

Lieutenant-Commander Willie Armstrong



Lieutenant-Commander Willie Armstrong, who has died aged 88, was the aircrew rating who sent the signal which started the hunt for the German battleship Bismarck.

On May 22 1941 Armstrong was a leading airman at Hatston in the Orkneys. Bad weather had prevented flying for several days when Commander Hank Rotherham called for volunteers to make up the scratch crew of a Maryland bomber for a dangerous reconnaissance of the fjords of Norway.

The Bismarck and the cruiser Prinz Eugen had sailed from the Baltic but their whereabouts were unknown.

The senior naval officer at Hatston, Captain Henry St John Fancourt, used his own initiative to order the reconnaissance of Bergen, Norway, where he guessed the ships might be, and, while he was confident that Rotherham and his crew could make it there, he was very concerned that they might not be able to

make it back. However, with Lieutenant Noel Goddard, commanding officer of 771 naval air squadron, at the controls and with Armstrong and Leading Airman JD Milne as his crew, Rotherham navigated the Maryland perfectly, despite flying at 50ft through low cloud and strong winds to avoid German radar. The crew flew through heavy ack-ack fire, only to find the fjords empty, and Rotherham ordered Armstrong to send the fateful signal: "Battleship and cruiser have left." Armstrong struggled to send his message until he used an emergency frequency. His signal set in train the hunt for the Bismarck, which led to the loss of Hood on May 24 and the destruction of the German battleship a few days later.

Sir Jack Tovey, the Commander-in-Chief Home Fleet, signalled his personal thanks and congratulations on a daring and successful reconnaissance: Rotherham was awarded an immediate DSO, Goddard a DSC and Armstrong a DSM.

John Walter Armstrong was born on January 22 1921 at Aldershot to an Army family. He was educated at Badshot Lea Elementary School, leaving at 14 to become a van boy for the Army & Navy Store.

In 1937 he became a boy seaman 2nd class.

While serving in the cruiser Dunedin, a target ship for airdropped torpedoes, Armstrong applied to become a naval airman, and after service in another cruiser, Manchester, in the Indian Ocean, took passage home in RMS Orcades to join No 2 Air Gunners' course at Worthy Down.

In early 1940 he was based in Jersey with 763 naval air squadron and was among the last servicemen to leave the island before the German occupation.

Later, in June, he flew in aircraft covering the withdrawal from France, before being sent to Hatston.

Armstrong qualified as a torpedo air gunner in 1944. In the early 1950s he took part in the Korean War in the carriers Triumph, Unicorn and Glory before being commissioned in 1954.

In the Suez campaign he was assistant operations officer in the carrier Bulwark.

Armstrong retired in 1970 and spent 15 years as the administrator of Huntingdon Technical College. He enjoyed gardening, reading and in his old age, bowls.

Willie Armstrong, who died on July 16, married Sarah Jane (Sallie) Bousfield, whom he met as a WRNS at HMS Ariel at Warrington in 1948 and with whom he had a son and a daughter.

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