

**AS AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL HISTORIAN DR DAVID SUTTON REVEALS,**

**O**n 2 October 1942, the Handley Page Hampdens of 144 Squadron RAF took off from Leuchars, Scotland, for a short flight to the Shetlands. The aircraft were to make their flight alongside 455 Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) and, when waiting for the Australians to take off, performed a series of daring aerial acrobatics over the airfield: flying low and taking sharp turns. A flight sergeant of 144 Squadron, who had just finished putting the aircraft into tip-top condition, despaired: "Three weeks of maintenance work and now those risks!"

After observing 144 Squadron's antics, Wg Cdr Grant Lindeman, commander of 455 Squadron, announced ▶



**HAMPDENS IN RUSSIA**

# MISSED

**BUT IMPORTANT ROLE IN THE WESTERN ALLIES.**

**ABOVE** A Hampden torpedo bomber of No.455 Squadron at sea, June 1943.  
 (ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL UNLESS NOTED OTHERWISE)  
**RIGHT** USSR leader, Joseph Stalin, in 1942. (US LIBRARY OF CONGRESS)  
**BELOW** Aircrew members of No.455 Squadron, Leuchars, Scotland, before the mission.





# TO MURMANSK



## MISSION TO MURMANSK



**ABOVE**  
A British cruiser sends a barrage of anti-aircraft fire as it escorts PQ18, September 1942.

over the radio: “455 will take off like gentlemen.” The Australians took to the sky and together the two squadrons made their way up north.

The British and Australian airmen were taking off on the first leg of Coastal Command’s Operation Orator, which, following in the footsteps of the RAF’s 151 Wing’s mission the previous year, flew converted Hampden torpedo-bomber aircraft from Leuchars to the Shetland Islands, across German-occupied Norway, neutral Sweden, hostile Finland and into the unknown frozen north of the Soviet Union.

**BELOW**  
A Hampden torpedo bomber at Leuchars, June 1943. Crews often referred to Hampdens as ‘flying tadpoles’ owing to its unusual shape.

**AN IMPORTANT UNDERTAKING**

The two Hampden units, along with photo-reconnaissance Spitfires and patrolling Catalinas, were to monitor and carry out raids against German warships harassing the vital Arctic convoy route to the northern Soviet port of Murmansk. The only

Australian squadron to be based in the Soviet Union during the war, 455 – along with its RAF comrades – played an important role, not only in protecting Allied ships, but also in maintaining the delicate diplomatic balance struck between Churchill and Stalin in the aftermath of Operation Barbarossa, Nazi Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941.

For the airmen of Operation Orator, the journey to the Soviet Union was no routine flight. They were to fly towards Afrikanda, a Soviet airstrip close to the Nazi-Soviet front line and near the White Sea, east of Finland. There they would refuel and move to the relatively safe base of Vaenga

(now Severomorsk), just north of Murmansk. The bulk of Operation Orator’s ground crew, spare parts and torpedoes were shipped ahead of the aircraft aboard the SS *Tuscaloosa* on 13 August 1942.

The Hampdens set off three weeks later, carrying the normal crew of four plus one ground crew should repairs be needed along the way. Even without the torpedoes and the extra crewmember, the length of the flight exceeded the normal ‘safe’ range of an unburdened Hampden by 60nm. The squadrons were to fly the most direct route possible: 1,100nm over soaring Scandinavian mountain ranges and close to enemy coastal defences. Should the pilots need to deviate from their route, exceed the average speed of 125kts estimated for optimal fuel consumption, or get lost flying over unfamiliar territory using outdated 1918 maps, then running out of fuel was a very real threat.

On 4 September 1942, the aircraft of 144 and 455 Squadrons took off from Sumburgh in the Shetland Islands for their epic journey. Of the 32 Hampdens that took off that day, 23 eventually made it to Vaenga.

Bearing slightly north of the intended route, 455 Squadron’s Sgt Edward John Smart’s Hampden crashed into Mount Arvestuottar in Swedish Lapland. All five on





**"THE UNHURT CREW EMERGED FROM THE AIRCRAFT TO A GROUP OF HOSTILE AND SUSPICIOUS SOVIET SOLDIERS, WHO LUCKILY DID NOT OPEN FIRE WHEN A DINGHY SUDDENLY SPRANG FROM THE CRASHED AIRCRAFT"**

board were killed. Sqn Ldr James Catanach's Hampden made a forced landing after encountering flak from an armed trawler in the Barents Sea. The crew survived, but were captured by a nearby patrol and taken prisoner. Catanach was one of 50 Allied prisoners of war shot by the Gestapo after escaping from the camp *Stalag Luft III* in 1944, an episode immortalised in the 1963 classic film, *The Great Escape*. Wg Cdr Grant Lindeman later wrote that Catanach, "was a most excellent flight commander, and was probably the most generally liked man in the whole squadron". Catanach was caught near the Danish border after having

crossed all of Germany from Poland. His final word before execution was: "Why?"

**THE HEAT OF A DOGFIGHT**

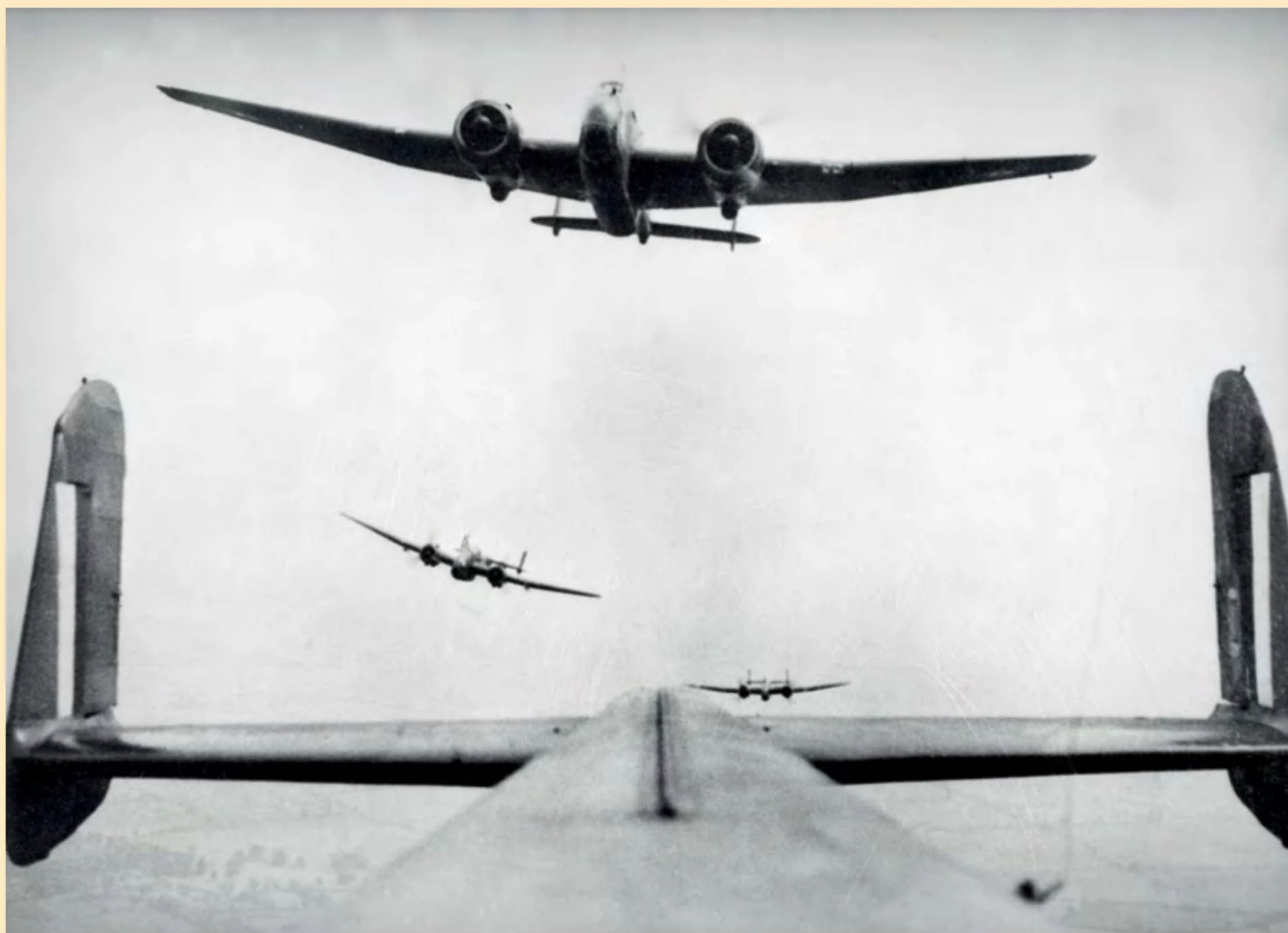
Not far from his final destination, 144 Squadron Sgt Walter Hood took his Hampden below the clouds over the Kola Inlet, into the heat of a Soviet-German dogfight. It is not known whether the aircraft was hit by Soviet or German fire in the confusion of the fight, but Hood was forced to crash-land on water. All of the crew managed to escape except for air gunner Flt

Sgt Walter Tabor. The 25-year-old Canadian sank with the aircraft.

Australian Plt Off Rupert 'Jeep' Patrick's Hampden made it to Soviet territory, but ran out of fuel and was forced to land 'deadstick' (gliding without power) on an area of flattened birch trees. The unhurt crew emerged from the aircraft to a group of hostile and suspicious Soviet soldiers, who luckily did not open fire when a dinghy suddenly sprang from the crashed aircraft and shocked the tense group. Jeep tried the only ►

**ABOVE**  
Convoy PQ18  
under attack from  
Luftwaffe Ju 88s on  
14 September 1942.





Operation Orator's task was to protect the Allied shipping convoy PQ18 as it made its perilous journey up the North Sea to the Soviet port at Murmansk. One of the biggest threats to the Allied ships was the powerful German naval force based in Altenfjord, which included the battleship *Tirpitz*, the pride of Nazi Germany's *Kriegsmarine*. On 14 September, after RAF reconnaissance Spitfires spotted German ships on the move, the 23 serviceable Hampdens of 455 and 144 Squadrons leapt into action. John Lawson, 455 Squadron's adjutant, summed up the mission succinctly: "The Hampdens were to operate from a strange foreign base, over unfamiliar seas, well within the Arctic Circle, against the most difficult target of the war."

The aircraft, each armed with a single Mk.VII torpedo, flew for more than seven hours along the likely course of the German ships, northwest from Vaenga in a box formation, at low altitudes and in heavy turbulence. They did not encounter any German vessels and many of the men returned to base with a combination of air-sickness and despondence that the mission had seemingly come to nothing.

However, Convoy PQ18 was a relative success, 27 of its 40 merchantmen reached Soviet shores. All of the losses came from air and U-boat attack, not the feared German warships.

### LIFE IN THE USSR

The Soviet sojourn was certainly an eye-opener for many of the Australian airmen of 455 Squadron. After their mission to support PQ18, the men settled into the routine of training Soviet airmen in Vaenga, passing the time by playing two-up (a coin-tossing game of chance popular with

**"TEMPORARILY FORGETTING THE TERROR OF THE RAID AS THEY WATCHED THE SHOW, THE MEN RETURNED TO BED "TIRED, BUT MENTALLY REFRESHED BY THE HYPNOTISING SPECTACLE..."**



and even put down a bit of flap to try and slow up enough to avoid ramming him. On several occasions when he did this suddenly the rest of us were unable to back pedal in time and shot past him on all sides till he found himself, like the *Queen Bee*, the centre of attraction. It was hectic while it lasted, and we all cursed him. However, he got us all safely to Vaenga."

Despite encounters with suspicious Soviet pilots, low-lying fog and landing at various sites, the rest of the aircraft eventually made it to Vaenga, the air base that would be their home for the next six weeks.

**TOP** three Russian words in his vocabulary: "Angleeski, vodka, Afrikander." He and his crew were promptly recognised as 'Englishmen', fortified with vodka and put on a train to Afrikanda.

**ABOVE**  
A camouflaged Hampden in the frozen north.  
(COURTESY OF GEOFFREY RAEBEL)

Wg Cdr Lindeman made a treacherous landing in heavy fog in Afrikanda and was in a group of five Hampdens eventually escorted to Vaenga by a Soviet fighter. He recorded in his diary: "He led us by devious ways to avoid Hun fighters, and we flew down valleys, over rivers and lakes and over miles and miles of hilly country covered with the same stunted scrub and granite. Unfortunately, this bomb-burr pilot of ours liked to mess about with his throttles and kept changing his air speed, so that when he wasn't squirting out black smoke and shooting on miles ahead he would throttle back until the rest of us had to throttle right back

**RIGHT**  
Australians pass the time by playing ice hockey.  
Note the battle-damaged barracks in the background.  
(COURTESY OF GEOFFREY RAEBEL)





LEFT  
A camouflaged  
Hampden.  
(COURTESY OF  
GEOFFREY RAEBEL)



LEFT  
The Vaenga  
barracks on  
fire following  
a German raid.  
(COURTESY OF  
GEOFFREY RAEBEL)

On 27 September 1942, a group of Australians enjoying a game of poker while doing their laundry had a close call when a Soviet Yakovlev fighter crashed through the roof of their barracks. The Yak had power-dived from 9,000ft (2,743m) in pursuit of two German Junkers Ju 88s conducting a hit-and-run bombing raid on the airfield. As it dived, the Yak was struck by friendly anti-aircraft fire and had its tail blown off. The pilot was able to parachute to safety, but his aircraft caused significant damage to the Australians' living quarters. A wheel and damaged gun breech from the Yak are now kept at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.

One aspect of life in the Soviet Union that the men found particularly difficult to adjust to, was the filthy rotunda toilets; wooden huts divided into cubicles over a deep pit. As winter began to set in, the men could only expose themselves for three minutes before frostbite threatened. A week before departing the USSR, the Australians discovered that one of the air raid shelters they had dug on arrival was in fact the site of an abandoned toilet pit. The soft and stone-free ground had at the time seemed a great place to get digging.

The British and Australian men grew accustomed to the taste of vodka (served with all meals, including breakfast) and made many toasts to *pobeda* ('victory'). ▶

Australian soldiers), attending local concerts and dances and avoiding frequent German bombing raids.

Sgt W Turner recorded how, after the first German raid on their position, the shaken Australians returned to their billets, put the radio on and thought of home: "All listen in silence, each letting his mind drift back to sunny Australia, to lonely farm and busy city; to the mysterious bush and the rolling surf; to the Mallee and mountains, all of which, to us, spell home." Five minutes later, a fellow airman rushed into the room and shattered the peace. Fearing another raid, the men hurried outside to be confronted with an entirely different spectacle – the *aurora borealis*

shimmering in the northern sky: "A piece of shining silk quivering in the reflection of a bright light." Temporarily forgetting the terror of the raid as they watched the show, the men returned to bed "tired, but mentally refreshed by the hypnotising spectacle which has now dwindled to a mere smudge".

After another German raid, an unexploded 250kg bomb was found lying nose-first on the earthen runway of their airfield. The local bomb disposal team decided that simply blowing it up would cause too much damage, so with a truck and a long rope, one plucky Soviet soldier dragged the bomb to the side of the airfield and proceeded to destroy it.



**RIGHT**

Camouflaged Hampden ready to be loaded with a torpedo.

(COURTESY OF GEOFFREY RAEBEL)



**RIGHT**

Soviet and RAAF airmen in front of a Hampden in November 1942.

(COURTESY OF GEOFFREY RAEBEL)

Many of them clamoured to have haircuts by an attractive local girl, who first doused their hair in some 'evil-smelling concoction'. Also, they soon learned not to wander too far away from base; the surrounding woods were crawling with Soviet snipers, who would warn those venturing too close with a well-aimed shot around their feet.

The men struggled to learn Russian, but in a reflection of the wider diplomatic importance of their mission, some of the first words they did learn were those calling for a 'second front'. Although the men saw their fruitless hunt for *Tirpitz* as a failure – they flew only one sortie from Vaenga – the importance of the

mission was not lost on those at the top echelons of the Allied war effort.

### HIGH-STAKES DIPLOMACY

For almost as long as the British government agreed to support the Soviet Union in the war against Nazi Germany, Stalin had been calling for the Western powers to open up a second front to ease the pressure on Soviet forces. Even local Soviet citizens would question the men of Operation Orator about this, reflecting a genuine concern of the Soviet people: why were the Western Allies letting Soviet blood serve as the main price of their shared victory?

The Soviet contribution to the Allied victory in the Second World War was

**RIGHT**

Australians pose in front of a covered pit rotunda toilet.

(COURTESY OF GEOFFREY RAEBEL)



enormous, and so was the cost. From 1941 to 1945 in the Soviet Union, 70,000 cities, towns and villages were destroyed, along with six million houses, 98,000 farms, 32,000 factories, 82,000 schools, 43,000 libraries, 6,000 hospitals and many thousands of miles of roads and railway. The most commonly cited figure for total Soviet military and civilian deaths presently sits at 27 million. By comparison, Britain and the US suffered approximately 800,000 dead in the entire war.

The scale and importance of the Nazi-Soviet war is also reflected in the pivotal role played by the USSR in bringing about Hitler's defeat.



**"IN THE MEANTIME ONE OF THE CHIEF WAYS THAT THE WESTERN ALLIES COULD DIRECTLY AID THE SOVIET UNION WAS THROUGH SUPPLYING MATERIAL AND ECONOMIC AID"**



Almost three-quarters of German military losses (both men and materiel) occurred on the Eastern Front. On the eve of the June 1944 D-Day landings in Normandy, some 70% of Germany's manpower remained tied up on the Eastern Front, freeing up the west for Allied attacks. The Red Army was responsible for destroying more than 600 enemy divisions, 48,000 tanks, 167,000 guns and 7,700 aircraft. In 1944, Winston Churchill told the British Parliament: "The guts of the German army have been largely torn out by Russian valour and generalship." The Allied naval blockade and bombing of occupied Europe played a vital role in the

defeat of Nazi Germany, but from a Soviet perspective such actions were small-scale when compared to their suffering. Opening a second front was considered the only way for Britain and America to show their commitment to 'the grand alliance'. However, this would not come until June 1944, and in the meantime one of the chief ways that the Western Allies could directly aid Stalin was through supplying material and economic aid. The Lend-Lease program supplied the USSR war effort with millions of tons of raw materials and machinery, particularly those which in the words of historian Richard Overy became "the backbone of the Soviet motorised supply system". After the war, official Soviet-era histories tended to either ignore Lend-Lease or present it as more the product of brutal pragmatism than genuine altruism. According to the Soviet view, the Western powers were keen to see Soviet blood spilled before they entered the war to prevent the Iron Curtain from falling too far to the west. Operation Orator must therefore be placed in the context of this much wider diplomatic balancing act. Allied Arctic convoys, carrying thousands of tons of supplies for the Soviet war effort, had been making the

perilous journey since late 1941 under increasingly heavy German aircraft and U-boat attacks. It came to a head in July 1942 when PQ17 lost 23 of its 34 merchant ships and one of its three rescue ships. In response, Churchill informed Stalin on 17 July 1942 that no more convoys would make the northern route until the passage was deemed safer. Stalin responded by accusing the British government of refusing to fulfil its obligations and of willingly postponing the opening of a second front. Soviet naval experts determined that "with goodwill and readiness to fulfil the contracted obligations these convoys could be regularly undertaken and heavy losses could be inflicted on the enemy". Stalin flatly stated: "I never expected that the British government would stop dispatch of war materials to us just at the very moment when the Soviet Union in view of the serious situation on the Soviet-German front requires these materials more than ever." Therefore, PQ18, and Operation Orator's defence of it, was part of a concerted effort to appease the Soviet leader and ensure that ▶

**ABOVE**  
Members of 455 Squadron sporting local headwear in a bid to keep warm. (COURTESY OF GEOFFREY RAEBEL)





**RIGHT** Kapitan A. Stoyanov inspects a torpedo in front of a newly acquired Hampden, complete with newly painted Soviet Star.

(COURTESY OF GEOFFREY RAEBEL)

the Western Allies were seen to be wholeheartedly supporting the Soviet war effort.

**GOING HOME**

Most of the men of Operation Orator returned to Britain aboard HMS *Argonaut* in late October 1942. A return flight home against the prevailing winds was considered too dangerous, so the Hampdens were left as a parting gift to the Soviet defenders. A small party, including Flt Sgt Robert Raebel, remained behind to continue providing technical instructions to the Soviets. In late November, realising that they might be stuck up north all winter, the remaining Orator men were determined they would get home by any means necessary. Hearing that the British destroyer HMS *Intrepid* had limped into the port at Polyarnoe, nine miles north of Vaenga, they rushed towards what might have been their last chance to make it home for Christmas.

The men negotiated their way on to *Intrepid* by overstating their proficiency in operating a 20mm Oerlikon cannon and were granted temporary positions to support the gunners. When the ship later came under air attack, the ship's irate first officer disapproved of their performance: "Tell those bloody colonials to watch what they're firing at! The ship abeam has a funnel full of holes!"

**BELOW** A Hampden recently handed over to the Soviet Air Force.

(COURTESY OF GEOFFREY RAEBEL)



The men of 144 and 455 Squadrons considered their single flight in search of *Tirpitz* a failure, the mission more impotent than important. They had flown so far into the frozen north and failed to locate or engage any German ships. Wg Cdr Lindeman perhaps best summed up the Australian ambivalence to the mission when asked in a BBC interview if he would like to return to the USSR: "Should we be given the opportunity to return, we will unselfishly stand aside and give others a turn."

However, Churchill recognised the importance of the mission and sent a

congratulatory message to the men of Operation Orator, noting that PQ18 had successfully re-established the Arctic convoys that provided millions of tons of supplies to the Soviet Union. Also, the Western Allies had been able – at least in part – to show Stalin they were willing to do whatever it took to ensure vital Lend-Lease supplies reached the north Soviet ports. The joint British-Australian action may have been minor in the grand scheme of the war, but the men of Operation Orator played their part in this most important of missions. ☉

