



# THE DASH

## The Newsletter Of The Channel Dash Association



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### Welcome To The First Issue Of The 'Channel Dash' Newsletter.

**W**elcome to the first edition of 'THE DASH' the CDA Newsletter. The aim of THE DASH is to inform and update our membership on issues which affect the Association. This includes information regarding ongoing projects, functions and events within, or affecting, the Association. (Cont. on page 3)

### “Did You Know” By John Williams

**T**he Fairey Swordfish was designed by Marcelle Lobelle and the prototype flew for the first time on 17 April 1934. Affectionately known to a generation of Naval Airmen as the “Stringbag” the aircraft entered Royal Naval service in 1936 with 825 Naval Air Squadron. By 1939 and the outbreak of the Second World War the aircraft had become ‘virtually obsolete’. But the Swordfish carried on in service to such an extent that it outlasted its intended replacement, the Albacore. Between 1934 and 1944, 2,391 Swordfish were built, 692 by Fairey Aviation Ltd. and 1,699 by Blackburn. The latter being commonly known by the men who operated them as the ‘Blackfish’. Lieutenant Commander Eugene Esmonde’s aircraft, Fairey Swordfish Mk. 1, Serial Number W5984 had been built by Blackburn Aircraft Ltd. at their factory located at Sherburn-in-Elmet, Yorkshire and delivered by ATA pilot Ann Douglas on (Continued on page 3)

### Channel Dash Spotlight

Lt Cdr Edgar Lee DSO VRD RNR  
President: Channel Dash Association



See story on page 2

### Geoffrey Williams

*It is with very great sadness that we report the passing of one of our founding members Geoffrey Williams. Geoff died suddenly following a short illness in Hospital in Canterbury. He had been looking forward to attending the Memorial Service at the Spitfire Museum at Manston on the 12th of February but, was taken ill on the 11th and unfortunately Geoff died on the 19th.* (Continued on page 3)

### Victoria Cross Medal Presentation. Imperial War Museum



For Valour



**T**he Association was honoured to have been invited to a very special presentation in October 2007 at the Imperial War Museum, London. The Esmonde and Esmonde-White families have placed the Victoria Cross Medals awarded to two family members. The medals can be viewed in the Victoria Cross and George Cross Gallery. The first VC was awarded to Thomas Esmonde for action in the Crimean War and was presented for display at the Imperial War Museum by Lieutenant Colonel John Esmonde-White. The second VC was awarded posthumously to Lieutenant Commander Eugene Esmonde RN for action during 'Operation Fuller' when 825 Naval Air Squadron, commanded by Esmonde, pressed home an attack against the German Battleships Scharnhorst and Gneisenau and the Cruiser Prinz Eugene with their accompanying protective cover. Eugene Esmonde’s medal was presented by Lieutenant Colonel Eugene Esmonde.

### Wreath Laying Ceremony-Dover Straits

**T**uesday 12 February 2008 dawned with the promise of clear weather. HMS Ledbury, a 'Hunt Class Mine Countermeasure Vessel' departed Dover to rendezvous in Trinity Bay off the coast near Deal, Kent with a flotilla departing Ramsgate, Kent. The vessels from Ramsgate included Royal Navy Patrol Boat HMS Raider, a Thames Estuary Pilot Cutter and Dunkirk little ship veteran 'Sundowner'. Onboard the vessels were the President, Vice President, Chairman, Secretary and members of the Channel Dash Association (continued on page 4)

## Channel Dash Spotlight

**E**dgar 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 an Observer in April 1941 and was commissioned as a Midshipman (A) RNVR.

Promoted to Sub Lieutenant (A) RNVR at the age of 20 in May 1941 and appointed to 825 NAS embarked on HMS Ark Royal in June 1941, flying operationally with the squadron operating the Fairey Swordfish TBR until November 1941 when HMS Ark Royal was sunk. Edgar tells of the moment when the ship was struck *"I was in the aircraft hangar and, when the ship was hit, all of the lights went out. I was left in total darkness unable to see anything - even my hand in front of me. Knowing that I was close to an aircraft and on which side, I felt ahead of me until I touched the aircraft fuselage then I was able to move forward by keeping contact with the aircraft until I reached the aircraft propeller I then had a bearing to point me toward the hangar bulkhead. I was then, very carefully, able to edge forward feeling in front of me until I reached the bulkhead and was then able to move along the side of the hangar until I located an access lobby through which I was able to exit from the Hangar"*.

On returning to England, Edgar was sent to Lee-on-Solent where 825 squadron reformed in late December 1941.

In Early February 1942, 825 squadron, with 6 replacement aircraft and, still commanded by Eugene Esmonde, were sent to RAF Manston, Kent, where they started practicing attack techniques with MTB's of the Royal Navy in preparation for the widely believed theory that the German Navy were

going to attempt to Dash, under cover of darkness, through the Dover Straits in order to return to their home ports in Germany.

On the morning of 12 February 1942 a cold foggy day with snow blowing about in the wind the order came that, Scharnhorst, Gneisenau and Prinz Eugene complete with their surface and aerial escorts had been spotted travelling at speed toward the Straits and 825 NAS were ordered to make their attack immediately. The squadron took off from Manston at 1225hrs and circled over Ramsgate waiting for their air cover of RAF Spitfires to rendezvous with them. When,

***"I was left in total darkness unable to see anything - even my hand in front of me"***

after 5 minutes the expected number of covering aircraft didn't materialise, Esmonde decided that if he waited any longer the German ships would be too far away for them to reach so gave the signal to the other 5 aircraft to follow him as he pressed forward to attack.

Twenty minutes after taking off from RAF Manston all of the Swordfish had been blown out of the sky. Of the 18 aircrewmen, only 5 survived and of those 5, Edgar was the only man to have not received any significant injury. Edgar and his pilot, Brian Rose, were rescued from their safety dingy by a British Motor Torpedo Boat. For his actions in this fateful incident Edgar was awarded the Distinguished Service Order.

In March 1942, Edgar joined the new 825 Squadron and flew with them until in July of that year he was sent for re-posting to RNAS

St. Merryn on 'Flying Control' duties. At the end of February 1943, Edgar was seconded to No. 106 Squadron based at RAF Syerston and operating Avro Lancaster's, under the command of Wing Commander Guy Gibson, DSO DFC.

Six RN Observers were seconded to No. 5 Group Bomber Command, three were lost and three returned to Naval duties at the end of July 1943.

Edgar was promoted to Lieutenant (A) RNVR in November 1943, instructing in Canada from 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 re-joined the reserve in 1956 and was promoted to Lieutenant Commander RNR in November 1961, serving in most NATO and National Exercises until 1981 and as Acting Commander RNR in Exercises from 1969 until retirement aged 60 in 1981.

Lt Cdr Edgar Lee DSO VRD RNR flew in Fairey Swordfish W5983 'G' during the Channel Dash Operation (Codenamed Operation Fuller) on 12 February 1942.

### Lt Cdr Edgar Lee. DSO VRD



Photograph of Edgar (2nd from right) with CPO Les Sayer MBE DSM and our youngest member Stephen Stanford, aged 5 with CO Lt Mark Headley and crew members from HMS Raider.

**Welcome to the First Issue.** (cont. from front page)

It is hoped that it will be an active Association with members contributing as best they are able. This could be by your participation as an Officer or Committee member, regular attendee at our meetings and/or contributor to our activities, website and newsletter. Please give whatever time and skill you think appropriate to ensure that the Channel Dash Association continues to grow and create interest wherever and whenever it can.

**Geoffrey Williams.** (cont. from front page)

*On the 28th February Family and friends gathered at the Methodist Church, Garlinge, to say goodbye to a Partner, Father, Grandfather and good friend at a Service of Thanksgiving and Celebration of his life. It was a fitting tribute that the Church was full to overflowing. Friends from the Kent Fleet Air Arm Association formed an Honour Guard and the Standards from both Margate and Ramsgate branches of the Royal Naval Association and East Kent Submariners Association were present to salute Geoff at his final farewell. He will be missed by very many people.*



**Geoffrey Williams**  
**1923 - 2008**



## Wreath Laying Ceremonies Holland and Belgium. 2-4 November 2007

The Association was invited to participate in a number of wreath laying and memorial parades in Holland and Belgium during the weekend Friday 2 to Sunday 4 November 2007. The invitation, from Algemene Vereniging Oud Marine (AVOM) Afdeling Zeeland, Holland, via Ramsgate Royal Naval Association. The CDA laid a wreath at Eede in Holland along with the Town Mayor and members of the Canadian Military. CDA Members and the other UK Veterans Associations also paraded and laid wreaths at Aardenburg, Sluis, Knokke, Entranchement Oosthoek-Knokke and at the Canadian, Polish and British War Cemetery at Adegem with our Dutch, Belgian and Canadian colleagues. It was a very moving weekend and the CDA wish to thank everyone involved including the members of the Veterans Associations, Town Dignitary's and in particular the towns people of all the places we paraded for the very warm reception and wonderful hospitality we received over the entire weekend. Special thanks also go to the Canadian Consul and members of the Canadian Military who made up the majority of the overseas contingent by far for also making us feel most welcome.

**"Did You Know"** (cont. from front page)

17 December 1941 to no. 825 NAS. The aircraft had been ordered under contract No. B31192/239 and was powered by a Bristol Pegasus III m.3 engine rated at 690 horse-power.

**CDA Membership**

The current membership of the Association as of 1 March 2008 stands at 182 Well done everyone for helping with this. Special thanks go to member Charles Giles who has recruited almost 30 new members in the past month.

**Swordfish Memorial Appeal**

Using the recent very special occasion of the Wreath Laying ceremony at sea onboard HMS Ledbury the Chairman announced the final stage of our appeal to raise the funds to complete the Swordfish Memorial which we hope to complete this year. It is intended to place the Memorial, a full sized replica of a Fairey Swordfish aircraft, at Manston airport. It is our aim to place the aircraft in a location near to both the Spitfire & Hurricane Memorial Museum and the RAF Museum. This location is almost exactly the same spot from which, on that fateful day that Lt Cdr Eugene Esmonde signalled his Squadron to taxi for take-off on their mission to attack the Scharnhorst, Gneisenau and Prinz Eugen. The replica aircrafts build is currently in the planning stage with Ian Lauder, Secretary Peter Nixon and Dave Hobson of Gateguards UK leading the project. An original quote of £1.5million! quickly became £150,000 and thanks to Dave of GateguardUK, now only £40,000 remains to be found. Ian Lauder says, *"with the strong possibility of a £10,000 grant, a £3,000 pledge and a current membership of 182, it would only require the equivalent of each member raising less than £150, OPM (Other People's Money) we could unveil the statue, as seen below, on 12th February 2009."* Once the physical work of constructing the aircraft commences progress will be documented on the builders website and links will be created to our website. We are firmly committed to remembering this event and honouring all those who took part by the building of this Memorial.



The CDA Chaplain, Reverend Peter Adams conducted a Memorial Service in honour of all those who took part in 'Operation Fuller' which was followed by the laying of the wreaths on the waters of the Dover Straits. Also assisting the Association to commemorate the occasion were Councillor John Kirby, Chairman of Thanet District Council accompanied by his Lady, Councillor Jill Kirby. Councillor Steve Ward, Mayor of Ramsgate accompanied by the Mayoress Mrs. Pauline Arthur. Also present were members representing the families of Eugene Esmonde and Pat Kingsmill. Veterans from the Royal Naval Association, the Royal Air Force Association and the Royal Artillery Association Accompanied by their Standards representing all of the Services which participated in 'Operation Fuller'.

Following the ceremony afloat members retired to Ramgate RNA where a light hot lunch had been prepared for our return. There members had an opportunity to meet with other members, some for the first time who had elected to attend the Kent Fleet Air Arm Association Memorial Service at Manston Spitfire and Hurricane Museum to discuss the events of the day. Everyone seemed to agree that it had been a moving and very successful day. Without doubt a major contributory factor to the success of the day was the attendance of both the President, Edgar Lee and, the Vice President, Les Sayer as it reminded people very movingly exactly just what the day was all about. They both later remarked that it had been a much bigger event than they had at first visualised but were equally moved by the occasion and commented that 'as far as they could recall it was the biggest memorial to that fateful day in February 1942 that they had ever attended'.

The whole event was well

documented by both Meridian News and BBC SouthEast Today as well as sections of the local press and the Navy News. Members can see the TV coverage on the CDA website [www.channeldash.org](http://www.channeldash.org) under

***It is most fitting that these men are remembered on the anniversary of that epic action, and I shall be saluting them silently at that time.***

(see personal message from our Vice Patron Sir George Martin below)

'Recent Events' scroll down and click on the links shown underneath the respective TV company. There is also a report of the events with photo's. The article in Navy News will appear in the April issue.

## Forthcoming Events

The Association will be attending the 'Margate Big Event' which will take place over the weekend of 14-15 June 2008. We anticipate having our stall to both enhance the reputation and knowledge of our Association and 'Operation Fuller'. Dave Hobson of Gateguards UK has also indicated that he will attend and will display a section of the CDA Swordfish currently under construction. It is hoped that our attendance with the section of our 'Aircraft' will significantly increase our membership.

We also anticipate attending the Ramsgate Carnival in July. This is a smaller event over 1 day so the 'aircraft will not be shown.

### and on a lighter note!!!!

All Hell broke loose at the paranoid Schitzophrenic Christmas Panto when someone shouted ....

**"He's behind you"**

## A personal message from our Vice Patron Sir George Martin CBE

I am so sorry that I cannot join you on 12th February. I shall be in Los Angeles for the Grammy Awards and I will not be able to get back in time for the wreath laying ceremony commemorating the Channel Dash Heroes. I often think of that handful of gallant young men. They were so young, only a few days older than I was at that time, and they must have known that they would probably be killed in such an incredible attack. Some have compared it to the Charge of the Light Brigade, but this was no mistake. It was a deliberate sacrifice, a last ditch attempt to prevent two great German warships from joining up with a large fleet in Germany that could destroy all our Atlantic shipping and with it the future of our country. Eighteen months later, when in 1943 I volunteered for flying with the Fleet Air Arm, our front



line planes were more modern than the old Swordfish, but I did get in to one in the course of my becoming an Observer, Chief Petty Officer Don Bunce (the Channel Dash Hero credited with shooting down a FW109) taught us the art of air gunnery, and I regarded him as my hero. He still is! It is most fitting that these men are remembered on the anniversary of that epic action, and I shall be saluting them silently.