

Sir William Garthwaite, Bt

LT-CDR Sir William Garthwaite, 2nd Bt, who has died aged 87, won the DSC for his part in the chase and destruction of the German battleship *Bismarck* in the North Atlantic in May 1941.

Although Garthwaite — then a Lieut RNVR in the Fleet Air Arm was an experienced pilot, he had made only a handful of deck landings when he flew out from Hatston in the Orkneys with 825 Naval Air Squadron. They joined the new aircraft carrier *Victorious* 48 hours before the ship sailed.

At 10pm on May 24, nine Fairey Swordfish took off from the carrier, briefed to find and torpedo *Bismarck*, reported 120 miles ahead.

The weather was bad, with huge seas running, and many in *Victorious* who saw those Swordfish take off into a darkening sky beneath lowering clouds wondered whether they would see them again.

The Swordfish gained ship-radar contact at about 11.30pm; coming down through cloud they sighted *Bismarck* at 20 miles. Going back into cloud, they lost their way and were redirected by frantic signalling from the shadowing cruiser *Norfolk*.

They soon obtained a second ship-radar contact, which they believed must be *Bismarck*: it turned out to be the US Coast Guard cutter *Modoc*, with *Bismarck* herself in sight six miles away.

All surprise by now lost, the Swordfish had to approach a fully alerted battleship through a storm of fire. *Bismarck* even used her main 15-inch guns in the hope that the tall columns of water thrown up by the shellbursts would knock a Swordfish down. But not one was hit.

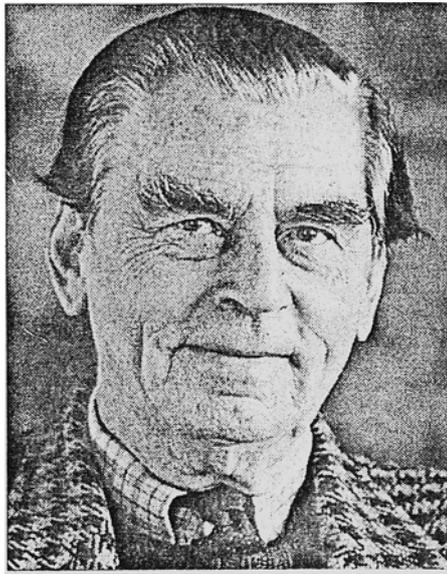
During the approach Garthwaite seemed to draw much of the fire but he pressed on steadily. As his observer said later: "Bill didn't mind the stuff going above him and below him, it was these beastly little balls of fire that nipped in between the wings that upset him."

All the port side torpedo attacks failed, but one Swordfish flew round to *Bismarck's* starboard side and scored a hit.

It was now dark. Garthwaite, like most of 825, had never made a night deck landing. Disregarding the danger of U-boats, *Victorious* switched on all her lights and shone every searchlight and signal projector.

Miraculously, all landed safely, although Garthwaite hit the flight deck with a resounding thud and bounced high in the air; he quickly slammed open his throttle and went round again.

Years after the war Garthwaite and the rest of 825's survivors discovered why none of them was hit. Their Swordfish flew at about 80 knots; the designers of *Bismarck's* fire control systems had never envisaged any modern aircraft flying at less than 100 knots, and



Garthwaite: after the *Bismarck*

so made that the lowest speed setting on their instruments.

After the *Bismarck* episode 825 transferred to Ark *Royal* and took part in Operation Substance, the Malta relief convoy of July 1941. On the 24th Garthwaite led six Swordfish to Malta to join 830 Naval Squadron, based at Hal Far.

Their task was to disrupt the flow of supply convoys to the Afrika Korps in Libya. A "pathfinder" Swordfish equipped with flares would illuminate a convoy, while the others attacked the silhouetted targets with torpedoes.

The squadron's strength was steadily diminished by relentless bombing of Hal Far, but with the help of RAF reconnaissance and Ultra Special Intelligence they sank or damaged 100,000 tons of Axis shipping during the year.

Garthwaite, who was particularly skilled as a pathfinder, flew on 35 operations, was mentioned in despatches and awarded a Bar to his DSC.

William Francis Cuthbert Garthwaite was born on Jan 3 1906, the eldest son of Sir William Garthwaite, 1st Bt, president of the Marine Navigation Co of Montreal, who ran one of the last working fleets of sailing ships.

Young Bill was educated at Bradfiel and Hertford College, Oxford. On coming down he sailed from the Clyde to Australia in the last grain clipper of the line, the four-masted barque *Garthpool*.

In 1926 he joined Lloyd's as an underwriter and broker. He stood as Conservative candidate at Hemsworth in Yorkshire in 1931 and at Ely in 1935.

Rejected by the RAF because he was colour blind, he memorised the patterns in the colour test and joined the Navy in August 1939, going on the No 1 ("Old Gentleman's") flying course for RNVR pilots.

Aged 33 when war broke out, Garth-

waite was the oldest man in every squadron he served in, but he took to the hectic life of a naval pilot with zest. A large man with a bushy black beard, he filled the front cockpit of a Swordfish nicely and always flew as though convinced he could not be shot down.

In 1940 he trained air gunners and underwent deck landing training in the carrier *Furious*. Early the next year he flew with RAF Coastal Command, laying mines in Dutch, Belgian and French harbours.

After leaving 830 in January 1942 he set up a ferry service for reinforcement aircraft from Tobruk to Malta. In March he went to America, took a bomber conversion course and ferried a Liberator III back to Britain. In June he went as an instructor to HMS *Jackdaw*, the torpedo training school at Crail.

In December he was appointed in command of 841 Squadron, operating with RAF Fighter Command from Manston in Kent. Flying by night, 841 made 99 attacks on enemy shipping in the Dover Straits and the English Channel. Garthwaite was mentioned in despatches for the second time.

By now one of the Navy's most experienced pilots, Garthwaite was appointed in command of 766 Squadron Operational training unit in July 1943. As chief flying instructor at HMS *Merganser*, at Crimond in Aberdeenshire, he fell foul of a regular RN captain who wanted to run the air station like a pukka battleship.

He later joined Naval Intelligence and reported on the suitability of airfields in the Middle and Far East after the war. He kept up his flying: in 1954 he survived a crash in a Vampire jet, and his logbook eventually recorded that he had flown 72 types of military and civil aircraft.

He also went back to Lloyd's and became chairman of Sir William Garthwaite (Holdings). In the 1945 general election he stood as a Tory at Wolverhampton East; he was subsequently president of the Royal Tunbridge Wells Conservative Association.

By way of recreation Garthwaite owned racehorses, farmed, skied, sailed, played golf — and drove motorcars, including a magnificent crocus yellow V-12 Lamborghini Islero S, which he continued to drive around Kent well into his 88th year.

He married, first, in 1931 Dorothy, only daughter of the 1st and last Lord Duveen. The marriage was dissolved in 1937 and he married secondly, in 1945 Patricia, widow of Cdr Barry Leonard and daughter of Cdr Charles Neate; they had a son. The marriage was dissolved in 1952 and he married thirdly, in 1957, Patricia, daughter of Sir Philip d'Ambrumenil; they had three sons and a daughter, who died in 1964.

The son of his second marriage, William Mark Charles Garthwaite, born 1946, now succeeds to the baronetcy.