

THE ARMED ROVERS

**BEAUFORTS AND BEAUFIGHTERS
OVER THE MEDITERRANEAN**



ROY CONYERS NESBIT

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over the Mediterranean

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CONTENTS

Foreword by Air Chief Marshal Sir Christopher
Foxley-Norris GCB OBE DSO MA RAF (ret'd).

1	The Strike Aircrews	13
2	An Electrical Storm	22
3	The Scourge of God	37
4	Fighters from Egypt	53
5	The Lost Squadron	71
6	Fuel for the Panzerarmee	88
7	Fighters from Malta	104
8	The End in Tunisia	122
9	The Surrender of Italy	140
10	Sideshow	158
11	Rocket Squadron	186
	Bibliography	214
	Index	217

This book is dedicated to those who served in the maritime squadrons of the RAF and the Commonwealth Air Forces in the Mediterranean during the Second World War.

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FOREWORD

by

Air Chief Marshal Sir Christopher Foxley-Norris
GCB, OBE, DSO, MA, RAF (Ret'd)

This book is of particular interest because it details the critical part played by the RAF's anti-shipping squadrons in defeating Rommel, by interdicting his essential sea supplies; a fact which he was the first to acknowledge. I did not come on the scene until late in 1943, but was thereafter a Flight Commander listed in one of the Beaufighter squadrons on page 14 (252) and finally Commanding Officer of 603 Squadron.

The anti-shipping squadrons involved were equipped successively with Blenheims Mk IV, Beauforts and Beaufighters, and torpedo-carrying Wellingtons at night. All suffered heavy casualties, largely attributable to one inherent defect in armament, i.e. that the aircraft had to point directly at, and usually overfly, their heavily defended targets at low level. This applied particularly to the torpedo-carrier, which had to fly straight and level to launch. At one stage, the Beaufighter squadrons were suffering fifty per cent casualties. The two versions of rockets proved the most effective armament but were introduced deplorably late into the Mediterranean squadrons.

Well-earned credit for the successful campaign is given to the all-important flow of intelligence originating from the central decoding unit at Bletchley. The Axis never woke up to this fact and attributed the vulnerability erroneously to all sorts of other sources.

A detailed account is given of the calamitous Cos-Leros operation but the blame for it (largely Churchill's initiative) was never directed at the right heads. The basic defect lay in the attempt to conduct a major amphibious assault and occupation without being able to ensure air superiority. A lot of lives were lost in consequence.

The book fills a major gap in contemporary accounts of World War II. The crews concerned performed with skill and courage unsurpassed in any other theatre of war, and they played a vital part in the ultimate victory.



OPERATIONAL AREA





1

THE STRIKE AIRCREWS

On 16 November 1942, the Air Member for Training, Air Marshal Sir A. Guy R. Garrod, sent a table of RAF operational casualties to the Air Member for Personnel, Air Marshal Sir Bertine E. Sutton. Rearranging this table in decreasing percentage of danger to the aircrews, it reads:

	Percentage Chance of Survival	
	One Tour	Two Tours
1. Torpedo bomber	17½	3
2. Light bomber	25½	6½
3. Fighter reconnaissance	31	9½
4. Night fighter	39	15
5. Bomber reconnaissance	42	17½
6. Day fighter	43	18½
7. Heavy and medium bombers	44	19½
8. Light general reconnaissance landplane	45	20
9. Medium general reconnaissance landplane	56	31½
10. Long-range fighter	59½	35½
11. Sunderland flying boat	66	43½
12. Heavy general reconnaissance landplane	71	50½
13. Catalina flying boat	77	60

These figures were not made known publicly at the time, nor were they circulated within the RAF. It was left to the aircrews on the squadrons to guess the statistical odds against them, if they chose to brood on that subject. The letter containing the figures is now available for scrutiny at the Public Record Office at Kew, and verifies that the average chance of survival on an operational tour in the RAF was appallingly low.

Of course, not every airman who failed to complete an operational tour was killed. Some were injured and forced to drop out. Some were shot down and became prisoners of war, sometimes after ditching in the sea. A very small number were taken off because they could not stand the strain, with the stigma of 'lacking moral fibre' to dog them for the remainder of their period of RAF service. But most of those who 'failed to return' from operational flights lost their lives.

THE ARMED ROVERS

Nevertheless, there were wide differences in the chances of survival, depending on the types of aircraft and the work on which each squadron was engaged. These figures demonstrate that the aircrews of the torpedo bomber and light bomber squadrons were more at risk than any others in the RAF. Although there were some light bomber squadrons in Bomber Command during the early stages of the war, such as those equipped with Battles and Blenheims, many of the squadrons in the dangerous top two categories formed part of Coastal Command in the UK or were maritime squadrons in the Mediterranean or the Far East. The men in these squadrons were known in the RAF as 'strike crews' and were engaged primarily on anti-shipping work.

One of the purposes of the memorandum was to try to establish a 'datum line' in operational flying hours for each category of aircraft, so that the airmen would have at least a fifty per cent chance of surviving their tours. It was calculated that the torpedo and light bomber aircrews reached this line after eighty hours of operational flying, whereas they were expected to fly for 200 operational hours, but the suggestion that it should be reduced was not acted upon. Instead, the tours remained at 200 hours, but training and tactics were improved. This book is concerned mainly with the men in eight such squadrons, during the periods when they were equipped with Bristol Beauforts or Bristol Beaufighters and flew in the Mediterranean between 1941 and 1945. These were 39, 42, 47, 144, 227, 252, 272 and 603 Squadrons.

At the outbreak of war, there were only two strike squadrons based in the UK – 22 and 42 Squadrons – with two more based in Singapore – 36 and 100 Squadrons. All these were equipped with the Vickers Vildebeest IV torpedo bomber, an obsolete biplane with open cockpits. The two-man crews were highly trained but handicapped by their slow, short-range machine and the absence of suitable fighter escort. They were easy prey for enemy fighters and defensive flak from warships.

Following the catastrophe of the fall of France in June 1940 and the entry of Italy into the war, there was an immediate need for more strike squadrons and trained aircrews. The anti-shipping squadrons were then required to cover most of the north-west coastline of Europe as well as the whole of the Mediterranean. At the same time the threat of the Japanese in the Far East was becoming even more menacing.

By early 1940, the two squadrons based in the UK had been equipped with the Bristol Beaufort, a twin-engined monoplane which was hailed as the fastest torpedo bomber in the world. It carried a crew of four. But it soon became apparent that the machine was subject to engine failure and that it was difficult to fly on one engine. Moreover, it was so poorly armed that it was at the mercy of enemy single-engined

THE STRIKE AIRCREWS

fighters, and it sank so quickly after a ditching that there was little time for the crew to scramble into their dinghy. The problems with the engine were largely overcome and the armament was increased, but the work on which the squadrons were engaged – mainly daylight attacks on enemy warships or armed merchant ships – was so hazardous that the machine topped the list compiled by the Air Member for Training in 1942. Another purpose of these statistics was to gauge the replacement rate for the aircrews, for on average the men survived only about two months of operational flying.

In late 1940 and early 1941, the training of strike aircrews for replacement and expansion was woefully inadequate. For instance, in January 1941 the author was sent straight to a Beaufort squadron, after having completed his training as an air observer at Navigation School and then Bombing and Gunnery School. The additional processes of School of General Reconnaissance and Operational Training Unit were omitted entirely, for the need for air observers in squadrons was so urgent. At this stage, the function of air navigation was usually performed by second pilots in Beauforts, and the arrival of air observers enabled these men to be released. This was the quickest method of increasing the numbers of aircrews. The other two crew members were wireless operator/air gunners, who were often drawn from volunteer ground staff at this stage, and they could be trained fairly quickly.

By the autumn of 1941, however, crews with more adequate training during wartime began to arrive in the Beaufort squadrons. Some of the pilots and navigators had received part of their training abroad, under the Empire Air Training Scheme, but the wireless operator/air gunners were trained almost entirely in the UK at this stage.

The development of flying training generally constitutes one of the most remarkable successes of World War Two. In 1934, the RAF as a whole had trained only about 300 new pilots and no other crew members. In 1936 the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve was created, a means by which pilots, observers and wireless operators were able from April 1937 onwards to train in their spare time, as a form of 'Citizens' Air Force'. By the time war broke out, the RAFVR stood at over 10,000 men in these three categories, mostly pilots at various stages of training. These were the men who shared with the regular RAF aircrews the brunt of the fighting in the first year of the war. Once war was declared, there was no shortage of additional volunteers for flying duties, but the facilities for training fell far short of requirements. But in December 1939, Canada, Australia and New Zealand agreed to set up flying training schools, partly staffed with RAF instructors. Southern Rhodesia also set up a training group, largely staffed and run by the RAF, while other facilities were provided

THE ARMED ROVERS

by South Africa. The first school was opened in Canada in April 1940, and RAF entrants were trained in this country as well as in South Africa and Southern Rhodesia. In addition, all these Commonwealth countries trained their own nationals. The success may be gauged by the figures of mid-1942, when the British Commonwealth was producing 11,000 pilots and 17,000 other aircrew members each year. Other RAF pilots were trained in the USA under the scheme inaugurated by General H.H. 'Hap' Arnold. The Germans and the Italians could not match this output, and indeed were seriously handicapped by shortage of petrol in training their aircrews as the war progressed.

The main problem besetting the expansion of flying training in the UK and the Commonwealth during the early stages of the war was the shortage of flying instructors. The Operational Training Units especially needed to be staffed with operationally experienced pilots, but the maritime strike squadrons were suffering such heavy casualties that only a trickle of men were completing their tours. Naturally, commanding officers of squadrons were reluctant to part with their most experienced men before they had squeezed the last vestiges of service from them.

Meanwhile, the shortage of flying and ground instructors in the stages before operational training was met by a form of compromise in the RAF generally. Some of the best pupil pilots, air observers and wireless operator/air gunners were 'creamed off' as soon as they had obtained their wings or brevets and 'ploughed back' into the training system as flying or ground instructors, after they had taken suitable courses. Many of these men were resentful when they were told that they had been selected to become instructors, since they felt that they had joined the RAF to fight and not to teach. Nevertheless, about half the wartime flying instructors were found in this way, and a greater proportion of the ground instructors. The remainder of the instructors were pre-war or 'tour-expired' men.

All those who joined the aircrew branch of the RAF in the UK during wartime first entered Flying Training Command. Every man was a volunteer for flying duties, even though he might have been conscripted into military service generally. Most of these volunteers went first to a Receiving Centre for two weeks. The pilots and air observers (who were later called navigators, when the various functions were split up into specialist categories) then passed on to an Initial Training Wing (ITW) for about two months, where they were called 'cadets'. Here the instruction consisted of a general introduction to service life and training in drill and discipline, together with elementary work on technical subjects such as navigation, armaments and signals. Some entrants were excused this initial training, however; these were the cadets who had passed through equivalent courses at one of the University Air Squadrons.

THE STRIKE AIRCREWS

The pupil pilots then moved on to Elementary Flying Training School (EFTS), where they continued learning ground subjects and underwent basic training on single-engined aircraft for about six weeks. Those who went solo and then completed their course were sent to Service Flying Training School (SFTS), where there was further ground training coupled with flying more advanced aircraft, either single – or twin-engined. Those who qualified were awarded their wings, which were usually received with intense pride. The pilots who trained abroad and then arrived in the UK were usually sent to Advanced Flying Unit (AFU) for about a month, in order to improve their skills and familiarise them with flying in the conditions of a wartime and blacked-out Britain.

Meanwhile, the pupil air observers went to Air Observers Navigation School (AONS), where they received detailed instruction on the ground as well as navigation instruction in the air. Then they moved on to Bombing and Gunnery Schools (B & GS), where they learned the theories of bombing and air gunnery, and practised in the air. They also became adept with the Morse code key. After qualification, they were awarded their brevets. The wireless operator/air gunners did not pass through ITW but were sent to Wireless School and then on to Bombing and Gunnery School, where they also received their brevets.

After qualification, all aircrew were either commissioned or given the rank of sergeant. Those who were selected as strike aircrew for the maritime squadrons left Flying Training Command as soon as they received their wings or brevets and then came under the direction of Coastal Command for further training. The next course was at a School of General Reconnaissance (S of GR). At the outbreak of war there was only one of these schools, at Thorney Island in Sussex, and this was soon moved to Squires Gate in Lancashire. Pressure was relieved by the creation of two schools abroad, one at George in South Africa's Cape Province and the other at Charlottetown in Canada's Prince Edward Island. The course, which lasted about three months, concentrated on practice in long-range navigation over the sea, using such methods as astro-navigation.

The next stage for the strike aircrews was Operational Training Unit (OTU). It was here that the pilots, air observers and wireless operator/air gunners met each other, often for the first time, and formed their crews. They were also introduced to their operational aircraft and began to fly in them, while receiving some instruction in the operational conditions to expect on the squadrons. Casualties began to mount at this stage, even before the crews began operations. It is estimated that about fifteen per cent of RAF aircrew losses occurred during training. The majority of these were at OTUs, when the men were training on aircraft which were more difficult to fly, especially at night, and were

THE ARMED ROVERS

faster than the machines on which they had trained previously. Accidents occurred when practising take-offs, when flying or landing on one engine, or perhaps crashing into cloud-covered hills as a result of navigational errors. There was also over-intensive use of aircraft at OTUs, resulting in engine failure.

In May 1940 there was only one OTU available for the landplanes of Coastal Command, at Silloth in Cumberland. Throughout the war, Coastal Command's OTUs opened and closed with surprising rapidity. In the spring of 1942 the situation was as follows:

1 OTU	Silloth, Cumberland	Hudsons
2 OTU	Catfoss, Yorkshire	Blenheims and Beaufighters
3 OTU	Cranwell, Lincolnshire	Whitleys and Wellingtons
4 OTU	Invergordon, Ross & Cromarty	Flying boats
5 OTU	Turnberry, Ayrshire	Beauforts
6 OTU	Thornaby, Yorkshire	Hudsons
7 OTU	Limavady, Londonderry	Wellingtons
8 OTU	Fraserburgh, Aberdeen	Spitfires (for photo reconnaissance)

Most aircrews of the maritime strike squadrons received their operational training in the UK but, in late 1941, attempts were made to create additional OTUs abroad. This was partly in response to the need for strike squadrons in the eastern Mediterranean to help counter the Italians, and for similar squadrons in the Indian Ocean as defence against the advancing Japanese. Debert in Nova Scotia was formed for Hudson aircrews, but there were insufficient instructors and output remained small until late 1942. Patricia Bay in British Columbia was selected to train Beaufort aircrews, but lack of equipment and instructors resulted in delays. Indeed, this unit was converted into No. 32 Operational Squadron for several months from December 1941 after the alarming successes of the Japanese in the Pacific, and all training was halted. Nicosia in Cyprus was opened in February 1944, mainly for Beaufighter aircrews.

After OTU, some strike aircrews passed directly to operational squadrons; others had to qualify on yet another course. This was the Torpedo Training Unit (TTU), where the pilot learnt the difficult art of dropping torpedoes against fixed and moving targets, having first studied the theory of the subject. In May 1940 there was only one TTU in the UK, at Abbotsinch in Ayrshire, which trained both Coastal Command and the Fleet Air Arm, although torpedo development took place at Gosport in Hampshire.

Abroad, Patricia Bay in Canada developed a torpedo training course as part of its OTU. In addition, another unit was set up in Egypt, and this assumes particular importance in this narrative. This was Shallufa

THE STRIKE AIRCREWS

on the Bitter Lakes, near Suez. At the end of 1940, Shallufa was formed as a headquarters for maritime Wellingtons in the Mediterranean. It became a Wellington OTU in early 1941, and Beauforts began to appear later that year. By March 1943, Shallufa became No. 5 Middle East Training School and thereafter was the main training centre for maritime strike crews in the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. The pilots, who were already experienced in their aircraft, were taught tactical approaches at low level on target ships, when flying in various formations. They learnt how to evade enemy fire by side-slipping, diving under the bows of their target, and then skidding away with flat turns over the surface of the sea. They also trained in work at night, guided on to targets by their air-to-surface vessel radar, as well as by homing devices installed in Wellingtons which then dropped flares to silhouette the enemy ships against the skyline for torpedo attacks.

The crews who reached this stage were at last allowed to join an operational strike squadron, but training did not cease. Squadron training was very patchy and inadequate during the latter part of 1940 and much of 1941, but thereafter became steadily more intensive. In fact, the learning and training processes never stopped, except when the men flew on operational flights, and even then the pilot's performance was assessed and the navigator's log analysed if the aircraft returned safely.

A typical syllabus for training on a strike squadron in late 1943 included night flying, formation flying, single-engined flying, practice with air-to-surface vessel radar, controlled approaches using various homing methods, torpedo dropping, air-to-air gunnery, mock combat with single-engined fighters, rocket firing, and long-range navigation exercises. On the ground there was the Link Trainer and continued lectures on a multitude of subjects such as navigation, photography, meteorology, bombing, gunnery, pyrotechnics, ship recognition, wireless and signals, first aid, and intelligence concerning the enemy. Some subjects were covered again and again, but there was a constant stream of new information which was eagerly assimilated by the aircrews. Excellent journals were issued monthly by the Air Ministry, giving details and photographs of actions undertaken by maritime squadrons and containing well-informed articles on technical subjects.

By 1944 the performance of each man in his squadron training programme was listed monthly on standard forms, and each was expected to satisfy Wing or Group Headquarters. Such measures may have seemed irksome when the men were risking their lives in some of the most dangerous flying activities in the RAF, but there is little doubt that the emphasis on continued training improved chances of survival as well as effectiveness against the enemy.

As the training of strike aircrews intensified, new aircraft were

THE ARMED ROVERS

provided, although at first these were not ideal for such dangerous operations. At the outbreak of war, Coastal Command squadrons were being equipped with Lockheed Hudsons as replacements for their Avro Ansons. This American aircraft proved excellent when employed on short-range reconnaissance and anti-submarine work, but some of the Hudson squadrons were pressed into service for daylight and night bombing attacks against shipping, tasks to which the machines were not well suited. Other aircraft used by the strike squadrons were those which the other Commands no longer wanted. In the summer of 1940, three squadrons of Bristol Blenheim IVs were transferred to Coastal Command and used for bombing enemy shipping, while other squadrons at home and overseas were equipped with these machines and employed on the same work. In the summer of 1942, Handley Page Hampdens were converted into torpedo bombers and handed over to Coastal Command, being employed mainly along the Norwegian coastline. Beauforts, Hudsons, Blenheims and Hampdens were too lightly armed for anti-shipping work and suffered very heavy casualties, especially when they were not escorted by long-distance fighters. They were remarkable, not for their performance, but because the crews achieved so much with such inadequate machines.

In December 1940, the Bristol Beaufighter IC began to replace the Blenheim VIF as a long-range fighter in Coastal Command, but it was a year before this new aircraft began to enter service with maritime squadrons in the Mediterranean, where it was first employed in the Western Desert. The machine was an adaptation of the Beaufort, but far more heavily armed, and with the crew reduced to two, the navigator performed the additional function of wireless operator. It was followed by the Beaufighter VIC. The combination of Beaufighters with torpedo-carrying Beauforts began to transform the effectiveness of daylight attacks against Axis shipping in the late summer of 1942. Then the Beaufighter TFX, specially designed as a combination fighter and torpedo bomber, began to enter service in the early summer of 1943, both in the UK and the Mediterranean. It was a most effective anti-shipping weapon, and became even more devastating when fitted with rockets a few months later. The ubiquitous Vickers Wellington was also adapted for anti-shipping work. In December 1941, some Wellington ICs were converted to carry two torpedoes and engaged on anti-shipping work in the Mediterranean. They operated primarily at night, equipped with air-to-surface vessel radar and homing radar, and achieved considerable success.

The men who flew in these anti-shipping aircraft considered that they were above average in both intelligence and enterprise. All wanted to acquit themselves well, even though they clearly understood the risks that they faced, and their awareness of danger was sometimes covered

THE STRIKE AIRCREWS

by a veneer of humour and cynicism. Although all were volunteers and most had joined the service for only the duration of the war, they could be regarded as tough and highly skilled fighting men. Each man knew that it was not only his own life that he risked, for every crew member depended on the high standard of skill and judgement of others. Indeed, the sense of comradeship was a major factor in continuing to face danger. The men believed, with some justification, that they were the best crews in the Allied air forces.

The tasks that the strike squadrons performed in the Mediterranean were multifarious, although little has been written about them. The Beaufort and Beaufighter squadrons included in their collective repertoires such sorties as torpedo attacks, anti-shipping bombing attacks, cannon and machine gun attacks on escort vessels, rocket attacks, mine laying, fighter escorts, long-range fighter attacks against enemy air transports, bombing of ports, and even strafing of enemy ground troops and transports. Their role was almost always aggressive rather than defensive. A large number of the aggressive sorties were called 'Armed Rovers' and entered as such in the Operations Record books. The operations were guided by an astonishingly effective combination of British Intelligence and photographs taken by reconnaissance aircraft. In spite of the heavy losses suffered by the squadrons, the damage they inflicted on the enemy was enormous.

Nowadays, most of the men who survived their tours in the anti-shipping squadrons or their experiences as prisoners-of-war have retired from their post-war occupations. Some of them have joined squadron or other associations and meet regularly to discuss their experiences or hear news about former comrades. Although they are patriotic to a man, they are not jingoistic nor do they seek to glorify war. What they remember is something which some of those without experience of war find difficult to believe or accept: a heroism, trust and comradeship in their RAF careers which the days of peace have seldom provided with such intensity. This book relates only a few of the actions which these men undertook, but they are representative of the work of the 'Armed Rovers'.

2

AN ELECTRICAL STORM

Beaufort I serial N1091 of 39 Squadron had been in the air for about five hours when the crew saw the line squall ahead. They had taken off at 0805 hours on 2 November 1941 from Baggush Satellite, near Mersa Matruh in Egypt, with orders to carry out an 'Armed Rover' on one of a new series of operations codenamed 'Plug', with the object of attacking enemy shipping off the coast of south-west Greece. It was known that supply vessels were slipping down this coast before making their dash across the Mediterranean with fuel and war materials for the Axis forces in North Africa.

The Bristol Beaufort, a twin-engined monoplane with a crew of four, was carrying only two 500lb general purpose bombs. Although the aircraft could carry another 1,000lb, the bomb load had been reduced in order to extend the range, since the flight was expected to last for nearly seven hours. This was near the limit of the range, even when nursing the aircraft along at its economical airspeed of 135 knots. Although the Beaufort had been designed as a torpedo bomber, the crews had not been trained on such work, nor were torpedo racks available for the aircraft at Baggush. In fact, the squadron was in the course of converting on to new Beauforts from the Martin Marylands which the crews had flown on reconnaissance and bombing attacks from bases in Egypt since the previous January.

By November 1941, 39 Squadron was the principal anti-shipping strike squadron operating from Egypt. It formed part of 234 Wing, which consisted of three squadrons. Of the other two, 203 Squadron was equipped with Blenheim IVs and engaged primarily on photo-reconnaissance (although the aircraft were sometimes used for anti-shipping work), while 230 Squadron flew Sunderlands on anti-submarine patrols and was also equipped with some Dornier 22 floatplanes flown by Yugoslavian aircrews. This Wing was the main element of 201 (Naval Co-operation) Group, based at Alexandria in the same building as the Naval C-in-C's headquarters.

The Beaufort was flown by Flight Lieutenant Reggie A. Lenton, a twenty-seven-year-old pilot from Reading who had joined the RAF with a short service commission in May 1939. His navigator was

AN ELECTRICAL STORM

Sergeant Edgar R.R. Cerely, a twenty-year-old from Sanderstead in Surrey; he had also applied for a short service commission as a pilot shortly before the war but had been told to reapply as an air observer, which he did the day after war was declared. The other two men were also wartime volunteers: Sergeant H. John Langley from Brighton sat in the wireless operator's seat, while Sergeant W.J. MacConnachie from Leith occupied the mid-upper turret. It was a scratch crew, for they had not flown together before, although Lenton had been in 39 Squadron since August 1940 and Cerely since March 1941. Indeed, Cerely had been taken off flying two months before, when he found that flying at 30,000 feet on reconnaissance missions in unpressurised Marylands pained his ears and even affected his eyesight. It was not until he complained of inactivity to his commanding officer, Wing Commander R.B. Cox, that he was given the opportunity of a low-level sortie in the Beaufort.

The crew had seen nothing on their flight and were returning with their bombs. Ahead was a long black cloud, low and almost straight. They had no option but to fly through it, for it barred their route home and fuel was running low. Base was over two hours' flying time away, to the south-east. When they entered the line squall, rain and hail lashed down and the Beaufort bounced unpleasantly in the turbulence. The wind strengthened considerably and there was dense black cloud above, with a succession of violent flashes from forked lightning. The thunder was so loud that they could hear the crashes above the roar of the two 1,130hp Taurus engines. But this unnerving experience lasted for only about five minutes and the sturdy Beaufort flew through the squall into clearer air. The crew continued their course for home, or so they thought, but with cloud above and poor visibility below.

After a few minutes, Cerely noticed that the magnetic compass of the 'course setting' bombsight in his nose compartment showed the wrong course. He thought at first that Lenton must have set the wrong course on his P.4 pilot's compass, and clambered back to check. There was a discrepancy of nearly sixty degrees between the two compasses. He went back into the nose and checked the hand-held bearing compass, and this showed yet another course. It was evident that electrical discharges from the storm had affected the magnetism of the aircraft itself, resulting in enormous deviations of the compass needles. This was a very serious matter, for the magnetic compasses provided the only method of steering a course. Lenton had continuously adjusted his gyro to agree with his magnetic compass. They had no sun compass and in any event the sun was not visible. They were outside the range of radio direction finding. Now they were not sure of their heading.

After about an hour and a half of worrying uncertainty, mountains loomed ahead. Cerely could only guess that it must be Crete, well to the

THE ARMED ROVERS

east of their intended track. Lenton had no option. One engine was starting to give trouble. There was a lot of sea between them and base, and the fuel tanks were almost empty. They had been in the air for seven hours and could not get home. 'I'll have to put it down,' he told the crew, and turned slightly towards a bay they could see on the shore ahead.

Cerely came out of the nose and strapped himself into the seat beside Lenton. Langley left the wireless operator's seat and sat on the floor of the fuselage against the main bulwark, facing backwards. MacConnachie backed out of the turret and sat on the Elsan pan by the entrance hatch on the port side, also facing backwards.

'We've still got our bombs,' Lenton said suddenly, when they were on the final approach. Cerely unstrapped himself and went back into the nose. He made sure that the bombs were not armed and released them into the sea. Then he scrambled back and stood beside Lenton. There were only a few seconds left and he did not have time to strap himself back into the seat. All he could do was to hold on to the panel on the starboard side and hope for the best, although it seemed unlikely that he could survive.

The mountains towered above but Lenton flew straight towards them, low over the sea. The beach of the bay was curved and quite narrow, only about thirty yards wide. Lenton put the Beaufort down into the sea, about 300 yards from the shore. The aircraft smacked the water, shuddered and rose again. Then it came down for the last time and skidded over the surf to the beach. But the beach was not sand. Instead, it consisted of smooth pebbles, with some stones as big as ostrich eggs. The Beaufort slid over them, with flying sparks coming from its belly. It ground to a violent stop and the nose broke away. Cerely shot through the opening while Lenton jerked forward against his Sutton harness and smashed his forehead against the edge of the instrument panel.

Fortunately, the aircraft did not catch fire. Langley and MacConnachie, who were not harmed, helped Lenton from his seat and away from the wreckage. Blood was pouring from the pilot's scalp. They went forward to look at Cerely, who was lying sprawled on his back, arched over a piece of wreckage. His trousers had been torn off and his eyes were closed.

'C's had it,' said MacConnachie, almost nonchalantly. The navigator was known to his fellow sergeants merely by the initial of his surname. MacConnachie was a tough and resourceful Scotsman, who was to demonstrate his almost indestructible qualities in the months ahead.

But Cerely was not dead. His thighs and buttocks were badly lacerated and he had been knocked out. He heard the air gunner's