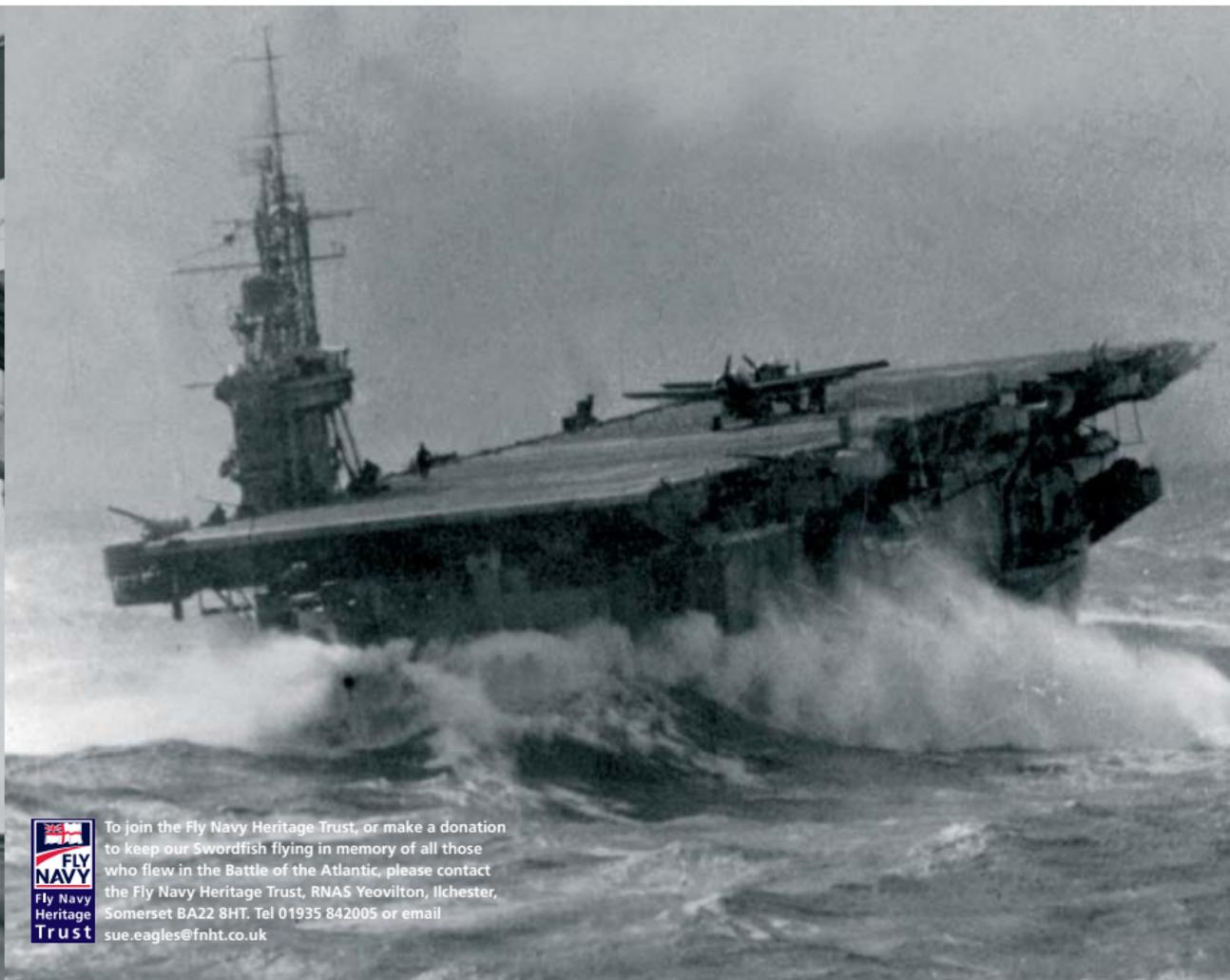


For 68 months the Battle of the Atlantic raged with ruthless intensity. It started with the sinking of the Athenia west of Ireland less than 12 hours after the outbreak of war on 3 September 1939 and ended with Grand Admiral Donitz's signal of 4 May 1945, ordering his U-boats to cease hostilities and return to base, followed 4 days later by the unconditional surrender of Germany.



THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC AGAINST THE U-BOAT MENACE WAS THE HARDEST FOUGHT VICTORY IN HISTORY.



To join the Fly Navy Heritage Trust, or make a donation to keep our Swordfish flying in memory of all those who flew in the Battle of the Atlantic, please contact the Fly Navy Heritage Trust, RNAS Yeovilton, Ilchester, Somerset BA22 8HT. Tel 01935 842005 or email [sue.eagles@fnht.co.uk](mailto:sue.eagles@fnht.co.uk)



The Fleet Air Arm in

# THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC





The Battle of the Atlantic against the U-boat menace was the hardest fought victory in history and it was one in which the Fleet Air Arm and many Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve pilots played a vital part. Thirty-six Fleet Air Arm Squadrons including Swordfish, Albacores, Avengers, Martlets and Sea Hurricanes, flew some of the most hazardous missions imaginable during the arduous six year campaign.

Next year, in May 2013, their courage and bravery will be remembered during a four day national tribute, including a service in Liverpool Cathedral and fly past by two Royal Navy Swordfish of the Royal Navy Historic Flight, to commemorate the 70th Anniversary of Britain's survival, and eventual victory, over the deadly combination of the U-boat and the long range Focke-Wulf Condor, described by Churchill as 'the scourge of the Atlantic'.

By February 1942 the UK's lifeline of food, oil and military supplies was in danger of being severed. Without it the country would perish. Air cover in the mid-Atlantic was non-existent.

30,000 merchant seamen had lost their lives. We were losing the logistics battle enabling us to continue the fight in Europe and we could not feed our own starvation level civilians, let alone support the millions of extra men we needed to undertake an invasion.

The last week of May in 1942 was the vital pivotal point in World War II when every Atlantic convoy had air cover. After this point, the tide turned and we slowly managed to get more and more arms, ammunition, fuel, trucks, tanks, aeroplanes, food and troops across the Atlantic, with which to ultimately defeat the Axis forces. **We would have certainly lost World War Two if this hadn't happened. It was Churchill's greatest fear.** The RAF fought the Battle of Britain - but for a prolonged and extremely costly sixty eight months, the Merchant Navy, Royal Navy and Allied Forces fought the Battle for Britain.

The unsung heroes who provided the crucial air cover and helped turn the tide of the War were Naval pilots, many of whom joined the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve at the start of the war, flying the obsolescent Fairey 'Swordfish'. These venerable biplanes and their aircrews, with an average age of 21, flew from the pitching decks of merchant ships, in all that the Atlantic could throw at

them, including mountainous seas and bitter cold. They patrolled in an area known as the mid-Atlantic gap, the 500 mile wide gap in the middle of the Atlantic, out of range of Allied aircraft, where the U-boats had almost complete freedom to operate; freedom to surface and recharge their batteries and to communicate by radio with their brother wolves, their home bases and their long range Condor bomber aircraft scouting for convoys.

Over 350,000 tons of enemy shipping was sunk by Navy Swordfish aircraft but the statistics on U-boat sinkings only tell half the story. The tactic that made the Swordfish so successful in ensuring the safe passage of convoys was not the number of U-boat kills, but the **deterrent effect** it had in keeping U-boats submerged. U-boats had to spend many hours of each day on the surface in order to replenish their batteries. They could travel at quite good speeds and fire their torpedoes very effectively whilst on the surface, but once submerged their weapons and more particularly their diesel engines were almost

inoperable. Relying on their electric batteries for power they were restricted to barely three knots and unless they could surface and recharge their batteries they were virtually dead in the water, and easily detectable by Allied surface units. Thus patrolling Swordfish, continually in the air from an hour before dawn to an hour after sunset, fully exploited the U-boat's weakness and by keeping it submerged for as long as possible, they rendered it ineffective, thereby directly preventing attacks on the convoys. Each Swordfish was armed with eight armour-piercing rockets for attacking U-boats but U-boat Commanders invariably crash dived immediately they saw a Swordfish – doing exactly as the Swordfish crews wanted them to do.

This tactic of defensive Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) was particularly successful from early 1943 onwards, when Swordfish aircraft were flying over 4000 ASW sorties a year, but many of the aircrews did not live to see the fruits of the peace they had helped to win. Their extraordinary

bravery in the face of atrocious conditions was little publicised. Very often they crash landed back on deck and maintenance crews worked on exposed flight decks in sub-zero temperatures, handling freezing metal by torch light to get the aircraft repaired and ready to take off again at first light.

The lack of escort carriers and the pressing need to provide air cover for the convoys called for innovative and bold measures and again the Fleet Air Arm rose to the challenge. Under Churchill's direction, RAE Farnborough developed a rocket powered catapult capable of launching a fully armed and fuelled fighter from a merchant ship. These Catapult Armed Merchant (CAM) vessels and Naval Fighter Catapult Ships became vital to the war effort but it was the courageous pilots both Fleet Air Arm and RAF, who volunteered to undertake the task that turned the tide of the Condor threat. One pilot, Sub Lieutenant David Wright RNVR described his first launch as terrifying. "It was like sitting on an exploding bomb". The naval CAM

pilots were extraordinarily courageous as they took off knowing that on completion of their mission, their only recovery option was to bale out or ditch in the sea and rely on being picked up by their mother ship or another ship in the area. The first naval pilot to successfully launch from such a ship, shoot down a Condor and survive his subsequent ditching was Lieutenant Bob Everett RN who was awarded the DSO. Nine German aircraft were shot down by CAM pilots keeping the Condor threat at bay until suitable escort carriers and their aircraft became available. Holding our own in the mid-Atlantic gap in the critical weeks of April and May 1942 was an outstanding feat of airmanship and co-operation between the services.

But the U-boat war did not stop there. Between April 1943 and May 1944, six grain carriers and thirteen tankers were converted to become Merchant Aircraft Carrier Ships (MAC ships). Essentially they were merchant ships with a flight deck capable of operating three or four Swordfish or Martlets,

naval fighters used to intercept the heavily armed Focke-Wulf Condors.

Speaking of his experience as a fighter pilot, flying Martlets from Britain's first escort carrier, HMS Audacity, a converted banana boat, Captain Eric 'Winkle' Brown CBE DSC AFC (93) described her as 'tiny' and her flight deck as 'terrifyingly short'. Landing-on was precarious, but constant patrols continued regardless, often in filthy weather, with Audacity's stern regularly pitching as much as sixty-five feet and the flight deck rolling sixteen degrees. Following the loss of his Commanding Officer, shot down by a Condor, Captain Brown worked out that the best tactic to intercept the heavily armed Condor was head-on. Closing at speed on a certain collision course he successfully shot down a Condor, holding on until the last possible second before making his attack. He described being 'close enough to see the windscreen round the two German pilots shatter'. As debris flew off its nose, he took violent evading action to avoid a collision.



The remarkable success of Swordfish defensive ASW operations, the bravery of the CAM pilots and the introduction of escort carriers and MAC ships, together with the work of the scientists from Bletchley Park in breaking the enigma codes, all played a part in the eventual victory, but the contribution made by the Fleet Air Arm was substantial and should never be forgotten. The 70th anniversary of the Battle of the Atlantic is an important opportunity not only to pay tribute to all those who gave their lives in the icy waters of the North Atlantic but to recognise the vital role played by Naval aircraft in one of the most protracted and bitterly fought sea and air campaigns in which the British

Empire and her Allies have ever been engaged. The U-boats very nearly succeeded. Without the protection provided by these carrier based aircraft and the bravery of their young crews, many convoys would never have reached the British Isles with their vital supplies or Russia with their vital equipment. Churchill himself wrote "The Battle of the Atlantic was the dominating factor all through the war. If we had lost that we would have lost everything."

Many Naval Air Squadrons comprised over 95% RNVR pilots. Most of the young 'A' men as they were known, who flew in the Battle of the Atlantic

are no longer with us, but two gallant Swordfish remain on the military register, serving as a powerful living reminder of their service and sacrifice and the great victory that they helped to win.

These two Swordfish LS326, and W5856, which will be painted in 820 Naval Air Squadron markings, just as she was painted during the Battle of the Atlantic, will fly in the national commemorative events in Liverpool next year. Preserving the Nation's Naval Aviation Heritage is the work of the Fly Navy Heritage Trust, a registered charity that raises money to keep the Royal Navy's iconic historic aircraft flying.



## The Battle of the Atlantic was the Fleet Air Arm's Battle of Britain

### 36 Naval Air Squadrons flew some of the most hazardous missions imaginable during the arduous six year campaign

