

## **Ernest Gane (1926 -1981) Fleet Air Arm**

**Pontllanfraith nr Blackwood  
& Newport, Gwent**

**West Wales Veterans Archive**

**Collection contains photographs from wartime album and written description**

**Date: 30.7.24.**

### **Description**

Ernest John Gane was born in Pontllanfraith nr Blackwood in 1926. His father was the local butcher and upon leaving school Ernest became an apprentice butcher in the family business. Ernest was then called up to the Royal Navy in April 1943 and spent the next three and half years in the Fleet Air Arm. It was inevitable that having been a butcher, Ernest was christened 'Butch' by his fellow ratings in the FAA.

Sadly, Ernest died just 55yrs old without speaking about his war to his family. However, his son, Ian, kept Ernest's precious wartime photograph album which provides a graphic presentation of Ernest's service in the war in the Pacific, aboard two aircraft carriers, HMS Formidable, and then for a far shorter period, HMS Victorious. Whilst this important album has provided Ian some visual clues to his father's wartime service, he sought advice from Age Cymru Dyfed to try to find out more about his father. The charity (which set up the West Wales Veterans Archive in early 2020), were very happy to assist.

The result was that Ian applied for Ernest's service record from the Ministry of Defence. After two months or so, Ian received a detailed record of Ernest's service as an Air Mechanic in the Fleet Air Arm from 6.2.1943 – 27.4.1946. His service took him right to the heart of the Pacific campaign and surrender of the Japanese forces on 15.8.45. On HMS Formidable Ernest experienced Kamikaze attacks from suicidal Japanese pilots, and his album contains photographs of these attacks.

### **Ernest Gane's Wartime Service**

Ernest entered HMS Gosling on 8.2.43. Gosling, the RN Air Training Establishment, was located near Warrington in Cheshire, and provided preliminary discipline and weapon training for all Aircraft Maintenance ratings. HMS Gosling consisted of 5 camps and Ernest found himself moving between Camps 1, 11, 111, and 1V.

After initial assessment at recruiting depots, all new entrants arrived at Camp 1 for joining routine before being allocated to Camp 4 for 12 weeks basic training - This included 4 days spent at RAF Sealand, Flintshire, where trainees were taught on the rifle and grenade live firing range.

Depending on the results of aptitude tests, ratings were sent to other camps for their trade training. In Ernest's case he was selected for Air Mechanics Airframes training and was posted to No 6 School of Technical Training at R.A.F. Hednesford, Staffordshire, on 2.5.43 where he remained until 9.9.43. There, Ernest learned his trade as an Air Mechanic Airframes.

He was then posted to Yeovilton in Somerset. Better known today as RNAS Yeovilton, it was then known as HMS Heron and was the location for the RN Air Fighter School. Interestingly Ernest is referred to on his service record as Air Mechanic 2<sup>nd</sup> Class E, indicating that he specialized in aero Engines. On 1.1.44 Ernest became a member of the Fighter School workshop in Yeovilton which is where he served for the next five months, before being posted on 10.5.44 to first Manston and then Thorney Island. Thereafter followed Ernest's first operational posting to 848 Naval Air Squadron (NAS) on 18.8.44. Just 5 days later he was promoted to Air Mechanic 1<sup>st</sup> Class.

By late January 45, 848 NAS became actively involved in the war in the Pacific aboard the aircraft carrier HMS Formidable which was a key component in the British Pacific Fleet. 848 NAS was equipped with 18 American-built Grumman Avengers, and Ernest worked on the Avenger's engines.

On 20 March 45 Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser, commander of the BPF, inspected the ship and her crew. Formidable arrived in San Pedro Bay in the Philippines on 4.4.45 before becoming actively involved in attacks against the Japanese and replaced the damaged aircraft carrier, Illustrious.

On 4<sup>th</sup> May Formidable launched two Vought F4 Corsairs for bombardment-spotting duties and the deck park of eleven of 848 NAS's Avengers were moved forward to allow the Corsairs to return to land on the deck. Suddenly and without warning, a Mitsubishi A6M Zero fighter attacked at 11:31. Before any of *Formidable's* guns could open fire, Zero strafed the flight deck and then turned sharply to drop its bomb and dive into the forward flight deck. The ship had already turned hard to starboard, but it all happened far too quickly to avoid the violent attack. Just before hitting the base of the ship's Island (the command centre for the flight-deck) deck, the Zero had blown up having been caught in the blast of its own bomb.

The impact from the bomb created a large hole in the flight deck of 24ft x 20ft x 2ft deep. 2 officers and 6 ratings were killed, with 55 other crewmen injured, many of whom were caught by shrapnel which had peppered the ship's Island. One Grumman Avenger was blown clean over the side, and another was on fire. Seven Avengers and a Corsair which were damaged beyond repair were dumped over the side. The fires raged on the deck for a further 25mins before being extinguished. A photo from Ernest's album captures the chaos caused by the Kamikaze attack.

Just 5 days later on 9<sup>th</sup> May a second Kamikaze hit Formidable's deck park at 17.05. One killed and four injured with 18 aircraft destroyed. This left only 4 Avengers and 11 Corsairs flightworthy, and the decision was taken by Admiral Rawlings, the CO of the British Pacific Fleet, to withdraw Formidable and its sister aircraft carrier Victorious for repair and replacement aircraft.

Three days later Formidable returned to action and on 18<sup>th</sup> May an accidental firing of one of the Corsair's machine guns caused a fire and loss of 7 Avengers and 21 Corsairs. So, Formidable sailed to Sydney for further repairs, arriving on 31<sup>st</sup> May. Ernest and the crew then spent the next four weeks in Sydney.

Patched up, Formidable, departed Sydney on 28.6.45 and headed eventually for the Japanese Home Island. The ship was now equipped with 6 Hellcats, 36 Corsairs as well as 848 NAS's Avengers. These were all American built aircraft. Targets near Tokyo were attacked, and Japanese shipping sunk. In one attack which had been mounted from Formidable, Lt Hampton Gray RCNVR, was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross.

On 6.8.45 the first of the Atom Bombs was dropped on Hiroshima, and then on Nagasaki on 9.8.45. The Japanese surrendered to the Allies on 15.8.45 meaning that the war was finally over for the battle-hardened personnel of 848 NAS who had served on HMS Formidable. The ship made its way back again to Sydney arriving on 24.8.45 when its aircraft-hanger was re-equipped to house repatriated PoW's from the Japanese PoW camps, returning home.

Ernest's served on HMS Formidable between 27.1.45 – 2.9.45. For his wartime service which related to his time on HMS Formidable, Ernest was awarded the 1939-45 Star, Burma Star, Defence Medal, War Medal, and Pacific Ribbon. By this time, Ernest had become Acting Leading Air Mechanic E and was then posted for a while to RAF Nowra, which was located in southern New South Wales, Australia.

On 18.9.46, Ernest transferred to HMS Victorious, another RN aircraft carrier with a distinguished wartime record. Victorious, sailed from Australia to the UK and Ernest left the ship on 28.10.45, the day after it had docked back in the UK. Victorious' decks were full of returning servicemen some of whom returned from the Far East and Australia with brides.

A day later Ernest found himself at RNAS Zeal in Wiltshire as Temporary Acting Leading Air Mechanic E. He remained at Zeal for the next few months, interspersed with a short four day posting to HMS Deodalus in Hampshire, an airfield which had played a key role in the aerial support of D-Day. On 18.1.46 Ernest received his final posting to HMS Godwit, located just a few miles south-west of Market Drayton in Shropshire and it was there that he was demobbed on 27.4.46.

Returning after war to Blackwood, Ernest became a master butcher and slaughter man in the family butchery business. He met Enid who married Enid in 1947 and together they moved to Cardiff and had two children, Michael and Ian. In 1951 Ernest started a food manufacturing business in Newport, Gwent, which he ran until his death on 26.2.1981. As requested by Ernest, his ashes were scattered at sea.