



# SNO Number One

## The Extraordinary Story of Stan Keane DSC

By Graeme Lunn

Walking nervously out to the CT-4 Airtrainer of No.1 Flying Training School, RAAF Point Cook, I made sure I walked at ninety degrees to the flight line as we had been taught in the groundschool Airmanship classes. It was April 1981, I was lucky to have been selected for 114 Pilots Course off *Swan*, and this was my very first flight. A freshly-minted General List Lieutenant of only three months seniority, my instructor for sortie GF1 was the base's Senior Naval Officer.

Naval aviators within a RAAF unit on a RAAF Base are almost inevitably quite junior in the hierarchy. A designation of Senior Naval Officer, however, amplifies that officer's responsibilities as the nominated representative of the Senior Service and is a title well respected by the parent unit. To be a SNO is a proud appellation for any young aviator.

As we settled into level flight for the Area Famil, heading south over Port Phillip Bay, I pulled out my carefully prepared area chart and held it up in the approved seaman officer manner suitable for a ship's chart table, north to the top. The SNO, with a sigh audible over the noise of the 210hp Continental piston engine, reached over and rotated my chart one hundred and eighty degrees while saying "Aviation Lesson Number One, charts are held oriented to the direction of flight".

No doubt that very patient SNO - thank you Lieutenant 'Terry' Morgan SLEX (P) - who gave me my first flying lesson forty-one years ago, would have been proud to be in a lineage that included many SNOs with enviable active service records. Perhaps none were more illustrious than the career of his 1948 predecessor, RAAF Point Cook's SNO Number One.

In May 1948 Lieutenant-Commander (A)(P) Stanley 'Stan' Keane DSC, nominated to be Chief Naval Ground Instructor at the Elementary and Service Flying Training Schools called for in the RAN's 1947 Aviation Plan, arrived at RAAF Point Cook as that base's first appointed Senior Naval Officer. Promoted Commander the following month Stan was SNO and CNGI until October 1949, when he handed over to Lieutenant Bill Henley DSC and returned to the UK with his wife Ethel and four year old Richard.

Stanley Keane, a Curate's son, was born on 16 July 1912 and educated at Framingham College in Suffolk. Commissioned a Royal Air Force Probationary Pilot Officer in 1931, Stan became a flying instructor in 1935. On 20 February 1939 Flight Lieutenant Keane relinquished his RAF short service commission on appointment to the Air Branch of the Royal Navy and became Lieutenant Keane. Only three months later the Fleet Air Arm returned to full Admiralty control, facing the coming conflict woefully equipped with barely marginal front-line aircraft.

Flying with the Swordfish I equipped 818 Squadron, Stan was to be heavily engaged in the hastily impro-

*Top. Korean winter in Feb 1951 - HMS Glory with Stan as her CMDR (Air).  
Left. Stan Keane (right) and his Canadian Observer Terry Goddard (left) aboard Ark Royal.*



*Swordfish Mk.1 of the Fleet Air Arm, which Stan Keane flew off various RN carriers.*

vised fight for Norway after the Germans invaded on 9 April 1940. Lacking available fighter aircraft *Furious* - upgraded from being the fleet training carrier after the loss of *Courageous* - could only embark the eighteen reconnaissance/torpedo bomber Swordfish of 816 and 818 Squadrons from *Landrail*/Naval Air Station Machrihanish. With four escorting destroyers *Furious* rendezvoused with units of the Home Fleet on the morning of 10 April. The three battleships, three cruisers and sixteen destroyers around *Furious* set course for a flying-off position to attack shipping in Trondheim Fjord.

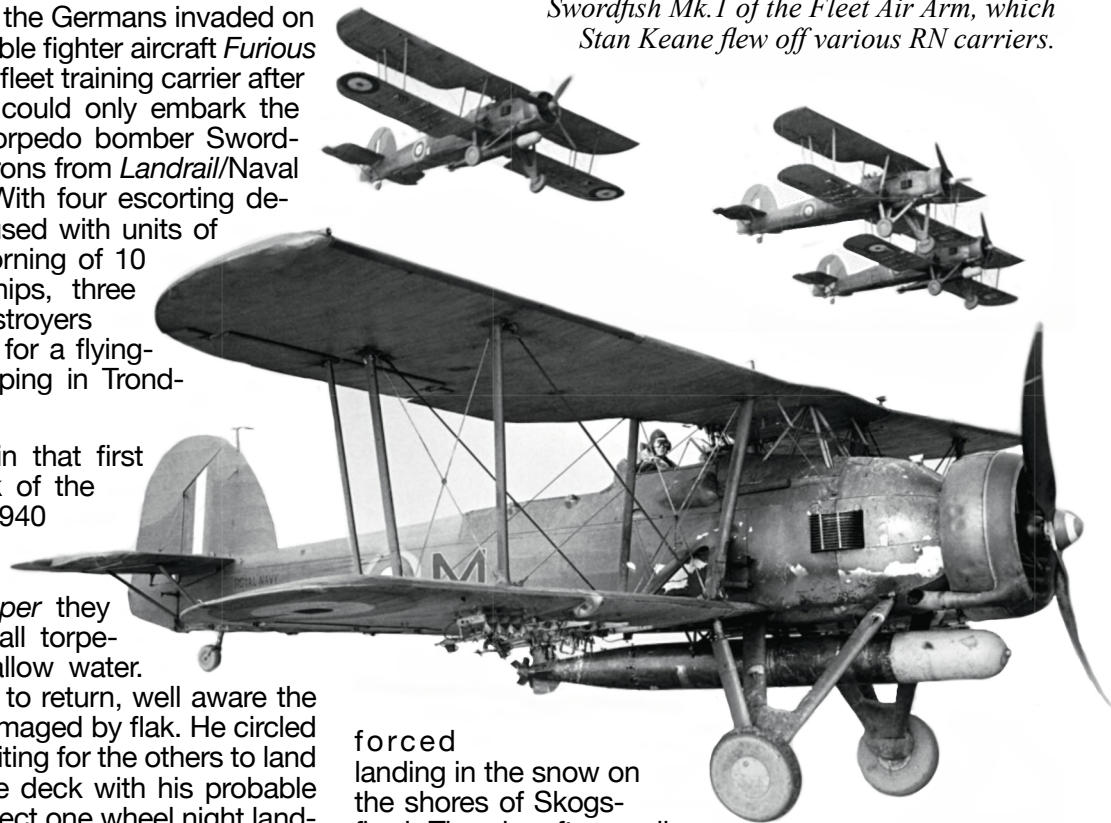
Stan and his crew were in that first large scale torpedo attack of the war mounted on 11 April 1940 by all eighteen aircraft. Failing to find the reported heavy cruiser *Admiral Hipper* they attacked a destroyer but all torpedoes grounded in the shallow water. Stan's aircraft was the first to return, well aware the undercarriage had been damaged by flak. He circled *Furious* for over an hour waiting for the others to land on to avoid obstructing the deck with his probable crash. He then made a perfect one wheel night landing on a wildly pitching deck. Not only were these the first shots in action for the squadron but for many it was their first night deck landing.

The days that followed were ones of seeking targets in twisting fiords among plunging mountains as snow squalls and fog often hid their targets, each other, and sometimes 'mother' as they groped back to her heaving deck in the heavy seas. Six out of seven aircraft, including Stan's, were damaged by heavy flak as they attacked German ships in Narvik on 12 April. The CO was shot down and one aircraft made a forced landing. All the injured crew were recovered by the destroyer *Grenade*.

The battleship *Warspite* on 13 April catapulted her own embarked float-fitted Swordfish from 700 Squadron for reconnaissance and gunfire spotting as she led nine destroyers into Ofotfjord, while Stan and the rest of his squadron 'dive' bombed the waiting Kriegsmarine destroyers from under the low cloud base of 800 feet. Two aircraft were lost. That 700 Squadron Swordfish went on to bomb U-64, the first of many to be sunk from the air over the coming years.

On 15 April Stan was in a flight of three from 818 Squadron to strike at eleven Ju52s flying from the frozen Lake Hartvig. Their 250lb bombs blasted airframes and holed the ice making the temporary airstrip unusable. For three days *Furious* anchored in Tromsø harbour but continued to launch her aircraft in the appalling weather. Sailing on 18 April *Furious* was attacked by air with the near misses damaging her propeller shafts and reducing her to a maximum 20 knots.

Tasked with a reconnaissance ahead of the damaged carrier on 19 April Stan could not find her again in a blinding snowstorm so was compelled to make a



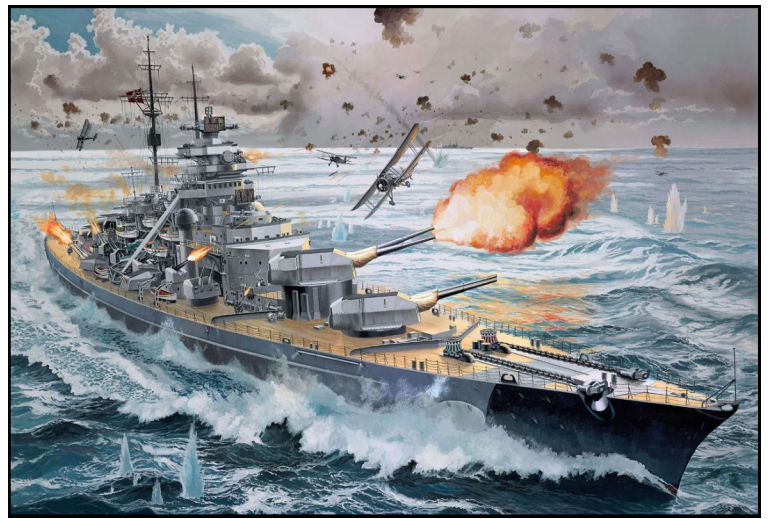
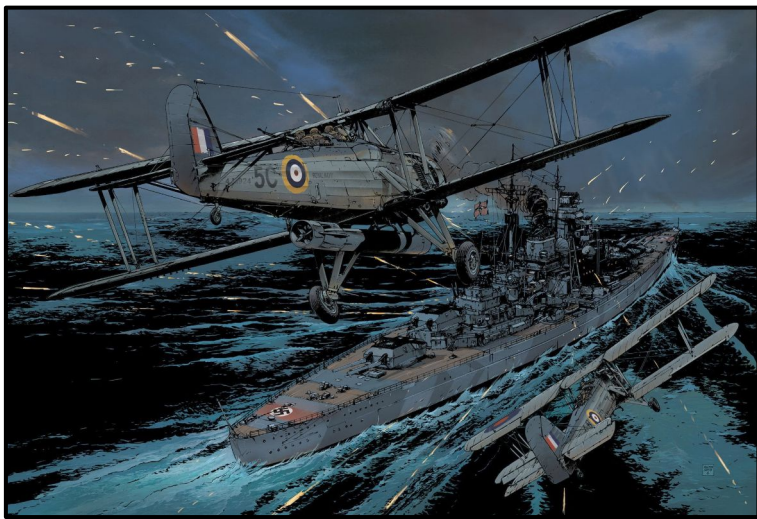
forced landing in the snow on the shores of Skogsfjord. The aircraft was dismantled by Royal Norwegian Navy air mechanics and the unhurt crew were ferried back to the carrier.

Relieved by *Ark Royal* and *Glorious* on 26 April *Furious* withdrew back to Scapa Flow in the Orkneys. After two weeks of fighting only nine of the eighteen aircraft had survived to disembark to *Sparrowhawk*/Naval Air Station Hatston - and each of those nine had flak damage. Stan was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for 'daring and resource in the conduct of hazardous and successful operations by the Fleet Air Arm on the coast of Norway'.

Those hazards continued in June with operations in the English Channel during the evacuations from France flying armed reconnaissance and anti E-boat patrols from RAF Thorney Island in West Sussex. On 18 June 1940 818 Squadron embarked on *Ark Royal* for the Mediterranean. These next months into early 1941 included unsuccessful strikes against the French battleship *Strasbourg* and the Italian battleship *Littorio*. There were Malta convoys to protect from submarines, Genoa to be bombed and mines were laid in the La Spezia naval dockyard.

Ordered into the Atlantic Stan Keane's was one of several possible crews who scored the crucial torpedo strikes against *Bismarck* on 26 May 1941. With his Observer Sub-Lieutenant (A)(O) Rene 'Terry' Goddard and Telegraphist Air Gunner Petty Officer (A) Douglas Milliner, Stan had already flown Swordfish 5K on a morning reconnaissance but had not participated in the disastrous first attack by 820 Squadron that mistakenly attacked *Sheffield* in the afternoon. Still flying 5K Stan was a sub-flight leader in that evening's final desperate strike by all *Ark Royal*'s fifteen remaining Swordfish of 810, 818 and 820 Squadrons to slow down the rapidly escaping *Bismarck*.





*Paintings of the strike against the Bismarck on 26 May 1941 capture a little of the extraordinary valour of the aircrews involved, flying obsolete canvas covered relics against the most modern battleship of the era. The attack was pressed home by determined aircrew in appalling weather at point blank range. Swordfish 4C, for example, returned with no less than 175 holes in it and both the pilot and TAG wounded. For a detailed account of the Bismarck strikes read Mark Horan's 'With Gallantry and Determination. The Story of the Torpedoing of the Bismarck.' See [here](#).*

The handlers, assisted by volunteers, ranged the aircraft efficiently despite green water on a flight deck that was pitching 60 feet and rolling 20 degrees. It was raining with a 600 foot ceiling and only 0.5nm visibility. Fuel shortages meant there were no escort or plane guard destroyers and, fortunately, U-556 had no torpedoes left when she saw Ark Royal through her periscope. With the deck well outside normal wartime flying limits aircrew willingly accepted that the already hazardous undertaking was now even graver. At 19:10 Swordfish 5K launched. Terry Goddard recounts the sortie:

*"There's green water coming over the bow. In my aircraft - Swordfish 5K - Stan Keane was the pilot, I was the navigator and Milliner was the Air Gunner. He was responsible for working the radio, I'm responsible for getting us there and Stan is responsible for flying the aircraft and carrying out the attack... The bow was going up and down 60ft. It was raining, windy and the ship was rolling and pitching but...we were airborne before we passed the island..."*

*The whole aircraft shook as if there were a number of express trains roaring by [editors note: these were Bismarck's 15" salvoes as she fired on Sheffield]...we had found her. So, down we went. Ice was peeling off the wings, couldn't see a bloody thing. The altimeter is spinning, spinning, spinning and then we break into the clear about 600ft and there's Bismarck on our starboard bow. She was a fire-spitting monster. Everything was coming at us and she was illuminated...awesome. This ship was just magnificent. It looked exactly like a battleship*

*should, I mean scary and everything, but just a beautiful ship.*

*Once the attack has started it's all about the pilot. The Observer and the Air Gunner, we just stand by and get really excited watching what is going on. You are not thinking you are going to be killed, you're thinking you are going to hit the bastard and that's it...the more you frig around, the more chance they get to hit you, so we just went straight in. We got as low on the deck as we could and went straight in. Bismarck was on the port side and she just got bigger and bigger. The flak is bursting over our head. Well above us. The small arms fire is pretty well all around us - and hitting us every once in a while - but we get in to drop the torpedo...do a quick turn away.*

*Looking back shortly after the turn I see a large black and white explosion on the Bismarck. It is high and wide. Obviously it is a torpedo hit. There is no other aircraft anywhere near us and it is no doubt it was the torpedo we had just dropped. I tell Stan, he grunts - he's busy doing various manoeuvres...I give a message to the Air Gunner that we have scored a hit...Ark Royal requests us to repeat the message. Then we climb back into the clag."*

*'Bismarck firing a salvo during the Battle of Denmark Strait. In the following days there was powerful motivation amongst RN aircrew to avenge HMS Hood, which had been destroyed in that engagement. .*







**Left:** Survivors from *Bismarck* struggle in the icy water alongside *HMS Dorsetshire*, a chilling scene witnessed by Stan Keane and his crew as they circled overhead, ready to strike the ship again if necessary. Only 116 men survived from the complement of over 2000.

“When we arrived King George V opened fire on us - idiots! - and *Bismarck*, that formerly magnificent vessel, was a pathetic hulk...The seas surrounding *Bismarck* was filling up with bobbing bodies. Staring down in horror I saw the carnage continue: salvo after salvo hitting *Bismarck* and claiming survivors in the sea around her.

Of course *Bismarck* had to be sunk and the *Hood* avenged; this was brutal, not at all pleasant to watch - savage revenge? Or was it the RN's suppressed guilt that the cancellation of three *Hood* refits had left the battlecruiser vulnerable?

I did, with mixed feelings, watch *Bismarck* sink; her list to port picked up - clearly she was going - and then her stern went down, together with the *Flaming Red Ensign*. Then the bow reared up, as if to say: ‘Up Yours!’

With nothing to do we jettisoned our torpedoes and returned to Ark.”

Mentioned in Dispatches, Stan's next posting was in command of 786 Squadron, a Torpedo and Reconnaissance Training unit. When all six aircraft of 825 Squadron from RAF Manston, led by Lieutenant-Commander Eugene Esmonde VC, were lost attacking *Scharnhorst*, *Gneisenau* and *Prinz Eugen* in the ‘Channel Dash’ of 12 February 1942 the now Lieutenant-Commander (A) Keane was posted in as that squadron's replacement Commanding Officer.

Re-grouped and re-equipped with *Swordfish* IIs Stan embarked from *Sparrowhawk* with three aircraft and five crews to the escort carrier *Avenger*. Also embarked were eighteen *Sea Hurricanes* of 802 and 883 Squadrons to escort an Arctic Convoy. In September 1942 PQ.18, and the return convoy QP.14, were the first Russian convoys to be provided with an escort carrier. The Admiralty were determined there would be no repeat of June's PQ.17 when only thirteen out of thirty-six merchantmen survived to reach Archangel.

Arrayed against PQ.18 were 133 bombers, 99 torpedo aircraft and twelve U-boats. The escort force's fighters and guns accounted for forty-one aircraft.

The high sea state saw three of the aircraft crash while landing back onboard. In the briefing room there was initial reluctance to accept that there had been anything decisive from the claimed two or three hits. Then the shadowing *Sheffield* signalled that *Bismarck* had slowed and was turning back towards the approaching battleships, cruisers and destroyers and her inevitable destruction.

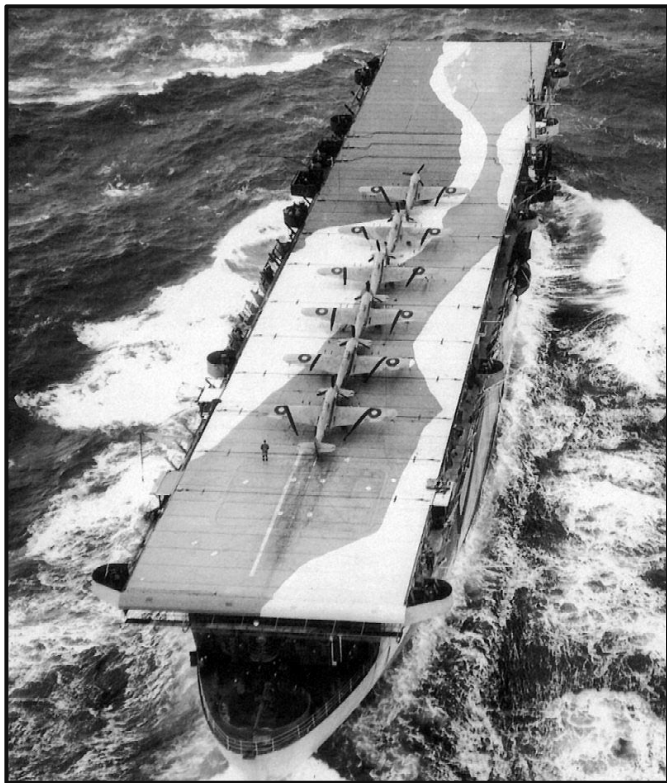
Stan himself never claimed he had scored the vital hit on *Bismarck*'s rudder. Perhaps he felt it was a group effort in which all played their role since, as *Bismarck* heeled violently to comb the torpedo tracks of one attack, she was then unwillingly exposing her sides to one of the other attacking sub-flights. His Observer had recorded their hit at 21:05, some ten minutes after the hit on the rudder is recorded in other sources.

A third strike force launched at 0930 the next morning in even worse weather. Terry Goddard with Stan in 5K continues the story:

*Arctic Convoy PQ.18 - Ammunition Ship Mary Luckenbach exploding as seen from Avenger's flight deck.*







*HMS Avenger during her escort duties of convoy PQ.18 with Sea Hurricanes on deck. It was a very small flight deck. By way of comparison, the area of the deck was only about 40% of Ark Royal's, or about 60% of the post-war Majestic/Melbourne's.*

Four U-boats were sunk with a Swordfish sharing in the sinking of U-589 with *Onslow* on 14 September. Sixteen U-boats had been sighted by the anti-submarine patrols and six attacks were made by Swordfish.

*Avenger*, with Rear-Admiral Burnett flying his flag in the AA cruiser *Scylla*, and her escorts 'only' lost thirteen out of thirty-nine merchantmen and on the return QP.14 lost three of fifteen. The necessity for embarked air power was clear in the reduced casualties, but sadly no further escort carriers could be spared

from other hard-pressed theaters of the war until February 1944.

The Swordfish of 825 Squadron were disembarked to make space for extra Sea Hurricane's as *Avenger* headed south where the fighters of 802 and 883 Squadron's were needed to provide air cover for Operation Torch. This was the invasion of North Africa whose first landings were on 8 November 1942. For 825 and Stan this proved a fortuitous escape as *Avenger* was sunk by U-155 west of Gibraltar on 15 November 1942 with only 12 survivors out of the 528 crew. Adding to the tragic history of 802 this was the third time that squadron had ceased to exist having already gone down with *Glorious* in June 1940, and then again with *Audacity* in December 1941.

Stan had disembarked back to *Sparrowhawk* on 26 September 1942, shortly afterwards taking his squadron on to RAF Thorney Island. The remainder of the year was spent operating under 16 Group RAF Coastal Command on English Channel anti-E-boat operations.

The inevitable but vital staff appointments for Stan followed in 1943 and 1944, first at *Merlin* under the Commodore Naval Air Stations and then at *Monck* under the Flag Officer Carrier Training and Administration. Here at *Monck* his Chief Staff Officer was Captain Edmund Anstice. In the final months of the war Stan was Acting-Commander (A) at *Sparrowhawk*/Naval Air Station Hatston and then at *Corncrake*/Naval Air Station Ballyhalbert.

Following duty with the RAF's Empire Flying School Stan proceeded to Australia on loan service in 1948 to help found an RAN Fleet Air Arm. Members of No.1 and No.2 Naval Air Pilots courses saw little of Stan, although Probationary Pilot Norman Lee (then nineteen) still recalls seventy-three years later a 'cheerful older chap' giving a talk about the Swordfish attack on *Bismarck*, and being impressed by the idea of a flight deck pitching 60 feet. With his extensive staff experience known at first hand by Anstice,



*A Sea Fury launching from HMS Glory in a Korean summer. Stan Keane was Commander (Air) of Glory, which was relieved on station by HMAS Sydney during her deployment.*



now heading the Aviation Planning Office twenty miles up the road in Melbourne, no doubt Stan was often called in to Navy Office for temporary duties.

Reverting to the RN Stan was posted to the light fleet carrier *Glory* as her Commander (Air). Following an intensive Mediterranean work up *Glory* sailed for Korean waters with the 14th Carrier Air Group of 804 (Sea Fury) and 812 (Firefly) Squadrons to relieve *Theseus* who was completing a seven month tour. The handover included a Sikorsky S-51 Dragonfly SAR helicopter promptly nicknamed 'The Thing' by the fixed-wing fixated CAG.

*Glory's* first war patrol coincided with the the communist's spring offensive. Commencing operations on 28 April 1951 a Sea Fury and pilot were lost that first day. There followed 107 sea days conducting nine war patrols with the last strike aircraft landing at 18:05 on 25 September. 'The Thing' had quickly proven it's worth when, on 14 May, it returned Stoker McPherson who fell overboard during a replenishment. This was the first Fleet Air Arm rescue by an embarked helicopter.

*Glory* berthed alongside *Sydney* in Kure, Japan, on 27 September to be relieved in turn. This handover also passed along 'The Thing', as well as very welcome cannon armed Firefly FR 5's. *Glory* sailed south for a much needed refit at Garden Island Dockyard with a crew anticipating the legendary Aussie welcome. Her CAG disembarked to *Albatross*/Naval Air Station Nowra on 22 October.

Landing the CAG back on in Jervis Bay on 2 January 1952 for deck landing practice, final farewells were made on 7 January. *Glory* sailed 51 sailors short due to the welcoming arms of Australia. Returning to Korean operations, escorted by *Warramunga*, 'The Thing' was welcomed back with alacrity when reluctantly returned by *Sydney* in Hong Kong. *Glory* commenced her tenth war patrol on 6 February.

On this second deployment the average of 50 sorties per day was maintained over *Glory's* five further war patrols. 106 sorties were flown on 17 March 1952, taking back the record for a light fleet carrier from *Sydney's* 89. An effort that almost certainly required Stan to fly one or two sorties himself. The 14th CAG - and Stan - in fourteen war patrols flew an outstanding 4,835 sorties. Losses were 27 aircraft and nine aircrew.

Rear-Admiral Scott-Moncreiff reported that: '*I consider HMS Glory and her Air Groups have made an outstanding contribution to the prestige of British naval aviation during her two spells in the Korean theatre.*' An accolade that all onboard deserved and one that would have been particularly welcomed by her Commander (Air).

After this further period of active service Stan was posted as the Commander at *Blackcap*/Naval Air Station Stretton. On 12 May 1954 the front page of the Manchester Evening News headlined 'War Hero Killed In Plane Crash'. Commander (P) Stan Keane DSC and Sub-Lieutenant (P) John Garston-Jones had been killed in a Harvard trainer of 1831 Squadron. It was believed control had been lost at low level in a practice forced landing.

His Commanding Officer, in epitaph for the 41 year old, held that:



Foam from the fire-extinguishers covers the crashed plane. In the background are houses on Chester Road about 30 yards away.

## War hero killed in plane crash





“His happy manner, his wit and his humour brought joy and happiness wherever he went. He was loyal, always considerate, always forgiving. I never heard him speak harshly of anyone and I am convinced that he met his death as he had lived, fearlessly and with a smile.”

## Eight Point Cook SNOs

### 1. Commander (P) Stan Keane DSC RN

**May 1948.** An experienced pre-war aviator Stan saw extensive action in Swordfish ashore and embarked from 1939. Prior to Point Cook he had been on the staff of the Empire Flying School and was Commander (Air) in *Glory* for her first two Korean deployments. Killed while flying in 1954.

### 2. Lieutenant (P) ‘Bill’ Henley DSC RN

**October 1949.** Bill had won his DSC for flying on the Arctic Convoys of 1944/45 off *Campania*, including sinking U-365. He won a second DSC leading Sea Venom strikes in the 1956 Suez Crisis from *Eagle*.

### 3. Lieutenant-Commander (P) Richard How RN

**February 1950.** Another pre-war aviator who had been a Walrus Flight Commander in the cruiser *Emerald*. The manning requirements for a Korean deployment to relieve *Glory* saw Richard volunteer to extend his loan service and he was posted from Point Cook to *Sydney* as her Flight Deck Officer.

### 4. Lieutenant-Commander (P) John Nunn RN

**May 1951.** Interestingly John flew a Walrus embarked in HMS (ex HMAS) *Albatross* in 1943. He

served aboard *Theseus* in Korea flying Fireflies with 810 Squadron. When *Theseus* handed over to *Glory* John had a pier head jump to Point Cook whilst alongside in Singapore. He was injured in a Wirraway forced landing out of Nowra in 1953.

### 5. Lieutenant (P) ‘Brassie’ Cooper RAN

**August 1952.** The first RAN SNO. Brassie was lucky to survive bailing out of his Sea Fury at 800 feet over enemy territory in Korea. Posted to No 8 Flying Instructors Course Brassie was one of the first two RAN QFIs to graduate from the RAAF’s Central Flying School. See *FlyBy* August 2022.

### 6. Lieutenant-Commander (P) Digby Johns RAN

**September 1953.** An ex-RAAF 453 Squadron pilot with 80+ Spitfire missions over Europe Digby flew a Sea Fury with 808 Squadron in Korea, and was that squadron’s Senior Pilot after he left Point Cook.

### 7. Lieutenant-Commander (P) Ian Hutchison RAN

**October 1953.** Ex-RAAF Ian had flown with the RAF’s 695 Squadron (Spitfire and Vultee Vengeance) in 1944/45. On joining the RAN he flew Fireflies and had been Senior Pilot 816 Squadron before posting to Point Cook. After serving as that base’s Maintenance Test Pilot Ian was posted on to the School of Land/Air Warfare.

### 8. Lieutenant (P) ‘Fred’ Lane RAN

**May 1955.** Flew with 805 in Korea and then trained as a Landing Signals Officer. Went to Point Cook as a QFI after No 13 Flying Instructors Course and was posted on to 851 Squadron. In the early 1960’s Fred also served as SNO RAAF Pearce and was the first RAN A1 QFI.

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*‘It is difficult to speak without emotion of the pluck and endurance of the young officers and men who flew their aircraft to such good effect. All were firing their first shot in action - whether torpedo, bomb or machine-gun; many made their first night landing (on a carrier) on April 11 and, undeterred by the loss of several of their shipmates, their honour and courage remained throughout as dazzling as the snow-covered mountains over which they so triumphantly flew.’*

Captain Thomas Troubridge (HMS *Furious*) speaking of his aircrew after the Norwegian Campaign.



*The 27,000 ton HMS Furious taking heavy seas over her flight deck whilst in company with the battleship HMS Warspite off Norway in April 1940.*