



remembrance ni

In arctic waters

Part 3 - The Murmansk run



**Northern Ireland's service in
the Battle of Narvik and the Russian convoys
by Houston McKelvey**

Part 3

The Murmansk run



In April 1940 Nazi Germany occupied Norway under the pretext of defence of its nationals from the British invasion. On June 22, 1941 Germany attacked the USSR. The Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin, demanded help. On July 12, 1941 the Soviet Union and Great Britain signed the treaty on 'mutual assistance' against Germany.

The western Allies provided supplies. The most direct route was by sea, around northern Norway to the Soviet ports of Murmansk and Archangel.

In September 1941 Allied convoys commenced running to the Arctic port of Murmansk. (With the exception of several months in 1943 the convoys to the Soviet Union ran from 1941 until the war's end).

The northern route of less than 2,500 miles was practical, but it crossed the cruellest seas of all, the Arctic Ocean. This Arctic route became known as 'The Murmansk Run'.

The route passed through a narrow funnel between the Arctic ice pack and German bases in Norway, and was very dangerous, especially in winter when the ice came further south. Many of the convoys were attacked by German submarines, aircraft and warships. Convoy PQ17 was almost destroyed.

Conditions were among the worst faced by any Allied sailors. As well as the Germans, they faced extreme cold, gales, and pack ice. The loss rate for ships was higher than any other allied convoy route.



Frozen hell: Sailors chipping away the ice and snow from the deck of H.M.S. Vansittart while on convoy escort duty in the Arctic in February 1943

Over four million tons of supplies were delivered to the Russians. As well as tanks and aircraft, these included less sensational but still vital items like trucks, tractors, telephone wire, railway engines and boots.

Although the supplies were valuable, the most important contribution made by the Arctic convoys was political. They proved that the Allies were committed to helping the Soviet Union, whilst deflecting Stalin's demands for a 'Second Front' (An Allied invasion of western Europe) until they were ready. The convoys also tied up a large part of Germany's dwindling naval and air forces.

For the gruelling years of the Second World War the Soviet, British, American, Canadian, South African and other military and merchant sailors ploughing the Arctic seas within the Convoys discharged their allied duty with honour. They endured the fire miles of the World War II, and supplied arms, ammunition, food and thousands of tons of other strategic cargo to Soviet Russia, essential to our war effort.



Appalling cold: Snow and ice covered the upper works of all ships. Some 3,000 servicemen were awarded bravery medals for taking part in the daring campaign

The hard stats

Between August 1941 and the end of the war, a total of 78 convoys made the perilous journey to and from north Russia, carrying four million tons of supplies for use by Soviet forces fighting against the German Army on the Eastern Front.

In summary, about 1400 merchant ships delivered vital supplies to Russia. 85 merchant vessels and 16 Royal Navy warships were lost. Towards the end of the war the material significance of the supplies was probably not as great as the symbolic value hence the continuation of these convoys long after the Russians had turned the German land offensive.

On the whole these convoys delivered about 4,5 million metric tons of cargoes, which is about one fourth of the western allies' total aid. The cargoes included over 7,000 airplanes, about 5,000 tanks, cars, fuel, medicines, outfits, metals and other raw materials.

The Allied seamen showed true heroism in their long and perilous sea passages in convoys, being constantly attacked by enemy forces in the appalling weather conditions of the Arctic. The bravery of these men and women who unsparingly fought for the victory will be always remembered and respected.

The convoy system

Originally convoys started to be used at the beginning of the war in 1939. The system of convoys provided for formation of large groups of merchant ships under the escort of military vessels for making sea trips. Such a system is organizationally complicated and hardly effective since the speed of any convoy does not exceed speed of its slowest ship.

On 'The Murmansk Run' a convoy set off each month, except in the summer when the lack of darkness made them very vulnerable to attack.



Convoy PQ17 assembles at Hvalfjord, Iceland, June 1942. PQ17 was ordered to scatter as the Admiralty feared an attack by the German battleship Tirpitz. The merchant ships were attacked by U-boats and aircraft, and only 11 out of 34 reached Russia. In all, 153 merchant seamen died. In the background is the Soviet tanker Azerbaijan, whose mainly female crew saved their ship after she was bombed and set on fire.

On the other hand, in the darkness of the Arctic winter, when the sun never rose, keeping station was difficult for the poorly equipped merchant ships, so there was always a danger of ship-to-ship collision. Sailing around the northern tip of Norway, the convoys would be exposed to one of the largest concentrations of German U-boats, surface raiders and aircraft anywhere in the world.

Strict orders forbade the halting of any ship for even a moment for fear of being attacked by prowling German U-boats, and individuals who fell overboard or survivors seen adrift on the waters had to be ruthlessly ignored. Each delivery of arms was an epic achievement, described as undertaking the impossible.

Notable convoys

Some of the convoys are particularly notable.

On August 12, 1941 the first convoy 'Dervish' departed Liverpool to Scapa Flow. It was composed of 6 British and a Dutch merchant ship. It reached Archangel with no losses on August 31 and delivered 10,000 tons of rubber, 3,800 depth-bombs and magnetic mines, 15 'Hurricane' fighters and other equipment.

At first the Allied convoys went unnamed and unnumbered. After several round trips were successfully completed, a coding system was established. All convoys bound for the Soviet Union were designated 'PQ' and those returning were designated 'QP'. The name of the officer who was monitoring convoys in the British Admiralty was P. Q. Edwards, his initials 'PQ' were used to mark the convoys heading outward and QP - homeward.

On September 28, 1941 the first of the PQ-convoys made up of 10 merchant ships under the escort of a cruiser and 2 destroyers departed Iceland to Archangel and reached it safely on October 11, 1941.

By the end of 1941, seven convoys had delivered 750 tanks, 800 planes, 2,300 vehicles and more than 100,000 tons of general cargo to the Soviet Union. Convoy PQ-8 was attacked by a U-boat but came to Murmansk on January 19, 1942. By early February 1942, 12 northbound convoys including 93 ships had made the journey with the loss of only one ship to a U-boat.

During 1941 the enemy did not put up serious resistance to the convoys in the Arctic still setting hopes on blitzkrieg. After the failure of the offensive on Moscow, Germany started a systematic fight against convoys by means of its fleet, submarines and air force.

By the beginning of 1942 Germany additionally deployed in the arena one of the worlds' best battleships - Tirpitz, two heavy cruisers, 10 destroyers and later another battleship and cruiser, plus 260 Luftwaffe military aircraft. Most of the time all these forces acted simultaneously by delivering massive strikes at the convoys.

Limavady and Bangor men survive the loss of HMS Edinburgh

Edinburgh, a Belfast class ship, under the command of Captain W Faulkner, came under heavy attack on two occasions in three days in April and May 1942. Whilst escorting Russia/Iceland convoy QP. 11 on 30/04/1942, she was torpedoed by German submarine U. 456 at 73.09N, 32.45E.

Lieutenant John Moir whose wife came from Ballyhalbert died in this attack.

On 02/05/1942 in the Barents Sea (71.51N, 35.10E), as Edinburgh was returning to Murmansk under tow, it was attacked again. 57 crew were lost when the vessel was hit by a third torpedo from German destroyers Z.24 and Z.25, and finally scuttled with a torpedo from destroyer HMS Foresight.

Hugh Gallagher of Limavady and Norman Sparksman of Bangor, a former pupil of Methodist College, Belfast and a keen member of Ballyholme Yacht Club, were amongst the survivors.

PQ17 - a horrendous loss

By the end of June 1942, PQ-17, the largest and most valuable convoy in the history of the run, was formed up and ready to sail for Murmansk and Archangel. Its cargo was worth a staggering \$700 million. Crammed into bulging holds were nearly 300 aircraft, 600 tanks, more than 4,000 trucks and trailers, and a general cargo that exceeded 150,000 tons. It was more than enough to completely equip an army of 50,000.

It sailed from Iceland on June 27, 1942. Thirty-five cargo ships were escorted by six destroyers and 15 other armed vessels. One ship was a catapult-armed merchantman that carried a Hawker Hurricane fighter which could be launched to intercept enemy aircraft and perform reconnaissance. Due to the threat from German surface ships, the convoy was ordered to scatter on July 4, and the escorts were withdrawn rather than risk their loss.

The toll taken on the abandoned convoy was horrendous. Only 11 of the 35 merchantmen that left Iceland finally made it to the Soviet Union. Fourteen of the sunken ships were American. More than two-thirds of the convoy had gone to the bottom, along with 210 combat planes, 430 Sherman tanks, 3,350 vehicles and nearly 100,000 tons of other cargo. More than 120 seamen were killed and countless others were crippled and maimed.

PQ-18 was the last convoy of this series which became the largest convoy formation. It departed on September 2, 1942 and was escorted by more than 30 military vessels, including 1 cruiser and 14 destroyers, as well as 2 tankers, 4 trawlers and a salvage ship. In total 51 vessels took part in this operation. 27 transport ships of PQ-18 delivered 150 thousand tons of cargo to Archangel which equaled to the total cargo amount supplied in 1941.

In November 1942 the convoys' marking was changed for the reasons of secrecy to the following identifiers: JW for the journey to Russia and RA for the return journey.

By the end of 1942 well over a million tons of Allied shipping had been sent to the bottom of the Atlantic. 85 U-boats had gone there too. Slowly but surely the Battle of the Atlantic was turning the Allies' way.

In January 1943 a great success was achieved. The convoy JW51B was attacked by the cruiser Hipper and the pocket battleship Luetzow, but the allied escort was able to drive off the attacking forces. After this victory, convoys ran regularly, with breaks from March to November 1943 and in the summer of 1944, until the end of the war. A total of 14 convoys sailed to Russia from November 1943 to May 1945 with only 13 ships lost altogether.

U-boats were losing their effectiveness as Allied submarine-hunting techniques improved through 1944. The battleship Tirpitz, always

more potent as a threat than actual weapon, was finally sunk at her Tromso anchorage by RAF bombers on 12/11/1944.

Four Northern Ireland men in ill-fated HMS Lapwing

James Bickerstaff from Castlereagh, Edward Close from Banbridge and Henry Gordon from Belfast were lost in HMS Lapwing on 'The Murmansk Run' escorting one of the last convoys in the closing months of the war. Thomas Jess of Lisburn was amongst the sixty survivors.

Lapwing, a 1460 ton escort sloop, was completed and delivered to the RN in 1944.



The crew photograph taken on board Lapwing after a Church parade late May 1944 in Greenock, prior to preparations for participating in the D-day landings.

Convoy JW65 made up of 26 ships left the Clyde estuary on 11/03/1945. Its principal protector was The Seventh Escort Group of which Lapwing was part.

Despite the fact that the Russian army had almost reached Berlin, the German navy and airforce kept up their attacks on the Arctic convoys. The Germans detected Convoy JW65 by radio transmissions and then ordered a number of U-boats in its direction.

On 23/03/1945 very dense snow showers and rain squalls grounded the convoy's air patrols and the Russia land-based fighter cover was



HMS Lapwing

also affected. The Germans took advantage of the weather and during this wind of opportunity the US ship Horace Bushnell was sunk. Three hours later the convoy encountered the second line of U-boats.

At about 1235 Lapwing was struck amidships by a torpedo from U-968. She broke in half and



Survivors photographed in Greenock, Scotland on their return March 1945. Thomas Jess - back row second from right

sunk within 20 minutes. The sinking took place about six miles off Cape Kildin on the Kola inlet.

U-968 then sank a further US ship, the Thomas Donaldson.

The convoy then proceeded to Murmansk without further loss.

Thomas Jess was a gunner on Lapwing. He was blown 10 yards across the deck when the torpedo struck the destroyer "The explosion just lifted me off my feet, skinning all my knuckles," he said. "But I was lucky as I always wore my lifebelt, which was my best friend at sea. Other fellows were more careless. There was one poor man who tried to make his way below for his lifebelt but he never got back up on deck."

After the torpedo ripped through the ship's hull, he stayed at his post until the abandon ship order was given. Then he jumped into the freezing sea and was lucky enough to be pulled onto a raft that had been thrown overboard by the crew.



Tommy Jess 1923 - 2015

"There were about 16 of us on the raft when we set off and then one by one they fell off in the cold. I fell unconscious while we drifted for at least two hours...There were just six of us pulled on board HMS Savage when we were rescued ...And one of them died on the deck of HMS Savage. I'll always remember that man,"



**The sloop
HMS
Lapwing
of the 7th
Escort**

Dungannon naval surgeon's polar expeditions expertise developed the kit for the WW2 Arctic convoys

Surgeon Captain Edward W Bingham was one of the most experienced arctic explorer.

Seconded to the Ministry of Supply, he drew on his experiences to forge through improvements in the gear issued to those on the arctic convoys.

Edward W Bingham was born 02/01/1901 in Dungannon, the son of a well-respected headmaster of the Royal School. He graduated in medicine at TCD in 1926.

He wanted to travel and explore, and soon after joining the Royal Navy he volunteered to go as a medical officer in the British Arctic Air Route Expedition 1930 - 31. He spent almost a third of his professional career in the polar regions, participating in three important expeditions. In 1932 he was appointed to HMS Challenger, which was to carry out hydrographic surveys off the coast of Labrador. When Challenger returned at the end of the summer of 1933, Bingham stayed for the winter to help Captain Baker with the coast-line survey. This involved getting to know Labrador huskies and a different method of sledging.

Whilst in north Labrador, Bingham received an offer to join John Rymill, who had been in Greenland with Watkin's expedition, on an Antarctic expedition. The Admiralty having approved his appointment, he sledged from Nain to south Labrador, from where he reached Britain in time to join the British Graham Land Expedition (BGL) which sailed for Port Stanley in the autumn of 1934. Bingham became an expert in the training and welfare of dogs, and became a very experienced dog driver, a skill which was invaluable to him when he was appointed to command the newly created Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey in 1945. He was the only one within extensive polar experience. His new companions were former commissioned ranks used to exercising leadership. However, in 18 months, Bingham completed his task admirably, and in 1947 was appointed OBE and given a third clasp to his Polar Medal. He also was awarded the Murchiston Grant of the Royal Geographical Society.

During the war he served in HMS Duke of York in the Home Fleet, on Russian convoys, and in the Ministry of Supply where he met manufacturers and enabled the development of better clothing for convoys. The cold weather clothing produced were simple, strangely reminiscent of the garments used by the Inuit of East Greenland, with peaked hoods and simple drawstrings. One tribute said “For those of us who served in the far north, and who offered thanks to the person who thought up these strange garments, Ted Bingham’s work was a miracle that only took three months...”

From 1948 - 52 he was principal medical officer at RNAS Eglinton, and promoted Captain in 1951. He then served as fleet medical officer in HMS Vanguard, Mountbatten’s flag ship in the Mediterranean command. His final appointment was as principal medical officer at RNAS Lee-on-Solent. He retired from the Navy in 1957. He died aged 92 on 01/09/1993. At the time of his death he was the last surviving holder of the Polar Medal with three clasps.

A book “Of Dogs and Men - Fifty Years in the Antarctic” with a foreword by HRH The Prince of Wales was published as, “a tribute to the late Ted Bingham whose skip and enthusiasm for dog driving became a tradition and feature of the British Antarctic Survey for 50 years...”

No losses on final convoy

The last convoy left on May 12, 1945, arriving at Murmansk on May 22, 1945. It had no losses. Between August 1941 and the end of the war, a total of 78 convoys made the perilous journey to and from north Russia, carrying four million tons of supplies for use by Soviet forces fighting against the German Army on the Eastern Front.

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The **remembrance ni** programme is overseen by Very Rev Dr Houston McKelvey OBE, QVRM, TD who served as Chaplain to 102 and 105 Regiments Royal Artillery (TA), as Hon. Chaplain to RNR and as Chaplain to the RBL NI area and the Burma Star Association NI. Dr McKelvey is a Past President of Queen's University Services Club. He may be contacted at houston.mckelvey@btinternet.com

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