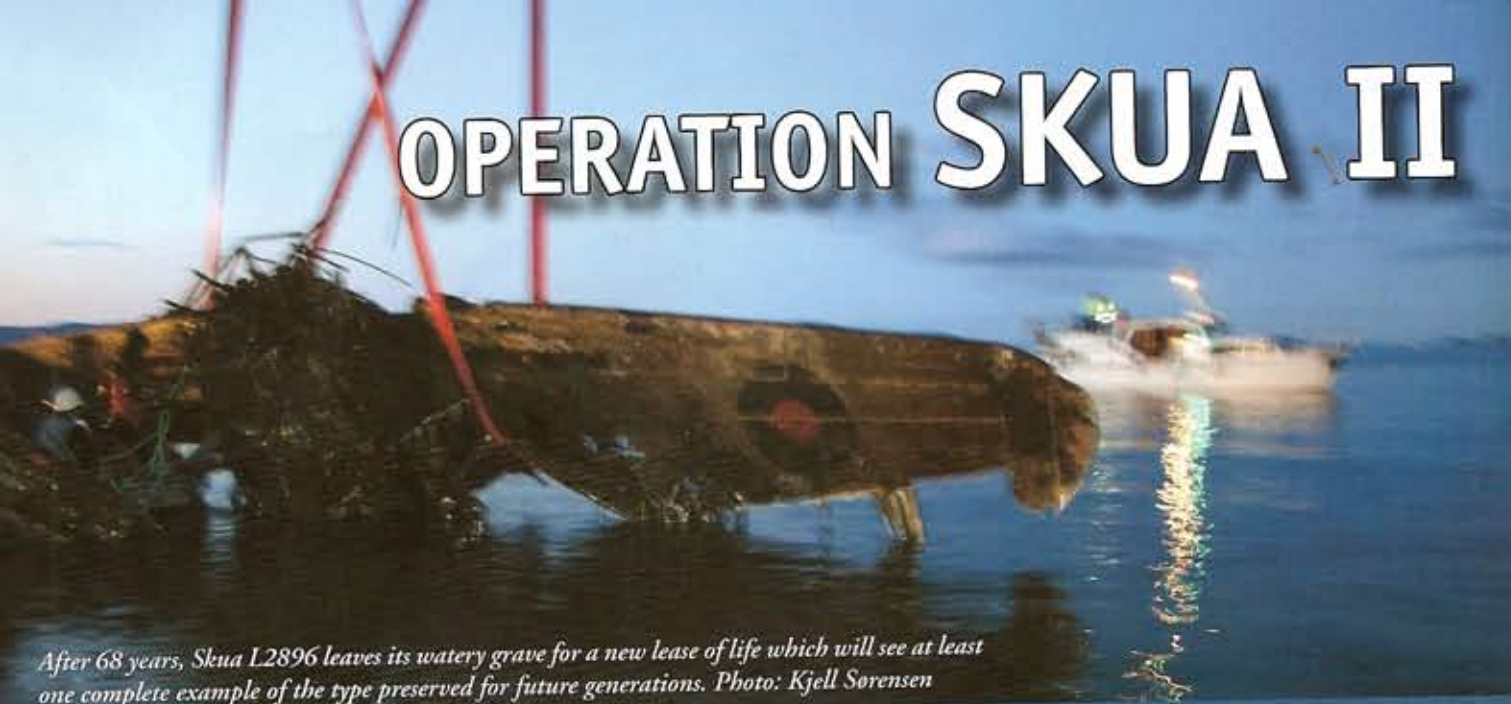


# OPERATION SKUA II



After 68 years, Skua L2896 leaves its watery grave for a new lease of life which will see at least one complete example of the type preserved for future generations. Photo: Kjell Sorensen

The ungainly Skua was the Fleet Air Arm's first operational monoplane and the Royal Navy's only true dive bomber, although it was also to have a secondary role as a fighter, which soon proved to be a mistake, suffering heavy losses when confronted with modern fighters. Although reasonably well armed for



A flight of Skuas. This unsung aircraft achieved some notable 'firsts' including that of being the first aircraft to sink a large enemy warship.

the time with four fixed 0.303 inch (7.69 mm) Browning machine guns in the wing and a single rearward-firing Vickers K machine gun, the aircraft was underpowered with its 860 hp Bristol Perseus XII radial engine which gave it a maximum speed of 225 mph (362 km/h).

The prototype Skua first flew on 9th February 1937, six months after Blackburn had received an order for 190 aircraft. It was a significant advance on the fabric covered biplanes that then equipped the Fleet Air Arm, featuring metal construction, flaps, a variable pitch propeller, retractable landing gear and an enclosed 'greenhouse' cockpit - all firsts for a British deck landing naval aircraft. The Skua entered service late in 1938 with Nos. 800 and 803 squadrons, allocated to HMS 'Ark Royal'. A Skua of No. 803 squadron of HMS 'Ark Royal' became the first

British 'fighter' to shoot down a German aircraft during the Second World War when, on the 26th September 1939, a Dornier Do 18 flying boat was destroyed. The Skua was far better equipped for the role of dive bomber, a single 250 lb (113 kg) or 500 lb (227kg) bomb being carried on a special swinging crutch under the fuselage which enabled the bomb to clear the propeller arc on release. Four 40lb (18 kg) bombs or eight 20lb (9 kg) Cooper bombs could also be carried in racks under each wing. It was in this role that the aircraft achieved a degree of fame when, on 10th April 1940, twenty aircraft from the 800 and 803 Squadrons attacked and sank the German cruiser 'Königsberg' at Bergen. This was the first time a major warship had been sunk by aircraft. However this success was soon tempered when squadrons suffered heavy losses in an attack on

the capital ships 'Scharnhorst' and 'Admiral Hipper' at Trondheim on 13th June, in what would become known as 'Black Thursday'. The attack was repelled by fighters and heavy flak resulting in eight out of fifteen aircraft being lost in the attack, their crews killed or taken prisoner. Among the latter were both squadron commanders, Cpt. R. T. Partridge (RM) and Lt. Cdr. John Casson (RN) whose aircraft ditched at Geitastand, near-by Trondheim.

It is the latter machine that was the focus of this recovery effort, being one of two aircraft shot down by Messerschmitts and sought by the museum in order that a complete example might be rebuilt for display (the other being L3047 of 800 Sqdn flown by Derek Martins (POW) which was shot down about 4 kms further north).

Skua L2896 was located on 25th April 2007



L2896 was discovered at a depth of 242m, perched precariously on a cliff that held the wreck from falling a further 200m!

following a Remote Operated Vehicle (ROV) search. Bjørg Gjølmesli describes the discovery. "In April last I went onboard the research ship, M/V 'Gunnerus', belonging to the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim to show them what I had on wrecks in the fjord. The most important object, and the one which I had eyewitnesses to, was Casson's Skua. So I gave them all the info that I had, and I left the ship with the feeling that they would try to find it when they carried out tests of different equipment for other companies. The price per hour for using the ship varies on different jobs, but they gave me a price of 25- 40,000 kroner an hour (US\$ 4,965-7,940), and there was no way that we could raise that amount of money!

Luckily, all the information was sent to Marine-Teck at the university and they made this into a research task for the students. Then one day they called to inform me that they were ready to do a search on 24-25 April. The 24th was cancelled, so we only had the one day available.

I went to see one of the witnesses, Johs Halsen (81), and told him to go to the position from where he saw the ditching and to bring his mobile phone. Mr. Nodland (87), who picked up the crew in his rowing boat joined us on the bridge of 'Gunnerus' and pointed out the approximate position where the aircraft sank. Mr. Halsen called us from the shore and told us where to start the search. We soon got a very good 'fix' and in fact we started the search less than 100 meters from the wreck, such was the accuracy of these two old men's memories!

It was exciting to be there. All the students were sitting around the TV screens making notes. To see their faces and hear their reaction when the wing appeared on screen was fantastic".



Ashore at Trondheim harbour and one of the wings shows off its RAF roundel.

## UP SHE COMES!

Birger Larsen describes the operation to raise Skua L2896 from the ocean floor.

"7th April 2008, and the first phase of the recovery of Skua L2896 (Green 'A') was performed in Orkdalsfjord close to Trondheim. Because of bad weather on this day, time was spent in surveying the condition of the wreck as well as planning the recovery. The wreck was at a depth of 242 meters perched on a cliff ready to slide down an additional 200 meters, one wing reaching out into the void! A shift in the position of the wreck could see it disappear into the void and be lost, meaning ROV operation was limited because of the narrow space between the sea bottom and the wing. To make matters even worse, close to the trailing edge of the right wing was another cliff making it difficult to operate the ROV. Loose silt reduced the visibility, sometimes

to zero, when the ROV came close to the bottom which slowed down the work of connecting the lifting straps even more.

The original plan was to raise the Skua in a horizontal position and a special steel frame was made so that the tail end of the aircraft could be supported during the lift operation. We knew from the surveys on the 7th that the tail of the Skua was a problem because most of the rivets were gone and only connection to the rest of the airframe were the steel control cables. However any attempt to supporting the tail more securely would mean an extra day of ROV operations. We did not have that extra day. 'Gunnerus' was scheduled for other operations on the 9th, therefore the lift had to be undertaken despite the risk of parts from the tail section falling off.

Late in the evening on the 8th the ROV pilot had completed the strapping of the wreck and the Skua could start its journey back to the surface. Almost at once, the centre piece of the tail broke off, separating the tail plane from the fuselage.

Over the years much silt had collected inside in the area of the open aft cockpit and this contributed to a rather heavy load aft of the main spars. Due to the rather frail condition of this area and the weight of the accumulated silt, the lifting straps tore into the structure and made the front section turn to a nose up position for the rest of the lift, which unfortunately resulted in the loss of several parts of the structure needed for the reconstruction of the aft cockpit area. However the winching of the Skua to the surface was performed without problems. Upon surfacing the wreck was transferred to the crane barge in a relatively short period of time and taken ashore.

The above operation was made possible by the use of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) vessel 'Gunnerus',



The centre section is a vital part of this wreck, as this is missing from the parts cache in Norway, and also from the recovered remains at the FAA Museum, Yeovilton