

Sitting Birds: Pay-Lieutenant Alec Wear's story 1941- 1943 by his grand daughter, Elizabeth Wear

As a new recruit, Bristol-born Alec Percival Henry Wear RNVR (2.4.09- 3.12.88) served on HMS Newcastle in the Mediterranean and South Atlantic from Nov 1940-Summer 1941. He then received officer training at HMS King Alfred in Sussex, being promoted to sub-lieutenant on 27th November 1941 and in January 1942 had just returned from cypher duties in the US and Bermuda where he had accompanied Churchill- who was visiting Roosevelt after the bombing of Pearl Harbour in December 1940. He was promoted to lieutenant in May 1942 while he was in Russia.

In the 1970s he wrote a memoir of his war years, included here in italics (although not necessarily in the order in which he wrote it which didn't make for an easy narrative). He called his memoir *Sitting Birds* as he likened being part of a convoy to birds sitting together on the water hoping their proximity to others would give any individual protection from the enemy. I have added comments to his account and some background information about the places, people and events he describes.

Alec's orders to Russia, 4th Feb 1942

Sailing to Russia

Alec wrote: *Leave simply flew by and before long we had a call by a policeman from Westbury Police Station. [Bristol] "I was to report forthwith to the NOIC (Naval Officer in Charge) - Aultbea."*

He continued: *My train, I was told, would leave Kings Cross the following evening and I was to book a single to Aachnasheen. They told me at the ticket office that I should change at Inverness and with a trolley load of luggage [I] drifted on to the platform where two young ladies gave me a brief once-over*

By command of the Commissioners for executing the Office of Lord High Admiral of the United Kingdom, etc.

CONFIDENTIAL

C.W.

To *Paymaster Sub Lieutenant A.P.H. Wear, RN.V.R.*

The Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty hereby appoint *Temporary Paymaster Sub Lieutenant, President of the Admiralty* of His Majesty's Ship *outside Admiralty with S.B.V.O., North Russia* and direct you to repair *on board that ship on the* Station.

Your appointment is to take effect from *11th February 1942*

~~and~~

~~and write~~ (date to be reported) and you will be required to be in readiness to leave ~~not later than~~ *at an early date.*

You are to communicate forthwith in writing with the Director of ~~Sea Transport~~ *Naval Intelligence* (Passage Section), ~~Berkeley Square~~ *Admiralty* London ~~S.W.1~~ reporting your telephone number and stating the address to which passage orders are to be sent.

You will require a passport visaed for *Russia* and the attached application form should be completed and forwarded to the Admiralty (N.I.D. Passport Section), together with the necessary photographs (2) as soon as possible.

If for any reason, your departure from the United Kingdom is delayed, you should be particularly careful to ensure that the visa is still valid. The period of validity is noted on the visa.

You are to arrange for inoculation against Typhoid and Para Typhoid ~~forthwith~~ either at the Medical Department, Admiralty, any day except ~~Saturdays, Sundays or Public Holidays~~ Saturdays, Sundays or Public Holidays, between the hours of 1000 and 1700 or at the nearest Naval Depot or Hospital.

When an Officer resides at a considerable distance from London or any Naval Depot or Hospital, inoculation may be received from a Surgeon and Agent on production of this letter of appointment.

If before embarkation, inoculation (or vaccination) has not been completed, the services of the ship's surgeon should be utilised, the account being settled and completed with full details in compliance with King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions, Article 1439 (4).

You should also be re-vaccinated at the earliest possible date, if this has not been carried out within the last 5 years, (3 years in the case of officers appointed to the East Indies Station or China Station) either by your private medical attendant (at your own expense) or at the nearest Naval Hospital or the Medical Department, Admiralty, at the times

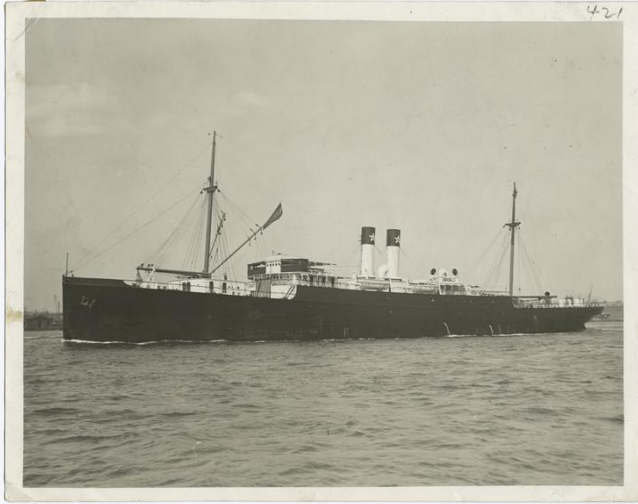
and decided I was the man they were looking for. Just what their official jobs were I never got to know. I think they were on the staff of N.I.D.17 [Naval Intelligence Division], that branch of Admiralty responsible for personnel based in N. Russia. Anyhow, they had an enormous kitbag for me which they told me I should be needing. They wished me well, I thanked them, promised to open the bag later, boarded the train and waved goodbye.

The next afternoon, we arrived at Inverness. The train went on to Thurso carrying sailors to join their ships in Scapa Flow in the Orkneys while I made enquiries about my train for Aachnasheen. Although it was a dull February afternoon, the light held out long enough to me to appreciate some magnificent scenery on my journey westwards. I had the carriage to myself and by the time we reached Aachnasheen, which proved to be a small terminus miles from anywhere, it was a pitch black moonless night, and of course a strict black-out was in force. The station master undertook to look after my luggage and suggested I walked down the road to an army camp where they might give me a bunk for the night. So after being duly challenged by the sentry, I was admitted for bed and breakfast. Early next morning I cadged a lift in a cement lorry and arrived bag and baggage at a small dwelling with a White Ensign and which proved to be the office of NOIC [Naval Officer in Charge] Aultbea, a pleasant enough cluster of buildings on the shore of Loch Ewe. From where we stood the scenery, though bleak, was distinctly impressive though my eyes were searching rather for anything resembling a warship. Of course there weren't any warships around with room for passengers.

We were to travel in "that one with the two funnels". Just how many merchant ships were there lying at anchor I don't remember - probably 12 to 15. 'Ours' was the biggest, say about 10,000 tons and at a guess the most comfortable ride and the most satisfactory target for any loitering U boats. So with no time for dalliance, I was taken out to what was to be my home for the next 6 or 7 weeks and put aboard.

*The ship itself had a Spanish name, was registered in Panama, wore the Panamanian flag, carried a miscellaneous cargo and was well able to keep up with the convoy's speed of around 9 knots. A small gun was mounted aft and somewhere aboard there should have been a guns crew. [The ship was *El Coston*, 7286 tons, built in 1924 as a passenger liner. However, two months later her entire superstructure was destroyed by fire and she was rebuilt as a freighter.] Shortly after dark we slid quietly out of Loch Ewe into the Minches and in single line ahead set off on a northerly course. I thought I glimpsed a navy trawler leading the way and later another escort on the edge of the convoy which formed into three columns with us last in the middle column - first stop Iceland (we hoped!). Our first surprise (NOT I suspect shared by the ship's officers) was that next morning at first light we seemed to have lost the convoy! Visibility was good and not a ship in sight. The second mate was a Frenchman - spoke NO English - and during the dark hours had lost his way (?). Radar at this time had not been available and station keeping depended on keeping in sight of a dim stern light of the ship ahead. However, towards the end of the day we managed to get back into position only to find the same thing happen*

the following night. No doubt many sailors felt less vulnerable on their own than in convoy and it seemed our French Second Mate was one of those who did not think very highly of the convoy system. Our sparse escort may also have influenced his sentiments. With a top speed of 17 knots her officers appear unhappy by the constraints of a slow convoy. On trips from USA to Iceland, *El Coston* would normally be dispatched to dash ahead for the second half of the trip. After a collision in April 1944 while making for Bermuda, the crew put so much water on board fighting a fire that she sank.



El Coston The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library.(1860 - 1920). *Morgan Line Freighter El Coston*. Retrieved from <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-3d54-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

It is unclear what date *El Coston* left Loch Ewe, but they arrived in Reykjavik on 27th February 1941. The sailing normally took five days, so they might have sailed about 22nd. Although they were obviously sailing as part of a convoy, I can find no evidence that this was part of a numbered convoy. PQ11 had arrived in Murmansk on 22nd February so was quite separate. Most convoys sailing from Loch Ewe to Iceland used a UR designation (RU for the return journey) and the *El Coston's* travel dates fall between UR13 (17-22 Feb) and UR14 (28th Feb- 4th Mar). However in the list of ships that sailed on to Russia as part of PQ12, in addition to *El Coston* are five British ships (*Temple Arch*, *Navarino*, *Llandaff*, *Empire Byron* and *Earlston*) and two other ships registered in Panama (*Capulin*-1920, 5613 tons- and *Artigas*-1920, 5613 tons) who all arrived in Reykjavik on the same day as *El Coston* and all of whom have SD1.3 against their arrival date. This might imply they sailed together in a convoy with this designation but I can find no information about a convoy SD1.3 and most SD convoys sailed in the opposite direction, from Iceland to the Clyde. They all subsequently became part of PQ12.

Alec wrote: *Some of our top men thought the whole project [the Russian convoys] was rash, unjustified and suicidal as it might have proved if the Germans had put their heart into their attacks. Only rarely did they do this, Hitler refusing to put his big ships at risk and the ship's company of 'Tirpitz' for instance must surely have been sick of the sight of a Norwegian Fjord. However, the Germans were getting very close to Moscow and the decision was taken to start rolling the tanks and guns into Russia. Some supplies were already getting through in the South through Persia and now in addition to all our other commitments in the Western Approaches, the Atlantic landings at Casablanca (already in the planning stage), Force H at Gibraltar, Malta Convoys, U Boat Sinkings, [quite] apart from Burma and the Far East, it was decided we could spare enough escorts from the Home Fleet and Force H at Gibraltar to provide the cover required for these operations.*

[Having arrived in Reykjavik, they spent a day or so awaiting the arrival of the American ships which would join them on their journey to Russia. They were not allowed ashore so Alec spent time getting to know his ship.] *We also inspected the little gun which had been provided for us to sink any U boats but already it was quite cold and without any Arctic grease we feared that we should be unable to train or elevate the thing anyway.* [He also got to know his cabin companion and the ship's crew.] *My cabin companion was a most agreeable young South African [Pay Sub Lt Hancock] with tremendous admiration for the British, which was more than could be said for the other 40 people on board who made up the ships company.* [He was pleased to learn that Hancock,] *another Sub-lieutenant who had arrived direct from King Alfred (even therefore junior to me), wanted to improve his chess and had a pocket set with him. The Captain, he was a dour looking Dutch Canadian and the only time I remember seeing him laugh was when he came into our cabin one night to tell us that he'd just heard on the Radio News that the BWITISH HAD BEEN DWOVEN [sic] out of Libya! The Mate was a competent Scot. The Second [mate] was the Frog [sic] who I suspect understood more than he made out [it was this Frenchman who was so dismissive of the convoy system and the need to go slow during their passage to Iceland] and the Third [mate] was an Aussie who we liked. The rest of the crew were of mixed nationalities including Australian and Chinese who were following their trades as indeed they would have been whether or not there was a war on. They lived well and discipline as we knew it in the Navy was NON existent. Naturally they hoped for survival though who eventually would win the war wasn't their chief concern and we weren't the only ship in the convoy flying the flag of Panama.*

PQ12 set out from Reykjavik on March 1st bound for Murmansk, North Russia.

At first all went well. As a passenger he would have spent his time on deck, reading, playing chess with Hancock and staring out to sea. Alec wrote: *The first surprise for me came on the first night. I could hardly believe my eyes when it appeared that a host of search lights appeared to the North that looked like an air raid over some big town where I knew no land could be, and this was the first time I'd seen the Aurora Borealis or Northern Lights in all their glory. The next memorable surprise was a sudden drop in temperature when I realized we were sailing through a sea of ice. It then became very foggy and the sun barely rose above the horizon.* Having sailed up the west coast of Iceland, after a couple of days they reached the March sea-ice limit about 200 miles north of Iceland and on their third day at sea they passed Jan Mayen Island. In early March the sun rises just before 9am and sets around 6.30pm, but even at noon it would only get 12° above the horizon. In the first weeks of March 1942, weather conditions were extreme, with force 10 gales, snow storms, icing of exposed surfaces and poor visibility. Due to the unseasonable extent of the sea ice, they were pushed further south than they would normally have sailed.

However, things were about to get even more dangerous: *It was on the second [sic] day out that a lone Focke Wolfe aircraft was circling around the horizon at a safe distance so we knew we had been spotted and reported*

and many books have been written of the hazards to be expected from surface ships, dive bombers and U boats. Hilter had given permission for Operation Sportpalast- intended to find and destroy both PQ 12 and its reciprocal, QP 8.

The threat to PQ12, and to QP8 which had left Murmansk on the same day (1st March) for the reverse journey, was well-known to all. Alec wrote: *On our last day in Reykjavik harbour, captains of all ships had to go ashore to attend the Commodore's Conference. Our Captain acquainted us with the details when he returned on board. "P.R.U. [Photo Reconnaissance Unit] had reported the German Battleship [presumably Tirpitz] had left her usual berth in Trondheim and was presumed to have put in at one of the more northerly Norwegian Fjords." He had a sealed envelope only to be opened in the event of an order to SCATTER. A destroyer escort was awaiting our departure in Seidisfjord. But all that everybody talked about was the battleship 'Tirpitz'. If she decided to come out surely we should be a simple target for the mighty guns of this monster battleship and we were told to rate our chances of getting through at no better than evens. The American merchant ships had joined us and the enlarged convoy formed into line surrounded now by the destroyers, corvettes and frigates that had sailed from Seidisfjord. This of course cheered us up and we knew nothing about the shadowing escorts below the horizon of cruisers and more destroyers or of the Battleship King George V in Scapa waiting for news that Tirpitz had sailed.*

The German Battleship, Tirpitz

A large number of Royal Navy ships were mobilised to protect the convoys. On 5th March (actually their fifth day out) the convoy was sighted about 100 miles south of Jan Mayer Island by a German reconnaissance aircraft- this was the Folke Wollfe Alec saw. This signal was picked up by the Y service (a network of British signal intelligence sites), passed to Bletchley Park



who, due to their breaking of Enigma, were able to decode it almost immediately and the information was passed to Admiral Tovey. On 6 March *Tirpitz* and three escorts sortied from the Norwegian fjords. *Tirpitz* was spotted by a patrolling submarine and the allies sought to bring the German battleship into action. Over the next two days these groups of ships manoeuvred around each other, without coming into contact, though on two occasions they were just 60 miles apart. *Tirpitz* had no success, though her destroyers encountered and sank one straggler from QP 8. Finally on 9 March as *Tirpitz* headed for home. The appalling weather had affected both sides, but *Tirpitz* only failed by a narrow margin in finding the convoys.

The breaking of Enigma helped save Alec's life, however all Alec wrote was: *We never saw the Tirpitz and arrived in Murmansk [on 12th March 1942] without a single casualty.* The safe arrival of PQ12 provided valuable military and other equipment for the Soviet war effort.

'Jack in Joe's Land'- A Year in Russia

Alec wrote his memoir because: *The fates of the less fortunate in other convoys have been told by senior naval officers and researchers, though I have not come across any books on this subject either by a Russian or by a merchant seaman [of course, Alec was neither of these either!], so perhaps a few recollections and impressions during my stay in North Russia at the Headquarters of the Northern Fleet "Krasnayaflotsky" might help to fill the gap. Among the literature obtainable relating to these convoys, I have not as yet come across one written by a 'passenger' in a Merchant Ship (unarmed). As this was my role in an outward bound convoy in 1942, I shall enjoy recalling a few memories which I should find it difficult to forget.*

Within a few months of the safe arrival of PQ9, there followed PQ14,15,16,17 & 18, involving more than half of the home fleet.

The well-known fate of the outbound convoys after PQ12 shows how lucky Alec was in his journey and possibly why he did not dwell on what might have been.

Alec had been sent to North Russia to assist the shore operations of Naval Party 100 based at the Headquarters of Russia's Northern Fleet. The convoys sailed to Murmansk, on the east coast of the Kola Inlet (off the Barents Sea), about 35 miles from the open sea, but the Senior British Naval Officer (SBNO) was based about 25 miles further north (nearer the sea), on the west coast of the inlet at Polyarnoe (now the closed city of Polyarny but still the HQ of the Russia's Northern Fleet). There was also a Russian airfield north of Murmansk at Va(y)enga Bay in Severomorsk. Naval Party 200 were based at Archangel, about 300 miles further east, in the large inlet called the White Sea, but both NP100 and NP 200 were run from Polyarnoe; when Alec arrived the SBNO was Rear Admiral Bevan and later, from July 1942, the role was taken by Rear Admiral Fisher. Alec wrote: *A few miles north of Murmansk the Russians had an airfield in Valnga Bay [sic]. British spitfires had been added to the Russian aircraft and pilots taken out to demonstrate how to fly them. Two flotillas of British Fleet Minesweepers were based at Polyarnoe and Archangel respectively and experts in mine rendering safe devices were sent to assist.*

The SBNO made monthly reports which can be found at

http://www.halcyon-class.co.uk/SBNOreports/sbno_reports.htm although some appear to be missing, including those from July 1942 when PQ17 was scattered.

The Russians complained there were too many British personnel, that they were there for other reasons (spying) and they were treated with suspicion. They were subject to surveillance, NKVD entrapment attempts and their movements were restricted. Women they socialised with would suddenly disappear. Alec may have met some of these women- *Two Russian girls cooked and served the officers and even brought us early morning glass of tea. As they had the same name 'Zena' we called one Zena Maclinke and the other Zena Bolshoi. Another Russian*

girl Alia was our more or less resident interpreter and another Tamara lived in Murmansk. There was also a fluent English speaker Galena whose duties I wasn't sure about. The number of naval ratings actually based ashore was also quite small - offloading of cargo being the responsibility of Ministry of War Transport.

It is possible that the shore party based themselves in Polyarnoe (home of a Russian submarine base) rather than Murmansk for safety. During March, Murmansk was bombed on three occasions including 'on 24th March, when five JU88 and three ME109 dropped 18 bombs, seriously damaging SS Lancaster Castle and causing some damage to the Port Office, to railway crossings and destroying two boxed aircraft.' [Bevan]

Conditions were hard. Food was in short supply, the weather was dreadful and all the time the Germans were carrying out bombing raids, both on land and on shipping. By June Bevan wrote 'Murmansk town is now in ruins and it seems likely that more attention will now be paid to ships and perhaps Polyarnoe. The risk is grave that all ships coming to the port will be damaged or sunk during the next two months.' [Bevan]. Alec estimated four fifths of Murmansk was destroyed.

As well as ships sunk in the inlet, many ships arrived in Murmansk with survivors of convoy ships sunk by U-boats and torpedos in the icy wastes of the Barents Sea.

Alec wrote: *By far the greatest number of British ashore were survivors from sunken ships and when one very cold night survivors from the cruiser 'Edinburgh' were brought in by one of our [mine-]Sweepers, their Royal Marines lined up on the jetty as smartly as if they had been in Portsmouth Barracks. Finding accommodation was of course a problem and eventually we were allocated the 'Asdic' [Anti-Submarine Detection Investigation Committee or sonar] factory which we found to be quite empty. All these men needed to be cared for, housed and fed.*

In April 1942, Bevan praised the men of Alec's team 'The conduct of 'Naval Party 100' continues to be satisfactory and their health remains very good. Every precaution has been taken to provide against the summer mosquito menace and all beds are supplied with spreaders and nets. I hope that the gradual relief of all the ratings may take place as they become due, after 9 - 12 months service in North Russia. None complain, but it must be owned that none wish to stay.' [Bevan]

In his memoir he names 14 of the men in NP100 as of July 1942, by which time Rear Admiral Bevan had been replaced by Rear Admiral Fisher.

"Naval Party 100 c/o G.P.O. London" was the address of the few officers and ratings chosen to assist and consisted of:- As at July 1942

Rear Admiral Douglas Fisher [1890-1963, served in WW1 and retired as a full Admiral] - *it was necessary to have a man of this seniority in order to have parity with the resident Admiral Golovco, and Admiral Fisher was the ideal man for the job, though no doubt he would have preferred to be on the bridge of the 'Warspite' [his previous command].*

Pay Lt. Con. Charles Evans R.N. *Admiral's Secretary and Base Accountant Officer - very very efficient. [my*

father-Alec's son- has a letter written to Alec by Charles Evans from Moscow in July 1943]

Lt. Cdr. Viscount Redburn R.N. Flag Lieutenant (Flags) also acted as Signals Officer. Promoted goodwill and never missed a party if he could help it.

Lt. Cdr.----- S.O.O. R.N. Operations Retired from navy years ago then a midshipman. Became a solicitor in Barnstaple and brought back for the war. Liked to make a signal in rhyming couplets.

Lt. James Bould R.N.V.R. First Lieut. Duties discipline and also went aboard Russian destroyer when providing local escort to assist with recognition etc. and signals generally - private life West End Actor - wrote a good pantomime for our sailors Christmas 1942. [More on this later]

Lt. Morris R.N.V.R. similar duties, (went home when Admiral Bevan left July 42).

Lt. Ward R.N.V.R. Intelligence Officer, liaison with Russians at Russian H.Q. office.

Lt. Rory O'Connor R.N. Irish doctor usually sober a.m.

Pay Lt. A. Wear R.N.V.R. 2nd stripe up in June, [promoted Paymaster Lieutenant on 27th May 1942] senior Cypher Officer and 2nd accountant officer, also i/c signals when Flags was away.

Pay S/Lt. Hancock R.N.V.R. (South African) - cypher duties [This was the 'agreeable' young South African Alec had shared a cabin with aboard El Coston on their journey out]

Pay S/Lt. Gale R.N.V.R. - cypher duties

S/Lt. Grey R.A.N.V.R. (Australian) Interpreter, Special duties at Polyarnoe, Archangel, Moscow etc.

Lt. Cdr. Vickers R.N. (Vickers Armstrong – Barrow) with a civilian specialisation in mine rendering safe

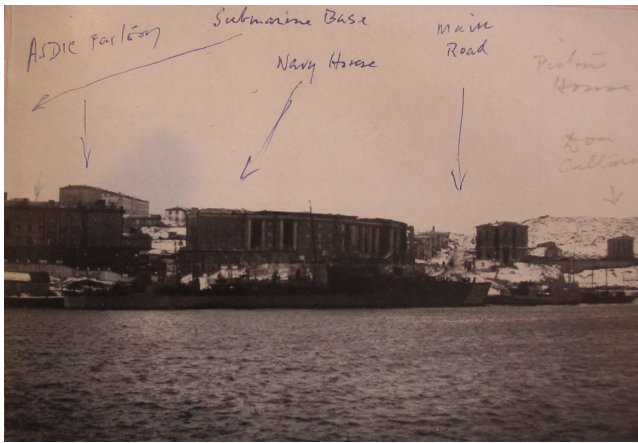
Lt. Higgins R.N.V.R. Oxford don with nine languages, interpreter for duty with Admiral.

Alec continued: *We had a full complement of Signals ratings under an elderly C.P.O. Tel. [Chief Petty Officer Telegraphist] including six who lived in 'Y' Cottage on a hill a mile or so away. They were under P.O. Tel Appleby whose contribution earned him a Mention in Despatches and a P.O. writer and Supply rating and a sick berth attendant in Valnga hospital and later a surgeon.[...] We had no Officers' Stewards and the Admiralty didn't consider it necessary to send us any Wrens. [This is where the presence of the Russians, the two Zenas, Alia, Tamara and Galena came in.] In 1943 the complete naval party consisted of 72 men [Tye- The Real Cold War, 1994].*

From this we get a brief summary of Alec's duties- deciphering signals as they came in (and presumably cyphering out-going signals), accounting duties (this may have included pay, allowances, expenses etc- I assume most of the men's pay was paid to their families at home, as the men were being fed, housed etc in Russia) and setting up flag signals for messages to passing ships and those moored in the inlet. Probably the most significant message he had to decipher and deliver to the Admiral was the one from the Admiralty instructing convoy PQ17 to 'Scatter.' Everyone knew that this was likely to lead to very great losses – which, indeed, it did. This message was delivered to the convoy in the evening of 4th July 1942 having been sent from the Admiralty. Its interception by Alec in Polyarnoe was just for information. Without their escorts and separated from each other, the merchant ships were left to the mercy of German aircraft and U-boats- Tirpitz,

the threat of which caused the order to scatter was actually safely in harbour during this time. Of PQ17's original 33 ships, only 11 finally delivered their cargoes and only two ships, both American, reached Murmansk. As Churchill so aptly put it, PQ17 was "one of the most melancholy episodes in the whole of the war." Regrets over errors in judgment could not bring back the ships, the men, or the vast amount of cargo sent to the bottom. The losses and subsequent arrival of survivors caused great loss of morale amongst naval staff in Russia.

The men of Naval Party 100 lived ashore in 'Navy House', a block of flats facing the inlet on Polyarnoe's waterfront. By all accounts this was quite reasonable accommodation 'a sumptuous block of flats, generously heated and double glazed'. The men (although maybe not officers) shared rooms with three or four others, with 'luxurious single beds', wardrobes and access to washing facilities and plenty of hot bathwater, albeit brown. [Tye] The Russians provided women to cook and clean, until they were removed when their authorities decided they were getting too good an opinion of life in the west. In one of Alec's books, *The Kola Run* by Campbell and MacIntyre, is an annotated photograph of Polyarnoe showing the Navy House, Asdic factory (where the survivors of the *Edinburgh* were housed), the main road and the picture house, Dom Cultura [Kulturny]. The Navy House is still standing, although looking rather dilapidated in online photos.



Polyarnoe. From Alec's copy of *The Kola Run* (Campbell and Macintyre 1958)

The 'Navy House' now...



Clean Hands? Alec inspecting the galley(?) team. With a second (RNVR wavy) stripe, I suspect this was taken in North Russia once he had been promoted to lieutenant. Photo: author's collection

Everyone who spent time ashore was struck by the unhelpfulness of the Russians, who they were risking so much to help, and who appeared spectacularly ungrateful. *Alec wrote: By far the most perplexing aspect of the whole affair as I saw it was the unwillingness or inability of the Russians to co-operate with us in our*

operations. We asked for local escort protection [for the incoming/outgoing convoys?] for the last tricky entrance to the Kola Inlet where German U boats lurked and aircraft from nearby Petsamo threatened. The answer to all requests was "Nyet". Even a request for use of a storeroom on the jetty for vital repairs and replacements to our ships was refused. Eventually we were permitted to use their storeroom - or rather share it - but were not allowed a key - if we came at 2 o'clock they would open it for us and lock up when we went. These provocations over relatively minor matters were not attributable to any ill will on the part of the Russian officers but dictated entirely by the official Communist leaders, as was evident when we took matters into our own hands and cut off their lock with a hacksaw! They laughed heartily at what they regarded as a splendid joke! and afterwards we were given our own storeroom. Even the captains of their own destroyers were overlooked by a commissar who may not have seen the sea before, but whose authority always seemed to be respected or even feared.

Other areas of non co-operation were in the treatment of casualties, the unwillingness to heed or even learn Anglo Russian recognition signals and a disinclination to prepare proper meals at sea. All I suspect due to a thorough detestation of the sea itself. We heard some pretty grim tales of their hospitals of amputations without anaesthetics - sharing a bed between two when limbs had been removed etc. We also knew that our own aircraft had been shot down in error and pilots fired on in the water. All of this contrasted strangely with the individual kindnesses shown to me and others when off duty. They loved parties, sang English songs which they learnt phonetically, danced a hornpipe, swallowed Harvey's sherry like Vodka, played soccer, volleyball and chess though never talked of their families or private affairs. [Alec's son wrote: One souvenir Father brought home was a china chess set which served as an ornament at home for many years; even though it was slightly damaged. The damage was probably why he was able to acquire it by bartering it for half a loaf of bread!].

The Russians in Moscow clearly did not wish to have any more British personnel on their shores than were absolutely necessary to assist in the offloading of the convoy's precious cargoes and in one convoy landing permission was refused to a whole hospital unit which consequently had to run the gauntlet all the way back to U.K. for "nothing". Everything I have read shows the Russian hospitals were worse than grim, akin to what Florence Nightingale may have found when she arrived in Crimea.

Food supply was a continual problem. In January 1942 (before Alec arrived), 'The supply of fresh meat, bread, butter, sugar and tea remains ample. Potatoes, vegetables, eggs, milk, cheese, fruit and chocolate are not obtainable... There is no prospect of potatoes or vegetables being sent here from Russian sources until June. Reindeer meat is plentiful but fish is scarcely provided.' [Bevan] In October, 18 tons of corned beef arrived and many memoirs mention yak meat, sometimes 'yak' meat, so it may have actually been something else...

Clothing all the survivors brought ashore was also a challenge - 'Half of the 500 sets of naval clothing, including warm gear, being sent out in PQ18 was unfortunately lost. Replacement has been requested. [Fisher]

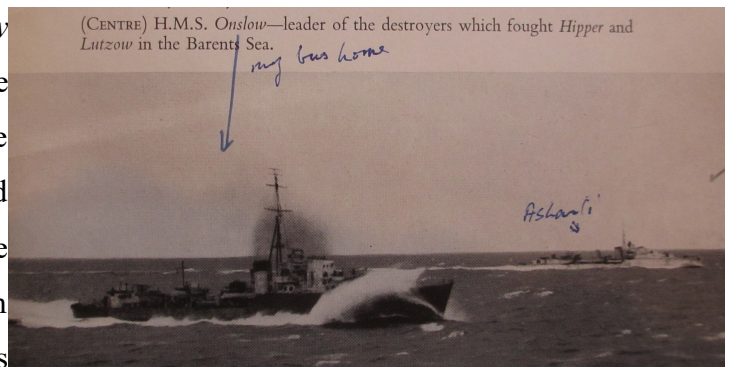
Alec has touched on some of the recreational activities available in Polyarnoe when he was talking of the Russians. They loved parties, sang English songs which they learnt phonetically, danced a hornpipe, swallowed

Harvey's sherry like Vodka, played soccer, volleyball and chess. Alec played the piano and chess, was used to amateur theatricals and good at team sports so he must have been in some demand for concerts and on the sports field, although in winter most outdoor activities were curtailed by the cold and dark. In one of Alec's books about the convoys he has labelled one of the men in a picture captioned 'Officers of the sixth flotilla of minesweepers' as a chess player, so presumably they enjoyed a game together when his minesweeper was in port. Alec has added the word 'Bramble' after the caption. Minesweeper *HMS Bramble* was escorting PQ17 when it was ordered to scatter. It sank with the loss of all hands, possibly including this un-named chess-playing officer. At Christmas 1942, he mentions the Christmas pantomime organised by *Lt James Bould- West End Actor - wrote a good pantomime for our sailors Christmas 1942.* Alec kept a copy of the program- he is not mentioned by name but may have been involved with the 'music by- ALL and SUNDRY'. This pantomime was titled *Jack in Joe's Land.* Jack- the British sailor- in the land of Jo(seph) Stalin and used for the title of this summary of Alec's life in Russia.

Eventually, after over 10 months, it was time for Alec to leave, and he returned home in convoy RA52 which left Kola Inlet on 29th January 1943. Having been at the heart of the convoy operations all that time, this must have seemed an alarming prospect, running the gauntlet of German U-boat patrols, Luftwaffe bombardment and the ever present threat from the battleship, *Tirpitz*. However, he may have taken comfort from the fact that the Germans concentrated their efforts on the laden, outbound convoys rather than those returning home empty. Alec travelled on the escort ship, *HMS Onslow*, which had been part of the distant cover for his outward convoy and had spent a considerable part of the intervening 10 months providing cover for Arctic convoys in both directions, including PQ17 and QP13 in July 1942. In December the ship had escorted the outward bound convoy, JW51 and during the Battle of the Barents Sea in defense of the convoy *HMS Onslow* sustained major damage and many casualties, including 17 killed. Commanding officer, Captain Sherbrooke received a Victoria Cross for his gallant conduct.

HMS Onslow, annotated by Alec in his copy of *The Kola Run*

After temporary repairs in Murmansk, *HMS Onslow* joined the returning convoy with Alec on board. The Commander in Chief of the Home Fleet gave instructions that the *Onslow*, returning to the United Kingdom with only temporary repairs, was to be stationed within the screen. No doubt this was a much safer place to be than as part of the escort. Fewer ships



than expected sailed with the convoy, partly to the presence of sea ice in the White Sea which prevented ships from Archangel joining them. In the end the convoy consisted of 11 ships, including the *Windrush*, later to be made famous bringing immigrants to Britain from the West Indies. One merchant ship from the convoy was sunk by a U-boat but the rest arrived safely in Loch Ewe on 9th February. *HMS Onslow* detached from the convoy on 2nd and arrived in Scapa Flow on 4th, and proceeded to Hull for permanent repairs. It is thought Alec disembarked at Scapa Flow and returned to his wife, Marjorie, and son, Jeffery- now aged 6, in Bristol.

Between August 1941 and the end of the war, a total of 78 convoys made the perilous journey to and from north Russia, carrying four million tons of supplies for use by Soviet forces fighting against the German Army on the Eastern Front. About 1400 merchant ships delivered vital supplies to Russia. 85 merchant vessels and 16 Royal Navy warships were lost. Towards the end of the war the material significance of the supplies was probably not as great as the symbolic value hence the continuation of these convoys long after the Russians had turned the German land offensive. <https://rusemb.org.uk/arcticalliedconvoys/> The potential threat tied up a vast amount of British shipping, preventing its use elsewhere, Alec mentions *more than half of the home fleet* being used to protect convoys in the spring and summer of 1942.

Alec's preamble to his memoir touches on the background of the personnel involved in the convoys, from Churchill to Chinese seamen, from Chiefs of Staff to Admirals. It gives some insight into his personal opinions about the effectiveness of the operations and his (what might now be described as traditional and old-fashioned) ideas about Britain's place in the world order and apparent hero-worship of Churchill, who he had assisted in person and probably met.

Just what motivates people in wartime, how differently they behave, how some earn our admiration, others our contempt or disregard, have provided historians and story tellers with much to write about over many years, and some knowledge of life before we were born does seem desirable in order that we may learn from the past and improve in the future.

English Schools early in the twentieth century [when Alec was at Colston School] selected for their history books 55 B.C. and 1066 A.D., presumably because these periods had been well documented by contemporary historians and men who could tell a good story. Also language masters could use the same text books to drum into unreceptive minds such valuable snippets as "Omnia Gallia in tres partes divisa est". [we might assume from this that Latin was not his favourite subject at school!]

In parts of Russia however, where illiteracy was the norm, any English history taught in the schools was that of a reactionary and decadent nation covering the last few hundred years, augmented by Shakespeare. [50 years on from Alec writing this, and with Putin's anti-west propaganda during his war with Ukraine, this still seems true] This preamble, which you may say surely has nothing to do with Russian Convoys in World War II has been included in order to illustrate in a small way the need to allow for the genius of the individual who undertakes to tell us all about it and "What we fought each other for".

Such a genius was Winston Churchill, whose six volumes on the Second World War published between 1948 and 1954 include Prime Minister's personal minutes and telegrams together with maps, diagrams, code names, statistics, conferences, problems, interviews with ministers and heads of foreign government as they occurred. [My father now has Alec's copies of these volumes on his bookshelves] Chiefs of Staff of the three services (four including Combined Operations) met regularly and frequently to formulate plans and decide on deployment of forces, final approval coming from Churchill. There was no doubt in anyone's mind about who was the boss.

So if you ask "Who ordered the Russian Convoys?" the only correct answer is 'Churchill'.

Were they justified?

Were they worth the loss of lives and ships? Some thought not.

Did the Russians appreciate the sacrifices made by the sailors in order to provide them with the tanks, fighters, bombers, aviation spirit necessary for their defence against the German Army?

Certainly NO. Their armies were fighting for their very lives and thus became our allies against a common enemy.

Russian loss of life far exceeded our own but while we were kept informed of the devastation of Stalingrad, Russians were not told of our sailors going to a cold and watery grave in the Barents Sea.

However, a very large amount of war material from America and Britain did get through and the biggest mistake we made was to sail a big convoy during the summer when the sun never sets [he presumably alludes here to PQ17]. All of this you can read about in books written by researchers in Admiralty and by Captains and Officers in H.M. Ships who took part in the operations, though the ability to write an 'interesting book' is seldom given to those in command of great ventures, Julius Caesar and Winston Churchill being two exceptions.

Perhaps one of the most amazing aspects of sea warfare is the attitude of the sailors themselves. What makes them such tough people to deal with? What motivates them? In my very limited experience, NOT patriotism. Germans for instance were well thought of as sailors. Italians were NOT. That is in wartime. But in peace time for holidays, I'm sure the order of preference would be reversed. [Alec and Marjorie visited Elba in the 1970s, so would have come across Italian sailors during their holidays] But in war time, to find merchant seamen sailing away to the frozen north to face dive bombers, U boats and the Tirpitz for the second, third and fourth times really does tax the imagination. Crews of these ships on the Murmansk run were there from choice. They were of all nationalities and far from unanimously pro-British.

*There followed the recollections included in this account although I have reordered them to make the narrative clearer. He concludes *Well these are just a few recollections, a bit scattered I'm afraid - most of the incidents I remember are humorous and the Russian sense of humour though not always helpful, I have to admit was very like our own!**

For the rest of the war, Alec remained in Bristol, first at HMS Bristol- an on-shore training establishment- and then at HMS Flying Fox, another training centre moored in Bristol docks. It is thought his commanding officers in Russia were able to pull some strings so the second part of his war service was within a few miles of home and much easier and less dangerous than the first two and a half years had been.

Elizabeth Wear, Exeter, 2022