

*Chapter 5*

# Unrecognized Patriotic Sacrifice



neisenau — the name of the great battle cruiser — strikes fear in the bravest of the British forces. Heavily guarded, the magnificent killing machine, along with her sister ship, the Scharnhorst, sits in dry dock at Brest waiting impatiently for the day they are once again unleashed in the battles waging around them. These ships are the greatest threat to Britain and her allies. They have already wreaked havoc on the British fleet; No. 22 Squadron of Coastal Command is on constant standby to strike at any German naval activity, either at sea or in well-defended coastal ports. So, no one is surprised when the battle order is posted, stating “at all costs.”

Pilot Ken Campbell (Scottish) and his crew, Navigator Jim Scott (Canadian), Wireless Operator William Cecil Mulliss

## *Incredible Tales of the RCAF*

(British), and Air-gunner Ralph Walter Hillman (British) are up early. The four head out from dispersal in the pre-dawn mist at North Coates air base. They are to be in the second wave of the attack. The first three aircraft carrying mines are to breach the torpedo nets and silence the flak ships to make way for the second attack of three torpedo bombers. Their orders are to bomb the battle cruisers while they lay dormant and trapped in port. Each aircraft is to take off independently and rendezvous near Brest. They are to fly in formation and then break to attack the ships in the harbour at first light. Their prime target is the Gneisenau.

The group is quiet. Only three light bombers are on this mission to attack the most intensely fortified harbour in Europe where the mightiest ships of the Third Reich's navy sit in port.

The airmen have the greatest confidence in their plane. The Bristol Beaufort — often referred to as a Torpedo Bomber — is a twin-engine plane with greater manoeuvrability than the Halifax and other heavy bombers. Although not as quick as a Hurricane or Spitfire, it fills the gap between fighters and bombers.

This isn't the first attack on the harbour since Gneisenau went into dry dock. Because of the intense Allied attacks on Brest, the port is on constant alert. A British bombing raid the previous day left an unexploded bomb on the dock next to the Gneisenau. The Germans defused the bomb and the most recent reconnaissance photos show that the Gneisenau

## *Unrecognized Patriotic Sacrifice*



A Bristol Beaufighter

has been removed from the dry dock and moored out in the harbour in the shelter of a breakwater. This is the chance the Allies have been waiting for: the ship is more vulnerable now, and more accessible to attack.

None of the crew mentions what's on their minds, but all involved in the mission are aware that coming back is unlikely. At best, they may be shot down and live out the war as POWs. At worst, they won't survive at all. All four men know they are Britain's last chance to get rid of this threat. Damaging the ship to prevent her from continuing the destruction she has already caused to the British fleet is imperative. She has to be stopped from leaving the harbour

## *Incredible Tales of the RCAF*

and joining the others. The aircrew's prime objective is to get a clear run in with a torpedo and get out any way they can.

Suited up, parachutes tucked under their arms, the men climb aboard their aircraft. Ken takes his place in the cockpit after hanging his parachute behind his chair. Jim sits down next to the pilot in front of his navigation table. Although his role is navigation, he is also the bomb-aimer, and if necessary, the co-pilot. They strap themselves in.

Behind the pilot, William (Bill) Mulliss heats up his wireless set and slides his earphones over his head before strapping in. In the rear turret, Ralph Hillman checks his guns, locks down, puts on his headphones, and buckles up as well.

Due to bad weather, Campbell and his crew arrive alone at the grouping point off the harbour. After waiting for the others, they soon realize they aren't coming. They either go in alone or scrub the mission and turn back. They decide to go in and launch a single aircraft attack, knowing full well the harbour of Brest is the most heavily armoured area of the Third Reich. Bracing themselves for the inevitable blast from the shore and ship guns defending the area, they burst through the cloud cover as dawn breaks. Hoping surprise is still with them, they circle quickly to get into position for their run.

The harbour is protected on either side by curved strips of land dotted with clusters of gun batteries facing both the sea and inland. Along the north side of the harbour is a

## *Unrecognized Patriotic Sacrifice*

stone breakwater coming out into the bay and bending back toward shore. It's in this protected area of water where the small torpedo bomber spots the great ship secured along a wall on the north side. Behind her, rising sinisterly along the shoreline, stand more guns. Near the ship are three heavily armed anti-aircraft ships (flak ships), guarding the battle cruiser.

None of what they see is a surprise to the crew. They are there to do a job, and that's what they plan on doing. The only way to make it past the defences is to fly in low and fast, deliver the torpedo and pull up quickly in order to miss crashing into the wall, then bank sharply toward land and take their chances against the shore batteries.

The bomber sweeps in, skimming low over the water. James takes the aim while Ken flies the plane in front of the anti-aircraft ships, directly in front of their ominous guns. The brazen attack is a surprise for the Germans, who race to their positions on the flak ships as the bomber flies over the barrels of their guns. As Ken barely clears the breakwater, James lines up the shot and tells the pilot to let fly the torpedo from 460 metres. The plane jumps as the torpedo takes air. Water splashes when the missile breaks the surface and then whooshes up as she hits the ship's stern below the water level. The explosion blows a hole in the hull and damages the propeller. The great ship starts taking on water immediately as the guns from the three flak ships let blaze into the small torpedo bomber, raking it front to back. Ken banks the plane

## *Incredible Tales of the RCAF*

toward land as it is peppered with bullets. The bullets find their mark, killing Ken and wounding Mulliss and Hillman. Jim Scott pulls the body of his skipper and friend out of the cockpit and jumps into the pilot's chair. Strafed by thousands of enemy bullets, Jim pulls up to gain height as a German gunner lets fly his charge. There's a mighty *woof!* The small plane recoils as the shell smashes into the aircraft, ripping a large hole in the belly. Losing one engine, Jim makes a snap decision and aims the bomber straight down onto the deck of the German vessel. Some eyewitnesses in the French resistance onshore watch as the bomber explodes on impact, travelling across the deck and landing in the ocean, sinking with all crew members on board.

Photos taken later show the bomber's crash does very little damage to the cruiser's deck, but the hole in the hull from the torpedo disables the ship, and she starts sinking stern first. If she had been at sea, she would have gone down, but two of the harbour boats tow her back to shore where they pump out the water. Returning to dry-dock, she remains there for the next eight months, no doubt saving many Allied ships and men.

A year later, based on evidence collected from German prisoners of war and other witnesses, Campbell is posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross. There's no doubt in anyone's mind that he had heroically flown to the target and was killed by the anti-aircraft flak after the torpedo was off. But when the Germans recover the Beaufort out of the bay,

## *Unrecognized Patriotic Sacrifice*

they find to their surprise that Jim Scott is in the pilot's seat. It is now known that it was the navigator, Jim Scott, who took over the bomber, guiding it to the deck of the Gneisenau in a further attempt to disable the vessel.

The pilot's VC is the first awarded to Coastal Command in the war. None of the other crew members were awarded a medal, but they all bravely gave up their lives for their country.