

A Hidden Story: A New Zealander in the Arctic Convoys

Dick's account of events aboard the HMS *Rhododendron*:

“Many stories have been told of the Russian Convoys, of blood and thunder but this is the story which I hope will enable readers to appreciate the humorous as well as the serious side of various situations.

The ship I was serving in was HMS *Rhododendron*. She was a Flower-class corvette and built like so many others of her class purely as an anti submarine vessel engaged in the battle of the Atlantic.

Many stories have been circulated as to the age of this ship, but I believe in all truthfulness that it was one of the earliest corvettes built. We on board believed her to be the second corvette off the stocks. I first joined this ship in October 1943 as a Sub-Lieutenant – after she came back from the Mediterranean where she had been engaged in various invasions and convoy duties.

Our home port was Greenock and in the two years in which I served in this ship our main job was the escorting of convoys to and from North Russia. The particular convoy about which I am going to relate would have been just another convoy had it not been for this one brief humorous interlude. I say ‘humorous’ but at the same time realize how serious the situation could have been.

For several days now we had been chased and attacked by German U-boats. The convoy was originally routed at about 9 knots but as soon as depth charges and a few torpedoes started flying most of the merchant ships found they could squeeze out about 11 knots and so for the last three or four days of the trip the convoy pressed on at 11 knots. However, one merchant ship found it could not make the speed and so with only one day off Russia and heavily besieged by U-boats, it began to drop astern.

Naturally the convoy couldn't wait for one ship and the Admiral in Charge decided that as night was drawing near. The HMS *Lotus* - another Flower-class corvette - should drop about 5 miles astern of the convoy to escort this ship into Russia. This we on board were all very pleased with because we had imagined ourselves being detailed off and had no wish to be 5 miles astern of any convoy, especially in the midst of these U-boats.

But our luck didn't hold, for in the afternoon of this day we were detailed to go back and help HMS *Lotus* escort this merchantman.

My watch that night happened to be the first watch (8pm to midnight) and strangely enough the weather was fine, visibility was good, and the sea was reasonably calm. This I might say was rather unusual for such waters. With me on the bridge was Sub-Lieutenant P. J. Marden of Yeovil, Somerset. “P J” as he was known to the rest of the officers, was a young man who had set out to make the Merchant Navy his career;

however, this career was interrupted by hostilities, and he found himself with a commission in the RNR. P.J. was busy in the chart room and I was leaning on the edge of the bridge next to the voice pipes thinking of all the things one doesn't associate with war – what I was going to do on my next leave, thinking of everybody at home, and wondering how long the war was going to last.

We were doing our steady zigzag and listening to the various chatter on the radio telephones, when suddenly HMS *Lotus* - who was our senior officer at the time - came up with a signal telling us to investigate a light bearing so-and-so. Being two or three hundred miles off the Russian coast, a light at sea was the last thing we ever imagined. However, we immediately swung our glasses on to this bearing. At the same time our radar operator who had been sweeping all round with his set, made an emergency call to the bridge that he had obtained a surface echo on a similar bearing. We had been trained well and so we remembered the old adage which ran...

“Both in danger and in doubt,

Always call the old man out”

Our Commanding Officer was Lieutenant O. B. Medley, a farmer from Oxfordshire. We immediately called up the captain and at the same time rang the general alarm bells. In about 5 seconds the ship was changed from its serenity into a mass of whirling figures. The crew had learnt the hard way what “action stations” meant and so each man went about his job quietly and efficiently. The captain was on the bridge in a flash and having briefly explained the situation to him we on the bridge retired to our respective action stations.

I went down aft in charge of the depth charges and Sub-Lieutenant Marden to his familiar position as navigator to the chart room. Our other officers, disturbed from their sleep, rushed to their positions... Lieutenant F. Bull RNVR to assist the Commanding Officer on the bridge; Sub-Lieutenant D. Clark RNVR to his position as anti submarine control officer; and Lieutenant C. J. McCalvey to his position as gunnery control officer.

Let me here digress briefly to explain the tactics of the U-boat commanders at this stage. Their policy was to surface astern of the convoy and with their superior speed of about 17 or 18 knots, would run up ahead of the convoy on the surface, then submerge and attack the convoy as it passed. At the same time, they were using the acoustic torpedo - a torpedo which would home in on the noise of a ship's propeller, striking it in the stern and thus blowing it up. So naturally when we found this echo about 5 or 6 miles astern of the convoy, we supposed it to be a U-boat on the surface.

HMS *Lotus*, still convoying its solitary merchant ship, could lend us no assistance and thus we had no alternative but to stay behind and fight it out.

We closed to about 4000 yards range and the Commanding Officer ordered the target to be illuminated with star shells. This was done by a left to right sweep by the guns crews. Immediately our target came into sight. On the bridge and even down aft where I was

standing, we could see the sleek silhouette of a U-boat. With the target fully illuminated the gunnery officer then proceeded to plaster it right, left, and centre with high explosive shells. With the first salvo of star shells went about five or six high explosive shells. Our 4-inch gun which all corvettes carried was an old type and its primary purpose was purely for the combating of U-boats. Whether Nelson used this gun at Trafalgar we were not quite sure; we had our doubts but anyway we were always pleased to have an old "Gerty" with us.

As I have said before, the U-boats were using acoustic torpedoes and for this reason a certain amount of precaution had to be taken. The Commanding Officer manoeuvred the little ship at will and finally when the time was opportune decided to run in on this U-boat. The radar kept giving us the range – 4000, 3000 yards – still our 4-inch gun was pumping high explosive shells. At 2000 yards we expected the U-boat to dive, but this was not done. At 1500 yards our two-pounder opened fire. At 1000 yards our starboard Oerlikons opened fire and shots from all guns were observed to be hitting – or at least going close to the target.

I might say at this stage that everyone on board from the Commanding Officer down to the Chief Engineer who was busy organizing damage control on deck believed this to be a U-boat. For my part down aft, I would have been ready to beat my gratuity that such was the case...and would have been prepared to bank 3 months pay on it.

At the same time this was going on our wireless operators- on the Commanding Officers' instructions- were busy keeping the Admiral informed of our doings. Signals and instructions were flashing backwards and forwards from the flagship to ourselves and vice versa. I am sure that other ships of the convoy – who by this time must have been 9 or 10 miles ahead of us – were sure that a battle to the death was being carried out.

In such a craft we did not carry enough crew to man the armaments for depth charges and for surface craft attacks. For my part down aft, I was very busy trying to keep the guns' crews going and at the same time organize a skeleton depth charge crew should the U-boat suddenly decide to dive. On the bridge everything was going like clockwork. Any body who knows Western Approaches ships in operations will realise how thoroughly small ships such as ours were trained. It was only then that everybody on board began to appreciate how much our Base staff at Greenock and other various training bases – let me mention here the fine work done by the training ship *HMS Western Isles* under Commodore Stephenson at Tobermory – had done for us.

Let not the idle reader imagine this was the ship's first action - it was far from it - but our various actions such as this, combined with our solid training, had built up a ship's team second to none.

At 800 yards the Commanding Officer decided that there was something irregular at stake and ordered the ceasefire. At 600 yards he took a bold step and will all guns ready ordered the starboard searchlight to be turned on. This was indeed a bold step for as previously mentioned, to show a light was almost a fatal step. However, the Commanding Officer must have considered that that our guns would have already given away our position, so

that this was the only course open. It was a tense moment. Imagine our surprise and I might say indignation when we perceived the outline, not of a U-boat as we had hoped for and had visions of capturing, but that of an ordinary fishing trawler.

The Commanding Officer immediately summed up the situation. To stop engines in the middle of this U-boat pack might be fatal and yet in the interests of mercy and humanity what else could we do. Here was a fishing trawler, whether it be German, Russian or English, a defenceless craft that had been shelled and battered for the last half hour, lying adrift in mid ocean. Orders came down from the bridge that we were going along side to pick up survivors and at this stage everyone on board probably wished that they were back home in bed not stuck out here in the middle of the Arctic Ocean with our engines stopped, ready to catch any stray torpedo that may have been floating about. It took a few minutes in the heavy swell to manoeuvre our small ship alongside this craft, but in the end, ropes were made fast, and the craft was brought along side our starboard side. As we pulled the two vessels together signs of life began to appear on the other ship. In all we took off fourteen survivors, men, women and children. Most of these had to be assisted on to our ship; their nerve had completely gone. Could we but doubt this having been shot at and shelled for at least half an hour.

Their stern had been completely blown off, their main mast had been shot off, their wheelhouse was battered, and we could see where cannon shells had ripped up the deck. Most of the survivors collapsed on deck after being taken on board and it was several minutes before we realized that our new passengers were Russian. Imagine our surprise.

The Commanding Officer of the Russian Trawler could speak no English, and it was several minutes before we were able to fathom out the fact that they were Russians and that they were lost in the Arctic Ocean.

We could not linger in this precarious position, so as soon as all survivors were on board our engines were at full speed ahead and we proceeded to join our merchantman.

The amazing part of the whole story and probably one of the most amazing episodes of the whole war was that not one Russian was even wounded. This was not bad shooting on our gun crews either. As we learnt later, four out of first five shots from our 4-inch gun were hits or very near misses on our target. As Lieutenant C. J. McCalvey RNVR later remarked, it was one of the best shoots we had ever put up. However, the amazing part of the story is yet to come. The Commanding Officer realized that such a small craft would be a menace to shipping and could not be left afloat, so at 400 yards range ordered the vessel to be sunk. With open sights and out layer and trainer both on a shot was fired. Lo and behold it missed. Our gunnery officer was naturally very disgusted after we had had several hits at 400 yards range, but the Commanding Officer could linger no longer.

What became of this vessel no one knows. Today it may be found as some wreck on the Northern Coast of Norway or possibly it may have been salvaged by Russians or Norwegians and may to this day be used in the industry fishing. We do not know.

I believe to this day that the only way those fourteen Russians saved their lives was by hiding below or lying flat on the deck. In fact, when we came alongside them, we noticed several flat on the deck and naturally we believed to be killed. Let me once again say that not a man, woman or child was even wounded. Many people to whom we have told this story scoff at our bad shooting, but this was not the case. We hit our target alright and how or why these people escaped injury God alone knows.

Well off we set to rejoin our solitary merchant ship. By this time, we were 18 or 20 miles astern of the convoy and almost out of radio range.

The Russians could speak no English, and we could speak no Russian so after they had recovered sufficiently, we had great trouble in learning their story. It was a crude bunch indeed. I cannot remember the exact sex and ages of the personnel, but roughly speaking we had about five men, four women, two boys and two girls aged from nine and ten years upwards. This had evidently been a craft which was the home of at least two or three Russian families. By signs and fingers and general symbols which anyone would understand, we found that these people had been 28 days adrift in the Arctic Ocean, the last ten of which has been without any substantial food. Naturally, they were almost on the point of starvation. This fact, combined with their nerve-wracking experience, was probably responsible for the way they all collapsed on our decks.

Our first thought was therefore to feed them. And here I might mention our leading supply assistant Lane did a good job. He rummaged and found the bread and butter and other delicacies which we ourselves did not even know we carried and finally put before them a very tasty meal indeed.

Another major problem was where exactly we could keep these people until the end of the voyage. Anybody who knows corvettes will know that the space on board is very limited and to find the comfortable quarters for 14 people meant that several of our crew had to be displaced from their own quarters. The lot fell to the petty officers. They were a fine bunch indeed and readily assented to give up their own mess so that the Russians might be comfortable.

The whole action was over by 12:30am and as the leading supply assistant later told me, the Russians ate until 6am, solidly without stopping. They were certainly hungry. These 14 people must have eaten enough rations for the whole crew which comprised about 90.

Daylight came and once again we were with our one ship convoy...very disappointed that we had not been able to sink a U-boat, but nevertheless quite happy in the fact that we had rescued fourteen Russian people from what must have been a slow death by starvation and exposure. And, in the fact that after our strenuous action not one person had been injured. On this day we were due to arrive in the Kola Inlet and everybody on board was very excited. It was always an exciting day to arrive at Kola for once again we could feel secure. At last, we would be able to take our boots and life jackets off and this meant a big thing after nine or ten days at sea in weather that only persons who have experienced the Russian Convoys can understand.

Another amusing interlude occurred at the crack of dawn when the Captain of the Russian trawler came up on deck expecting to find his vessel in tow. The reader might imagine the gesticulations and facial expressions that were noticed on the Russian's face when he could not find his vessel and we explained to him in words and actions that we had been forced to attempt to sink it. (We did not tell him that we had not sunk it). Before we had determined the nationality of our passengers we had taken all possible precautions. We had searched them thoroughly and all their belongings including tobacco and cigarettes and ship's log etc, we had locked in the bathroom which was our only available space on a corvette.

The Russians I must add here were very brave men and appeared quite unperturbed by their previous night's experience, in fact, I have been told by one of the petty officers that they spent most of their time in between meals by gambling and smoking vast quantities of English cigarettes which we supplied to them.

Late that afternoon the outline of Kildin Island and various other parts of familiar coastline came into sight. Russian escorts came to meet us, and overhead Russian fighter planes gave us the necessary protection from the German bombers which were quite frequent even at this late stage of the voyage. We steamed down the Kola Inlet, all eyes on HMS *Rhododendron*, all ships staring at us and wanting to know the ins and outs of the previous night's engagement. We received several enquiring signals when we got in, most of them from our good friends in the other corvettes. We were not downhearted though, our spirits were high. Even if we had not sunk a U-boat, we had at least done a good job. Many were the signals "request pleasure of company for a glass of gin" from the ships eager to know our fortunes.

On arrival, with the crew of our Russian trawler fully recovered, our first thoughts were for their disposal and comfort. It was a full day after several signals had been exchanged with the Russian authorities – before a boat was sent to collect our survivors. We gave these unfortunate people bread, butter, meat, and other delicacies and after shaking hands all round, finally bade them God speed as the Russian boat took them from us. We were very sorry that such had been the end of their happy home, but at the same time we were pleased to know we had rescued them from their fate.

Naturally the Commanding Officer was very worried and so in accordance with naval procedure he sat down and wrote a report of proceedings to the various authorities. I think about six reports in all went out – one to the Admiral of the convoy, one to the Flag Officer commanding the cruiser squadron, one to the Russian authorities, one to the Captain commanding the destroyer flotillas, one to the Captain Destroyer at Greenock and the other to the Senior British naval officer, North Russia. Another copy we kept for ourselves. I can remember these distinctly because it was my job to deliver them personally. I cannot remember the names of the various Flag Officers and for this I make an apology.

While I am on the story another amusing incident was the fact that by the time we joined our merchant ship after this action we were at least 20 miles behind the main part of the convoy. However, by cutting corners and by various dodges known only to the old sea

dogs, we steamed into Kola Inlet with the convoy visible on the horizon several miles astern of us!

Thus, another convoy got through to Russia safely and the BBC had much pleasure in announcing that “under the guidance of ships of the Royal Navy another convoy has arrived safely in Russia.” However, the climax of this whole story is yet to come.

We arrived back in Greenock after another strenuous ten – eleven days on the sea during which times we had to encounter equally vicious U-boat attacks. It was on this return trip to the UK that rocket-firing Swordfish from our carriers claimed four or five U-boats sunk. It was also on this return trip that I had my first experience of two torpedoes being fired across our bows. We arrived back in Greenock much relieved, and the incident was duly reported to our local Captain HMS *Destroyer*, the late captain W. Gronow Davis, who most New Zealanders will remember as Commanding Officer HMS *Achilles*.

The incident was soon forgotten and all on board were greatly relieved, for I must admit we all had rather a guilty conscience for having sunk a Russian trawler. The weeks went by into months and after two or three more convoys to Russia, not without incident (but here I have neither the time nor the space to record them), we finally found ourselves engaged in the Invasion of Europe. Our home port for this operation was Milford Haven.

There was great excitement amongst the officers and crew of our ship when one day from the Senior British Naval officer, North Russia, came on board to the following effect – that the Russian were highly appreciative of the work done by the officers and crew of HMS *Rhododendron* in rescuing the lives of 14 Russian merchant in the face of heavy U-boat attacks. The names of two officers and six ratings were to be forwarded for immediate decoration by the Russians. Imagine our surprise. On one hand we had shot up a Russian trawler and now on the other hand the Russians were wanting to decorate us. Admittedly the job of picking them up had been dangerous and we had lain ourselves open to a torpedo from any lurking U-boat, but at the same time we considered that to pick them up was the least we could do in such circumstances. However, the names of the Commanding Officer, the Gunnery Officer and six ratings were duly forwarded. Here the whole question was forgotten and in the next few months our ship's Officers were to undergo a complete change. On the last convoy to Russia in the war with Germany our ship was once again in the thick of it.

If my memory serves me right it was on 1 May 1945, when the war was nearing a climax, that we finally sailed from Russia. At this stage, I was the only remaining officer of the incident aboard. The interpreter from HMS *Murmansk* came aboard us one day to have a drink and talk over old times, for HMS *Rhododendron* was one of the old hands of the Russian Convoys. And I asked him when after 11 months, the medals for our officers and crew were coming up. He told me that arrangements were well in hand, but to this day (1946) I do not know whether our officers and crew received the Russian decorations...probably they did, for I am sure the Russians highly appreciated our work.

Thus ends this incident that occurred on one of our many Russian convoys. It is not a glamorous story, nor is it a story which I suppose the public has ever been told about. It is just one of those stories which happened daily.....