

THE ARCTIC CONVOYS

WORLD WAR II

(from Iceland to Russia)

Prepared by Horace R. (Red) Macaulay.
Story by John R. Evans.

Arctic Convoys

Arctic Convoys

CONTENTS

Introduction.....	V-5
Convoy Details.....	V-6
Veanga Airfield, Russia.....	V-7
Trip to Murmansk, Russia.....	V-8
Return to Scotland.....	V-9

Arctic Convoys

PREFACE

The heavy losses of life and shipping through the Arctic Ocean to Russia in 1942 has aptly been recorded by Sir Winston Churchill in his World War II book “The Hinge of Fate.” The Allied sacrifices in carrying out these convoy trips, delivering much needed supplies, resulted in heavy losses of personnel and ships of the Royal Navy and the Merchant Marine. The Royal Air Force, in providing defensive coverage, was also faced with operating under austere conditions in a very dangerous environment.

Royal Canadian Air Force radar personnel were directly involved with these convoy activities. They played an important part on fixed surveillance radar stations and with aircraft carrying air to surface vessel (ASV) and air interception (AI) radars. CAN R101738, John R. (Jack) Evans of Thunder Bay, Ontario, was one of the Canadian radar technicians who was there. His story is included in this essay.

Arctic Convoys

***Introduction**

Following the attack on Russia by Germany, the British and Americans discussed ways of assisting their Ally and in October, 1941, the Beaverbrook-Harriman Anglo-American Mission met in Moscow and made arrangements for the supply of vitally needed weapons, fuel, medical and food supplies. The most logical route to deliver these was by sea from Iceland via North Cape and through the Arctic water to Murmansk and Archangel. Small convoys had commenced in the fall of 1941 and things went well initially, but by March, 1942, German aircraft flying from bases in northern Norway and German U-boats began to destroy a large number of the convoy vessels.

The convoy sailings in the spring of 1942 ran into increased difficulty in an attempt to reach their destination. Heavy pack ice and continued attacks by the enemy resulted in many convoys having to turn back or continue on with very few arriving with the much needed supplies. Convoy P.Q.17 sailed from Iceland for Archangel on June 27th. It had an extremely difficult passage. Twenty-three vessels of the thirty-four in the convoy were sunk along with most of the crew members who perished in the icy sea. Survivors who were rescued suffered terrible hardships, many with mutilations from frostbite.

In July, 1942, Prime Minister Churchill sent a message to Premier Stalin outlining his concern over the heavy loss of merchant and naval vessels on the convoy runs. Churchill advised Stalin that any increased naval support to the convoy runs could possibly result in loss of control in the Atlantic, seriously affecting the war effort in delivery of home food supplies, the convoys of American troops and materiel for the second front. Naval support would also be required in the Persian Gulf to help Russia on their southern flank. In addition, the planned operations in north-west Africa would place a heavy demand on the Home Fleet. Premier Stalin frankly opposed the British assessment of the convoy situation, stressing the need to continue delivery of urgently needed supplies.

In September, 1942, P.Q.18 convoy set sail for Russia, but this time with increased air support. The RAF aircraft assigned to protect the convoy were fitted with ASV (air to surface vessel) radar and IFF (identification, friend or foe) radar equipment. The resulting battle saw extensive action in the air, in which 24 enemy aircraft were destroyed. Ten merchant ships were lost, but 27 successfully arrived in Russia to deliver their precious load. The air support was directly responsible for a significant decrease in lost vessels.

The responsibilities assigned to radar technicians were very demanding. In many situations they were alone with their secret equipment, and no NCO or Officer to back them up. Their stories were many and hopefully the assembly of such episodes as “the convoy runs from Iceland to Russia” will some day be removed from the book-shelves or accessed on the Internet to enlighten future

**The Hinge of Fate, Book 1, Chapter 15, by Winston S. Churchill. Bantam edition published in July, 1962*

Arctic Convoys

generations concerning the mystery and intrigue with that common question, “what did you do in the war, grand-dad?” Yes, the Canadian radar technicians were involved in the Russian convoy runs and one of these was **Jack Evans**, so let him tell the story: -

Convoy Details

The life of every service person was a series of episodes. One of mine was a hurried request from #144 Squadron RAF for a radar technician. The squadron was flying Handley-Page Hampdens that had been converted to carry torpedoes. There had been rumours in Leuchars in Scotland that #144 squadron as well as a second squadron crewed by Australians and New Zealanders was to be sent off on a detachment. The destination had not been divulged. My transfer was immediate, and as well I was told to report to the squadron briefing room the same afternoon. There, together with other ground-crew from the squadrons, we were sworn to secrecy and told we were to fly the next day to Russia with the aircraft. The main body of ground-crew had already left by ship. We were told that we would be away about ten days. The object of the operation was to protect P.Q. 18 convoy after it had passed beyond the limit of UK-based air cover. This convoy was of great importance to Russia as it carried large amounts of war materiel and medical supplies.

In June of 1941, Germany had attacked the Soviet Union, and by that act Russia became an Ally of Britain. Every effort was made by Britain to supply them with arms. After Pearl Harbor when America came into the war they too made a commitment to aid Russia. At first the convoys of goods were able to pass up the coast of Norway without too much resistance, but as the Germans strengthened their occupation of Norway the convoys suffered great losses. In June of 1942, Convoy P.Q. 17 sailed from Iceland with 34 ships, protected by a strong naval escort. At that time there were based in Norway some of the larger vessels of the German fleet - the Tirpitz, the Hipper and the Scheer, together with many destroyers. These threatened the convoy by sailing out from the fjords. The naval ships from the convoy left the merchantmen to try to intercept the battle fleet, but due to bad weather no contact was made. The convoy scattered, but was attacked by waiting submarines. Only 11 of the original 34 ships reached Murmansk or Archangel. From that tragedy it was decided that future convoys would need air protection at the far end of the route. Thus, two squadrons were chosen to be sent from Leuchars.

After the purpose of the trip had been explained we were issued with army battle dress, flying suits and escape kits. These kits contained a knife, a package containing maps, money and food tablets. We were even given new collar studs that were in reality a small compass. The gunnery officer took us aside and told us that we would, in case of an attack, be expected to use a Lewis Gun. There were special fittings on which these could be mounted in the side port holes of the aircraft. We were shown how to fit the ammunition drums, cock and fire. All this was very exciting for those of us whose flying experience had only consisted of the occasional flight testing RDF equipment.

On the morning of September 3, 1942, the station brass assembled to say farewell to the crews as they left the dispersal points on the first leg to The Shetlands. I had been assigned to fly with one Johnny King, who I found out later held some resentment towards the station C.O. We were the last aircraft to be waived off, and for some reason King swung back and buzzed the dispersal point - leaving the senior officers crouching on the grass. The tower broke radio silence and told King to

Arctic Convoys

be on his way. For his indiscretion King was put on charge, but the court martial was never held. On his return to Scotland, King was transferred to the Mediterranean, where he eventually lost his life.

By nightfall we had left Sumburgh in the Shetlands flying over the North Sea, Norway and Sweden. We experienced no opposition but did see a couple of airdromes light up as we passed over. In the early morning we landed at a small airfield which I guessed to be somewhere in northern Finland. The landscape reminded me of Northern Ontario. As we were trucked to an underground dining hall we heard voices shouting "Churchill-Stalin". Evidently the owners knew that a joint operation was taking place.

The locals served us a meal of some very dark meat. It could have been venison or horse. It was a change from our usual RAF fare. At that meal we were introduced to Russian tea in a glass - "tchai." Quantities were to be served to us during our stay. We came to enjoy it.

Veanga Airfield, Russia.

The following day we took off again on a short trip to Veanga (Vee anga), an airfield near Murmansk. On the way we saw several airfields under construction. Essentially these were large clearings in which a drainage grid of rocks and gravel was laid. Over this was a covering of earth. We were later told that these were being constructed by political prisoners.

When we assembled at Veanga we learned that of the 30 aircraft that had left Leuchars eight were missing. Three had turned back due to engine trouble, two had crashed in Sweden and the crew were interned. They were later repatriated. One was shot down over Murmansk where it had arrived during an air raid. The only Canadian among the crews lost his life in that tragedy. The remaining aircraft were unaccounted for.

Veanga was a fighter airfield, and unusual to our eyes. There were no runways and around the perimeter of the field were open-faced shelters sloping back into the ground. In each was a fighter aircraft, and if it was necessary for them to scramble they literally flew out of the ground. Unless there was a strong wind they seemed to take off in all directions. Scattered around the outside of the field were many dummy aircraft made of wood and canvas. From the air they must have appeared quite genuine.

The barracks were permanent buildings, and in these we were housed. The former occupants were living in underground shelters. Each room was heated by a large brick stove, and outside was a woodpile. If we wanted heat we chopped wood. The toilet facilities were primitive. These were wooden pie shaped buildings. Each was divided into six one-hole toilets sharing a common pit. The graffiti on the walls indicated some unusual sexual practices on the part of the former occupants.

The Russian workshops were small portable buildings. There were no hangars as such, and temporary shelters were erected for the servicing of aircraft. The workmen must have been very skilled, for new parts for engines were difficult to obtain, and a great deal of repair and reconstruction was being done.

Arctic Convoys

When Convoy PQ 18 finally entered the zone where it was to be protected, many sorties were flown. No actual strikes were made, but while the ships were under air cover none were lost. Prior to reaching the zone around the North Cape of Norway eight ships had been sunk. All the remaining ones reached Murmansk or Archangel safely. Their return voyage was to be made later using darkness as a cover. In fact by the time we eventually left Veanga it was not light until 11:00 a.m., and it was dark again about 2:30 p.m.

After the work of convoy protection was done, it was announced that we would not be flying back but would be turning the aircraft over to the Russians, and the personnel would be taken back to Britain by ship. The original 10 days turned into seven weeks. The aircrew and mechanics were kept busy helping the Soviet crews become familiar with the aircraft. It was slow and frustrating work for there was a lack of interpreters. The job of the radar technicians was relatively simple for in consultation with the Engineering Officer it was decided that none of the secret radar equipment would be left to the Russians. All the RDF and identification, friend or foe equipment (I.F.F.) were to be removed and sent back to Leuchars. These were turned over to the stores people for packing. As a footnote, these were packed in two large packing cases. When these were finally put on board a destroyer it was found that the boxes were too large to be conveniently stowed below. Consequently they were lashed down as deck cargo. When they finally reached base, seawater had turned the contents into a mass of corrosion. All had to be destroyed.

Waiting has always been part of life in the services, and that was what we did until embarking for home. We had the opportunity to watch our Soviet counterparts carry out their daily duties. We were constantly amazed at their skills while working under very difficult conditions. Language was a barrier, but it didn't prevent the usual trading taking place. My offer of an RCAF cap badge was rebuffed. Incorporated in the badge is a crown, and that was not acceptable to a communist for it was a reminder of the old Imperial regime. I do, however, have a hunting knife made from a file and some plexiglass that I traded for an old brass bullet type cigarette lighter.

Trip to Murmansk, Russia.

A trip to Murmansk was arranged for us, possibly to allow us to spend some of our allowance of 30 roubles per day. As it turned out, there was almost nothing that could be bought. Some of us did visit the local post office to buy sets of stamps. There we saw more of the difficult conditions under which the local people worked. There were huge shell holes in the outside walls of the buildings, and all the women workers wore overcoats at their desks. On each desk was an abacus, a counting frame with rows of coloured beads. The last time I had seen one of those used was by the owner of a Chinese hand laundry in Western Canada.

Wandering the streets of Murmansk gave us a view of the devastation in that northern Arctic city. Most homes had been constructed of wood. Each was heated by a large brick stove with a brick chimney. The city had been fire-bombed, and there were rows and rows of streets where nothing remained but stoves and chimneys. Everything else was leveled. The former owners were living in basements and other underground shelters. Toward dusk we saw lines of people assembled at communal feeding stations. Each carried some sort of string bag containing a pot in which they collected some millet seed porridge. On no face did we see a smile. The Soviet Union was at that time under siege, and conditions throughout the whole country were deplorable.

Arctic Convoys

One evening we were taken to a concert at the community hall in Veanga. The Soviet armed services, like all others, contained people with a great deal of talent. Singing, dancing and acrobatics were performed. The following week a performance was put on in our own mess-hall. Those taking part were Australians, New Zealanders, and British servicemen. They were joined by Marushka, our pretty dining hall waitress, who danced in her native costume. These concerts helped keep away boredom.

Being in such a place was not without its risks. The airfield was sporadically raided by day and by night. In one evening raid two of the Hampdens were destroyed on the ground, as well as some of the dummy aircraft. On another daylight raid the Soviet fighters scrambled to meet some Me.109's. In the bright sunlight we watched them battle it out. One of the Soviet planes was hit, and the pilot bailed out. The aircraft reached the ground before he did, but instead of crashing in the wide open spaces it landed directly in the centre of one of the barrack buildings, plunging down the stairwell. Fortunately it didn't burn, and no one was injured. On another day as we were working on the field, a flare went up warning us to go to the shelters. Some bomb-carrying Me 109's were on their way in. One Australian pilot lingered at the mouth of the shelter. Suddenly he shot down the steps just as a bomb exploded nearby. He claimed that he had actually seen the bomb. Someone asked him if he had noticed if it had been equipped with an anti-personnel detonator on the nose. He replied he hadn't, but on the side of the bomb had been chalked "Good Luck Hitler."

Many sights were to us strange - women working at hard labor repairing roads and runways. One of the oddest sights was a Laplander driving a sled that was equipped with small wheels, drawn by a reindeer. On the sled was mounted a rear-facing machine gun. One of those days when there was no camera in sight!

Return to Scotland.

Word finally came that we were sailing for Scotland. On the afternoon of October 24th we were taken to the dock at Veanga, where two corvettes were waiting for us. Eighty- five of us were loaded on each. Anyone familiar with the size of those ships will realize how difficult, with that number of extra people on board, it must have been for the crew to function. At sailing time that evening there was a great deal of air activity nearby, so the ships did not leave the dock. The following morning we were put ashore and taken back to the barracks. That evening we were again taken on board and immediately moved to some larger ships further out in Kola Inlet. With us were some Merchant Marine personnel who had been left behind from a previous convoy, and the staff of a small Naval detachment who had operated a Naval hospital at Veanga.

The ferrying to the larger ships did not take long, and soon some very subdued airmen were filing on board a destroyer and a much larger cruiser, which turned out to be H.M.S. Argonaut. One of the reasons for our concern was that it was in that vicinity where the H.M.S. Edinburgh had been sunk on an earlier mission. The cruiser on which we boarded was a new one on its maiden voyage out of Rosyth. It carried very heavy anti-aircraft guns. The great amount of top armament gave the ship a decided roll. This we found out later.

Crowded conditions reminded us that we were not on a pleasure cruise, but to see some of the crew skylarking one might have thought otherwise. Three seamen were sitting on the mess deck with

Arctic Convoys

towels wrapped around their heads like turbans. One was playing a tin whistle, and out of a pot was rising a rope. It could have been a cobra emerging from a basket in an Indian bazaar. Then we noticed that one of the comedians was pulling on a thread that was looped over a pipe. Our tension was immediately relieved. To many of us this was our first introduction to the working Navy. Our admiration grew as we came to see the hardships under which they worked.

On the second day out the seas became very rough, and we were followed by enemy aircraft. That usually meant that submarines were near. The ship immediately went to battle alert, and all non-essential personnel were confined below decks. Large British ships are built as a series of compartments, each closed off from the next. To move from one section to another you must pass through a watertight locking door. Access to each section from above was through a similar hatchway. During a battle alert those hatchways were closed and locked. The only opening left was a manhole with a locking cover. At each was stationed a seaman whose job was to slam shut and lock the cover should that section be holed. One could not but have the highest regard for the seamen who slept and worked in such an area.

The alert lasted two days, and we were not allowed above deck until just before we reached Iceland. There we learned that during the heavy seas two sailors had been washed overboard, and a great deal of damage had been done to lifeboats and railings.

It was with relief a couple of days later that we found ourselves among all the ships at Scapa.

Every tale has an ending. Two days after our return to Leuchars all who had been on the detachment were invited to a party in the Officers' Mess. This was the mess that in 1942 had entertained such notables as King Haakon of Norway and the Duchess of Gloucester. The party started as a merry one - soon became unruly, and then out of control. Shortly after, the mess committee passed a resolution to the effect that never again would an entertainment be held to which "other ranks" would be invited.

John R. Evans, Thunder Bay, Ontario