

Missing in Norway

Acting Sub Lt Grenville Robert Hampden - Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm 1918-1940

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We were recently asked for information on a name on the church War Memorial of a young Fleet Air Arm officer Grenville Hampden. This prompted research into the short life and death of Sub Lt Hampden who was killed on 13th April 1940 in the 2nd Battle of Narvik.

In 1930 Grenville was 12 years old when he came to Ewelme to live in The Old Mansion at Cottesmore Lane, after the death there of his grandmother, Catherine Hampden. His father was Captain Geoffrey Hampden RN (obit 1951) and his mother Cicely (obit 1962). The Old Mansion had been purchased circa 1836 by Grenville's great-grandfather Bishop Renn Hampden, then Ewelme's Rector. (The last Hampden in Ewelme was Grenville's sister Moira, born in 1921, and is remembered as Moira Calvert who was a flamboyant figure in Ewelme until her death in 2000).

Grenville followed his father into the Royal Navy and qualified as a pilot in the Fleet Air Arm. At the outbreak of war he flew Fairey Swordfish biplanes that had entered FAA service in 1936. The Swordfish was a versatile and successful aircraft with a low stalling speed, ideal for carrier landings, and armed with torpedoes or bombs. Nicknamed 'Stringbags' (after a housewife's popular string shopping bags capable of accommodating odd-shaped objects) it was crewed by a pilot and an observer. In April 1940 Grenville was serving in 818 Squadron on board the aircraft carrier HMS 'Furious' under the command of Captain Thomas Troubridge. (This ship had a curious history, having been launched in 1916 as a battle cruiser but undergoing various conversions to an aircraft carrier from 1917 until 1932). After a spell protecting North Atlantic convoys, 'Furious' received orders to take part in an attack on Narvik - a warm water port at the end of a Norwegian fjord in which were cornered 8 German destroyers and 2 U-Boats, short of fuel and ammunition. The Royal Navy prepared to attack this prime target, led by the Battleship 'Warspite', accompanied by 9 destroyers, and the aircraft carrier 'Furious'.



The Fairey Swordfish biplane was nicknamed 'Stringbags' after the housewife's popular string shopping bags capable of accommodating odd-shaped objects



The memorial brass plaque in memory of Grenville Hampden and his parents in St Mary's church Ewelme.

On 13th April 1940 all 10 Swordfish biplanes were launched from 'Furious' armed with 250 lb bombs. None scored a hit and in the narrow confines of the fjord it took skilful flying to avoid enemy gunners. One Swordfish made a 'forced landing on the shore' and, amazingly, the two-man crew were rescued by the destroyer HMS 'Punjabi'. Sadly, Grenville Hampden and his observer Naval Airman R Dale were shot down into the fjord.

Although the Swordfish failed to land their bombs, it was a decisive British victory as 8 enemy destroyers were sunk or scuttled, 128

enemy killed and 67 wounded. U-Boat (U-64) was sunk, this was notable as being the first U-Boat destroyed from the air by a 100 lb anti-submarine bomb dropped by HMS 'Warspite's' catapult launched (float equipped) Swordfish. Of the British losses - 3 destroyers were damaged, 2 aircraft shot down, 28 killed and 55 wounded.



Grenville's estate was proved on 24th December 1940 leaving £264 9s 3d to his mother Cicily. He is named on the Lee-on-Solent Memorial, Bay 1 Panel 3, and twice in Ewelme church. Before the recent development of modern technology to assist pilots flying from aircraft carriers, the casualty rate was extremely high, and the bravery and skill of Grenville Hampden and his fellow carrier aviators deserves to be acknowledged.

(Some may remember a villager John Burbidge of Kings Pool House and latterly East Cottage, who died in 2013. He once remarked he trained as an observer on Swordfish - but towards the end of the war. John was interviewed by the Leeds World War II Experience Centre before he died).

Carol Sawbridge – Ewelme History Archive