

At this time, the task of taking war material to Russia had begun. The convoys went by the northern sea route, and Briarwood was chosen as one of the ships for the work. At the Clyde, some alterations would be made, extra lagging on pipes and so on, and it was then that I managed to get away. All I know of being at home was that my mother gave me a warm old trench coat that one of her brothers had worn in the First World War. What I do remember clearly was Barbara being in Glasgow for a few days and our having a lovely time, including seeing some show or other at one of the big theatres there. Whether the ship worked cargo, or whether, in fact, we had brought munitions from the States and these were taken on I cannot say. Extra food was loaded, for the Russians had warned that they could give us nothing; we were all issued with strong boots, thick socks and a stiff, heavy, windproof coat; and then we were off.

There were now three radio officers, a young Scot named Henderson having joined Atkinson and me. He was a pleasant lad, making his first trip, and he shared the cabin that I had. He was very emphatic that he didn't belong to the ordinary Henderson, but rather to the Ancient Henderson, clan. We were pleased to have him, for keeping six-hour watches is hard work, and he fitted in well.

We were off Reykjavik early in November, then to another bay where the other ships were assembling. With the days already short, both land and sea had a grey quality to them, and in this our small group

set out up the Denmark Strait.

The weather soon worsened, with the ship pitching heavily. One night, with both Henderson and me turned in, she got herself badly out of step with one of the rollers, so that as it was coming up she was on her way down. This did happen from time to time in a big sea, and the result would be an almighty, jarring crash as the fall of the hull was arrested. My sleep was broken by a wild yell of warning, and as I came awake I realized that Henderson had gone, the cabin door off its hook — we never fully closed them — and swinging on its hinges. What had happened was that he had been awakened by the crash and had leapt out of his bunk. Now we had a hand-basin unit in one corner, with a fitting inside the locker for a bucket to take the used water. The door of this locker had burst open and bucket and contents had flown out. As Henderson's feet hit the deck, they went into this water; hence the wild cry, the swinging door, and his rush up the companionway to the deck. Slightly sheepishly, he was back in a few moments. Poor fellow, in the months to come, he would have plenty of opportunity to get used to such things.

Indeed, almost at once, we all had such an opportunity: our ship struck an iceberg. Briarwood was lead ship of the port column of our small group, and visibility had been reduced to almost nothing by a snow blizzard swept into our faces on a northern wind. The deck officer on watch — again, the second mate, I think — had little time; he told us afterwards of how he suddenly realized that he was no longer looking at flying snow, but at a gleaming white mass in the water. But he did well for all that: she had already begun to answer to his "Hard a starboard" to the

quartermaster when she struck, so that the blow was a glancing one rather than direct. The shock of the violent impact, with the ship heeling and lurching sideways as she ground along the ice, brought a momentary confusion to all our minds; then all was business: Captain Lawrence on the bridge, the signal lamp warning the others — particularly the ship astern of us, the first Mate forward to see how bad was the damage, all hands busy with this or that. Immediately behind the stem post of a ship and going down to the keel is a compartment known as the fore-peak; together with an after-peak, it can be used to "trim" the ship by adding such ballast as will make her ride in the water in a suitable way. Behind it is a watertight bulkhead separating it from the number-one hold. This fore-peak had been split so that it was open to the sea; and so the question was quite simply whether the bulkhead would hold and so prevent the huge space behind it from filling also.

Normal procedure in convoys was for a Royal Navy officer in one of the warships to be in charge of the escorts, and for another officer, Royal Navy or Merchant Navy, designated as commodore, to have particular care for the merchant ships, and to sail in one of them. Whether our small group was dignified by such an appointment I no longer know, but the decision was soon made that the only course of action was for us to return to Iceland for repairs. And then came one of those moments I was never to forget, the mind's eye still carrying the scene, as we turned broadside on to the big sea running. The ship seemed almost to lie on her side; and, in my ignorance of how

soundly, such vessels were made, I watched fascinated, thinking that the funnel must surely go out of her. In our quarters there was a fair amount of damage; the galley became a shambles of pots and pans, and in our cabin — Henderson's and mine — a heavy book case tore itself off the bulkhead despite coachbolts.

And so back to anchorage off Reykjavik. Two divers — enormous Icelanders — came aboard: leather suit, brass helmet, lead-weighted boots, pumps, air-lines. Their task was to seal the split in the hull with what were referred to as cement boxes. Because of the great cold of the water, they could work only in short spells: while one was over the side, the other was down in our engine room being revived — externally in front of an open fire-box, and — so it was said — internally by a rum toddy. I remember their hands when they were brought to the surface — like lumps of raw meat.

All this took time, but eventually the work was completed and we set out again — another small convoy — for Russia. As we moved north, it was almost perpetual darkness, the day being only a few hours of twilight, the sun scarcely above the horizon. We made no objection: if we could see little, neither could submarines or aircraft. The northern lights would sometimes hang in the sky like shimmering curtains, delightful and most interesting to see, but a confounded nuisance to us radio men because of the great wall of static they transmitted, making it extremely difficult for us to use our receivers. As we neared Jan Mayen Island, we had some lovely weather: calm seas and

light winds. It was cold, yes; but the air was like wine, you could feel it going into your lungs. A mug of tea brought to the bridge and put down for a few minutes because you were busy, would be turning to ice when you picked it up. Keeping warm must have been a problem, for there would be a limit to how much steam heat the boiler could provide. Before we left Glasgow, I had acquired a "10 volt heating element, and this, fitted into a biscuit tin gave us some additional comfort in the radio room; but we had to keep quiet about it, for the Chief Engineer guarded fiercely the limited output of the ship's dynamo.

Our course took us south of Jan Mayen Island, then again south of Bear Island, and, as we neared the North Cape and the entrance to the White Sea, we met the real cold, the wind now coming to us from the huge frozen land-mass. Our decks became places to be on as little as possible. The White Sea itself was just freezing over — it was December now — and we were soon sailing amongst the pancake ice; by the time we went alongside in Holotovsk, the ice was continuous and we quickly froze in. We measured the air temperature at  $-15^{\circ}$  Fahrenheit (i.e.  $47^{\circ}$ F. below freezing). The engineers said that the ice around the ship was 6 ft. thick, and they gave the propeller a turn or two every few hours.

We had a Russian pilot for our journey into port. His attitude was very typical of the reception we had from almost all we met: extremely courteous and correct but really wanting to have as little to do with us as possible. Could you blame them? We didn't. After all, the English establishment in general, and Churchill in particular, had been bitterly opposed to the Revolution

that had established their state, and had been no friend of theirs in the years that followed. Furthermore, their cobbled-together alliance with Hitler had ended in disaster. Who were we, and what could they expect from us? The port authorities wanted to seal the radio room, excluding us from it totally, but Atkinson, with Lawrence's backing, refused at once, allowing them only the customary arrangement by which the transmitters were sealed — the method was to wire the starting-handles of the motors and then pour hot wax upon the wires, this impressed by the official concerned. Whether all the ships had this battle to fight or whether it was peculiar to those at Molotovsk I cannot say. There were whispers that a canal had been made to Molotovsk to bring from somewhere inland submarines being built in factories there: who can say? pure gossip probably; there were always such stories floating about during the war.

Our pilot lived aboard throughout our stay, mainly in the captain's quarters, but we did see him sometimes in the saloon, for meals. At Christmas, we attempted to include him in the general rejoicing, but he would have none of it. However, at New Year, the ship by now clear of the port and making her way up the White Sea, he did join us, a delightful and impressive man. In quite excellent English, he explained how he could be called upon to serve in either warships or merchant ships, and, in fact, had knowledge of both; then and later I was to reflect upon this. I could not but wonder whether a year or so in the merchant service might not have given to the Royal Navy officer a more immediate awareness of the part played by the

sea lanes of Empire in giving us, in peace, the means to prosper, and, in war, the ability to direct our efforts wherever it was best to do so. He would see the cargoes stowed, and this would give him a fuller understanding that when a merchant ship was sunk not only was the ship itself lost, as well as the patiently acquired skill of its officers and men, but also the thousands of hours of factory time, and transport time, and dock time that went into the making, and carrying, and loading of the aircraft, tanks, guns, shells, bombs and equipment, as well as the long planning that produced the meat, the wheat, the wool, the oil, and all the rest. And he would gain insight to the problems of handling the slow, ungainly vessels, and of doing it with a single man for each task instead of the more generous crewing he was accustomed to. Such thoughts were prompted as we listened to our pilot. Son of illiterate parents — he told us of the special classes where they struggled with reading and writing — he had been picked out as a capable boy, eventually reaching the Naval Academy at Koenigsberg, and the position he now occupied.

Another pleasure we had amidships was the company of a young R. A. F. officer; I no longer recall where we acquired him or whether we had also some men of his, living aft with our crew. His parents had fled Russia at the time of the Revolution and had settled in London as Hatton Garden diamond merchants. He had been brought up speaking both English and Russian, and the tasks assigned to him by the R. A. F. was to help the Russian flying men to handle and maintain the planes — strange to them, of course — which we merchant ships were delivering. When we docked,

and he was met by <sup>the</sup> Russian officials, darkened brows and suspicious looks were evident at once. But off he went, and we wondered — far too dramatically, I hope — whether he would ever see England again.

The captain obtained roubles from somewhere, but warned us not to draw many, as we would find it virtually impossible to spend them. He also told us that we had been invited to visit the local community centre. Going ashore was an experience never to be forgotten. Remember that this small place was not that far outside the Arctic Circle; that it was midwinter; that the whole country was still reeling from the terrible onslaught that Germany had unleashed; that Russian armies — and indeed civilians — were fighting desperately to hold Leningrad; and that German bomber air-bases near the land entrance to the Kola Peninsula had it well within range. Basically, it was a wooden town, the sidewalks — somehow the American word seems appropriate — and houses all of this material; but all was sheathed in thick ice and wrapped in Arctic night or, for a few hours, in the half-light that passed for Arctic day. There were no shops that we could see, and, as far as I can recall, no people in the bitter cold of the windswept spaces that passed for streets. At corners, were wooden poles; they may have had heavily shaded lamps, but what they most certainly did have were loudspeakers which gave a steady supply of military music, interrupted by what must have been news and messages. At the rough area that was our quayside, work went on steadily. On our way north, our steam-driven winches had been kept switched-on, and turned occasionally, so



that they did not freeze-up, and they were rattling away as they brought the cargo up from the holds and, when the derricks swung outboard, landed it on the dockside. Gangs, mainly of women, did the cruelly hard task of loading the railway trucks not far away.

At the community centre, the language barrier was so acute that any real exchanges of ideas were impossible. But, we found, <sup>such</sup> real exchanges were not looked for. If one of our fellows asked a girl to dance — there was dancing in one part of the building — she would accept courteously; but, as soon as the dance was over, she would be straight back to her own people. In another part of the place was a theatre where plays could be acted or films shown. I sat through part of a play one night; although I could not understand a word of what was said, I quickly deduced that its purpose was to stiffen resistance to the fierce and ruthless German advance. One scene I remember was of simple Russian country folk sitting in their kitchen, the door being broken down by savage German soldiers intent on murder, rape, and theft, and the arrival just in time of Russian army men to save the situation. Sadly, it was a scene that played in reality in many places at that time, though not always with the arrival of brave rescue.

What contacts we did make were minor. When we were back at sea, a story filtered through to us amidships that one of the crew had managed to persuade a girl to take him home for the night. But he got more than he bargained for: he discovered that the house had one bed only, a large wooden platform above the stove

upon which slept father, mother, daughter and all!  
My own small exchange was with the Russian soldier posted at the bottom of our gangway. When I was coming aboard one evening the man on duty — an older man — clearly wanted to be friendly. We shook hands with suitable nods and grins. Then he took out of his hat its red-star badge, giving it to me. In exchange, I gave him one of those drums of Players cigarettes — the ones that had a blade in the lid to cut through the metal-foil seal.

Christmas over — not that I knew much about it since the chief steward had thought it funny to give me a glass of undiluted rum with which to exchange compliments with him — and our cargo delivered, we set out up the White Sea. The question was whether we could be broken out or whether we would have to wait for the spring. It was a small group of ships, and we were accompanied by the icebreakers Lenin and Stalin — built by Lammel hard in Bergenhead our people said. One of these went ahead, cutting a channel, while the other was up and down the line, freeing any ship that got stuck. I seem to think that there was about two hundred miles of this before we reached clear water, the ship's hull now showing the shabby signs of this rough journey in addition to those left upon her by her encounter with the iceberg.

Again we had a passenger, a Russian admiral no less. A smallish, tidy man, he was provided for in the captain's quarters, even having his meals there, so that the rest of us saw little of him; but

Note :

An icebreaker is correctly so called. She cuts a channel, but she does so by breaking the ice.

The ship's stem broadens into a sloping platform as it goes downwards to the keel, and her extremely powerful engines drive this platform up on to the ice where the huge weight of the vessel causes it to break.

occasionally, he would stretch his legs on the boat deck by the radio room, and a friendly grin when we were changing watches seemed acceptable to him. The first time I saw him, he watched the operation of our heavy door with interest, and positioned himself so that he could peer inside to see what might be behind it. Eventually, we disembarked him in Kirbwall, where the Royal Navy people came to meet him.

Having cleared the end of the Kola Peninsula, we began to shed the mass of ice which encumbered our decks, masts and rigging, so that, for example, a one-inch wire stay went back to being that size instead of being as thick as your arm. How far north we went I do not know. Since Norway was now occupied by Germany, enemy planes had airfields not that far from Murmansk; we would want to be far enough away to be out of their sight, though, of course, the almost perpetual darkness befriended us in this.

Our journey home took us through the worst weather I was ever to experience at sea, with gales for most of the time and a full storm off Iceland. For some reason, we put in to Seidisfjord — probably merchant ships being collected together, or escorts fuelled or changed. Our steward did his best to buy food there. Mainly because of our loss of time on the outward journey, we were now short on supplies. In Molotovsk, we had begged for potatoes and been adamantly refused — which, when you think about it, was probably reasonable in that remote and frozen place. I know we were on short

commons all the way home, and for once we could not blame it on the evil shipowner's wanting to save his cash!

Off Seidisfjord we met the full force of the storm. What convey there was disappeared and each ship was left butting its head into the screaming wind in its own little world of mountainous seas and flying water. For a week we saw no sun, no moon, no stars. As we sank into a trough, sometimes seeming as if we would never stop sinking, it was all we could do to keep the ship's head to the next great rolling wave beginning to curl over high above us. Then the water would smash into us, the foredecks like a violent river, the rails under, the scuppers foaming, and the spray whistling through the air to hit the superstructure like gunshot. And the ship would fly up the wave to sit on the very crest, propeller thrashing the air and racing wildly, the vibrations adding their own threat to the hull's survival.

I cannot remember whether we radio men were able to help the navigators by making use of the direction-finding equipment to fix our position — probably so; but when, after a full week, the storm died down at last and visibility returned, there on the starboard beam and away on the horizon was Iceland — where it had been when the storm began! Little by little the convey reassembled itself, and we pushed on for home.

We anchored off Kirkwall, Capt. Lawrence went ashore for a meeting with the R.N. people and the other ships' masters. He told us that some had claimed that they had seen a running torpedo lift on the swell and pass clean over our foredeck. We were highly sceptical — as was Lawrence — but puzzled; was it a sly dig at a man already being taken notice of?

I remember nothing of Methil or why we went there. Perhaps it played some special part in organizing the passage of ships along the north-east coast, so constantly threatened from occupied Europe. Then it was South Shields, and for me an introduction to this still distinctive region where it was the Dane rather than the Saxon who had left his mark. Atkinson may have stayed with the ship — a special arrangement with the Master; but with her needing time for repairs, I said my good-byes — as would Henderson and most of the others — signed-off articles, reported to Marconi, and, from Newcastle's fine Victorian station, caught the train for Liverpool.

Briarwood became something of a veteran of the Russian convoys, and Lawrence was given some special task for the Admiralty; but of Atkinson and the others I know nothing more.

It must have been during this brief leave that Barbara and I joined another couple for an evening at the theatre, seeing a play at the Royal Court in Liverpool. We went with her McFarlane and her husband Alf Hughes, the pair of them quite newly married. He worked in a shipping office, one of the big companies and so was in a reserved occupation. But he was in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve; was desperate to serve at sea; and had just managed to persuade the authorities to release him from his office work. So we were both in uniform that evening. When I had my next leave, fourteen months later, he was dead, "Mac" — as Barbara always called her — so soon a widow. He had been posted to the old cruiser *Buraco*, now fitted out as an anti-aircraft ship; her task was to meet the independently sailing *Queen Mary*, coming in fast from the United States. Somewhere off Northern Ireland there had been a mix-up; the zig-zagging *Mary* had found the *Buraco* broadside on across her bows, gone straight into her and cut her in two. Alf had been on the watch below at the time.

Letters for merchant seamen were directed to the company that owned or managed the ship. The company then forwarded the mail to their agents at the ports where the ship was due to call. Even in peacetime, the system would be prone to failure, especially so for cargo carriers; the delays, re-routings and hazards of wartime made it even more likely that the captain would come back

empty handed from the agent's when his ship arrived at her port of destination abroad. Barbara wrote to me constantly during the war; lovely, chatty letters in an easy style as if she were talking to me. And it was her quick mind which devised the scheme that we now began to use. If I could give her an idea of where we were going, she would send some letters not to the shipping company but to poste restante at that place. Remarkably, for this was wartime, it worked again and again, and I would come back from the post office with my news from home, the only one <sup>aboard</sup> to have mail. Sometimes letters received through the official system would have a label saying that they had been opened by the censor, but this never happened with those sent poste restante. Strange indeed!

Then the usual telegram arrived and I was on the night train to Newcastle, my leave over. The experience of leaving the warm fuz of the crowded train for the bitter wind swept spaces of the station, this in the small hours of a winter morning, was one that I was never to forget. My greatcoat, with its tall collar, was a splendidly stout garment, but Tyneside in winter was to test it severely more than once.

My instructions from Marconi were to sign on as M.V. Moorby's third radio officer. There were usually a few days between signing articles and sailing, and Barbara came across so that we could see each other. Again, I remember an evening at a lovely old theatre.