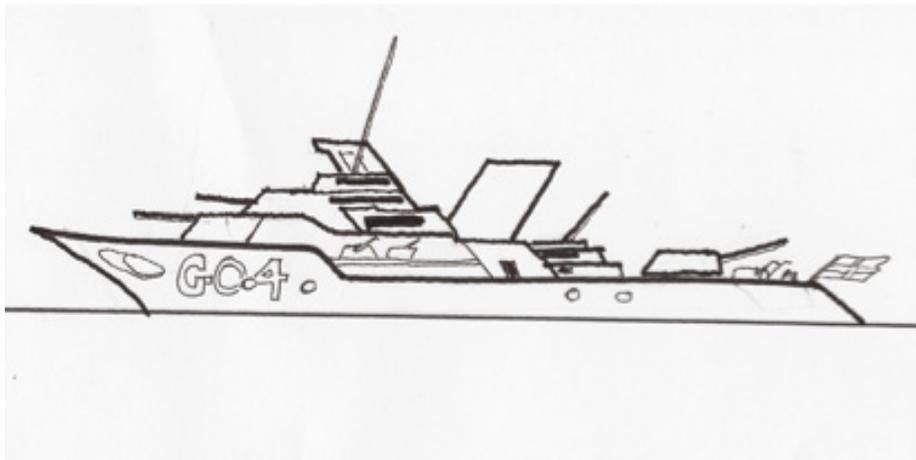


CHAPTER 4

ROMANCE IN MURMANSK



Destroyers have a sharp yacht-like bow that flares outwards, and this was reflected in the shape of my mess deck. Looking around it was quite a dreary prospect. Its interior flared inwards, the bulkhead was sealed with rivets, the floor was covered in a very tough-wearing, brown linoleum with a distinctive linseed smell, and there was only a 10mm thickness of skin between the mess and the sea outside, which later on I became only too aware of. As the vessel moved through the sea, you could hear the ocean thrashing all around you. It was a noise that became a constant part of one's life. At night, you would see ghostly forms pass as the watches changed; you would see them during the day too, because below deck it didn't matter whether it was night or day: watches at 4 hours on and 4 hours off ignored night and day. Watch-keepers would come down to the mess, get a slice of bread and sit hunched in front of a two-bar fire, toasting it. The smell of toast combined with the less-than-delicate aroma of unwashed bodies was quite high in every respect. Sometimes, with the noise of waves all around you, it felt as though you were sleeping in the sea.

The thing that strikes you more than anything is the abundance of steel – everything was made of the stuff: the ladders, which made an incredible noise as sea boots went up and down them; and the deck head with its latticework of steel brackets and metal plates. When you were in harbour, it sounded as if you were living in a blacksmith's workshop. You knew most of the people, so there was a tremendous comradeship amongst the crew, but we didn't think in a patriotic way – we were

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not thinking about England, the Royal Family, or even of killing the Germans. We were just intent on getting through the day – that was all.

Looking back now over the years, I'm amazed by the extreme casualness of the whole thing. I arrived on board as a cog in a machine, fell into wartime and was ushered into its mysteries. Nobody told me what to do or how far I could go. It wasn't quite a character-building exercise, but it wasn't far off.

The following morning, the bosun's whistle sounded instructing us to make the ship ready to leave harbour and prepare for sea. Releasing the cable from the barnacle-encrusted buoys was not easy – not only were the barnacles sharp and the weather in Scapa Flow vicious, but they had to climb over the buoy to release the colossal cable. Once released, the cable would drop into the water, leaving the sodden crew members to return immediately to the ship to be hoisted on board before it began to slide away from the buoy.

On my first sea-going voyage, the ship headed out of the harbour, collecting our fellow escorts on the way (unless we were picking them up in Iceland or the Faroes, which were the first ports of call for Russian-bound Arctic convoys). Neither place really welcomed us. It was easy to understand why, since we had more or less invaded Iceland to prevent the Germans from doing so. We would then head for Seydisfjord or Akureyri Fjord, avoiding German reconnaissance aircraft, which were constantly patrolling overhead, waiting for the destroyers to assemble, knowing that a convoy would be in the offing.

On the second day out, I felt like death. I wished that the ship would sink. I had spewed up so much that there was nothing left in my stomach and I was bringing up yellow bile. I lay on the upper deck like a piece of flotsam and all I wanted to do was to die. My stomach felt as if it had been scoured with a Brillo pad. Occasionally, I returned to the mess deck, but as soon as I caught a whiff of fried eggs, I had to rush back to the upper deck again. When we arrived at Akureyri Fjord, I hoped that we would never leave, and when the crew began preparing to go to sea, my heart sank. The sun was shining but it did nothing to brighten my mood, but surprisingly, when we hit open water, I felt fine and from then on I was never seasick again.

I found my radar cabinet – it was in the officer's lavatory (they lost a lavatory and gained a radar operator). The officers were not pleased. I went outside and looked at the trellis mast: its ladder seemed to reach to infinity. I tried getting up there, some 35–40 feet in the air, and realised that I would have a real job on my hands to do this, especially in bad weather. The equipment had to be kept ice-free to be efficient.

It was my job to inform the bridge of the number of ships in convoy and relative position of escorts on the start of our journey to Bear Island. In Russian waters, the main enemy was two or three lines of pretty constant U-boat patrols across the North Sea. We had to slip through the lines of submarines and come out at the other end unscathed. In time, the German tactics changed and they began to hunt in pairs and packs. In some cases they became really cocky and travelled below the convoy, waiting for nightfall or sunrise when the ships were silhouetted against the evening or morning sky.

SELF PORTRAIT: THE EYES WITHIN

Many ships were lost. Survivors had about 6 minutes in the water before they lost consciousness and 10 to 15 minutes before they froze to death. The Barents Sea was similar to the Welsh Valleys – but instead of hills, enormous rollers obscured the sky. One moment we were on top of the world, the next moment we were sliding down into the valley again. Daylight lasted for only an hour or two.

What really got to me were the ice and the cold. Sometimes the sea was so cold it would be semi-freezing, and in bad weather, which was frequent, the combination of top-heavy ice and enormous waves was extremely dangerous. We knew we were in trouble when a blanket of ice would cake on the forecastle and over the ‘A’ and ‘B’ gun turrets. The 4-inch gun platform would look like a wedding cake. A half-inch-thick cable would expand to 2 inches in diameter when covered in ice, the ship would start to roll and we would hear the cry: ‘All hands to cut ice.’ There was no hesitation. The consequences were too extreme to even consider. We would dash out carrying hatchets and crowbars and hack at the ice, retreating behind the steel protection of the gun turrets when the bow began to sink slowly into the swell. It would disappear completely, gradually reappearing white and sparkling, with water cascading in all directions and freezing in the air before hitting the deck. The gloom of long winter days, being unable to wash or keep warm, and the constantly interrupted sleep made it feel like we were living in another dimension.

Recently, in 2012, the UK Government rejected a request from Russia to reward the survivors of the Arctic convoys with a medal in recognition of their courage in defence of Russia. A total of 78 convoys carried 4 million tons of supplies to Murmansk and Archangel. More than 3,000 seamen died and 85 merchant vessels and 16 Royal Navy ships were sunk. The Russians themselves have never stopped thanking us, and their embassy in London expressed profound regret that whilst Australian, Canadian, New Zealand and American Governments have granted permission for their veterans to receive medals, William Hague, the 2012 Foreign Secretary, refuses to allow the Ushakov medal to be presented to survivors of what Winston Churchill called ‘the worst journey in the world’. Undoubtedly, there are political motives we know nothing about – plus there is the convoluted rule that service to the country concerned should have taken place during the previous five years – but there are only about 200 Arctic veterans alive now – all in their late-80s or 90s, and it wouldn’t cost the British taxpayer a penny. Besides, the blue of the ribbon exactly matches the colour of my wife’s eyes. (On the 20 December 2012, the Prime Minister David Cameron announced that Arctic convoy veterans were to be awarded a British medal.)

Back to the Second World War: it was 1942 and I was 17 years old – a seasoned seadog and obviously destined for rapid promotion. In keeping with my aspirations, I started to copy the attitudes, dress and behaviour of my fellow seamen. At that time I wasn’t shaving, so a beard was out of the question, but I smoked, and after meeting the Welshman, I decided that a pipe was more appropriate than cigarettes.

A flap in the canteen was opened and inside was a small shop. You could buy stuff like sweets, writing paper and cigarettes. I asked if they sold pipes.

‘Sure,’ said the man who looked after the shop, and he pulled down a box, opened it, and there was the biggest pipe I’ve ever seen. It was an enormous, knurled chunk of what looked like apple-

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Chipping away the ice and snow from the deck of H.M.S. *Vansittart* while on convoy escort duty in the Arctic, on Feb. 27, 1943. It was estimated that there was 200 tons of ice and snow on the deck when chipping operations started. (Photo courtesy of AP/ Press Association Images)

wood. ‘That’s all I’ve got,’ he said.

I bought the pipe and some tobacco and must have looked comical – a skinny kid with a huge German pipe held between his teeth. The canteen shop was next to the coxswain’s office and as I was passing, a stentorian voice boomed out: ‘Mitchell, have you got permission to smoke a pipe?’

‘Do I need permission?’

‘This is the Navy, lad. You don’t do anything without permission in the Navy. Come in here.’ He shoved a blank sheet towards me as I entered. ‘This is a request form,’ he said. ‘Now, write what I say. I request permission from my divisional officer to smoke a pipe.’

I wrote exactly what he said and when I had finished he put the request form into a box.

Anyway, the ship left for Iceland. It was a terrible journey and when we got to Sedisfjord, first lieutenant’s ‘request men and defaulters’ was piped. You had to run up to the quarterdeck and line up, caps off and all that sort of palaver. There was a small desk and the first lieutenant stood behind it. I had already asked my divisional officer about the pipe and he told me that he didn’t think he was qualified to give permission and referred it to the first lieutenant’s report.

The coxswain said: ‘2019 is requesting permission to smoke a pipe, Sir.’

The first lieutenant stared at me as if I was a turd, and eventually he said: ‘Refer this to captain’s report.’

‘Left, right, left, right, left, right!’

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This was not good news: I had never spoken to the captain, but by all accounts he was a f***ing bastard. I was beginning to wish I could make them forget about the pipe, but it was impossible: according to the coxswain, 'In the Navy, once you'd started something like this, there is no way you can stop it.'

We made our way towards Murmansk. I was crouched over the radar screen looking for the enemy and for a while I forgot about the pipe. So I was surprised when we got to our destination and the whistle went for captain's 'request men and defaulters'.

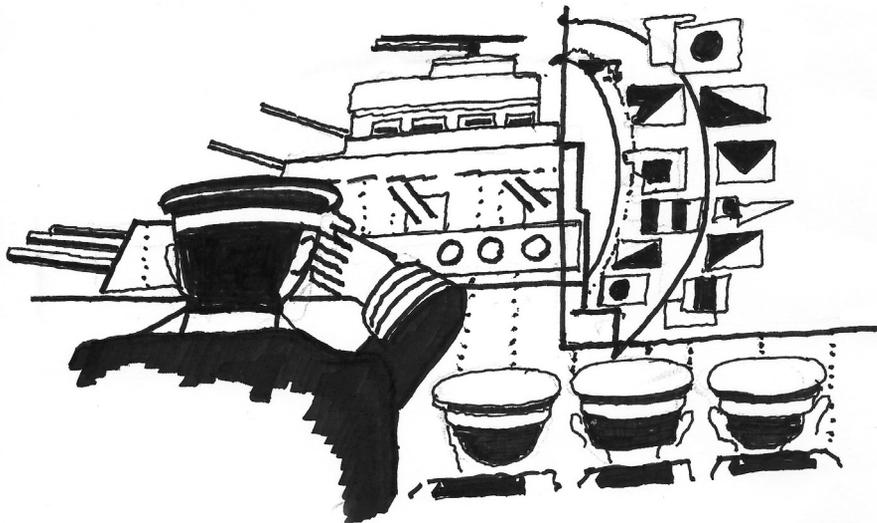
'Left right, left right, left right, caps off. 2019 permission to smoke a pipe, Sir?'

The captain was a fearsome man with blue eyes and a ginger beard. He became an admiral later, and recently I noticed his obituary in the newspapers. At the time, I thought that he would live forever. His sharp eyes pierced into mine for what seemed like forever. Then without warning, he suddenly closed the folder containing my request form and said: 'I can't deal with this – refer it to fleet.'

'Left right, left right, left right...'

'Refer to fleet' meant that my request went all the way to the admiral.

We went back to Iceland, the convoy split up and we sailed on to Scapa Flow, where a splendid sight awaited us. The flotilla looked magnificent against the green-blue sea, which sparkled in the sunshine. All the flags were flying. It was very traditional. Each ship flew its number and saluted the flag of the Admiral of the Fleet. As we came by the *King George V*, everybody was standing to attention on the quarterdeck, the whistles going and the battle flag dipped as we passed. The *King George V* itself was flaunting an enormous array of flags. It looked like a ship from the Battle of Trafalgar, and to my absolute amazement, somebody told me that the message signalled was about ME. He read it out: '2019 Mitchell William has been given permission to smoke a pipe.'



It was one of the biggest leg-pulls the Navy had ever seen. The truth, of course, was that one did not have to have permission to smoke a pipe. I wanted to disappear.