

## 825 Squadron

No. 880 Squadron has the longest history of all the units that served in Canada's Naval Air Arm. Although it was zero manned in 1990, the squadron is still on the Canadian Forces inventory today. No. 880 Squadron came into being in May 1951 when 825 Squadron was renumbered to 880. The following is a brief account of the rich heritage 880 inherited from 825 Squadron, its proud ancestral predecessor.

The Royal Navy (RN) formed No. 825 Squadron on 8 October 1934 by combining two Royal Air Force (RAF) flights to form a new squadron and renumbering No. 824, which at that time was embarked in *HMS Eagle*. No. 825 Squadron, equipped with 12 Fairey III F's, continued to serve on *Eagle* in the China Station in the spotter reconnaissance role. *Eagle* transferred to the Mediterranean Fleet in January 1935 and shortly thereafter the carrier disembarked its aircraft to Royal Naval Air Station (RNAS) Hal Far, Malta and sailed home for refit. In September 1935, 825 Squadron joined *HMS Glorious* for further Mediterranean service and in July 1936 it re-equipped with 12 Fairey Swordfish I's and became a torpedo spotter reconnaissance squadron.

At the outbreak of war in September 1939, 825 Squadron embarked from RNAS Dekheila, Egypt to *HMS Glorious* to search for shipping in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. *Glorious* returned to the Mediterranean in January 1940, and the squadron operated from Hal Far until March 1940 when the ship was recalled for the defence of Norway. Upon arrival in the United Kingdom, No. 825 Squadron disembarked at RNAS Preswick and deployed to RNAS Worthy Down, and the RAF Stations at Detling and Thorney Island to carry out operations in the English Channel against U-boats, E-boats and enemy transports in the Calais area during the Dunkirk evacuation. Eight of the squadron's 12 aircraft were lost at Dunkirk, including the CO LCdr Buckley RN; five of the aircraft were lost in a single bombing raid over France on 29 May 1940. To make matters worse, the squadron's carrier, *HMS Glorious*, was sunk by the German battleships *Gneisenau* and *Scharnhorst* on 8 June 1940.

In July 1940, the remnants of the squadron were augmented to nine aircraft and embarked on *HMS Furious* for September operations off Norway that included the noteworthy night attacks on Trondheim and Tromso. In February 1941, the squadron re-embarked on *Furious* for escort duty with a convoy ferrying aircraft to the Gold Coast.

In May 1941, 825 Squadron joined *HMS Victorious* and took part in the historic attack on the German battleship *Bismarck*. The squadron Swordfish sighted *Bismarck* on 24 May and attacked the following day; a single torpedo hit forced the battleship to reduce her speed. The *Bismarck* was crippled in a follow-on strike by Swordfish from 810, 818 and 820 Squadrons on 26 May and finally sunk by the Fleet on 27 May 1941.

From June 1941 the squadron embarked on *HMS Ark Royal* to provide anti-submarine protection for convoys fighting to reach beleaguered Malta; the squadron also conducted strikes against targets in Pantellaria, Sardinia and Sicily in September. On 13 November 1941, U-81 torpedoed *Ark Royal* 50 miles from Gibraltar and the

squadron's carrier sank the next day. The few 825 Squadron aircraft that were airborne at the time flew to Gibraltar, but the squadron essentially ceased to exist.

In January 1942, 825 Squadron reformed in England at RNAS Lee-on-Solent with nine Swordfish I's destined for torpedo bomber reconnaissance duties. In early February six aircraft were detached to Manston to augment strike forces against the possible breakout of the German battle cruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* and the cruiser *Prinz Eugen* from the French port of Brest. When these three capital ships dashed up the English Channel the squadron's six aircraft launched a torpedo attack, which was part of a poorly coordinated strike involving ships and other RAF aircraft; no hits were obtained and all of the squadron's aircraft were shot down. The CO, LCdr Esmonde, was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross and the five surviving crewmembers were all decorated.

The squadron regrouped at Lee-on-Solent in March 1942 receiving Swordfish II's as replacements for their lost aircraft. Three aircraft embarked on *HMS Avenger* for Arctic convoy duties to Russia; 16 U-boats were sighted of which only six could be attacked. The squadron shared in the destruction of U-589 with *HMS Onslow* on 14 September. Upon return to England the squadron carried out strike operations in the English Channel from the RAF stations at Thorney Island and Exeter while seconded to 16 Group, RAF Coastal Command.

From March 1943, 825 Squadron embarked in *HMS Furious* to provide anti-submarine operations for convoys sailing from Scapa (Scotland) and Iceland and to conduct anti-submarine sweeps off the Norwegian coast. In December 1943 the squadron joined *HMS Vindex* to begin a long association during which time it flew many sorties against the enemy in Atlantic and Arctic waters. At this time a fighter flight of six Hawker Sea Hurricane II's was added to the squadron to defend the convoys against air attack. Terrible weather failed to prevent intensive flying and the squadron shared with surface forces in the sinking of U-653 on 15 March and U-765 on 6 May 1944. During April 1944 three more modern Fairey Fulmars from No. 784 Squadron briefly augmented 825 Squadron's Swordfish.

In August 1944, the squadron now equipped with 12 Swordfish III's again embarked on *HMS Vindex* to provide anti-submarine protection for arctic convoys. The highlight of this period was the escorting of Convoys JW 59 and RA 59A to and from North Russia. On 22 August, Swordfish "C" sank U-354 and claimed a possible sinking the next day. A Sea Hurricane damaged another U-boat on 22 August, and two days later the squadron shared the sinking of U-344 with surface forces. The final success of this escort task occurred when Swordfish "A" sank U-394 on 2 September 1944.

In March 1945, 825 Squadron embarked in *HMS Campania* with the Sea Hurricanes having been replaced by eight Grumman Wildcat I's (Martlets in RN terminology) for further Arctic convoy duties. On return from this voyage the squadron's Swordfish were transferred to 815 Squadron while the Wildcats continued in 825

Squadron until also struck off strength in May 1945 (Victory in Europe) when the squadron was disbanded.

The Royal Navy reformed No. 825 Squadron at RNAS Rattray in Scotland on 1 July 1945. The squadron was a Canadian manned unit initially equipped with 12 Fairey Barracuda II's with Air Search Homing (ASH) radar. These aircraft were replaced in November with 12 Fairey Firefly FR I's that were given to Canada as part of Britain's war claim settlement. By the end of the year all of the pilots and 60 percent of the maintenance ratings were Canadians; observers were in short supply and none would be available to relieve their British counterparts in 825 until a group graduated from course in the summer. The squadron was transferred to the RCN on 24 January 1946 when *HMCS Warrior* was commissioned. In March, 825 Squadron embarked in *Warrior* for her maiden voyage to Halifax where the squadron disembarked for the first time on Canadian soil at RCAF Station Dartmouth. The RCAF provided hangers and accommodation for the RCN's fledgling Naval Air Arm at Dartmouth that formed the Naval Air Section. For the next year 825 Squadron was under training either ashore at the Naval Air Section or afloat in *Warrior*, in which the squadron embarked for a visit to the West Coast in the winter of 1946.

In April 1947, 803 and 825 Squadrons were formed into the 19<sup>th</sup> Carrier Air Group (CAG) and took part in fleet exercises off Bermuda. On completion, the 19<sup>th</sup> CAG turned its Seafire and Firefly aircraft over to the 18<sup>th</sup> CAG and sailed to the United Kingdom in *Warrior*. While in the United Kingdom 825 Squadron re-equipped with 13 Firefly FR 4's and returned to Canada in June 1948 aboard *HMCS Magnificent*. The FR 4's were loaned from the Royal Navy to train for the planned acquisition of the AS 5 anti-submarine version of the Firefly. In preparing for the creation of NATO in 1949 Canada agreed that the RCN would specialize in anti-submarine warfare; consequently, the AS 5 was required to replace the FR I, which was a strike-reconnaissance fighter. The FR 4's were used as an interim trainer because they better replicated the performance of the AS 5 than did the squadron's former Firefly FR I's.

In November 1948, the two Firefly squadrons, 825 and 826, were grouped to form the 18<sup>th</sup> CAG to facilitate maintenance on similar aircraft. In early 1949, 825 Squadron returned nine of their Firefly FR 4's to the Royal Navy (The squadron ditched two and lost another in a mid-air collision; the RCN retained one until 1954) and took delivery of 18 new Firefly AS 5's equipped for anti-submarine warfare. For the next two years 825 Squadron was stationed at the Royal Canadian Naval Air Station Shearwater or was embarked in *Magnificent* for cruises. There was another re-organization in January 1951 when 803 and 825 Squadrons formed the 19<sup>th</sup> Support Air Group (SAG). All RCN air units were renumbered on 1 May 1951 to better identify Canadian naval air squadrons in the Commonwealth numbering scheme. Consequently, 825 Squadron was renumbered to 880 Squadron and the 825 identity reverted to the Royal Navy.

No. 825 Squadron garnered a proud heritage during its wartime operations that are reflected in its Battle Honours: **Dunkirk 1940, English Channel 1940-42, Norway 1940, "Bismarck" 1941, Malta Convoys 1941, Arctic 1942-45 and Atlantic 1944.**

Although the Battle Honours were repatriated with 825 Squadron when it returned to the Royal Navy, the proud heritage and traditions of the squadron remained with the RCN and established the standard to be upheld by its successor squadron. The spirit of 825 Squadron's motto, "Nihil Obstat" (Nothing Stops Us), is exemplified in the fact that 880 Squadron remains in being today (albeit unmanned), despite political pressures to disband many of our air squadrons that reflect Canada's unique aviation heritage.

The Shearwater Aviation Museum is currently restoring Firefly PP462 to flying condition. This Firefly FR 1 was among the first 825 Squadron aircraft to fly ashore to Dartmouth. To preserve part of 825 Squadron's history and to commemorate the founding role the squadron played in our nation's naval aviation heritage, PP462 will be painted in the same dark sea gray and sky (light green) livery as the first 825 Squadron Fireflies that landed at Dartmouth on 31 March 1946.

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Postscript:

Upon return to the Royal Navy 825 Squadron continued to build on its proud heritage. Flying Firefly FR 5's, it served in the Far East and Korea for which it was awarded the coveted Boyd Trophy. In 1953 it converted to the Firefly AS 5 and was engaged in anti-submarine duties and later participated in strikes against Malaysian terrorists in central Johore.

In 1955, equipped with Fairey Gannets, 825 Squadron saw anti-submarine duty in the Mediterranean and then the Far East followed by shore based duty from Malta. In 1960, the squadron converted to Westland Whirlwind helicopters and saw duty in the Mediterranean, Persian Gulf (Kuwait Crisis) and East Africa (flood relief).

In May 1982, equipped with Westland Sea King helicopters, 825 Squadron prepared for service in the Falkland Islands in the trooping and heavy lift role. The squadron embarked eight aircraft on the SS Atlantic Causeway and two on the SS Queen Elisabeth II. The squadron put a detachment ashore in Port San Carlos in June and returned to RNAS Culdrose, England where it was disbanded on 17 September 1982. (Presumably for the last time as there does not appear to be any further documentation on squadron and it is not listed among the Fleet Air Arm's current squadrons.)