

EXPEDITION TO RUSSIA

Continuing with the second of his two-part series of features looking at the RAF in Russia during the Second World War, **Andy Thomas** explains how it is that only 81 Squadron are entitled to carry the Battle honour 'Russia 1941' on its colours.

MAIN PICTURE: Plt Off Scotty Edmiston flew Hurricane IIB Z5227/FE53 during 81 Sqn's first encounter with the Luftwaffe when he shared in damaging a Messerschmitt Bf 110.

THE GERMAN invasion of the Soviet Union that opened on 22 June 1941 inflicted massive losses on the Soviets. It resulted in the immediate offer of material assistance by the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill though the Soviet leader Josef Stalin demanded much more, including direct support. One result was a plan to send a Wing

of two Hurricane squadrons, code named Force Benedict, to North Russia which was approved on 27 July. To make up 151 Wing two new squadrons were formed at Leconfield in East Yorkshire. No 81 Sqn was formed around a nucleus of a complete flight of 504 Sqn under Sqn Ldr Tony Rook with 17 Sqn providing a similar nucleus for 134 Sqn to complete the Wing that was

commanded by Wg Cdr H N Ramsbotham-Isherwood. Both units rapidly built up to full strength and knew they were destined overseas, though most assumed the destination was the Middle East. Only the Wing and Squadron commanders knew the real task that was: '...the defence of the naval base of Murmansk and co-operation with the Soviet forces in the Murmansk areas.' >>

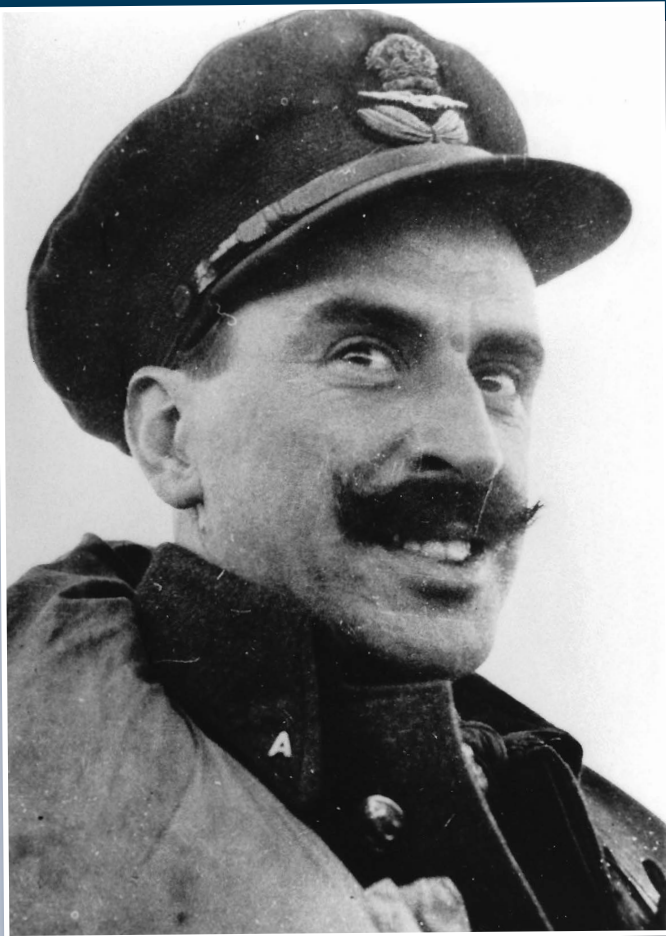


BATTLES OVER THE BARENTS
Heroism Above The Arctic Convoys



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ABOVE: No 81 Sqn's CO during the expedition to Russia was Sqn Ldr Tony Rook.

Preparations proceeded swiftly and in mid-August the Wing's ground party with some pilots and 15 crated aircraft sailed for Iceland to join the first convoy to Arctic Russia, code named Dervish. At the same time two-dozen aircraft with twelve pilots from each unit were loaded at Greenock onto the old aircraft carrier HMS Argus. She then sailed for the Fleet anchorage at Scapa Flow before

sailing under escort for the Barents Sea on 30 August. That day the Dervish convoy arrived at the port of Archangel on the White Sea where unloading and re-assembly began, albeit in the face of numerous difficulties. Having sailed under escort to the Barents Sea, Argus arrived at its flying off point early on 7 September and at 07.00 six Hurricanes of 'A' Flight 134 were the first to fly off, though to reduce weight the aircraft were fitted with just six guns. The six aircraft each of 81 Sqn's 'A' Flt and then 'B' Flt followed and all landed

safely at Vaenga an airfield about 10 miles north of Murmansk high in the Soviet Arctic just a few miles east of the front line. The rest of 134 Sqn then followed. The following day, the Wing's Soviet hosts held a banquet in their honour, though many pilots passed out after innumerable toasts in vodka! Meanwhile, on the 9th at Keg-Ostrov near Archangel Flt Lt Rook and Plt Off Holmes of 81 Sqn with Plt Off Woolaston of 134 Sqn made the first Hurricane flights after assembly. These were then gradually ferried to Vaenga.

BELOW: Hurricanes of 81 Sqn sit at a camouflaged dispersal at Vaenga. The nearest aircraft is thought to be that flown by Sgt 'Ibby' Waud in 12 September when he engaged a Bf 109 and the Henschel 126 it was escorting.



"It was an awesome sight, the 109 drifting along inverted with flames and debris pouring from it."

BELOW: F/Sgt Haw claimed RAF's first victory over Russia on 12 September when flying this Hurricane IIB, Z4018/FH-41 he shot down a Bf 109. He claimed another in this aircraft on the 27th.



ACTION OVER THE TUNDRA

The first patrol by both units was flown on the morning of 11 September taking them by way of the the front along the Finnish frontier. No enemy aircraft were seen, though several pilots had their engines cut briefly over enemy territory due to the inferior quality of Russian fuel. The first encounter with the enemy came during a patrol the following day. In good visibility Plt Offs Bush (flying Z5122) and Edmiston (Z5227/FE-53) from 81 Sqn spotted a twin-engined aircraft they initially thought might be a Russian Petlyakov Pe 2. Closing in they identified it as a Messerschmitt 110, probably from 1(Z)./JG 77 that was attacked with Bush's fire hitting its underside. It was

then chased at treetop level before making its escape, but was claimed damaged. More action came later that afternoon when 81 Sqn's duty section was scrambled towards the Finnish port of Petsamo. Flying Z4018/FH-41 F/Sgt Haw led Plt Off Walker (Z5157) and Sgts Waud (Z4006/FV-54), Smith (Z3746/FA-40) and Rigby (Z3746).

Flying at 5,500 ft, at 15.25 they spotted five Messerschmitt 109Es of I/JG 77 that were escorting a Henschel 126 that was on a reconnaissance. 'Wag' Haw's combat report relates the subsequent encounter: "The enemy aircraft were approaching from ahead and slightly to the left, and as I turned toward them they turned slowly to the right. I attacked the leader and as he turned I gave him a ten second burst from the full abeam position. The enemy aircraft rolled onto its back and as it went down it burst into flames." Sgt 'Ibby' Waud was more succinct in describing 81 Sqn's first victory of WW2: "It was an awesome sight, the 109 drifting along inverted with flames and debris pouring from it." Waud then found himself favourably placed to attack the Henschel which he claimed damaged, though Soviet Observers reported it had been shot down. He recalled: "I found myself in a favourable position to attack the HS 126 and after delivering a short burst from the beam it turned and dived away steeply westwards. I followed, overtaking rapidly and fired a burst at 50 ft range." He then attacked a Bf 109 that he claimed destroyed: "I saw

smoke coming from the e/a which was flying very low and just after I passed over it, I saw it crash in flames." Plt Off Jimmy Walker who was seeing action for the first time also shot down a Messerschmitt to complete a hat trick for 81: "Climbed up and saw a '109 on Red 1's tail [Haw], headed in and gave the e/a a couple of bursts of a few seconds each. The '109 broke away and fell towards the ground pouring out smoke. Followed him down and saw him roll over – then regain upright position – he then burst into flames and crashed." However, during the action Sgt 'Nudger' Smith's aircraft was damaged and he died in the subsequent crash landing. He was the only pilot to be killed on the expedition, but nonetheless it had been an encouraging debut. >>

LEFT: In shooting down three Bf 109s F/Sgt 'Wag' Haw of 81 Sqn became the RAF's top scoring pilot in Russia for which the Soviets awarded him the Order of Lenin.

BELOW: Flt Lt Mickey Rook (right) chats outside the entrance to a bunker with Fg Off 'Mac' McGregor (centre) and Plt Off Jimmy Walker (right).



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RIGHT: During late September Plt Off 'Scotty' Edmiston made three claims against the Luftwaffe but narrowly escaped injury during a bombing raid on Vaenga on 6 October when a bomb exploded in front of his aircraft.

BELOW: A section of Hurricanes overfly Z3768/FK-49 at its dispersal at Vaenga. It was the usual mount of Sgt Crewe and like the other RAF Hurricanes wears Soviet style numerical codes aft of the roundels.

Patrols continued on a daily basis, and near Balucha on the evening of the 17th, whilst escorting some Pelyakov Pe 2 bombers, a pair of Me 109s bounced the formation. The CO Sqn Ldr Tony Rook in BD792/FR-44 fired on one as it passed ahead of him and damaged it before running out of ammunition. Sgts Sims (Z5228) and Anson (Z5207) then fired on the Messerschmitt that caught fire and crashed into a lake. The second enemy fighter dived away to the west chased by F/Sgt Haw, who was flying Z5208/FA-48 as he later described: "I made an astern attack from about 200 yards range, firing a three second burst with no visible effect. The enemy aircraft then turned to the right across me and I delivered a quarter attack from about 150 yards, firing another burst of 3 seconds. During this attack smoke began to pour from the e/a, a large piece flew off him and he rolled onto his back and went into a vertical dive." Haw saw the pilot of his second victory over Russia bale out but 10 minutes later six more 109s dived on the Allied formation. Plt Off Basil Bush in Z4017/FU-56 dived onto some



more Me109s and attacked the nearest one: "A dog fight ensued in which I was able to out- turn the enemy aircraft, and deliver a two-second burst from the starboard quarter. Thick black smoke came from the enemy aircraft, as it dived to earth. I got in another burst, and it burst into flames as it crashed into a hill."

Defensive patrols then predominated for the next week as no escorts were

possible due to deteriorating weather which also flooded the dispersals at Vaenga making conditions on the ground treacherous. Then the first of the winter snow fell on the 22nd. However, on the afternoon of 26 September 81 Sqn achieved further success when a dozen of 81's Hurricanes were escorting four Soviet bombers on a raid on Petsamo. A trio of Me 109s attacked the formation and got onto the tail of Basil Bush's aircraft. Having initially evaded the attack, Plt Offs Arty Holmes in BD818 chased after them and hit the Messerschmitt that dived inverted spewing black smoke and was seen to crash by one of the bomber crews. At almost the same time Plt Off Scottie Edmiston in Z5227/FE-53 (that was decorated with a 'Scottie' dog motif) went after another 109 that was chasing a Hurricane and saw many hits around the cockpit before it flew into cloud; he was credited with a 'probable.' During the dogfight the CO's cousin Flt Lt Mickey Rook (in BD697/FZ-50) and his wingman Sgt Vic Reed (Z4006/FV-54) became separated and were attacked by a lone 109. Reed



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climbed after it firing several bursts, causing the enemy to dive vertically into cloud and it was seen to crash by Soviet observers.

The following day thirteen Hurricanes of 81 Sqn escorted Pe 2s towards Petsamo when 'A' Flt was attacked by four Bf 109Es. In a tight, turning fight Haw, once more flying Z4018/FH-41, hit the 109 that had engaged him as it climbed. The Messerschmitt stalled and went down pouring smoke to its destruction giving Haw his third victory over Russia. It had, however, been tough fight. With Plt Off Edmiston as his wingman, Flt Lt Mickey Rook (in BD697/FZ-50) fought off the 109s attacking their charges and climbing above them Edmiston, who was in Z5227/FE-53 opened fire on one causing the cockpit hood to fly off before it went into a spin from which it did not recover. That was to be the last action for over a week as increasingly poor weather, including some heavy snowfalls resulted in operations being cancelled.

FINAL ACTION

In clear, bright weather on 6 October a force of Ju 88s from I./KG 30 had been reported heading towards Murmansk and by 15.50 Sqn Ldr Rook was ordered off leading eight Hurricanes to find them; other aircraft from 134 were also flying locally. Shortly afterwards Vaenga was attacked by the 14 Ju 88s from Banak and bombs rained down on the airfield. Seeing the anti aircraft fire Rook led his formation back whilst three more of 'B' Flt that were on standby immediately scrambled. Plt Offs Bush (in Z3977/FN-55) and Holmes (BD818) managed to get off but as Plt Off Edmiston started Z5227/FE-53 a bomb exploded in front of the aircraft so he and the ground crew headed for cover. Those aircraft airborne then went after the intruders one falling to 134 Sqn whilst Sqn Ldr Rook (in BD792/FR-44) shared another with Plt Off Furneaux of 134. The latter attacked another in concert with Plt Off Ramsay of 81 (who was in Z5157) and it was

probably destroyed. Ramsay probably destroyed another Ju 88 with 134's CO whilst two more bombers were hit and claimed as probables by Plt Off A J McGregor (Z5228) and Plt Off Jimmy Walker (Z5209). Five more Ju 88s were damaged. The Luftwaffe recorded the loss of two Ju 88s over Soviet territory whilst a third crashed on landing at Petsamo.

Sitting above the action was Flt Lt Mickey Rook flying Z5207 who had been acting a weaver and had become separated. Having attacked and damaged a Ju 88 he then flew towards what he thought was a formation of 134 Sqn and so joined them, wagging his wings as he approached. To his horror, he realised that they were six Me 109s (of I/JG 77) – the Ju 88's escort! He was attacked but

ABOVE & LEFT: Hurricane IIB 4017/FU-56 is prepared for another flight in the snow at Vaenga during October 1941. Plt Off Bush flew it on 17 September when he shot down a Bf 109.

Hurricane IIBs used by 81 Sqn in Russia

Z3746/FA-40, Z3768/FK-49, Z3977/FN-55, Z4006/FV-54, Z4010, Z4017/FU-56, Z4018/FH-41, Z5122, Z5157, Z5207, Z5208/F*-48, Z5209, Z5277/FE-53, Z5228, Z5236/FO-**, Z5252, Z5349, BD697/FZ-50, BD792/FR-44, BD818, BD822, BD824/FA-47

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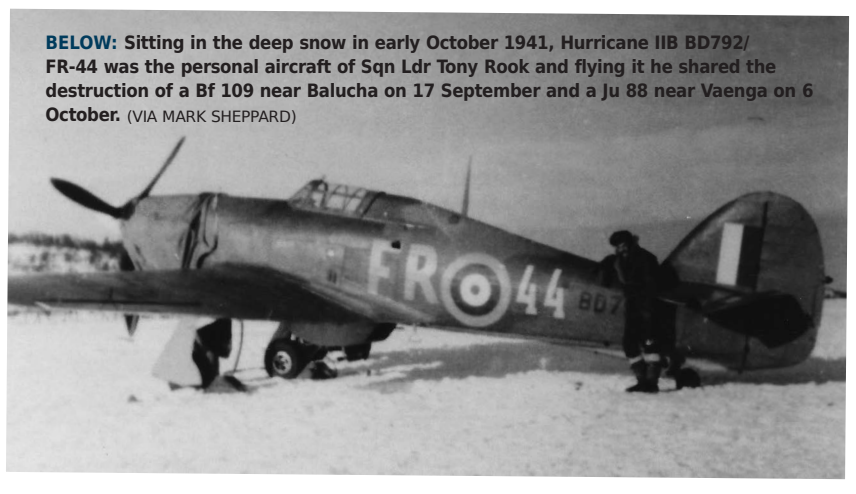


ABOVE:
The Standard of 81 Sqn bearing the Battle Honour 'Russia 1941'.
(AUTHOR)

fought back and in a furious dogfight managed to destroy his attacker, reportedly blowing it to pieces, but was then chased at low level by four other Messerschmitts almost as far as Vaenga. On landing with his black moustache bristling he said: "The

81 Sqn Pilots in Russia

Sqn Ldr A H Rook DFC, Flt Lt M Rook
Fg Off A J McGregor, Plt Off B M Bush
Plt Off J Edmiston, Plt Off R T Holmes
Plt Off D Ramsey, Plt Off J E Walker
F/Sgt C Haw DFM, Sgt P Anson
Sgt E Carter, Sgt F Crewe, Sgt J Mulroy
Sgt V Reed, Sgt B Rigby, Sgt P N Sims
Sgt N I Smith, Sgt K A Ward



BELOW: Sitting in the deep snow in early October 1941, Hurricane IIB BD792/FR-44 was the personal aircraft of Sqn Ldr Tony Rook and flying it he shared the destruction of a Bf 109 near Balucha on 17 September and a Ju 88 near Vaenga on 6 October. (VIA MARK SHEPPARD)

Germans must have thought me either bloody brave or bloody foolish." His log book read: "intercepted 14 Ju 88s. Helped damage one. Joined 6 109s, damaged one, destroyed one. Dogfight with others, one bullet through my tail. CO 1 Ju 88 destroyed." The aircraft then returned to Vaenga where fortunately there was only slight damage.

This was the last significant encounter the RAF had with the Luftwaffe over Russia. 81 Sqn flew a further patrol two days later but decreasing daylight and severe snowy weather meant that operations were restricted. The Squadron flew its final bomber escort on the 17th and the following day the remaining aircraft were handed over to the Soviets. The

Squadron was credited with fifteen destroyed, five probables and seven damaged against the loss on a single Hurricane.

In late November the Wing was embarked in the cruisers HMS *Kenya* and *Berwick* and the destroyers *Bedouin* and *Intrepid* and sailed for home, where they arrived on 7 December. On arrival, it was announced that amongst other decorations, the Soviet Order of Lenin had been awarded to Sqn Ldr Rook and F/Sgt Haw. When 81 Sqn was presented with its Squadron Standard at RAF Tengah, Singapore, on 24 June 1966 among eight Battle Honours emblazoned on it was 'Russia 1941' – the only unit ever entitled to carry it. Ⓞ

BELOW: Soon after beginning operations from Vaenga heavy rain and sleet turned the airfield into a flooded morass of mud as is evident as Hurricane Z3977/FN-55 sits at dispersal. In 81's last big action on 6 October it was flown by Plt Off Basil Bush.

