AFTER THE BATTLE

THE GREAT ESCAPE

THE DEATH OF ADMIRAL RAMSAY

HIGH WYCOMBE AIR HQs

9 770306 154059 03

£2.85 US $5.75

Number 87

Friday, February 25, 1944 — Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay, the Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief, has his photograph taken on the roof of Norfolk House (see *After the Battle* No. 84) by Captain D. W. Smith, the official war artist, who was commissioned to paint a portrait from them for an illustration in Kenneth Edwards' second volume of *Men of Action*. (IWM)

THE DEATH OF ADMIRAL RAMSAY

By W. J. R. Gardner

On New Year's Day 1945, the Allies could reflect that the Second World War was within recognisable sight of ending in their favour. Certainly, the Germans had just made their last large effort in the Ardennes, but this had by now been contained and was about to be pushed back. In large-scale coalition conflict of this nature it is often difficult to identify truly important personalities — especially those who stand the test of time. Eisenhower obviously holds this position, but another one who deserves much more attention than has come his way is Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay, Royal Navy, the Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief for the liberation of Europe.

It was apt that the man who had so successfully rescued the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk in 1940 should have overseen the return to France in 1944. His other achievements in North-West Africa, Sicily and the Scheldt estuary were also considerable. On the morning of January 2, 1945, he was due to fly from his headquarters near Paris to Brussels for a meeting with Field-Marshal Montgomery, the commander of 21st Army Group. Just before 11.30 a.m., he embarked in his personal aircraft, a Hudson. The aircraft took off, climbed slowly, banked, then crashed into the ground within a mile of the end of the runway. Ramsay and all those on board were killed.

Less than a year later, Admiral Ramsay arrives at Toussus-le-Noble to board his aircraft for his final, fatal flight: destination Brussels. The date is Tuesday, January 2, 1945. (IWM)

Recalled from retirement with the rank of Vice-Admiral (Retired) on January 12, 1939, in less than a year he was called upon to mastermind one of the greatest evacuations ever known. Operation 'Dynamo' was controlled from his headquarters situated in the tunnels within the White Cliffs of Dover.

RAMSAY'S WAR

Ramsay would, almost certainly, not have achieved the prominence he did had he not had the opportunity to demonstrate his qualities during the Second World War. In this, luck seemed to have played an important and balancing rôle. Bad luck played a part as he only had one brief job as a flag officer before retiring in the 1930s: good luck in as much as he was appointed as a retired officer to the dormant post of Flag Officer, Dover, which he took up on the outbreak of war.

Little more than a year later, Ramsay had to improvise the evacuation of Dunkirk, Operation 'Dynamo' (see *After the Battle* No. 3), using a motley collection of warships, peacetime pleasure steamers and small boats to lift the British Expeditionary Force from the European continent at the end of the disastrous campaign in Belgium and France. Starting with a largely disorganised and partly demoralised ground force, inadequate port facilities and virtually constant attack on harbours and beaches from the air, this was no small task. Although much of the achievement belongs to the ships, craft and men at Dunkirk, Ramsay's organisation was responsible for maximising the available forces to allow for rapidly changing circumstances. This attainment alone belies the charge sometimes later made at Ramsay that he organised in too great detail. Dunkirk was a model of clear, logical thinking being used to evacuate nearly 340,000 men under fire in little more than a week.

Some 20 months later, whilst Ramsay was still in charge at Dover, the German battle-cruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* carried out the 'Channel Dash' on passage to Germany. They were not stopped by the British, but this tactical success led to strategic oblivion as they were no longer in a position to pose an immediate threat to the Atlantic. The British failure did not reflect badly on Ramsay.

Shortly after this episode, he was appointed to command the expeditionary force, planning the invasion of North-West Africa. These operations, codenamed 'Gymnast' then 'Torch', were to be conducted simultaneously against both Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts of North Africa and were to involve 70,000 troops, 350 transport and landing ships, and 200 warships. Some of these came directly from America, adding to complication, planning time and the need for oceanic protection. Although it was hoped that the landings would be unopposed, some resistance had to be allowed for. In the event, this happened in some places, notably Oran. When the operation took place, Ramsay served as deputy to Admiral Cunningham, a relatively late change in the chain of command, brought about probably by the latter's familiarity with the Americans and, possibly, some British sensitivities about Ramsay still being on the retired list. The operations were successful, leading ultimately to the ejection of Axis forces from North Africa.

This was to lead on to the first return to Europe — Italy through Sicily — in mid-1943. Endorsed by the Combined Chiefs-of-Staff as late as April 1943, much had to be done before the planned landings in July. The challenges were greater than before. The land forces were much larger, with some 180,000 troops from the British Empire and America; resistance was certain and requirements changed frequently. Specialised landing craft and ships were used for the first time, too. Ramsay coped with all this admirably and Operation 'Husky' (see *After the Battle* No. 77) was another success, despite initially marginal weather. In this case Ramsay, as well as planning the entire operation, was given full command of the (British) Eastern Task Force. Within a month of the landings, Axis forces were carrying out their own version of Dunkirk across the Straits of Messina.

By the autumn, however, Ramsay was back in England starting to organise the greatest amphibious operation of all, 'Neptune' — the landings in Normandy. Here again, all that had gone before paled into insignificance. Its scale and challenges were immense. The invasion of Sicily had anticipated resistance which, on the whole, had not materialised. German troops in France were unlikely to be as easy a proposition. Their sheer numbers and relative ease of mobility made strategic deception absolutely essential. As well as the initial lodgement of the first few days, there would also need to be rapid build-up, as no deception — no matter how successful in the beginning — could last indefinitely. German beach defences were known to be formidable and the failure of the large-scale raid on Dieppe earlier in the war continued to haunt minds, especially British and Canadian.

One conundrum was choosing the site of the invasion to occur where some surprise might be achieved, but also having access to a major port to supply the build-up and the hoped-for subsequent advance into Europe. The Germans reasoned that for the Allies after the Dieppe débâcle, they needed such a port at an early, if not the initial, stage. The Allied solution adopted was to choose Normandy at a relatively weak part of the German defences and to conduct subsequent reinforcement by means of artificial harbours until a major port was in Allied use. The design and deployment of this novel development was just one of the problems that fell Ramsay's way. There were other technical difficulties with protecting the force in transit, combating the German defences both at sea and on shore, and in landing numbers of troops and their equipment with the minimum risk. All these forces — land, sea and air — from a number of different nations had to be trained in their basic tasks and rehearsed in the higher level mechanics of the operation. All of this was Ramsay's responsibility as Naval C-in-C.

Having been appointed the Naval Commander-in-Chief Expeditionary Force with the acting rank of Admiral for the invasion of North Africa, probably his Retired status led to him being switched to Deputy for the actual operation. In this picture, he is seen with the British Task Force Commanders for the subsequent invasion of Sicily: Air Vice-Marshal Harry Broadhurst and General Sir Bernard Montgomery.

Moment of triumph as Admiral Ramsay escorts General Eisenhower in a cruise off the Normandy coast on board HMS *Apollo* on June 7, 1944. (IWM)

But the greatest problem of all was the sheer organisation of the entire armada. Ships of varying characteristics and speed had to be formed up so as to arrive off a particular beach at a precise time. They had to be protected against aircraft, surface ships, mines and submarines throughout their passage. Their arrival was often preceded by naval gun-fire support; their journey had to be free of concern from mines; follow-on stores had to arrive promptly; craft with limited navigational capacity had to have help with this vital skill; and considerable and complex marshalling of the forces off the assault beaches was necessary. All these activities had to work in conjunction with air operations and precursory ones on land; forces of all participating nations had to understand unambiguously what their tasks were. Clearly, Ramsay could not attend to all these details himself, but his skill in selecting subordinates, and enthusing them with his method of working, ensured that this most complex of operations could take place at all and, more importantly, would succeed.

After Normandy, it would be easy to assume that the naval war had been won and thus Ramsay's tasks were at an end. But the many problems of supplying the advance into Europe occupied much of his time and efforts. Nor were these problems merely logistical conundrums. After the liberation of Antwerp in early September, Ramsay had to champion a case for the rapid clearance of the Scheldt banks against the enthusiasm of Field-Marshal Montgomery for moving straight towards Germany. Eventually successful, he then had to superintend the operation for the taking of Walcheren, the island at the mouth of the western Scheldt at the beginning of November 1944, known as Operation 'Infatuate' (see *After the Battle* No. 36) and the subsequent clearance of the Scheldt, Operation 'Calendar'. This was a desperate venture, conducted under difficult conditions against a still determined well-entrenched enemy, but it succeeded. It was to be Ramsay's last significant operation.

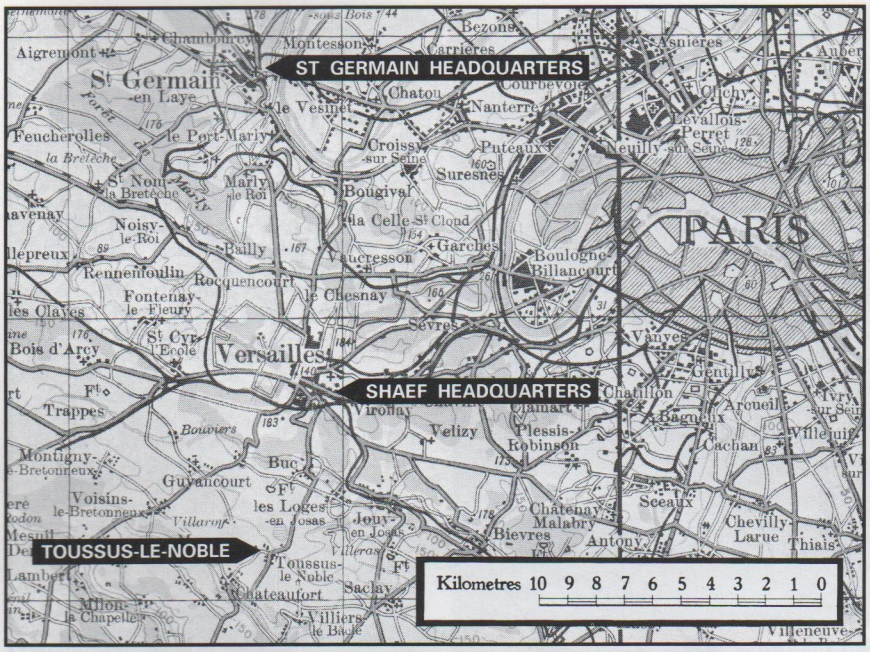
Although by now already embroiled in the post-war planning process for Europe, Ramsay felt, at the age of 61, that he wished to stand down once the war was won, so that he might enjoy his retirement with his family. Few rewards have been more deserved but, in the event, he was not fated to receive his due.

RAMSAY AND FLYING

As Ramsay met his death in the air, it may be helpful to say something about the use he made of this form of transport in the last year of his life. Since being appointed Allied Naval Commander Expeditionary Force (ANCXF) in the autumn of 1943, he had had an increasing need for high mobility. Initially, this had been caused by the necessity to keep in touch with the many widespread bases and training areas involved in Operation 'Neptune'. Later, another factor intruded making rapid transport essential: the move into Europe itself, shifting high commanders from such compact and easy locations as London and Portsmouth to greater dispersion on and off the continent of Europe. For example, Montgomery's tactical headquarters would be in one location; that of the (largely) British 21st Army Group HQ in another, whilst Eisenhower, the Supreme Commander, was in a third, while SHAEF HQ was at another (see *After the Battle* No. 84). Ramsay remained at Southwick near Portsmouth until early September when he moved to Granville in France for a short period, and then to St Germain on the western outskirts of Paris.

However, in that era, the vagaries of signal communication, both in its provision and reliability, made personal contact between these commanders as important as it always has been. Added to this, the sometimes difficult combination of personalities could often only be made to pull in the right direction through personal contact. As a negative example of this, Ramsay's problems in impressing the urgency of clearing the

Four days later, it was possible for the Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief to personally go ashore. Admiral Ramsay had been replaced on the Active List on April 26, just over a month before 'Overlord'. (IWM)



When SHAEF HQ moved to Versailles, on the south-western outskirts of Paris, Ramsay's ANXCF's headquarters were located in the Château Hennemont at St Germain, 12 miles west of Paris, with his personal quarters a few minutes walk away in the Château Léger.

Scheldt banks in the autumn on Eisenhower, and the latter's difficulties with Montgomery on the same subject, were no doubt made worse by geographical separation and poor communications. These problems could largely be offset by air transport, but flying was neither as reliable or safe as it was to become in the post-war years.

Many of Ramsay's flights in the latter half of 1944 can be traced by means of his diary. As well as logging these, something of his attitudes to flying also emerge. To later generations who take this mode of transport for granted, it should be remembered that manned flight was barely 40 years old in 1945, and that the Royal Navy had been deprived of its aviation arm in 1918 on the formation of the Royal Air Force. Control was not to be regained until the eve of the outbreak of the Second World War. An important consequence of this was that two or more generations of naval officers were not particularly aware of the air and its possibilities, both for warfare and transport: Ramsay falls into this classification.

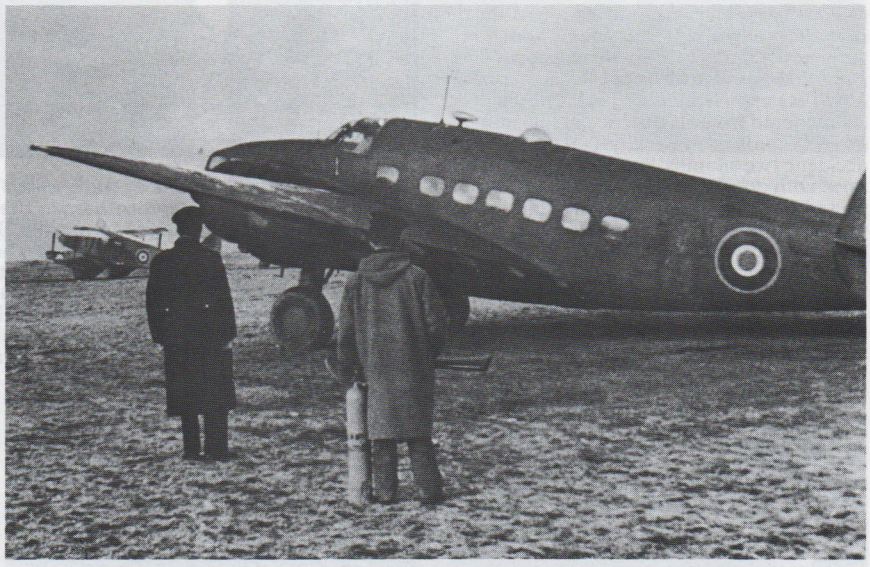
Nevertheless, Ramsay quickly developed a full understanding of airpower and its ramifications. On a daily basis, he made use of aircraft for transport around both his widespread and varied area of responsibility and for keeping in touch with other commanders. In July, he made three visits by air to France, generally in the Cherbourg area, and often noting pilot, aircraft type and significant events. On landing back at Thorney Island in West Sussex on July 14, he observed without further comment that the aircraft had burst a tyre on landing. Ramsay was becoming a relaxed and habituated air traveller. But on July 20 what was to become a common theme emerged, that of the cancelled flight, because of poor weather. Ramsay recorded in his diary, 'A wasted morning. Very annoying to miss this opportunity too.'

Later in 1944, Ramsay was to make much use of various aircraft, particularly those of X Flight of No. 781 Naval Air Squadron based at Toussus-le-Noble (near St Germain) since September for SHAEF comms and liaison duties, including the Domini and the Beechcraft, piloted by Lieutenant Albert Bret, French Navy and Sub-Lieutenant (A) John Sharp, RNVR. As well as the earlier burst tyre, he had experience of poor weather and other incidents. On November 28, he was attempting to land at Brussels when, '[a] strong northeasterly crosswind threw us about and on landing we were tilted over, necessitating immediate decision to take off again. Brett (sic) did this well, only slight damage along flap resulting. We then circled aerodrome until permission received to land in the wind across the runway. Made good landing but this delayed us 15 minutes.'

But increasingly, Ramsay was to make use of his Hudson, a three-year-old aircraft which had flown operationally with Coastal Command before conversion to a transport. Often, too, this was to be in the charge of Lieutenant-Commander Sir George Lewis. Ramsay was obviously satisfied with him as an aviator because he requested that Lewis be allocated as his personal pilot. On a more personal level, Lewis clearly got on well with the Admiral. This was probably not surprising. Ramsay would have found more in common with Lewis on a social basis than he did with the other pilots. Lewis's background and experience as a lawyer was more likely to interest Ramsay than that of the rest of his regular pilots. On the day before he died, Lewis was to be gazetted with an OBE for 'non-operational flying services'. More personally, he gave the Admiral one of his few recorded Christmas presents in 1944 and shared lunch with him that day.

The Hudson was used for other purposes, too. On August 2, Lewis took the Admiral to Scotland under conditions of poor visibility. After some problems with low cloud, they managed to land at Charterhall close to the Admiral's home. Ramsay's family were shown round the aircraft, before it returned south. On this occasion, Ramsay had his leave cut short and had to return to his headquarters at Southwick in the less roomy interior of a Beaufighter. Later in the month, he again flew to Scotland in the Hudson. This was to be Admiral Ramsay's last visit home.

His diary gives good indications of both his growing reliance on air transport during the year and the effect of weather on such means of mobility in north-west Europe in the autumn and winter of 1944-45. Often, poor weather of one sort or another, at one end or the other of a planned flight would preclude making the journey by air, or indeed at all. This often frustrated Ramsay who certainly developed an acute awareness of its strengths and constraints.



Admiral Ramsay had the use of a Fleet Air Arm Hudson V of X Flight of No. 781 Squadron based at airfield A-46 ('A' standing for American) five miles south of Versailles at Toussus-le-Noble. This is the actual aircraft used on January 2, serial AM550. The Hudson was a low-wing, twin-engined, tail-wheel monoplane whose origins lay in the Lockheed 14 Super Electra airliner. The aircraft was first ordered by the RAF in June 1938. Originally intended as a navigation trainer, it was quickly diverted for use as a maritime patrol aircraft and proved extremely useful, being available long before the higher performance aircraft such as Sunderlands and Liberators were deployed in sufficient numbers. At the outbreak of war in 1939, two squadrons, No. 224 (in which AM550 later flew) and No. 233 were operating from Leuchars and Bircham Newton, respectively, and one 224 Squadron aircraft claims to be the first operating from the United Kingdom to shoot down a German aircraft when, during a patrol over the North Sea on October 8, 1939, a Dornier Do 18 flying boat was destroyed. However, by 1945, the type was being replaced by more modern and powerful aircraft and, as a result, many Hudsons were converted to other rôles, such as training and transport. (IWM)

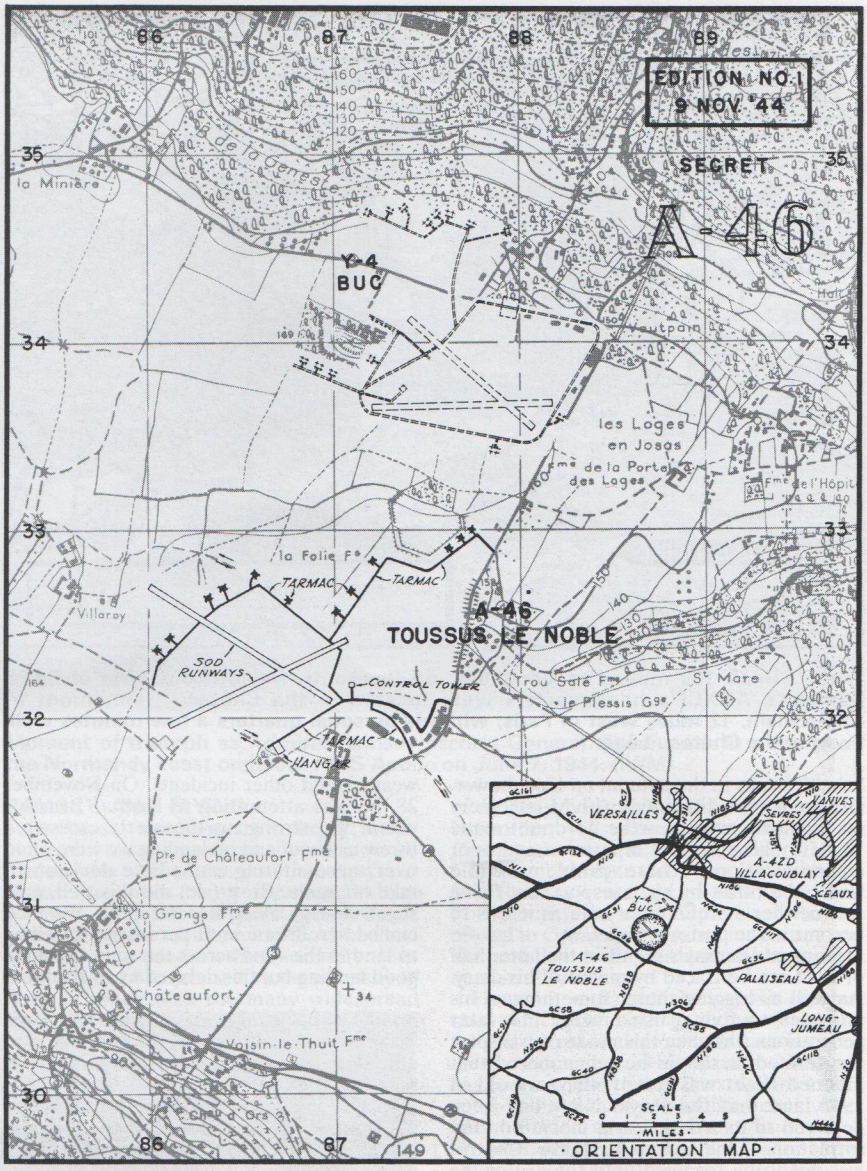
THE FATAL FLIGHT

Ramsay planned to fly to Brussels on January 2, 1945 to consult with Montgomery and his 21st Army Group staff on the defence of the northern Scheldt islands, although the threat to these had been much diminished by the defeat of the German Ardennes offensive. This should have been a routine flight conducted in fairly normal winter conditions. Since moving his headquarters to France, he used the airfield at Toussus-le-Noble which, using an Allied system of nomenclature in use since the Normandy landings, was often referred to as A-46. It was run by the USAAF and to them it was also known as AAF Station 384. It was primarily a communications and liaison facility, but from time to time operational fighters made use of it for refuelling.

That morning, Ramsay's personal aircraft was prepared for the flight. A Lockheed Hudson V, Serial Number AM550, this aircraft had been at the Admiral's disposal since the middle of 1944, when the first reference is made in his diary to flying in one piloted by Temporary Acting Lieutenant Commander Sir G. J. E. Lewis, Bt, RNVR. On January 2, Lewis was to pilot the Hudson. The aircraft belonged to No. 781 Squadron, which was based at Lee-on-Solent in Hampshire. Lewis had been CO of the squadron earlier, but he was now employed as personal pilot to Ramsay, who had requested him for this appointment. Present at Toussus was a small detachment from the parent squadron, known as 781X Flight. This detachment, whose principal duty was the running of a DH Domini and Beechcraft Traveller aircraft, had two pilots (Albert Bret and John Sharp), an aircrewman and 14 other ratings supervised by a Petty Officer Air Fitter, an Aircraft Artificer 4th Class and a Sub-Lieutenant (Air Engineer) RNVR. An additional charge on 781X Flight was the turning round of visiting aircraft such as Oxfords and Expediters and, of course, on this occasion, Ramsay's Hudson.

This particular aircraft had first been taken on charge by the RAF in April 1941 As an A/S aircraft, it had carried out one front-line tour with No. 224 Squadron from May 1941 until September 1942. Overhauled, it re-entered front-line service in the autumn of 1943, only to be badly damaged in an accident two months later. Rebuilt and by now converted for use as a transport, it passed back to American ownership in the USAAF in February 1944. On June 3, it was allocated for the use of the ANCXF, and Lieutenant-Commander Lewis, accompanied by John Sharp, both of whom were experiencing the Hudson for the first time, collected it from Heathrow (often written then as Heath Row) the same day. Sharp was to witness the take-off from Toussus in January 1945. For some of its early time in Ramsay's service, it was flown by Lieutenant Bret, who later commanded 781X Flight. In that capacity he too was at Toussus when Ramsay started his last flight.

Before moving to the events on January 2, it is perhaps useful to consider further both location and aircraft. Toussus-le-Noble, lying 12 miles to the south-west of Paris and about ten miles south-east of Ramsay's own HQ at St Germain-en-Laye, had two earth runways aligned NE–SW and NW–SE. Taking off to the south-west, as happened on January 2, there were no obstacles on the climb-out path and the ground sloped gently beyond the end of the 1,200-yard runway: half a mile out, the terrain was 30 feet below runway level, leading towards the wooded Mérantaise valley just over a mile away. Under these circumstances, a Hudson at full weight should have been able to take off in 900 yards in zero wind conditions. With five knots of wind from the west-south-west, as on January 2, the runway should have been more than adequate. There was a light haze



Toussus-le-Noble was one of the earliest airfields to be established in the Paris area, being used by the Farman brothers in the early days of French aviation. Basically still a grass airfield when captured from the Germans in August 1944, the US IX Engineer Command schematic plan as of November that year shows two earth runways: the longest extending NW–SE at 3,600ft and the NE–SW of 3,300ft. There were dispersals for 75 aircraft and, although there were German fuel tanks of 18,000 gallons, it seems from the American specifications that this storage was not used and that refuelling was via bowsers. The wind on the morning of January 2, 1945 was five knots from the west-south-west, the operative runway being the NE–SW.

and visibility of 2,000 yards. The temperature was just below freezing point.

At Toussus on that Tuesday morning, work began on preparing the Hudson for its flight to Brussels. On previous deployments to the airfield, an Aircraft Artificer (AA) had accompanied the pilot and aircrewman, but the AA was not present on this occasion. Similarly, 781X Flight held no manuals or tools for the Hudson and the Daily Inspection (DI) had to be conducted using experience, rather than hard information. Although this seems slapdash by modern standards, it was probably quite common during the Second World War as many different types might pass through relatively small air stations such as Toussus. Perhaps, more importantly, aircraft then (including the Hudson) were not only less complex, but also had many common features which made non-specialised support acceptable. In any event, with one possible exception described later, there was never any suspicion that inadequate or negligent preparation and inspection contributed to the accident.

As well as the rest of the DI, a number of the Flight's ratings spent some time clearing frost and snow from the aircraft's surfaces as it had been standing in the open under conditions of occasional snow and sub-zero temperatures over the New Year period. Clearance started at about 8.30 a.m. and occupied some two hours. It was a task which relied largely on manual labour, involving such basic implements as brooms. This was considered satisfactorily completed, as were other checks and inspections. Shortly after 10 a.m., the Flight's Air Engineer Officer, Sub-Lieutenant J. H. Tolley, RNVR, went into the Hudson's cockpit to conduct engine run-ups. He was part of the way through this process when the pilot, Lieutenant-Commander Lewis, came into the cockpit and took over stating that he (Lewis) had more experience of the Pratt and Whitney Twin Wasp engines. Lewis also told Tolley not to carry on with run-up checks as he would do these before take-off. Later, when this was done, Tolley neither noticed nor heard anything unusual.

Shortly after 11 a.m., Admiral Ramsay arrived in his car at the aircraft. He was accompanied on his flight by Commander George Rowell, RN, a planning staff officer, and Lieutenant Derek Henderson, RNVR, the Admiral's Flag Lieutenant. The fifth person on board the aircraft was the Telegraphist Air Gunner, Petty Officer Airman David Morgan. Before boarding, Ramsay talked briefly to Bret and some of the others. He handed his stick and notebook to Henderson, took off his duffel coat and donned a leather flying jacket. Ramsay appeared to be completely at ease. The Admiral, Rowell and Henderson then boarded the aircraft.

The Hudson taxied out to the eastern end of the runway. As it went, some white patches appeared to be visible on its wings. The take-off was witnessed by several observers, a number of whom were pilots, including some with Hudson experience. Lieutenant Bret and Sub-Lieutenant Sharp have already been mentioned, as has Sub-Lieutenant Tolley, the Air Engineer Officer. Also present with clear views were Captain Michael Adams, USAAF, the Commanding Officer of the airfield, and Captain David Martin, USAAF, a pilot, and there is virtual unanimity in their accounts of what occurred.

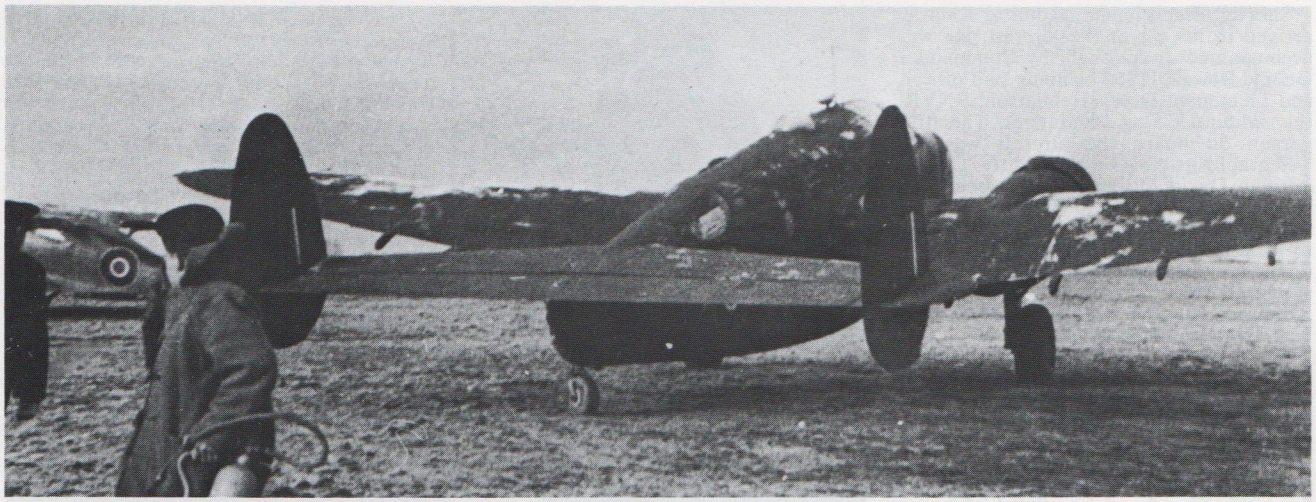
Firstly, the aircraft appeared to be very slow to gain speed for the take-off. Bret considered that at the point where he would have expected the aircraft to be doing 70 knots, it was going at little more than 40 knots. Nonetheless, both he and the others had no impression that there was anything wrong with the engines: only that they were not being used at full power. Sharp, some distance down the runway, noticed that both engines appeared to be operating satisfactorily by ear. However, he also noted that, on take-off, the Hudson rocked from side to side and appeared unstable. Others noticed that, before finally leaving the ground, the aircraft lifted first one wheel then the other. In Adams' account, it skipped and jumped about three times before unsticking finally. All observers noted that the aircraft became airborne in a three-point attitude, that is, without the tail up. Further, this occurred fairly close to the western end of the runway.

Bret experienced a sense of relief that the aircraft had got into the air, but then noted that the climb was very shallow and the undercarriage remained down. Adams, one floor up in the administration building, thought that the aircraft was in what he called a mushing attitude. Less than 1,000 yards from the end of the runway, the port wing slowly began to drop, a situation from which the aircraft never recovered. Bret reckoned the aircraft to have reached 200-300 feet, but Adams thought 100 feet more likely. At 10 degrees of bank, Bret thought that the Hudson was attempting a turn to

The departure was being routinely filmed by Paramount News — little did the cameraman know he was recording the last few minutes in the life of the Admiral and his crew. On the right, Lieutenant Bret, the CO of No. 781 Squadron's X Flight.

Ramsay's aide, Lieutenant Derek Henderson, helps him don a sheepskin flying jacket against the sub-zero temperature. (IWM)

Ramsay's contribution to the successful landings in Normandy was immeasurable, yet, like Leigh-Mallory, the Allied Air Commander who was still listed as missing on a flight to the Far East the previous November (see *After the Battle* No. 39), the Admiral was not to see the final victory. (IWM)



Ice or snow reflects from the top of the mainplanes as the Hudson turns to starboard to taxi to the eastern end of the runway. At this point, the cameraman stops filming and does not bother to record the actual take-off. (IWM)

port. However, although he could not say why, he did not like the look of the possible turn. Then the aircraft dropped its port wing and spiralled to the ground. Some parts of the aircraft, such as engines were separated and thrown some distance away. The main fuselage was relatively intact but, although level, there was a break in the structure at about three windows from aft. Fires were started, and although fire and rescue crews were quickly on the scene, it was evident that all those on board had died on impact, or very shortly afterwards.

Thus passed the senior serving Royal Navy officer to die on active service during the Second World War. The navy and the nation were fortunate in having been done many great services by Ramsay, most notably Dunkirk; the Normandy invasion; and, on a smaller if no less significant scale, Walcheren. It can only be regretted that he did not live longer to enjoy a retirement more merited than most and the pleasures of his family, which he so plainly enjoyed.

Save for the new tarmac runway, this is the view that the eyewitnesses would have had from the control tower in very similar weather conditions.

Perhaps, having turned away, the cameraman had started to pack away his gear. Perhaps he was already walking to his vehicle when suddenly came the awful sound of an aircraft hitting the ground. Rushing towards the spot beyond the airfield's western boundary where a column of smoke was rising, he approached the scene of the tragedy. (IWM)

THE CAUSES OF THE ACCIDENT

What had happened was only too evident; the how and why was not so clear immediately. As was normal in such cases, an investigation and Board of Enquiry was held: the former reported at the beginning of February and the latter convened towards the end of that month. There were three broad avenues for the investigation to consider:

(a) Structural or mechanical failure
(b) Mistakes in the preparation of the Hudson
(c) Pilot error

The first of these was the easiest to deal with. Post-crash examination revealed no signs of structural failure or defects. Both engines were stripped under supervision and showed no indications of damage other than that caused by impact with the ground. There was one further potential cause of the accident which was fuel contamination. Such an occurrence was thought unlikely for two reasons. Firstly, the bowser which had fuelled the Hudson had also recently supplied some 40 other aircraft of different types, none of which had reported any difficulty. Secondly, the evidence of several of the witnesses, some of whom were pilots and a few of whom had Hudson experience, suggested that there had been no engine problems detectable by ear. Some thought that the aircraft might not have used full power during its take-off run and brief climb, but none detected signs of any splutter or loss of power from either engine. Structural and mechanical failure could therefore be ruled out as causes of the accident.

The lack of documentation and tools, as well as Hudson experience in the ground crew was looked at and, although it was thought that this was not as it ought to be, it could not be considered responsible for the subsequent accident. It was recommended that measures should, however, be taken to prevent a recurrence of this situation. The form A700 — Flight Authorisation Sheet — which was carried by the aircraft had been properly completed by the ground crew, although Lewis had failed to sign it in a number of places as required by regulations.

Evidence given to the Board made it clear that the 781X Flight ground crew had spent a considerable time in attempting to clear snow, ice and frost from the aircraft. Indeed, this had probably been the most labour-intensive part of their preparation. The parking of the aircraft in the open over the New Year period in cold weather had led to a build-up on the wings and elsewhere. However, a relatively low awareness of the hazard of airframe icing, coupled with primitive clearance equipment, largely brooms and cloths, may have meant that, although much effort was expended on this task, it may not have been complete or sufficiently thorough. In any case, the process of clearance was completed some time before the aircraft took off, and the intervening period of about an hour in sub-zero temperatures may have allowed some frost to reform on the wings. Although the act of clearance was the task of the ground crew, the responsibility that the aircraft was in a fit state for flying rested as always with the captain of the aircraft, that is Lewis.

The question of some airframe icing being present on take-off, and whether it contributed to the subsequent accident, can never now be determined with certainty. There must, however, be some possibility that it did because, as chance would have it, a Paramount film crew were at Toussus that morning and they filmed Ramsay embarking in the aircraft, its initial taxying and the consequences of the crash. Stills from that film were seen by the Board and they clearly show white areas on the wing. The Board concluded that the aircraft did indeed have hoar frost on its wings. However, this matter was to be returned to after the Board had completed its investigations and rendered findings and recommendations.

Turning finally to the captain of the aircraft, it may be helpful to take a look at Lewis's career as a pilot. A lawyer with a civil pilot's licence, he had joined the RNVR at the outbreak of war. A few months later, he had gained his naval 'Wings'. He spent virtually all his service career with No. 781 Squadron in various capacities in total amassing nearly 2,500 accident-free flying hours, of which 106 were on Hudsons. Although he rose to command No. 781 Squadron, he had never received any heavy twin-engine training, nor had he received any 'checking out' on the Hudson, on which he had signed his own Qualifying Certificate as CO. That said, he was to some extent the product of a Fleet Air Arm (FAA) having to expand rapidly to meet the demands of war; and of an organisation which had only recently gained freedom from the RAF.

One probable result of this was that Lewis had developed faults, which had never been corrected. Principal amongst these was a tendency to take off at less than full revs, power and boost, and then to continue the climb-out at less than safety speed. In a twin-engined aircraft, this speed is defined as being high enough to allow recovery should one engine fail. This unfortunate trait of Lewis's, although never formally corrected, had been noted by several other pilots. In 1943, a Qualified Flying Instructor (QFI) had flown with Lewis in a Beaufighter and noted that he climbed this difficult aircraft at well under 100 knots, when its speed should have been much greater. Later, Lewis was observed to follow the same characteristic in a Hudson and apparently did not understand the concept of safety speed. Just a few days before the crash, Lieutenant Bret, too, had seen Lewis flying the aircraft in a similar fashion and had been perturbed to learn that Lewis was using much less power than was safe.

All the passengers and crew are beyond help; Royal Navy personnel walk back slowly to their transport past the scattered wreckage, leaving American airmen to douse the flames. (IWM)

The reported characteristics of Lewis's take-off on January 2 are entirely consistent with this fault. By not using power on the take-off run, he almost ran out of runway. Just clawing into the air, he was unable to raise the tail adequately to ensure full controllability. Pilot's Notes for the Hudson V make it clear that the tail should be raised from the three-point position early during the take-off run to keep the aircraft under control. They read:

'As soon as the aircraft has begun to pick up speed, the control wheel should be eased right forward to get the tail up as soon as possible. With full gross load, the aircraft can be eased off the ground at 60kts IAS, but in practice it has been found advisable to wait until a speed of 65kts has been attained. As soon as the aircraft is airborne, the stick should be eased slightly forward and the aircraft held level until a speed of 100kts is reached at which speed the initial climb may be started.

'Note the Following:

i. [use of brakes during initial roll]

11. If the aircraft gets bounced into the air at slow speed, care must be exercised in using the ailerons to maintain lateral level. If a wing drops at low speed, opposite rudder should be used to bring it up. The take-off run should be so chosen as to minimise the possibility of being bounced into the air at low speed.

As soon as the aircraft has FINALLY left the ground, the undercarriage lever should be moved to the UP position.'

Reinforcing this line are the views of Wing Commander Roland Falk, RAF, the Chief Test Pilot at the Royal Aircraft Establishment, Farnborough. Communicating with the accident investigation officer just over a month after the crash, he wrote:

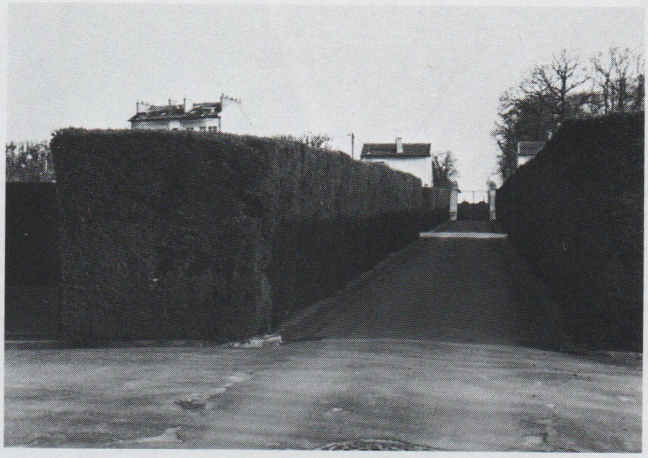
'I have myself experienced the effect of hoar frost on the wings of a Hudson when taking off. The effect was most noticeable, both in lengthening the run to unstick and also in the lack of lateral control when airborne. I was not happy to climb away until I had held the aircraft down and gained considerable speed.'

When Lewis was flying at a speed too low for safety, it would appear that he attempted a turn to port. Evidence produced to the enquiry suggested that even a relatively thin layer of frost could increase the point of stall of a Hudson-like wing by over 10 knots. Had Lewis either used full power and reached a safer speed, or gained more height before attempting a turn, he might have either avoided or at least been able to recover from the subsequent spin. Although frost should have been cleared from the wings before take-off, it would appear that it was Lewis's accumulated bad flying practices of several years that caused Hudson AM 550 to crash.

A recommendation of the Board of Enquiry led to disciplinary action being initiated against the AA4 for negligent performance of duty. However, having heard the evidence of Lieutenant Bret, Sub-Lieutenant Tolley and a photographic officer amongst others, it was decided that the evidence did not support the charge and the case was dismissed.

Below: **This photograph, crudely annotated in the margin, was presented to the Board of Enquiry showing the crash position. The Paramount film, from which these stills have been taken, was also considered when trying to establish the cause of the accident. (PRO)**

Although never commanding a major conventional battlefleet, Ramsay was one of the most successful and important leaders in the Second World War. However, nothing remains to mark the spot where he died, just a few yards from a new road near the hamlet of Mérantais, and there is no memorial or marker to say that here fell one of the Royal Navy's greatest sons.



The bodies were laid to rest at St Germain-en-Laye New Communal Cemetery on the Rue Péreire. (ECPA)

RAMSAY TODAY — MEMORIALS SOLID AND OTHERWISE

On January 8, 1945, Ramsay, with the four others who had died in the Hudson, were buried with full military honours at the cemetery of St Germain-en-Laye. The mourners included General Eisenhower; Admiral of the Fleet Sir Andrew Cunningham, the First Sea Lord; General Koenig, the French Military Governor of Paris, and Mr Duff Cooper, the British Ambassador. A naval guard was provided by HMS *Excellent* and a French naval band 'Musique de la Flotte' provided funeral music. On the same day, a memorial service was held in Westminster Abbey

As well as his grave in France, Ramsay is also commemorated in a window in Portsmouth Cathedral dedicated to him and to those who died under his command during the operations at Dunkirk and Normandy. His name is also noted in the war memorial in the parish of Leitholm, as well as in Christ Church, Duns, both in the Scottish border country near his family home.

In less tangible form, Ramsay was the subject of two post-war biographies. One by David Woodward, *Ramsay at War* (London, 1957), has recently been described as an heroic treatment. The other, *Full Cycle: The Biography of Admiral Sir Bertram Home Ramsay* by Rear-Admiral W. S. Chalmers (London, 1959) has the benefit of having had access to Ramsay's letters and diaries. Chalmers' admiration of Ramsay shines through this work although, considering its period and the conventions then observed by 'authorised biographers', he produced a balanced portrait of the Admiral. After this, a considerable hiatus ensued other than Captain S. W. Roskill's *Churchill and the Admirals* (London, 1977) which rates Ramsay extremely highly in the context that he enjoyed Churchill's consistent confidence with the very slight caveat that Ramsay never commanded a major fleet.

Since then, there have been peripheral mentions of the Admiral, especially in works dealing with 'Neptune', but few substantial works on Ramsay until the 1990s. The current decade has, however, seen a considerable resurgence in interest although no full scale biography as yet. Firstly, Martin Stephen's *The Fighting Admirals* (London, 1991) produces a very favourable account of the Admiral. This work, however, has been considered controversial by some, not because of his views on Ramsay, but because of his championing of two admirals generally maligned — Dudley Pound and Tom Phillips — and his downgrading of another, Andrew Cunningham. Corelli Barnett's *Engage the Enemy More Closely: the Royal Navy in the Second World War* (London, 1991) amplified by other articles and speeches by this writer singles out Ramsay for particular praise.

A further book containing an appreciation of Ramsay is *Men of War: Great Naval Leaders of World War II*, edited by Stephen Howarth (London, 1992). Lastly, the Admiral's diary for 1944 has been published as *The Year of D-Day* edited by Robert W. Love Jr and John Major (Hull, 1994), giving a great deal of insight into the man, his character and the views he had of his contemporaries.

A bitter moment for Eisenhower, leading the mourners on January 8 — just a year after he had assumed the mantle of Supreme Commander. (ECPA)

Fifty years after the event, we felt that it was fitting for us to remember the loss of Admiral Ramsay; Jean Paul Pallud made a pilgrimage to seek out the crash site at Toussus, while Karel Margry journeyed to the cemetery at St Germain.