

RESCUE UNDER FIRE

The high speed launches of the Air-Sea Rescue Service exist to save life. They rescue pilots and aircrews of British and enemy aircraft alike, but this does not make them immune from attack, and when this takes place the crews are called on to defend themselves, and to hit back.

During a recent operation in the Channel one of the launches was attacked by twelve F.W.190s. In the course of the fight the skipper of the launch, Flying Officer J.R.L. Hill, an Australian, who was a newspaper man in civil life, was killed while going to the assistance of his coxswain, wounded early in the attack by a burst of machine-gun fire.

When the last of the twelve enemy fighters had gone the launch was burning furiously, and only one man of the crew remained alive.

Another launch, attracted by the smoke, rushed to the rescue. German aircraft attacked again. The second launch fought back but was also set on fire, and her crew jumped into the sea while the diving F.W.190s continued their attacks.

Two more launches came to the scene, "at considerable risk to themselves", as the official report observes. Several men were picked up and the dead went down with the burning ships.

Such is the cost of rescue work at sea, in which men of the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force play a part.

Typical of the spirit of the crews of these rescue ships is this extract from the official report of the incident: "Very few details are available, but it is known that Corporal Banks, of H.S.L. "X", swam round the men in the water seeing to their safety and, in at least one case, blew up the 'Mae West' of a man who was too exhausted to do so himself."

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