

Women on the Arctic Convoys - Azerbaijan and PQ-17

PQ-17 is one of the more famous convoy missions owing to the terrible losses that resulted from the decision to scatter the ships, which was taken on the false belief that the Tirpitz intended to engage the allied vessels. What is less well known is the female presence aboard Soviet tankers that took part in this ill-fated mission.

Female crews were not unusual on Soviet vessels, much to the wonderment of the allied sailors, and there were women present aboard the Donbass and the Azerbaijan when the ships came under enemy fire (there are even sources indicating that the Captain and the Chief Officer of the Azerbaijan were married to members of their crew).

The female crew of the **Azerbaijan** particularly distinguished themselves with their response to enemy attack, which came on the 4th July 1942, in which they managed to save the tanker that was thought doomed by onlookers.



Above: Convoy PQ 17 sailing in Hvalfjord. The Soviet Tanker, Azerbaijan, can be seen in the distance.

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The Azerbaijan was transporting linseed oil to the port at Archangel. When the attack came, the tanker was **targeted by dive-bombers and torpedo planes**. As a result of the bombardment the vessel caught fire and sustained heavy damages.

In the immediate panic, lifeboats were lowered and some of crew members abandoned the ship, which was soon engulfed in smoke. The remaining crew tackled the fires while the heavy gun, manned by women, continued to fire at the enemy.

Upon the realisation that the ship was not sinking, **the lifeboats were ordered by megaphone to return to help extinguish the flames**. The lifeboats were hoisted back aboard and at last the flames were quelled. Other crew members that had been thrown into the sea were picked up by rescue boat Zaafaran.

Given the dire outlook for the tanker the remaining fleet had been ordered to leave the Azerbaijan, which had fallen out of station along with the Navarino and the William Hooper (which were both sunk in the attack). One can imagine the allies' amazement when the tanker was seen limping behind, eventually catching up and returning to its station. The Azerbaijan arrived safely at Archangel on 24th July.