



Lt-Cdr 'Mac' Samples

Lieutenant-Commander 'Mac' Samples, who has died aged 90, was one of the five survivors from 18 aircrew in six antiquated Swordfish which challenged a heavily-armed German fleet as it dashed through the Channel to Norwegian waters in February 1942.

Samples was the observer in Sub-Lieutenant Pat Kingsmill's aircraft when 825 naval air squadron took off from RAF Manston, Kent.

The mission was to attack the battleships Scharnhorst and Gneisenau, as well as the cruiser Prinz Eugen; and it seemed so hopeless that the station commander, Wing Commander Tom Gleave, stood in the snow to salute each aircraft as it taxied down the runway.



As Kingsmill, the third to attack, levelled up for his torpedo drop, Samples saw that the fabric of the aircraft's wings had been torn by enemy flak and was full of holes.

But the Swordfish flew on until a cannon shell hit the fuselage immediately between them, wounding both men.

When the air gunner, Don Bunce, looked up from his Vickers machine gun, the bloody Samples was shouting directions at him and Kingsmill.

Then, screaming insults at the Germans, Bunce shot down one plane while Kingsmill struggled to control the Swordfish. Samples was looking at the German gun crews in their sleek, black anti-flash overalls when he felt a sudden burning sensation in his leg. Looking down, he was astonished to see a neat pattern of holes in his flying boots. But although blood was oozing out he felt no pain, and he failed to notice that Kingsmill had dropped his torpedo, aimed at Prinz Eugen from about 2,000 yards.

With the aircraft on fire and ripped by the flak, Kingsmill struggled to maintain height. He tried to communicate with Samples, not realising that the speaking tube had been shattered. Despite his wounds, Samples climbed up and shouted into his ear: "We'll never make it, ditch near those MTBs" – pointing towards some British boats which had also attacked the Germans.

Shortly afterwards the three men were pulled from the drink by friendly hands.

Samples was awarded the DSO for his conspicuous gallantry, but was so badly wounded that he spent most of the rest of the war at the Royal Naval Air Station at Yeovilton.

Reginald McCartney Samples was born in Liverpool on August 11 1918 and educated at Rhyl Grammar School and Liverpool University, where he was reading Commerce when war was declared.

After being demobilised he completed his degree before joining the Central Office of Information as economics editor of its overseas news service.

A year later he transferred to the Commonwealth Relations Office and was sent as economic information officer to the British deputy high commissioner in Bombay.

For the next decade he worked in New Delhi and Karachi before being posted to Ottawa, where he was appointed OBE in 1963.

Two years later he was sent back to New Delhi as head of the British Information Service, then was briefly an assistant under-secretary of state at the Commonwealth Office in Whitehall before becoming consul-general in Toronto, where he was dean of the consular corps until retiring with a CMG.

On leaving the diplomatic service, Samples settled in Toronto, where he joined the Royal Ontario Museum as development officer and assistant director. He was active in the cultural life of the city, serving on the boards of the National Ballet of Canada, the Canadian Aldeburgh Foundation and the Canadian-Scottish Philharmonic Foundation.

Blessed with a rich and resonant voice, Samples was a volunteer reader at the Canadian National Institute for the Blind.

From 1983 until her death in 1999 he devoted himself full time to the care of his wife, Elsie, who had contracted polio and encephalitis in India.

Mac Samples died on July 31, and is survived by their two sons.

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Fairey Swordfish Specifications:

Crew: Pilot, observer, and radio operator/rear gunner

Length: 35 ft 8 in (10.87 m)

Wingspan: 45 ft 6 in (13.87 m)

Height: 12 ft 4 in (3.76 m)

Empty weight: 4,195 lb (1,900 kg)

Loaded weight: 7,720 lb (3,500 kg)

Engine: Single (750 hp (560 kW) Bristol Pegasus IIIM

Maximum speed: 138 mph (222 km/h) at 5,000 ft (1,500 m)

Range: 546 mi (879 km)

Ferry range: 1,025 mi (1,650 km)

Service ceiling 19,250 ft (5,870 m)

Armament:

Single 0.303 in (7.7 mm) Vickers machine gun mounted in the engine cowling

Single 0.303 in (7.7 mm) Lewis or Vickers K machine gun in rear cockpit

Eight 60 lb (27 kg) RP-3 under-wing rocket projectiles (Mk.II and later only)

Single 1,670 lb (760 kg) torpedo or 1,500 lb (700 kg) mine