



Luck of the Devil: Flying Swordfish in WWII

Robert le Page

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Robert le Page flew with the Fleet Air Arm from 1940 to 1945, mostly in 816 Squadron flying carrier-based Fairey Swordfish. He saw action mine-laying off Cherbourg, hunting U-boats, escorting convoys in the North Atlantic and Arctic seas and covering D-Day. Much of his early war years were aboard HMS Dasher and he was lucky to be ashore when the carrier mysteriously exploded and sank in the Clyde. This decimated 816 Squadron which was eventually re-equipped and then worked up to operational readiness to fly from HMS Tracker.

His story is full of insights into wartime naval flying. For example when they were tasked with finding and attacking German E Boats they found that in a headwind these powerful boats could outdistance the 'Stringbag'. They devised a plan which was to glide as quietly as possible on their approach to the quarry and power up the engine only seconds before they attacked – a plan that was unfortunately unsuccessful. Once when landing in rough weather his aircraft was waved to go round again. With throttle wide open the Swordfish struggled back into the air, but alas the tailhook snagged the top wire of the barrier protecting other parked aircraft. The author remembered staring down from the stalling aircraft to see a terror stricken fitter gazing up at him. Fortunately all survived.

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