



The Russian Convoys - July 1942

Those who took part in the convoys delivering supplies to Russia have vivid memories of mountainous seas, the biting cold and the continual fear of attack by air or sea. The supplies were vital to keep Russia in the war following her invasion by German forces in 1941. The PQ17 convoy, which left Iceland at the end of June 1942, is known particularly for the tremendous losses among the merchant ships. It was thought by the Admiralty that the convoy faced imminent attack from the *Tirpitz*, *Hipper*, *Scheer* and *Lützow* and a series of signals were issued, culminating in the order to 'Scatter'. Believing that they were steaming to intercept a bigger force, in order to protect the convoy, the destroyers and cruisers headed west. However the supposed threat failed to materialise and the merchant ships, now scattered, came under U boat and air attack resulting in the sinking of 23 ships. As well as the loss of precious lives and supplies there was widespread bitterness and the recriminations reverberated for many months.



The weather caused tremendous problems, for many of the convoys, with frequent storms. Life on board during bad weather is vividly described in the memoir of **William Smith DSM**:

"The sea was violent with waves of 30 ft plus. When we met a gale in the Atlantic we went into it bow on and ploughed through, but in the Arctic, east of Bear Island, the sea was very narrow and we had to go east with no deviation. This meant we were rolling as much as 30 degrees to port and starboard. With the deck covered in ice and snow we had to use lifelines when going aft to the guns and depth charges. These lifelines were fitted very firmly and anyone going aft on deck had to fix a rope round the body with a hook on to the lifeline and gradually move aft when the ship was steady. But when she rolled your feet left the deck and at 30 degrees you were hanging over the sea.

At maximum roll the ship shuddered for a few seconds and then decided to come back or turn over - some did. The temperature in these seas got as low as 60 degrees below freezing. Your eyebrows and eyelashes froze and your eyes were very sore with the winds blowing into them. When you got down to the mess deck there was about 3" of water from condensation. The older men, who had hair in their noses, found that these froze solid and were like needles. Many men came off watch with faces covered in blood as they had rubbed their noses without thinking. The main thing at this time was



Geordie & Tibs
1942
'Geordie and Tibs' with
Bill Smith on *HMS Magpie*



to keep the upper deck clear of ice and snow by means of axes, steam hoses etc or the ship could become top heavy".

See also [Able Seaman W Smith DSM](#)

Alan Smith was on board a ship acting as distant cover for the PQ17 convoy. During a tape-recorded interview with the Centre's Director, [Dr Peter Liddle](#), Mr Smith recalled collecting Norwegian commandos from Greenock and landing them at Spitzbergen Island in order to attempt its occupation. He also described the clothing he wore to keep warm:

"When I say it was cold, we had steam heat on all the guns. . . otherwise the guns would have frozen up. This was their summer and we had every bit of clothing on that we could muster. I mean, I had apart from extra thick Arctic long johns over pairs of long johns, I had a thick naval jersey, I had woollen vests underneath, pure wool. I had a naval blue greatcoat, over that I had a duffel coat. I had a balaclava and then I had a hood attached to the duffel coat and two or three pairs of gloves because if you had put your hand on the metal, you would have pulled the skin away. I couldn't believe that this was July".

In an interview with Richard Campbell-Begg, tape-recorded in 1996, **Roger Hill DSO, DSC, RN** in command of *HMS Ledbury* admitted that he had never come to terms with leaving the convoy without protection, echoed in his excellent book *Destroyer Captain*:

"There were 23 ships sunk in that PQ17, 190 seamen killed, 400-500 aircraft were lost, about 300 tanks and 100,000 tons of war material. That's what resulted from that Admiralty signal. It was really terrible, even now I have never got over it, because for the Navy to leave the Merchant Navy like that was simply terrible. The American cruiser people ashore, of course they just said 'The Limeys are yellow' and they all had fights and had to have leave on different nights and so on, and the *Tirpitz* was not within three or four hundred miles of the convoy. She came out eventually, but not that day, the next day I think, or the following day. She was sighted by a submarine which made a signal, the Germans intercepted that signal and called her straight back to harbour. There was no threat to the convoy at all except from the air and all these poor merchant ships, one merchant ship signalled 'I can see 7 submarines approaching me on the surface' and there was continual air attack. It was simply awful".



One of *HMS Magpie's* depth-charge crews



Among the surviving escorts was *HMS Pozarica*, commanded by **Capt E D W Lawford RN**. Capt Lawford's daughter **Joyce Openshaw**, at the time a WRNS Cypher Officer working at Derby House in Liverpool, wrote proudly of her father's achievements during the PQ17 convoy, which resulted in his being awarded the DSO:

"I knew what was happening throughout, but was unable to tell my mother any details, other than, from time to time, saying that my father was alright. The escorts were not able to return until October, when the days were shorter. They had a miserable time in Archangel, with very little food and a good deal of hostility from the Russians. . . We all went to Buckingham Palace for the Investiture by King George VI shortly after his return. The citation read: 'For bravery and resolution in H.M. ships, while taking a convoy to North Russia in the face of relentless attacks by enemy aircraft and submarines' *"To be Companion of the Distinguished Service Order"*.

Despite the constant dangers, memoirs held at the Centre usually contain details of some of the more humorous incidents, such as one example from **Lt Henry Doran RNVR**:

"As it was August it was daylight all round the clock. Early on there was an alarm and someone shouted "Look" and there was what appeared to be a U-boat on the surface. An aircraft took off and went into attack, strangely the U-boat did not dive. The pilot of the aircraft went in for the kill delighted at the thought of a DSC - which was the usual reward when an aircraft sank a U-boat. He dropped a depth-charge but it was badly aimed and missed - so he fired six rockets in his next run. Then there was a great water-spout and the object turned on its back floating - it was a whale!"



Lt Henry P Doran RNVR

On one aircraft-carrier, Lt Doran served under Capt Jack Broome:

". . . who was later the central figure in the famous PQ17 Russian convoy. He was unconventional enough to wander around the ship in dungarees at times and once after being told off in no uncertain language for standing around watching some work being done, he ordered his steward to get some paint and paint on his shoulder straps the four rings necessary to give him some immunity from the wrath of the petty officers".



Partial Transcript of pages (right) Aircraft carrier in heavy seas

Monday Sep 7 Proceeded to sea at 01.30 after emergency call to meet Russian convoy 300 miles S.W. of Iceland. Contacted convoy at 13.00. Quite large. 45 ships - but rather weak escort. 4 destroyers and 3 armed trawlers. Ships very heavily laden with tanks and aircraft.



Notes and Recollections of "Cruise in Northern Waters July 31 to Sept 27 1942"
Lt Henry P Doran RNVR

Tuesday Sep 8 With convoy. Spent night with lame duck - a Russian ship. She rectified trouble at dawn and rejoined convoy. No attack. Left convoy at 1600 and saw eight destroyers sailing in line ahead from Hjalpfjord to join up. We came near to Reykjavik and signalled our troubles. Anchored off R. all night.

Tuesday Sep 8 (cont) It was a very peaceful evening and very enjoyable anchored so close in - one could see most of the life of the harbour and town. Several big ships in docks - 3 or 4 passenger liners - possibly Danes interned.

Thursday Sep 10 Proceeded to sea bound for Scapa at 0615. Very heavy weather all day.

Friday Sep 11 At sea. Filthy storm. Waves breaking over ship all day. Mess awash. Man overboard at noon. (Jones) rescued 13 minutes later by skilful seamanship.

Saturday Sep 12 Entered Scapa Flow at 0800. Much to everyone's relief.



PQ17 - Journal of a Midshipman

The interviewer of Lieutenant Commander Hill, **Lt Richard Campbell-Begg**, joined *HMS Norfolk* in June 1942 as a midshipman serving in the Transmitting Station. His job was to set into the control table information regarding the target's estimated course and speed, in order that the guns could be positioned correctly for firing. His letters home, together with the Journal notes that all midshipmen were required to maintain, form an impressive record of the progress of convoy PQ17 until the ships were ordered to scatter:



Lt Richard Campbell-Begg

Journal. We arrived back at Scapa Flow on 23 June after exercising with our friends, the Swordfish aircraft, on the way. Rumours were circulating that something 'big' was afoot with various possibilities being mooted. We were off to open a second front in Norway, going to replace cruisers sunk in the Mediterranean but most probable of all escorting another convoy to Russia. It turned out to be the latter and early on the morning of the 29 June we proceeded to sea, our destination Seydisfjord in Iceland. We arrived there on 30 June and oiled. The cruisers *HMS London*, flying the Flag of Rear Admiral Hamilton, *USS Tuscaloosa* and *USS Wichita* were already there and we were to form the cruiser covering force for the Russian Convoy PQ17.

At 1am on 1 July 1942 our small fleet proceeded to sea. There were the four 8-inch cruisers escorted by the destroyers *HMS Somali*, *USS Wainwright* and *USS Rowan*. Our job is to cover the convoy PQ17 against German surface attack.

Journal, 2 July. We have been steering steadily on a course which has now brought us northwest of Bear Island. Occasionally we have sighted the convoy and have been able to see the top works of the nearest ships sheltering in a smudge of smoke on the horizon. All day we have been passing wreckage from previous convoys and possibly from this one. Waterlogged lifeboats and rafts are frequently seen. This afternoon five enemy aircraft were seen flying above the convoy at a great distance. 'Repel aircraft' stations was sounded but third degree of readiness was reverted to half an hour later when the planes had disappeared. A signal has been received to the effect that heavy German vessels have left their bases and are at sea. This afternoon we oiled the destroyer *Wainwright* but had to desist because of a submarine alarm. Oiling resumed half an hour later.

Journal, 3 July. Early this morning the American cruiser *Tuscaloosa* veered off at speed signalling that she was being torpedoed. A little later she resumed station rather sheepishly. The 'torpedo' was, in fact, the fog buoy towed by the ship ahead which had appeared on her starboard bow whilst zigzagging!



Later on this evening we were picked up by two German Blohm und Voss reconnaissance aircraft which circled us for a few hours before being driven off by anti-aircraft fire from the *London* and then ourselves.

Journal, 4 July. We have been passing icebergs all morning and were picked up by another German reconnaissance plane which has been shadowing us ever since. Someone or other has been credited with sending the German a visual signal asking him to 'circle in the opposite direction as you are making us giddy' whereupon the pilot acknowledged the signal and obligingly turned his plane in the opposite direction. On another occasion, when the relief plane had been picked up by radar, a signal was supposedly sent saying 'your relief is on his way' and gave the bearing and distance. This brought the response 'thank you' from the German who flew off homewards.

During the latter part of the afternoon we were closed up at 'repel aircraft' stations about six times and then the ship went to 'action stations' when the convoy was observed to be under air attack. Three ships were seen to be hit and one plane brought down. . .

Later in the evening there was a report that German surface vessels were close to the convoy. The convoy was ordered to scatter and then the cruiser covering force together with the destroyers from the convoy's close escort, proceeded to the west at high speed. With merchant ships breaking away from the convoy in all directions and signal flags flying from the yardarms, the cruisers steaming at speed in line ahead with the destroyers from the convoy taking position in line on the port quarter it all looked an awesome spectacle.

We thought we were about to bring the German Fleet into action until it soon became apparent that this was not the case but that we were withdrawing and leaving the merchant ships to their fate. Dreadful. The *Norfolk's* Walrus seaplane was in the air at the time and permission to stop and recover it was refused. She was lucky. She landed near a merchant ship which was one of the few to make it to Russia and we were able to re-embark the crew on a subsequent visit.

Journal, 5 July. Today we continued our withdrawal westwards but at a slower speed. We are receiving signals from individual ships of the convoy, 'am being bombed, torpedoed', etc and requesting assistance, and of course there is no assistance available. During the day we oiled three destroyers, *HMS Wilton*, *HMS Fury* and *HMS Keppel* (Captain D, Jack Broom).



PQ18 did not suffer the same level of crippling losses as PQ17 but **Yeoman of Signals Philip Richardson DSM, RN** recorded in his notes that twelve ships were sunk in just three days. As the convoy approached the gulf of Archangel its troubles were not yet over:

"Up to noon the sea had been dead flat calm, but it blew up in the afternoon and by the time we arrived off Dvina approach the seas were far too heavy to take pilots aboard and even too rough to anchor. We tried the anchor but it dragged and we had to cruise around all night. It was still as rough as ever the next day and it was maddening to see 27 merchant ships who had come through so much to get within a few miles of their destination and not be able to get up the river.



Yeoman of Signals Philip Richardson

And as we cruised round in no particular order back came old Jerry with his dive bombers. This time we had Russian fighters with us who no doubt did good work but we couldn't see them above the cloud. Now and again an enemy plane would come diving through the clouds and have a go at a ship and all the ships in the vicinity would open fire on him and every time he missed his mark. In the evening we learnt the Russians were going to try to put pilots aboard and the pilot cutter came alongside and as the bows rose with the swell by our ship's side the pilot took a flying leap and clung on to the ship's side to be hauled aboard just in time to escape the crashing of the cutter's bows as they crashed into the ship's side with the next wave. No damage was done and we had our pilot and I think he was a very brave man to come aboard in such a manner.

It was now too dark to try the dangerous channel so we waited outside for the dawn. Several of the ships tried it that night and six went aground. I slept well that night - undressed the first time since leaving Scotland and when awakened found we were nearly up to the town of Archangel. Each side of the river was massed with timber trees, logs in colossal stacks. The river was full of huge logs drifting down and occasional rafts of logs. We sailed past Archangel but we couldn't form much of an opinion of it from the river, and we went



Damage inflicted in the Barents Sea

alongside a quay made of timber at a place called Bakharitsa on the opposite bank to Archangel. Bakharitsa was our first impression of Russia and not too favourable either. The first thing that struck us was that everything was made of wood - docks, houses, roads, and footpaths all wooden. Another unusual feature on the docks was the loud-speakers which were continuously spouting Russian or playing Russian music. . . I think the labour of unloading the ships is done by prisoners of some sort - political I



believe. They seem dull and listless - always asking for cigarettes and smoking a foul-smelling concoction wrapped up in lots of newspaper".

Yeoman of Signals John Govey described being under attack and how he subsequently was forced to abandon ship:

"I looked to Starboard and there were two tell-tale streaks of torpedoes coming towards us. Slowly, oh so slowly we seemed to turn to comb the tracks, we had about 10 degrees to go, then Crash! The torpedo hit No 2 hold just forward of the bridge with a roar which was deafening, a huge wall of black shot up from the water and the ship shuddered with the explosion. We instantly heeled over to Port, over we went 30° 40° 'Christ' I thought, we are going to turn over, 45° and then slowly back to an even keel. 'Away to the boats lads' yelled the Chief Officer. I turned to the Commodore and said simply 'Books, Sir', he nodded and I placed all the signal books and coding material in a weighted bag. . . and dropped them over the side. . . [Having climbed into his lifeboat]. . . As we cleared the sinking ship I saw the Jutland, leading ship of the sixth column going down by the stern. I hadn't realised there were other ships hit. There were three casualties altogether, the third was an American ship full of ammunition. Peuf! A dull noise, a dark purple flash and she was gone. A trawler came alongside and we quickly transferred from lifeboat to the security of the ship. No sooner were we picked up, than we picked up three survivors of the ammo ship who miraculously survived on a raft. They must have abandoned ship before she was struck. . . The few days in the trawler were an eye-opener. Ice everywhere, even the guns were iced up, the heads were unusable, so we peed over the side, and when I really wanted to evacuate I was told to go down the boiler room and have a 'Fisherman's'. Do it on the shovel and throw it on the fire".

After a short stay in a camp in Russia, Govey returned home on board the *Matchless*, crammed full of survivors and spent another eventful journey under attack.

Transcript of Signal (right)

Wednesday 16th September 1945

To R.A.D.

From Commodore.

Before you leave us I wish to thank you and your forces very much indeed for the great efforts you have made for our protection.

Do not, anyone of the screen, blame himself because a couple of submarines got through. The scale of their attack must have been immense and that from the air had to be seen to be believed.

You had some near shaves and I hope you will all get home safely and reap the rewards you so well deserve.

It is good for a "Has Been" to see "The Destroyer



Signal sent during Convoy PQ18



Service" still goes on as it always has done and is so ably led and commanded by yourself.

Once more, my own and PQ 18's thanks to you all and I trust that the hope expressed in the Book of Proverbs, Chapter six, verse ten, will shortly come true for everyone.
O731.

Prov. Ch.6, V.10,

"Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep:"

To Commodore.

From R.A.D.

We all thank you for your most appreciative signal. It is fine to have sailed with your gallant convoy. Please convey to them, in due course, my and our admiration for them. The Home Fleet Destroyers and myself would have you feel it is "the likes of you" taught "the likes of us" and if we meet with your approbation we are proud.

"May you finish the course successfully" is our wish to you.

O825.