



[John Nicolson - Sailor in the Russian Arctic Convoy (1942)]

The following graphic description of a voyage on the Russian Arctic Convoy route was written in 1945 by the late John Nicolson 'Iain Mor Mhurchaidh Choinnich', 11 Calbost, when he was serving on HMS 'Obdurate'. We feel that the experiences described in this article are typical of that of a great many Lewis seamen in both World Wars.

Before the War the writer was a fisherman/weaver, but like most Lewis men of his day, he had seen a bit of the world. About the age of 20 years he emigrated to California in the depression years of the late 1920s. After a few years there he returned and joined the British Merchant Navy and the whaling expeditions to South Georgia where he over-wintered at least three times. As a Royal Naval Reservist he was called up as soon as hostilities broke out in 1939.

At the end of 1942 we arrived at a Scottish port where we had three days at liberty, the first time in civilisation for over five months, so it was not surprising that twenty one ratings were adrift when we pulled out.

After mooring the ship to a buoy at our next anchorage we got settled down to arranging to celebrate Christmas in the small way in which circumstances would permit. The boys were all in fairly good humour, although they had been robbed of the opportunity of spending Christmas in a homeport. We were getting on well with the decorations and preparations for Christmas, which we expected to celebrate aboard swinging around the buoy and sheltered by lofty mountains.

As the clouds rolled over the mountains and darkness set in, we heard the familiar voice on the loud speaker - 'Captain speaking'. Everyone held his breath, as we knew when the 'Old Man' spoke he had something important to communicate. This is what he said: 'We have the honour once again of being entrusted to escort a convoy to North Russia, and we shall proceed at midnight'.

An atmosphere of gloom settled on the ship. We had heard such speeches on the many previous trips that we had made to Russia, but the fact that it was Christmas Eve and we had everything arranged to the smallest detail for spending Christmas in harbour, left us disappointed. However, we had to cast disappointment aside and face the situation with a smile, so we decided to celebrate Christmas when we arrived at Murmansk, which was to be our destination.

We proceeded to sea at midnight, and got settled down to the usual sea watches. The weather was bitterly cold. Some days the thermometer fell to zero, and we couldn't put enough clothes on to keep warm. One had to be always on the alert, and it wasn't too pleasant standing in a confined space for four hours in such weather.

Encounter with a U-Boat

On 30th December, the convoy had been steaming on its course for six days and had covered more than half the distance, and we had not even seen a sign of a hostile snooper, which was somewhat unusual on that route, so we concluded that 'Gerry' must have been having Christmas week off. On the night of the 30th we were passing the North Cape of Norway, and the sea was dead calm and the air was frosty. All of a sudden, the Officer of the watch reported a U-Boat on the surface right ahead. Immediately we took counter measures and rang the engines full speed ahead to ram the U-Boat, but the U-Boat's crew must have been on the alert and crash-dived, for we sailed over the top of him without touching. As we passed over the spot where he dived, the Officer touched the electric circuit to release a pattern of depth charges, but once again luck was against us, for the electric circuits that operate the charges were frozen and failed to work. Action stations were sounded, and we tried to make contact with the U-Boat again, but without success. As the convoy steamed on, we expected further attacks by the U-Boat that night, but, to our surprise, all was quiet.

At 9.30am, on the 31st, when daylight was coming in, word was passed along from the bridge to the gun crew to stand-by as there were strange ships lurking behind the convoy. We were expecting Russian destroyers to meet us, but it was very unlikely that they would come from

that direction. A signal was made to the Captain of the flotilla about the presence of the strange ships. The Captain flashed back, 'HMS "Obdurate" go and investigate. Cannot afford to send two destroyers'. We had lost one destroyer and a sloop the previous night in fog. Unfortunately, the sloop ran into a German surface unit, and was no more heard of.

As we turned back to investigate, steaming about 25 knots in the opposite direction, three ships loomed ahead in battle formation. We flashed a challenge to them but received no reply. The 'Old Man' steamed up to about 5000 yards and then slowed the engines to dead slow, at the same time keeping the ship head-on to present a small target. The leading ship in the formation altered course to starboard, and started making his way around our port beam to get between the convoy and us and at the same time to get all his guns to bear on us. At this juncture our Captain concluded that they were German destroyers of the Narvik class, mounting 5.9-inch guns. The odds were so much against he decided to make a get-away. The distance between the enemy ships and us was now less than 2000 yards. The Captain rang the engines full steam ahead, and the helm hard to starboard to get the ship around, and at the same time to put up a smoke screen. Instantly the enemy ships opened fire and followed up at high speed. The sea was boiling all around us with bursting shells, but fortunately we didn't get a direct hit, though we got many shrapnel holes. Our good fortune in eluding the enemy ships without severe damage was due to the skill of the Captain in handling the ship.

As we rejoined the convoy, a German cruiser of the Hipper class loomed up on the horizon right ahead, and opened fire on the convoy at a range of about 20,000 yards. At the same time, the three enemy destroyers closed in and began firing with everything they had. With the odds so much against us, we realised we were in for a hot time. The strength of our escort at that time was three destroyers mounting four 4.7 guns and three destroyers mounting four 4 inch guns. In addition, we had a corvette and a rescue ship. Captain D sent an SOS to two of our cruisers, which were with a homebound convoy ninety miles away. The three destroyers with the 4.7s were ordered to steam ahead and engage the enemy cruiser, and keep her clear of the convoy. At the same time, the rest of the escort were to lay a smoke screen round the convoy. The procedure proved very effective. The enemy couldn't see his target, and had to get rid of the escort before he could get into the pack.

At about 10.30, an hour after the battle had started; one of the three destroyers that were engaging the cruiser got hit and caught fire. At 10.45 a second destroyer was hit, killing forty ratings and putting one engine and the communications out of action. The destroyer was HMS 'Onslaught', which was in command of the escort. Unfortunately, the Captain caught a piece of shrapnel in the eye but he carried on giving orders until he collapsed on the bridge. Being the nearest ship, we got a signal to lay a smoke screen between him and the enemy cruiser so that he could limp back into the shelter of the smoke screen, which was being constantly laid around the convoy. We shot away at a speed of 34 knots, laying a smoke screen between him and the cruiser. As a result, we came under the cruiser's concentrated fire, and by the time we completed the run we had been straddled four times and we were pretty badly holed by shrapnel.

Situation Getting Worse

As time went on, the situation was getting worse. 11.30 found us with only three destroyers in action. Of the others, one was sunk and two badly crippled. During the action the enemy cruiser retired thrice, presumably to cool his guns, only to return again and close the range, as the opposition was getting weaker. We kept on laying a smoke screen round the convoy and returned the enemy's fire whenever opportunity presented itself. One of our guns was out of action from the beginning - the breech refused to budge because of frost. We tried our utmost to get it going with a steam pipe but all in vain.

Mid-day found us in a bad way. The enemy had closed in on all sides, and his destroyers were making an extreme effort to get within range for a torpedo attack on the convoy. Up to this time, only one merchant ship had been hit, and they had managed to extinguish the fire so that she did not become a total loss.

At 12.15pm, when it looked as if we were all doomed, one of our cruisers, HMS 'Sheffield', arrived on the scene, having steamed ninety miles. The other cruiser, 'HMS 'Jamaica', couldn't keep pace with her. The German destroyers made a dash at the 'Sheffield' for a torpedo attack, but she engaged them with her twelve six-inch guns. With the first two or three salvoes she hit one of the destroyers, which at once blew up. The other two destroyers withdrew to join the enemy cruiser without even getting into torpedo range.

The 'Sheffield' then opened fire on the opposing cruiser at almost extreme range. The Germans broke off the engagement with us and turned his attention to the new unit that had arrived. By the time they got into position for battle, HMS 'Jamaica' had joined in. The battle that followed

lasted forty minutes, after which the two German destroyers laid a smoke screen around the cruiser and withdrew at top speed towards Norway. Our force followed them up, and as darkness set in, about 3.30 pm, we could still see the gun flashes on the horizon. The German cruiser was badly damaged on the upper structure.

One of our own cruisers suffered some casualties, including a number killed. Meanwhile, the convoy continued on its course on the alert for further attacks, particularly from the air, and as we were now within range of bombers and torpedo bombers.

On the following day we were still at action stations as we were frequently attacked by aircraft. The frost was intense, and the cold we endured in open turrets since we had entered the danger zone can hardly be put into words. By New Year's Day our rations were getting pretty low, as we did not have time to take in stores before leaving. Water was rationed, and we could only get enough for drinking. In the afternoon the wind got up and the sea became very rough. At 3.00pm the rescue ship made a signal to us for a doctor to attend some serious casualties they had on board. It was a problem how to make the transfer in such rough weather. A boat could not survive the angry waves so the rescue ship decided to run the risk of being broken to pieces by steaming parallel to us so close that the doctor could get an opportunity to jump on board with his medical instruments. As she rose on top of a wave he leapt on board, and by sheer good luck, he made it. His instruments were thrown in after him, and before we arrived at Murmansk he performed three operations on the seriously wounded. For this act he was decorated with the D.S.C. Sad to say, we lost our gallant doctor on the last trip we made to North Russia the following year.

On 3rd January we arrived at Murmansk. We were just about exhausted with want of sleep and poor nourishment, and were looking forward to having just one peaceful night in bed, but we were disappointed. We were continually attacked by aircraft, especially during the night, and we had to man the guns almost all the time. We had a few narrow escapes. Once, we got straddled with bombs as we were taking in oil. On 8th January we had our first peaceful night, thanks to foggy weather, so we decided to celebrate Christmas. It wasn't much of a celebration - a bottle of beer between two. However, some of the boys had a few tots of rum saved up for the occasion, which brightened things somewhat, and we had a merry time of it while the liquor lasted. The following day 'Gerry' came over again, and the nearest ship to us got hit on the stern, causing five fatal casualties. Their remains were transferred on-board our ship to be taken to their last resting place, and I was one of those who got the unpleasant task of sewing the remains in canvas after which we were to have the burial at sea at dawn the following day. That night 'Gerry' came over in force, but 'Joe' had his fighters up and gave him a hot time. At midnight we got a signal to proceed to sea along with another destroyer to take the wounded home. Amongst them was the Captain of the destroyer flotilla, whose eye required an urgent operation.

We left Murmansk at midnight on the 9th, and covered the distance without mishap, and transferred the wounded to a hospital ship, after which we all got seven days leave for the part we played in the action. The Captain of our flotilla was decorated with the V.C. for his skill and devotion in handling a situation that appeared to be hopeless. We are now looking forward to a few days' leave, and big eats. We've been on hard tack so long, our bellies have shrunk a few inches, but the good old Guinness will soon take the wrinkles out.

[ends]

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