

Information sheet no 005

Eugene Esmonde VC

Born 1st March 1909, at Thurgoland, Wortley, Yorkshire. Eugene Esmonde was commissioned as a Pilot Officer in the RAF on the 28th December 1928 and was posted to the Fleet Air Arm, serving in the Mediterranean until the expiry of his commission five years later. On leaving the RAF, Esmonde joined Imperial Airways as a First Officer in 1934. Esmonde flew the mail carrying routes between London and Glasgow. Later, as the company expanded its service to the Middle East and India, he flew on regular service between Rangoon and Mandalay in Burma. He survived a serious accident when his aircraft crashed into Irrawaddy. He was promoted to Captain on the 3rd July 1937, and was one of the first to fly the giant flying boats which introduced the first airmail service between the UK and Australia. On the 3rd May 1939, Esmonde resigned from the company to take up a commission as a Lieutenant Commander in the Fleet Air Arm.

Esmonde survived the sinking of the aircraft carrier HMS *Courageous* in the Western Approaches on the 17th September 1939. Following this, he was posted to RNAS Lee-on-Solent and other naval air stations in the south of England and was later appointed to the aircraft carrier HMS *Victorious*. On 24th May 1941, he led a night attack on the German battleship *Bismarck* with a squadron of nine Swordfish aircraft. They flew 120 miles in bad weather and headwinds to attack the ship with torpedoes. They were attacked with intense anti-aircraft fire from *Bismarck*, but scored one direct hit amidships on the starboard side. Esmonde received the Distinguished Service Order for this action on the 11th February 1942.

Esmonde's next appointment was on HMS *Ark Royal*, and his air squadron rescued members of the ship's company when the ship was sunk off Gibraltar on the 13th November 1941. After this, Esmonde returned to Lee-on-Solent until 12th February 1942. This was the day when the German battlecruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, with the cruiser *Prinz Eugen* along with a strong escort of surface craft made their 'Channel dash' from Brest back to Germany.

In the Straits of Dover, Esmonde led 825 Squadron of six Swordfish aircraft to attack the German ships. The squadron encountered an intense hail of fire from the German ships off Calais in their desperate but unsuccessful attempt to damage or sink the enemy vessels. Just after releasing the torpedo, Esmonde's plane sustained a direct hit but he continued the run-in towards his target until the plane burst into flames and crashed into the sea. The attack continued and all the Swordfish aircraft were also shot down. Only five men survived, four of them wounded. The four officers received the DSO, while the sole surviving rating received the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal. Admiral Ramsey stated that 'the gallant sortie of these six Swordfish constitutes one of the finest exhibitions of self-sacrifice and devotion to duty that the war has yet witnessed'. Esmonde was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross on 3rd March 1942. About seven weeks after the attack, his body, still in the lifejacket he had been wearing, was washed ashore in the Thames Estuary near the River Medway. Esmonde was buried at Woodlands Cemetery, Gillingham, Kent, on the 30th April 1942.