

Ronald Arthur BAILEY D.S.C.

Date of Birth: 1920

Parents: Son of Percival Henry and Miriam Bailey of Felpham, Sussex

School Years: 1934-1938

House – St Richards

Oxford School Certificate passed with Credits

Exemption from London Matriculation

Form Prize Winner – 1936, 1937 & 1938

The Martlet – Roll of Service – December 1939

Civilian Occupation: In business with his brother in the building trade – 1938

Armed Forces Record

Service record: Sub Lieutenant (A)

Midshipman (A) R.N. 1939

March 1939 – Granted a commission in the Royal Navy and is in training at Devonport

Service Record: 815 Squadron – Fleet Air Arm

Launched from Aircraft Carrier ‘HMS Illustrious’

Date of Death: 26 June 1942



“Strike Deep”



Fairy Swordfish – ‘The Flying Stringbag’

Operation 'Judgement' - Strike on the Italian Fleet at Taranto (Source - Google)

Background to the Raid.

Between 1935 and 1940 three plans had been drawn up on how to attack the Italian fleet at Taranto. Italy declared war in June 1940 and plan three was then resurrected. It was thought imperative that the Italian Fleet's strength be reduced before their German allies could reinforce them. Strategically Taranto lies in the 'instep' of Italy, its two harbours with direct access to the Mediterranean. The Regina Marina (two harbours) at Taranto was home to the massive Italian Fleet which outnumbered the Royal Navy's Mediterranean counterpart. However, it lacked aircraft carriers, radar and had scarce knowledge of torpedo bombing. Its torpedo nets were not deep enough.

The Attack – 11th November 1940

The 'Attack on Taranto' was to become history's first-ever aerial sea-borne raid against an enemy fleet in harbour and the Fleet Air Arms 'finest hour'. Twenty one Fairy Swordfish aircraft, half loaded with torpedoes and the rest with bombs plus flares had been assembled on the carrier HMS 'Illustrious' in the Mediterranean. This aircraft's design enabled it to pack within its framework various combinations of arms lifted by its characteristic wings and numerous struts. Thought an obsolete bi-plane it affectionately assumed the nickname of the 'flying string bag'. The raid took place in the early hours of 11th November 1940 the crews flying in open cockpits at night time taking an hour to cover the 170 miles to their target.

In the first wave of six Swordfish Torpedo Bombers L4K of 815 Squadron was crewed by Lt. N.M. Kemp and *Old Boy* Sub Lt. Ronald Anthony Bailey.

A total surprise their attack came in from the West north of Pietro Island passing moored Italian cruisers and from 4000 feet L4K plummeted down and flattened out on line for the 45,000-ton battleship 'Littorio' dropping its torpedo at 23.18 from 1,000 yards which struck the ship on the starboard bow, crippling her. Other aircraft were picking their own targets lit by dropped flares and badly damaged two other battleships. The second attack of Swordfish bombed other moored ships and ground installations.

Though the ack-ack was ferocious only two aircraft were shot down. The same barrage caused severe damage to the town with some fatalities. A two-man crew was lost and another crew became POWs. Within the hour the Swordfish had returned to the deck of the 'Illustrious'. There were anxious moments amongst the returning aircrews concerning their vulnerability as rumours spread that they would be ordered to carry out a second raid. One pilot was reported to have remarked, "They only asked the light brigade to do it once". However, bad weather foiled the plan.

The raid won many awards. Initially only six but 'after a question in the House' later the number increased significantly and included the award of the Distinguished Service Cross (DSO) to *Old Boy* Ronald Anthony Bailey.

The Citation - Overall

"For outstanding courage and skill in the Fleet Air Arm torpedo attack on the Italian Fleet in Taranto Harbour on 11 November 1940"

Chichester Observer – FELPHAM MAN WINS D.S.C. – For gallantry at Taranto Lieutenant Ronald Anthony (Tony) Bailey, son of well know residents at Felpham has been awarded the D.S.C. Sub-Lieut is in the Fleet

Air Arm which he entered a year before the beginning of the war. He is 21 years old and was educated at the High School for Boys at Chichester. Mr Baily read of his son's decoration for the first time in the Daily Telegraph and knows nothing of what his son did to win the decoration.

Aftermath Speculation.

By this time the Japan and Italy were unlikely allies. It is known that a Japanese naval attaché visited Taranto following the raid to review the consequences of the attack and, it is said, he later briefed the Pearl Harbour planners although no report was ever traced.

On the 10 January 1944, the carrier *HMS Illustrious* as a Mediterranean escort came under sustained and ferocious attack from waves of Luftwaffe Dive Bombers. The ship was severely damaged and 83 personnel were killed and 60 wounded. Ronald Baily survived but six aircrew from the Taranto attack did not including his pilot Lt N.M. Kemp D.S.C. In total, fifteen crew from the Taranto raid did not survive the War.

Flying an Avenger, Ronald Arthur Bailey was killed with other crew members when his aircraft crashed whilst on operations off Madagascar on 25 June 1942. He was twenty.

Commemorated

Chichester High School for Boys

Chichester War Memorial –

Bognor Regis War Memorial

Bay 3 Panel 1 Lee-on-Solent Memorial Hampshire

Reaction

In Winston Churchill's speech to the House of Commons on 13 November 1940 he said:

“As a result of a determined and highly successful attack, which reflects the greatest honour on the Fleet Air Arm, only three Italian battleships now remain effective. This result, which affects decisively the balance of naval power in the Mediterranean, also carries with it reactions upon the naval situation in every quarter of the globe.”

German Naval Staff (Berlin) diarist:

“The English attack must be regarded as the greatest naval victory of the war. At a stroke, it has changed the strategic situation at sea in the entire Mediterranean decisively in England's favour. Even more than before, the enemy will move throughout the Mediterranean, taking no account of the Italian Fleet.”

The Italian Foreign Minister Count Ciano (Mussolini's son-in-law) wrote in his diary for 12 November 1940:

“These ships will remain out of the fight for many months. I thought I would find the Duce downhearted. Instead, he took the blows quite well and does not, at the moment seemed to have fully realised its gravity”.