



ARCTIC CONVOYS

WORDS STEVE ROBERTS INTERVIEWSTOM GARNER

Treacherous seas, freezing cold, pack ice and attacks from U-boats, capital ships and bombers – welcome to the worst journey in the world

The Arctic Convoys' *raison d'être* came with 'Barbarossa', Hitler's attack on the USSR, commencing 22 June 1941. Stalin immediately demanded help from the Allies.

The most direct route was by sea, navigating a narrow 'funnel' between the Arctic icepack and German bases in northern Norway, to reach the Soviet ports of Murmansk and Archangel, the latter only being accessible in summer. So from September 1941, ships began the hazardous voyage.

British and American chiefs of staff were against this plan, citing stretched resources, but their premiers insisted. One of Churchill's objectives over 1941-42 was to engage German forces anywhere, so he demanded a 'cycle' of Arctic convoys. First Sea Lord Admiral Sir Dudley Pound questioned the diversion of resources from the Atlantic, but the prime minister wasn't listening.

This was no picnic though. Convoys enduring a week-long passage at eight or nine knots (slower than a runner) were sitting ducks against attacks from above and below. Crews loathed the winter darkness, particularly when ice ventured south and ships became coated in it. Sailors worked relentlessly, hacking away dangerous weights of ice and testing weapons because of freezing lubricants. 'Arctic Smoke', a layer of mist overlaying the freezing water, made seas particularly treacherous, while in more stormy weather, mountainous seas loomed more than 12 metres from trough to crest.

On one occasion, a monster wave stripped the armoured roof from the forward gun-turret of HMS Sheffield. Another time, a 'moving mountain' of water crashed so hard on the flight

deck of HMS Victorious that the forward aircraft lift was unusable. It is inconceivable that the sea could bend four-inch armour, but it did. On the Murmansk passage almost every ship, even the biggest, suffered damage.

Then there were the Germans, necessitating naval crews to often be at action stations 22 hours a day. There wasn't much sleep – a nap often taken fully clothed on a bench or even standing up. When U-boats formed a line ahead, the Royal Navy attempted to charge through and disperse them. Some sailors began to prefer rough seas as these kept the U-boats away.

It was impossible to stay dry on the convoys – heavy layers of clothing didn't keep the cold out and fur-lined boots failed to keep feet warm. When it was really cold, it was barely possible to breathe and sailors didn't dare to touch metal as it burned and stuck to their fingers, prompting a visit to the sick bay.

The summers were no better, with almost endless daylight increasing ships' vulnerability. The early forays, however, were promising, as a few British merchantmen made the trip late in 1941, arriving unscathed, with small quantities of tanks, aircraft and rubber. This barely registered with the Germans, but the sailors' luck wouldn't last.

Some of the perils were illustrated early. On 10 December 1941, the crew of Harmatis spotted smoke, then found a flaming lorry careering about the hold. The ship limped back to the Clyde, but poor cargo stowage remained a problem, with loads breaking loose and threatening ships' survival. Much material arrived in Murmansk damaged, a sickening outcome for battered crews.

"WHEN U-BOATS FORMED A LINE AHEAD, THE ROYAL NAVY ATTEMPTED TO CHARGE THROUGH AND DISPERSE THEM. SOME SAILORS BEGAN TO PREFER ROUGH SEAS AS THESE KEPT THE U-BOATS AWAY"



Right: Extreme conditions on the deck of a British cruiser herald a return to the ice age for the crew, 27 February, 1943



FORGOTTEN HEROES OF THE ARCTIC CONVOYS

The earliest convoys were coded 'PQ' (outbound) and 'QP' (homeward bound) and these became one of WWII's naval epics. With the threat of German capital ships, such as the Tirpitz, the convoys needed almost as many warships as merchantmen. The warships were fitted with anti-aircraft guns, while destroyers provided close protection against U-boats. Between them they sent up a formidable barrage against Heinkels.

Royal Navy plane-carrying cruisers offered safeguards against German destroyers as far as Bear Island, north of Norway, when they turned back because of increased air threat. Merchant Navy officers ploughed on without air cover and accusations flew that they were treated like children and kept in the dark. The Germans were also paranoid about losing capital ships, however, so 'action' was frequently broken off, as their vessels fled for the sanctuary of a Norwegian fjord.

From 1942, the British began transporting substantial shipments, which prompted a firmer German response. The unlucky Hermatis was



Soviet warships escorting Arctic convoys repel a German air attack in the Barents Sea on the Eastern Front

hit by two torpedoes on 17 January, water flooded its hull but thankfully the damage was contained and it limped into Murmansk, towed by tugs, yet still attacked by Heinkels. The same day, HMS Matabele was torpedoed, with the detonation occurring in the magazine. Only two survivors were rescued and many froze to death in the water before help arrived.

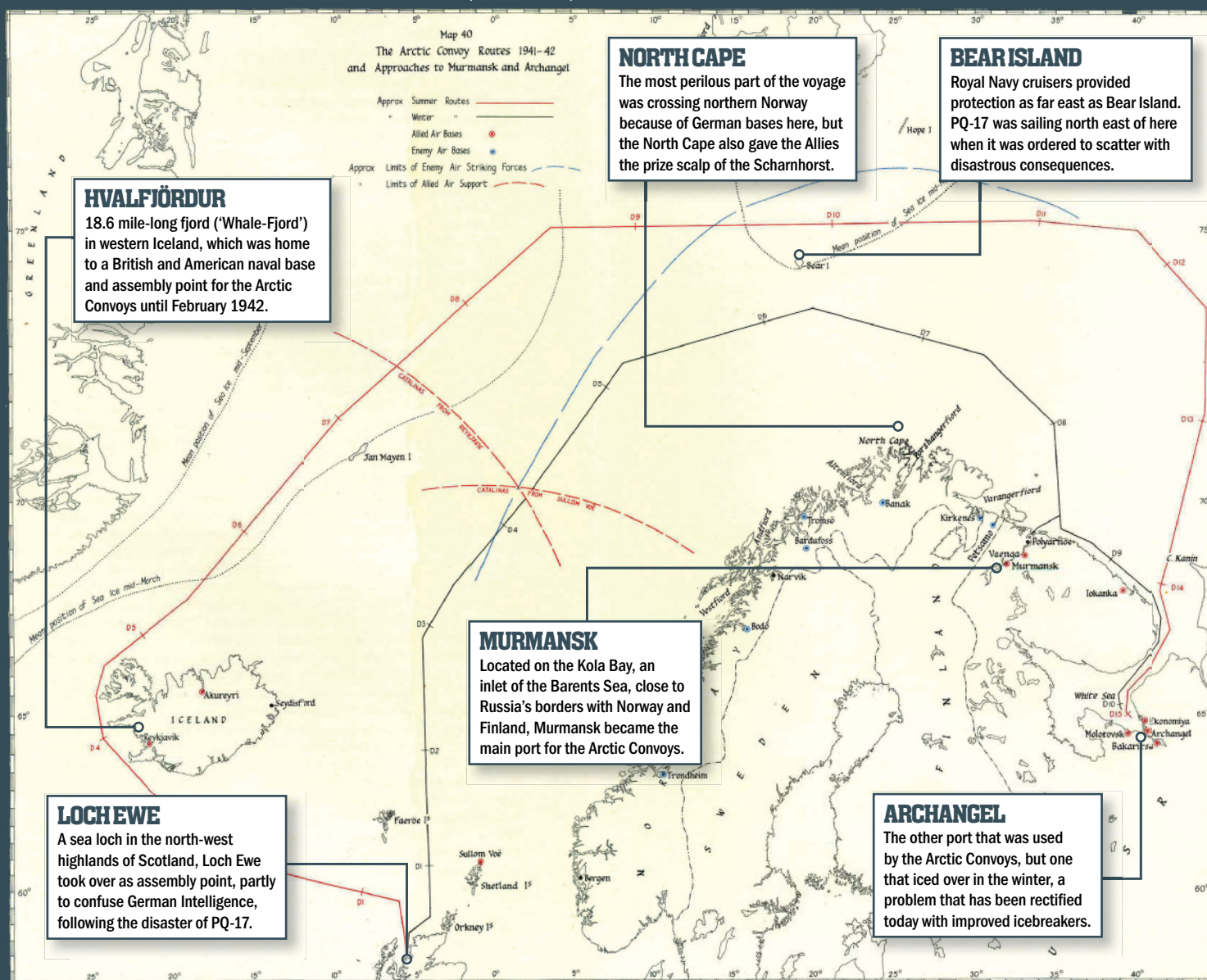
A German long-range aircraft, usually a Focke-Wulf Condor, buzzed about, transmitting

the convoy's position to the Luftwaffe in Norway. The stakes were rising and the last convoy enjoying a relatively straightforward passage was PQ-11 in February. PQ-12 suffered from thick pack-ice, then played a deadly game of 'blind man's buff' with the infamous German ship the Tirpitz, which intelligence reported was at sea at the time.

March 1942 saw PQ-13 scattered in a storm, then savaged, with a quarter of its 20-odd

THE WORST JOURNEY IN THE WORLD

THE 'MURMANSK RUN' WAS LESS THAN 2,500 MILES, BUT ACROSS THE CRUELLEST SEA OF ALL: THE ARCTIC OCEAN



SURVIVOR OF A FROZEN WAR

GEORGE OSBORNE

ACTING LEADING SEAMAN

BORN IN 1922, OSBORNE TOOK PART IN CONVOY DUTIES ON HMS SHEFFIELD AND EXPERIENCED A DETONATING MINE AS WELL AS THE SINKING OF THE SCHARNHORST

WHAT WERE CONDITIONS LIKE DURING A CONVOY?

The cold was the biggest enemy really. We never had any hot drinks and the only redeeming feature was that we would get a cup of hot soup on the noon watch. At the time we didn't really think about it but looking back it was horrific. We were huddled up in a shelter or behind the gun shield. Doing it for four hours was a long time but sometimes it was six hours and that wasn't very nice at all. The temperature was always below freezing and the further north you went the colder it got.

We eventually received more sensible clothing but on the convoys, all we had initially was the standard oilskin. They then gave us duffle coats that were warm but once they got wet they began to stink and you never had time to get them dry. We eventually had gloves and overcoats but they also gave us wool long johns and you itched constantly.

WHAT HAPPENED WHEN HMS SHEFFIELD STRUCK A MINE OFF ICELAND ON 3 MARCH 1942?

We were three hours out of Reykjavik when we struck a mine. As I came out of the bathroom, I heard this thud and wondered what it was. I got ready and we went to action stations. We were told that we'd struck a mine although nobody was really sure whether it was a mine or torpedo. The mine had stuck in between the ammunition magazines and in between those were the rum and the officers' wine store. It was Sod's Law that the mine got the rum! All the empty barrels floated out and in the moonlight they looked like mines so there was a bit of a panic. The only casualty was a marine sentry who was stationed outside the captain's cabin and they found him floating in the water.

We got into an inlet off Iceland and started repairs. A Canadian officer went ashore and commandeered all the coke that he could find. The coke would absorb the water so they filled the hole with that. The next problem was how to sail the 1,600 kilometres from where we were to Newcastle and you couldn't rely on the weather, but we eventually got the ship down to the Tyne.

CAN YOU DESCRIBE YOUR EXPERIENCES ON CONVOY WHEN HMS SHEFFIELD TOOK PART IN THE SINKING OF THE SCHARNHORST?

The Sheffield was the most sophisticated radar ship in the fleet and we picked up the Scharnhorst and chased her with two other cruisers. We were steaming at 26 knots when the ship shuddered and suddenly halted. The

other cruisers carried on and we were left in the Arctic Sea all alone while the engine room worked feverishly on repairs. Then all of a sudden it came through that an unidentified ship was nine kilometres away. All the guns were loaded because we didn't know who it was. I remember watching the range close from nine to six kilometres and my life went before me. It was the first time I felt really scared. Eventually we discovered it was one of our ships so we got underway. We could hear the gunfire coming from the ships. They finished the Scharnhorst off. We didn't see it because we weren't allowed out on the upper deck but the ship steamed past where she was sinking. More than 1,000 lives were lost that day.

“THE MINE HAD STUCK IN BETWEEN THE AMMUNITION MAGAZINES AND IN BETWEEN THOSE WERE THE RUM AND THE OFFICERS' WINE STORE. IT WAS SOD'S LAW THAT THE MINE GOT THE RUM!”

HOW DID YOU FEEL ABOUT THE ROLE OF THE CONVOYS? DID YOU CONSIDER IT AS JUST YOUR JOB OR WERE YOU AWARE OF THE WIDER IMPORTANCE?

We knew it was important and something we had to do. The people that I really felt sorry for were the sailors on the escort vessels and the merchant seamen. They were the real heroes. The merchant seamen were living on time bombs but they went ahead and steamed on. On the small naval ships, they didn't have cooks and had to buy and prepare their own food. Just imagine what it was like trying to prepare a meal with the ship rolling and water going onto the deck, it must have been hell.

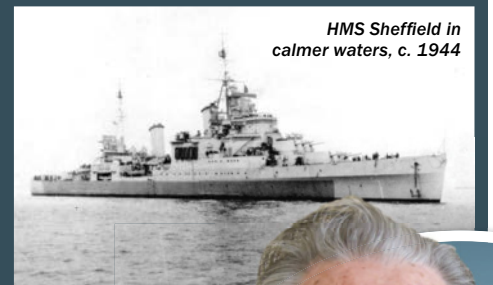
WHAT ARE YOUR OPINIONS ON THE LATE ISSUING OF THE ARCTIC STAR MEDAL IN 2013?

Even Churchill said how bad the convoys were, but nobody stood up and said we should have had a medal. One officer fought for the medal until he died and I'm still convinced that when Vladimir Putin came and issued a medal to some of the veterans, it was only then that the British government agreed to award the Star – but that's just my opinion.

The view from the bridge of Sheffield, battling heavy seas while escorting convoy JW 53 to Russia



HMS Sheffield in calmer waters, c. 1944



Right: Before taking part in convoy duties Osborne survived an attack on his ship by the battleship Bismarck prior to her sinking



Image: Dorset Echo

FORGOTTEN HEROES OF THE ARCTIC CONVOYS

Ice forms on a 50-centimetre signal projector on the cruiser HMS Sheffield while escorting an Arctic convoy to Russia, December 1941



“ARRIVAL WAS NO PARTY. THE KOLA INLET, THE FJORD LEADING TO THE PORT, WAS LIKENED TO HELL – IF IT WERE POSSIBLE FOR HELL TO BE THAT COLD – WITH LUFTWAFFE ATTACKS ON MURMANSK OCCURRING ALMOST DAILY”

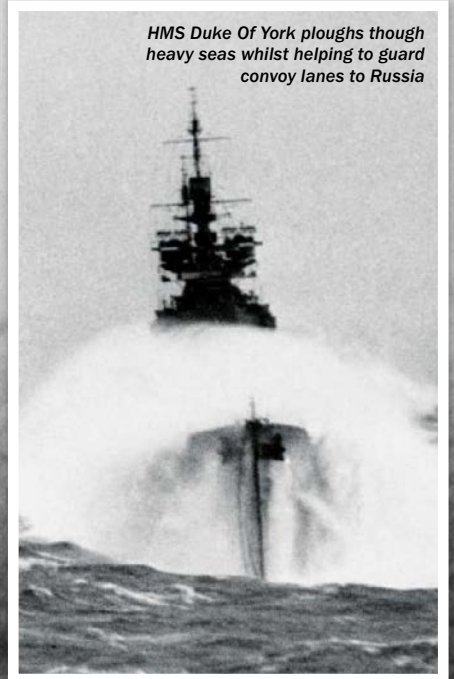
An oil tanker erupts into flames during one of the convoys



Below: HMS Honeysuckle alongside the aircraft carrier HMS Trumpeter in the Kola Inlet



HMS Duke Of York ploughs through heavy seas whilst helping to guard convoy lanes to Russia



SURVIVOR OF A FROZEN WAR

CLAUDE SEALEY

LEADING STOKER

BORN IN 1923, SEALEY SERVED ON HMS JASON AND WITNESSED RUSSIAN BRUTALITY AGAINST THEIR OWN PEOPLE, AS WELL AS SURVIVING GERMAN ATTACKS AND A TERRIFYING STORM

CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE CONVOY YOU WERE PART OF IN 1943 AND THE STORM YOU ENCOUNTERED?

In early February, we were issued with warm clothing but we didn't realise we were going on a Russian convoy. We went up to Loch Ewe, which was where the convoy was sitting waiting. There were around 30 ships and it was so bleak. I thought "Oh, my goodness!" but before we knew where we were, we set sail.

We had a rough voyage and they said it was the worst storm recorded in the North Sea at that time. I was down in the boiler rooms and we had a 'port sea' where the water was coming into the ship from the left side and we nearly turned over. I was scared, the ship went right over and all the lights went out. I don't know how many degrees it turned but it didn't right itself for a long time and we all thought, "This is it." It eventually recovered but the storm lasted for four days, it was terrible.

WHAT DID IT FEEL LIKE TO BE REPEATEDLY ATTACKED BY THE GERMANS?

It was horrible. They used to come from Norway with both air and U-boat attacks. We were a 'rescue ship' so we were right at the back of the convoy. If any part of the convoy got hit, those who worked on the upper decks knew what was happening but we didn't get any information down below. I was annoyed about [that].

We didn't get hit but there was one episode where we were astern of the convoy at night when we got an order for full speed ahead. There was panic in the engine room as somebody on lookout saw a U-boat overtaking us on the surface. We dropped a full pack of depth charges over them when they swerved because you couldn't turn any lights on. We didn't know whether we sunk it or not. There were a few more attacks afterwards and we were a bit concerned because they were mainly targeting the merchant ships. However, once we approached Russia, we were distracted because we started to ice up.

DID YOU FEEL VULNERABLE WORKING BELOW DECKS?

Because I was often in the boiler room, people have said, "I bet you were warm" but we were freezing cold. I'd be in there wearing my overcoat like everybody else. I felt vulnerable in there but most of the time I didn't think about it because we were all busy. We just had to adapt and get on with it.

WHAT WERE CONDITIONS LIKE WHEN THE CONVOY REACHED RUSSIA?

We reached a little naval base called Polyarny. When we came out on deck there was snow and ice everywhere and the first thing I saw was a funeral. There were these black figures carrying a coffin so that didn't cheer us up, it was awful.

Afterwards, we carried on near to Murmansk where we provided anti-aircraft protection while the cargo boats were unloaded. German bombers used to come over a hill, drop a few bombs and then head straight off. They were quick so that we couldn't respond in time as they mainly targeted the merchant ships. That wasn't very nice and there was many a time when I ran out of the bathroom and race to the engine room in the nude. That's how it was.

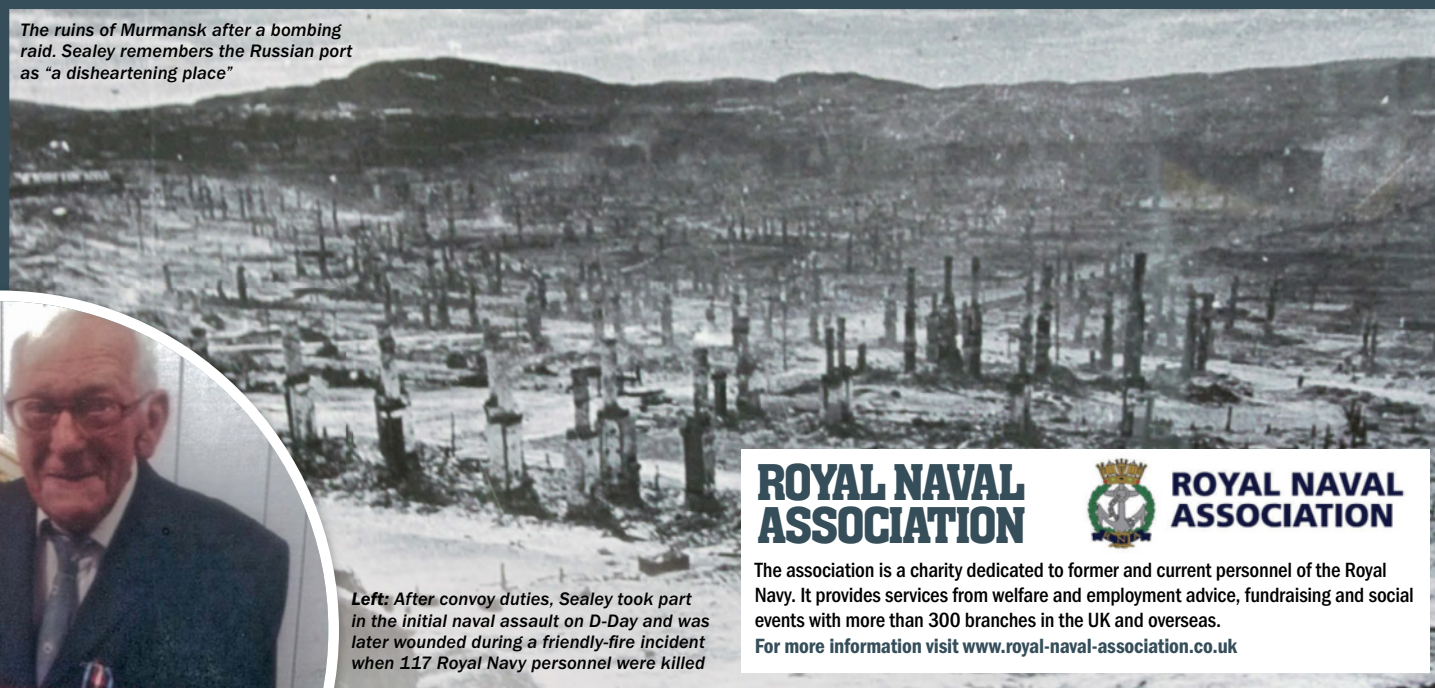
We arrived in Russia at the end of February 1943 and we didn't leave until August, which was disappointing because we thought we'd go straight back. One day I came out of the engine room in August and went out on deck at Archangel. I saw all these old men, women and children crying out for us to take them. They knew we were leaving that day to return to the UK, the poor devils were treated so badly by their own people, I remember there was one old man who stole a loaf of bread and they just came out and shot him and chucked his body in a lorry. It was as bad as that and commissars sometimes chased us.

HOW DID YOU FEEL ABOUT THE ROLE OF THE CONVOYS?

I think the convoys were a worthwhile thing to do because it helped the Russians. They reckon it was all our tanks and aircraft that we took up there that helped to win the war. The Russians did make their own equipment when they attacked Germany and pushed them back, but before that it was all our stuff that went up there. It was well worth it, there was no doubt about it.

"THERE WAS ONE OLD MAN WHO STOLE A LOAF OF BREAD AND THEY JUST CAME OUT AND SHOT HIM AND CHUCKED HIS BODY IN A LORRY"

The ruins of Murmansk after a bombing raid. Sealey remembers the Russian port as "a disheartening place"



Left: After convoy duties, Sealey took part in the initial naval assault on D-Day and was later wounded during a friendly-fire incident when 117 Royal Navy personnel were killed

ROYAL NAVAL ASSOCIATION



ROYAL NAVAL ASSOCIATION

The association is a charity dedicated to former and current personnel of the Royal Navy. It provides services from welfare and employment advice, fundraising and social events with more than 300 branches in the UK and overseas.

For more information visit www.royal-naval-association.co.uk

merchant ships sunk by U-boats and bombers. A torpedo malfunction caused Trinidad to cripple itself while attempting to sink a damaged German destroyer. Two lifeboats got away from the doomed Induna, with badly burned men, but hypothermia quickly finished off the injured and seven died in the first night. In desperate conditions, the boat's fresh water froze. One lifeboat was found with one man from nine still alive. Of the 64-man crew, 24 were rescued, 18 of whom lost limbs to frostbite.

The following month, PQ-14 was mauled. HMS Edinburgh fought off a German destroyer attack, but Empire Howard was torpedoed, the engine room staff blown to bits as the ammo cargo exploded. 40 others jumped into the sea and all but nine succumbed to blast injuries when a trawler tried to depth-charge an attacking U-boat.

Later in April, PQ-15 saw the destroyer Punjabi cut in half when it crossed the bows of battleship King George V, also damaged when the destroyer's depth charges exploded. Matters didn't improve on later homeward trips, where six ships were lost on QP-13, after straying into a British minefield off Iceland.

In theory, the convoys were better protected from April, as the first CAM ships were introduced, affording primitive air cover. These were merchantmen with a catapult Hurricane, the pilot parachuting into the sea after one sortie. In theory he had, at best, a 50/50 chance of rescue before freezing.



British Royal Navy ships passing through Arctic fog while on convoy duty in the Northern Waters, January 1945

“ONE LIFEBOAT WAS FOUND, WITH ONE MAN FROM NINE STILL ALIVE. OF THE 64-MAN CREW, 24 WERE RESCUED, 18 OF WHOM LOST LIMBS TO FROSTBITE”

Churchill rejected Royal Navy pleas to suspend summer convoys as he tried to placate Stalin, who raged against the Allies for delaying the Second Front. In the meantime, losses suffered by the Arctic Convoys cut little ice with him. The prime minister wanted PQ-16 in May, even if only half the ships got through; he feared the political consequences of cancellation. The supplies delivered over 1941 and 1942 were mostly of symbolic significance, a key indicator of the Western Allies' determination to support Russia.

PQ-16 seemed to vindicate Churchill with five-sixths of the convoy reaching Murmansk.

Showing this was a joint effort, Polish destroyer Garland took shocking casualties, but made it with “Long Live Poland!” scrawled on the ship's superstructure in the crew's blood. As one Merchant Navy officer acknowledged: “They were hard men.” 371 were rescued from lost ships in astonishing feats of courage and skill, but how long the merchantmen could be asked to continue was a moot point. One Royal Navy senior officer warned the Admiralty that while his men were paid to do this job, they were asking too much of the Merchant Navy.

The RN suffered too though, cruisers Trinidad and Edinburgh were lost on return trips in May.

THE BATTLE OF THE NORTH CAPE

DECEMBER 1943: AN ILL-JUDGED SORTIE BY THE GERMAN BATTLESHIP SCHARNHORST SAW IT SUNK IN THE BATTLE OF THE NORTH CAPE

Hitler refused to sanction warship attacks until Scharnhorst was let off its leash in December 1943, slipping out of Altenfjord to attack convoy JW55B. With Tirpitz laid up following an attack by midget-sub, it was likely Scharnhorst would attack the convoys as Hitler needed to stem the flow of supplies to Russia.

The heavily-armoured pocket-battleship – with nine 27-centimetre guns, gross tonnage of 38,000 and top-speed of 31 knots – missed its quarry due to poor visibility and then became separated from its own destroyer escort.

Scharnhorst was unaware that a Royal Navy long-range protection group was trailing it. The British fleet was led by the battleship, the Duke of York, along with cruiser Jamaica and four destroyers. The first intercept occurred early on Boxing Day, the British strategy being for the cruiser and destroyers to hold Scharnhorst at bay until Duke of York was ready to press home its attack. Above all else, it shouldn't be allowed to wriggle out of the net.

Norfolk took out one of Scharnhorst's radio sets with a shell, but the German ship turned-tail and looked like it would out-run its adversaries as it tried to flee for Norway.

It was the evening of the same day by the time the British ships caught up with their quarry for the final time and the main battle commenced. According to one eyewitness aboard Scorpion, it was this ship that fired the torpedoes that slowed the leviathan up. Duke of York came up behind, with a pair of destroyers to port and another pair to starboard.

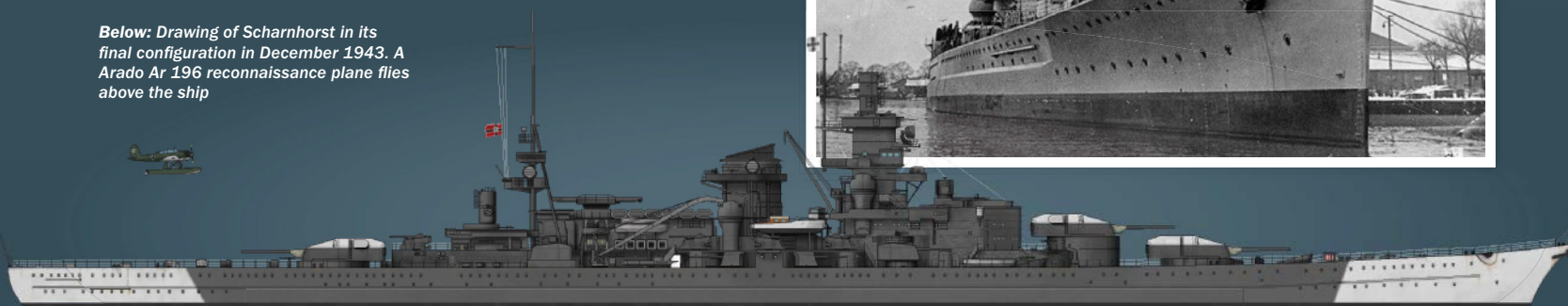
Below: Drawing of Scharnhorst in its final configuration in December 1943. A Arado Ar 196 reconnaissance plane flies above the ship

Duke of York opened fire at ten kilometres and after about 90 minutes of gunnery exchange, it became clear that Scharnhorst's speed was slowing. The final gun battle lasted for about an hour with the German ship finally losing power. Allegedly unsinkable from gunfire, it was finished off with torpedoes, 11 direct hits were registered. Although an Arctic 'fret' obscured the view, a terrific explosion confirmed the ship had gone.

Scharnhorst was claimed by the same ocean depths it had consigned so many other vessels to, sinking with the loss of all but 36 of 1,968. Scorpion rescued more than 30, who were taken back to Scapa Flow. In one fell-swoop, the worst remaining menace to the Arctic Convoys had gone. The following day, an ecstatic Churchill telegraphed Stalin with the news. The wreck of Scharnhorst was discovered in September 2000, lying upside down in approximately 290 metres of water.

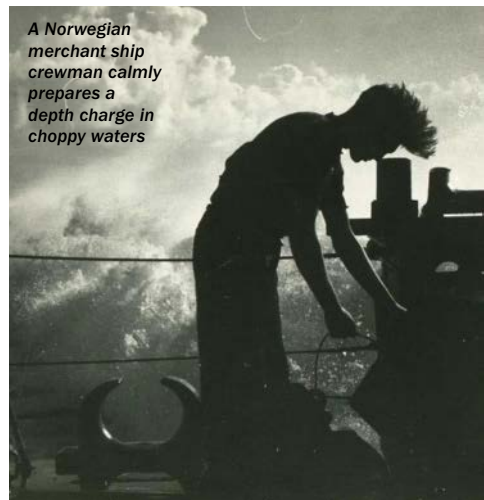


German battleship Scharnhorst in harbour when first completed. Note the ship's badge mounted on its bow

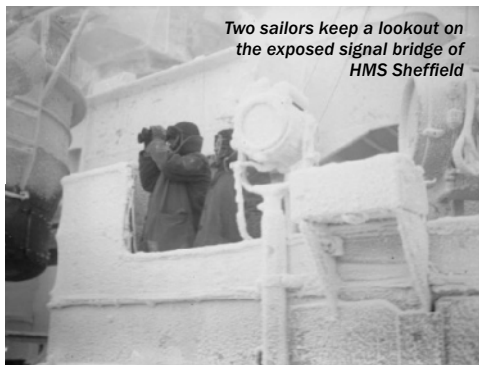


“A FEW STARK NUMBERS DO NOT CONVEY THOUGH THE COURAGE OF THE MEN WHO FOUGHT THEIR WAY ACROSS THOSE INHOSPITABLE SEAS”

The British destroyer HMS Faulkner laying down a smoke screen to obscure the convoy on its way to Russia



A Norwegian merchant ship crewman calmly prepares a depth charge in choppy waters



Two sailors keep a lookout on the exposed signal bridge of HMS Sheffield



Black smoke billows after a Grumman Avenger crashed on the flight deck of HMS Tracker

It seems invidious to single out one individual, but on the Trinidad, engineer officer Lieutenant John Boddy, refused to abandon his stokers. Although concussed by a bomb blast, he was last seen trying to free them from beneath jammed hatches.

If one convoy epitomised the gauntlet though, it was PQ-17 in June 1942, the largest yet sent. It became one of the greatest naval disasters of WWII, and as such, was veiled in secrecy. The convoy assembled at Hvalfjord in Iceland, with 36 ships, mostly American, and sailed on 27 June with more than 150,000 tons of military and general stores, including nearly 600 tanks, 300 planes and more than 4,000 other vehicles. British codebreakers warned the Admiralty that the Germans intended a major effort against it, including capital ships. Finally, Hitler intended to hit the convoys hard.

Faulty intelligence suggested the Tirpitz, Admiral Hipper and Admiral Scheer had left Trondheim to engage, and on 3 July, the Admiralty ordered its cruisers to turn west towards the perceived threat. The next day the convoy was ordered to 'scatter', a decision that saw two-thirds of its ships sunk by aircraft and U-boats, with the loss of nearly 100,000 tons

of material and 153 merchant seamen. No British warships were lost. The abandonment of the convoy left a lasting mistrust within the merchant service, at a time when morale was already precarious. After this, summer convoys were suspended; Stalin was unimpressed.

The next convoy, PQ-18, did not sail until September, but still lost a third of 40 ships, ten to air attack. Among naval ratings and merchant seamen, there was now general agreement that the Arctic Convoys were the war's worst naval ordeal. Some men remained forever traumatised. To try to cut losses, the winter of 1942 saw some single, unescorted merchantmen making the trip. Five out of 13 arrived in Murmansk.

Arrival was no party. The Kola Inlet, the fjord leading to the port, was likened to hell – if it was possible for hell to be that cold – with Luftwaffe attacks on Murmansk occurring almost daily. Russian hospitality was lukewarm, but as they could proffer, they were repaying with Russian lives.

Come the end of 1942, the coding changed, 'JW' an outbound convoy and 'RA' homebound. Losses fell dramatically, as, at last, the Royal Navy could deploy escort carriers and powerful

anti-submarine and anti-aircraft defences. The Germans meanwhile, hard-pressed elsewhere, diverted resources and later lost their most potent capital ship, Scharnhorst. This 'triple-whammy' helped the Allies. The Arctic route lost some criticality as America began delivering supplies to Russia via the Pacific and Persia.

Come the end, more than 4 million tons of supplies had arrived, everything from tanks, aircraft and trucks to tractors, telephone wire, railway engines and boots. The most important contribution, however, was political, as the Western Allies demonstrated commitment to Russia. A significant portion of Germany's air and naval forces was also tied up.

The human cost? One could argue it was small compared to other battlefields; 18 warships and 87 merchantmen lost, with around 830 merchant seamen and almost 2,000 naval personnel.

A few stark numbers do not convey though the courage of the men who fought their way across those inhospitable seas; the worst journey in the world.

2013 saw the long overdue award of a campaign medal, the Arctic Star; sadly too late for many brave mariners.