



UK Arctic Star medal.
Credit: Wikimedia
Commons

To Russia,

AS OUR DISCERNING readership may no doubt have noticed, here at *iScot Magazine*, we're not generally big on any jingoistic tub-thumping that harks back to some mythical bygone age of British military superiority. Come to think of it, we're no gey big on muckle that's *British...* the clue's in oor title after all – *iScot, for those o independent mind!* Aye, we definitely lean more towards the Basil Fawlty attitude of "don't mention the war" unless, of course, we have good reason. For example, just last year (May/June 2019, Issue 53, *He never talked about it...*) we highlighted the forgotten, or rather deliberately suppressed, story of the 51st (Highland) Division at St Valéry

By the end of that year he had deployed Operation Barbarossa, utilising around 3 million troops to invade along an 1800-mile front.

in 1940, when Churchill sacrificed thousands of mainly Scottish troops just so he could say there had been no retreat or defeat. Today we bring you the story of another much-ignored chapter from Scotland's contribution to the WWII effort, many miles removed from France and Belgium, where everyone naturally assumes the major events of the war took place. At a time in our history where we are increasingly looking northwards to our Icelandic, Baltic and Nordic neighbours, it seems fitting to recognise the wartime heroics of the Russian Arctic Convoys...

In 1939, the Soviet Union and Germany had signed a non-aggression agreement, *The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact*, which basically divvied up control of the countries of Central Europe between them. As Hitler became more and more expansionist, by mid-1940 he was already planning to invade the Soviet Union and by the end of that year he had deployed *Operation Barbarossa*, utilising around 3 million troops to invade along an 1800-mile front. This *Eastern Front* would become notorious for

by Gordon
Craigie



Order of
Ushakov
medal.
Credit:
Shutterstock

with love...

the scale of its battles, the number of casualties on both sides, and the atrocities committed. By the end of the war, some 26 million Soviet citizens would be killed, including more than 8 million soldiers. Stalin had been slow to react, presumably believing that the *Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact*, signed only a year earlier, was still in effect. But, by June 1941, Germany had invaded the Soviet Union and Stalin required help from the Allied forces, specifically requesting supplies of food for the starving citizens in addition to munitions, tanks and planes. The only way to get these supplies in was by sea, through the northern ports of Murmansk and Archangel, which determined the route through the treacherous Arctic climate while skirting the dangerous coastline of German-occupied Norway. This was the background to the initiation of the Russian Arctic Convoys in August 1941.

Meanwhile, back in Aberdeen in 1942, young Stanley McKessock had just turned 18 and was called up by the army to join the fight against Nazi Germany. While

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Stanley was undertaking his initial training, one of the early convoys, PQ17, fell victim to what Churchill would later describe as "one of the most melancholy naval episodes in the whole of the war". US Admiral Dan Gallery was more forthright, calling the episode "a shameful page in naval history". From the subsequent enquiry it was clear that strategic and tactical errors had been made which directly contributed to the loss of 5 aircraft and 24 merchant ships, with 153 merchant seamen killed. However, as the critical orders had been issued by the First Sea Lord, Sir Alfred Dudley Pickman Rogers POUND, it was deemed politically unacceptable to assign blame for the incident...

Russians take the March of the Immortal Regiment seriously.
Credit: Shutterstock



Bamse statue at Montrose.
Credit: Gordon Craigie



Because of the scale of this disaster, the MoD immediately launched a campaign to recruit volunteers for the Royal Navy in order to get the convoys up and running again, and better equipped than previously. Stanley liked the sound of this, somehow reasoning that it would be safer than staying in the army. In later years he always used to laugh about that saying "how young and daft was I?". Once he was in the navy, he got a few more months of training and was then sent out... on a minesweeper!

Yet that minesweeper, *HMS Repellent*, doesn't get mentioned in any history books or publicly accessible documents – it seems to have, perhaps conveniently, been 'forgotten'. Stanley's daughter, Anna, has tried to uncover the truth. "Dad used to talk about being on the minesweeper, but I can't find anything anywhere about *HMS Repellent* apart from that name being on his log. I actually thought I may have read it wrong until I met another veteran a few years ago who knew that *Repellent* was a minesweeper. I think it's been 'disappeared' from history deliberately. Dad once told me a story about floating about in a minefield – he had a lifejacket on and he said that saved his life, because he couldn't swim. He always used to say the only way he could swim was down the way! A bit vaguely, he also said that one time they came out of a port and went the wrong way, and it was the captain's fault that they ended up in a minefield. I think that's when something happened to *Repellent*. The navy would cover up any kind of disaster like that in wartime.

Bamse onboard HNoMS Thorodd.
Credit: Royal Norwegian Navy Museum



Shipmates at Scapa Flow.
Credit: RACC/Club 21 collection





Salty helps celebrate a veteran's special birthday. Credit: Trudy McKessock

@2018 Trudy McKessock

They didn't want people at home to know, to keep morale high, and I think that's what happened and that's why *Repellent* has disappeared."

However, like most of the men of his generation, when it came to his wartime experiences Stanley generally "didn't like to talk about it", so many of his stories remained untold for many years. Fortunately, Anna, wasn't easily put off the scent. She was naturally curious about her father's past and, being a self-confessed history buff, once she started to connect some of the lesser known stories she was discovering to Stanley, she was off on a mission...

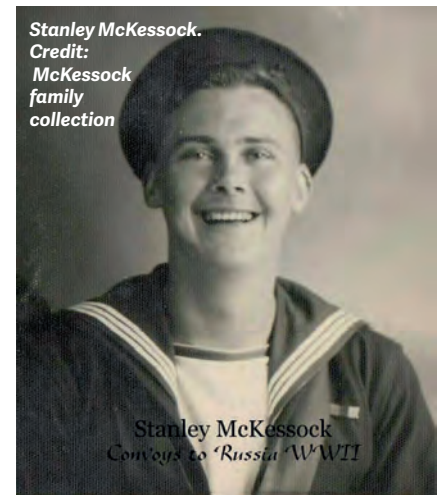
"My interest's probably been bubbling away ever since I was a kid, even though Dad never really spoke about the war. I was the youngest child and, very occasionally, he would tell me wee stories here and there. I've always been into history – my first job was in a library and I used to pick up all the books about WWII and go back and ask my parents questions. A few years later I got interested in the Russian Convoys because it was something so different that I'd never heard anybody speak about. I'd never seen anything much in newspapers, or on TV. But when the film *The Cruel Sea* came out my dad loved it even though he always said it was quite slow and it wasn't quite right. But it was something to do with the convoys, so we'd always watch it."

It's clear that what began as an interest because of her father's connection has become a labour of love. By 2008, Anna had realised that various Russian Convoy clubs were starting to fall by the wayside, mainly because their members were getting too old to maintain them. So, she decided to institute the Russian Arctic Convoys Club



1940s Murmansk. Credit: Derek Hirst

21st Century (RACC/Club 21) as a not-for-profit group to provide help and support for convoy veterans, and also to educate people and keep the memories of their exploits alive for their families and for future generations. "Initially I just set up a website, to get information out there and to try and tell people about events before they happened. By 2011 I was trying to get my kids and my nephew involved too, and my dad started to take more of an interest, started talking a wee bit more. I then discovered that, because I'm the daughter of a veteran, other veterans would tell me things they hadn't told anybody else! We started issuing



Stanley McKessock. Credit: McKessock family collection

Stanley McKessock
Convoys to 'Russia' WWII

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Anna presenting at Russian conference. Credit: Callum Mitchell



Spoiled convoy moggy! Credit: RACC/Club 21 collection



Dutch submarines in Dundee. Credit: Bobby Hansen



Errol Memorial. Credit: Anna McKessock

ammunition, even aircraft. And fuel – imagine being on a fuel ship with the thought you might get blown up? You're not going to survive that! There would've been thousands of Scots involved in the convoys. The ships would normally have moved goods, or maybe grain, for companies and the guys would've joined the Merchant Navy at 16/17 to see the world and meet lots of girls. Some were only 15 – they lied about their age – so imagine how they felt when they found they were actually going across the Arctic Ocean to Russia, with a gun on their ship – scary!"

"To get to Russia the convoys had to pass close to the Norwegian coast, which was completely occupied by the Germans. Once the convoys were established, they started going out as forces. There were always two aircraft carriers with each force. The forces would cover each other but one would stay close to the convoy while the other would go to attack strategic targets on the coast, like munitions factories, radar stations and telecommunications stations. Narvik was a hugely important port because it had iron ore which the Germans were transporting back to Germany for military purposes. They would also try and destroy the German ships, particularly looking for *KMS Tirpitz*, *KMS Scharnhorst* and *KMS Bismarck* which were the huge German battleships. They would look in the fjords for these ships so they could destroy them before they came out into the open sea – they were so huge each could take out an entire convoy by itself! Sometimes the forces would even use the convoys as bait to try and get the Germans

newsletters in 2015 – four per year – and the thing's just grown from there. They're really popular and we get a lot of feedback from them, with the grandchildren of veterans coming forward with stories, questions, medals, all sorts of interesting snippets. The Russian Arctic Convoys represent an important piece of our history that seems to have been forgotten and our mission, if I can call it that, is to ensure that the convoys and the men who served on them are not forgotten."

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The information that Anna has collected over the years paints a vivid picture of the realities of those convoys. Her research suggests that many Merchant Navy ships would gather at Loch Ewe, then be escorted out to sea by Royal Navy ships, which were based at Scapa Flow. The convoys would then either head first for Iceland then over to Russia, or directly to Russia. "Russia was starving, millions of ordinary people died of starvation. Grown men were given half a potato to eat, it's horrible. Russia was completely blockaded by the Germans, and Stalin asked the Allies for food, grain,



Kola Inlet, Murmansk 1944. Credit: Jim Bentley



Olga the Christmas reindeer - a gift from the Russians to HMS Kent!

to come to them. They would try to trap or trick them out of the fjords then the other force could block their route back. Massive battles were taking place – the battle of the Norwegian coast lasted about 2 weeks! These guys were out there for weeks getting battered by storms and gales at the same time.”

As is usually the case, from serious and often tragic situations, there are also many happy or funny stories that emerge. One veteran recounts the story of getting married while on leave, and his bride giving him a beautiful watch as a wedding gift, warning him not to wear it on the ship because she didn't want him to lose it. Naturally he defied her advice and wore his watch all the time – then one day he got blown overboard in a gale and the watchstrap caught on something on the side of the ship leaving him dangling by his arm! The watch had saved his life, because somebody was able to grab him and pull him back on, though it took him until years after the war before he could tell his wife – “I was too scared that she wouldnae be happy with me!” Another veteran recalls being ordered to bring his boat in to safety from a force 12 gale while anchored at Scapa Flow. His struggles resulted in both him and the boat plunging into the very cold Atlantic Ocean, him only surviving because he grabbed something heading up as he was heading down! After being rescued and treated for his injuries, including a broken nose, he was rewarded for his efforts by being charged with losing a motorboat – “I didn't lose it, I knew where it was...”

Also, on the lighter side of convoy life, there were animals on board many of the vessels, and not just cats and dogs, though there were plenty of them too. Russian friends gifted the submarine *HMS Trident* a reindeer, Pollyanna, who took up residence when she was very young. When the time came for Pollyanna to disembark, she had grown considerably and the crew had fed her so well that she was unable to leave through the hatch, so an alternative exit had to be found! The most famous dog is probably Bamse, the Norwegian naval mascot who served faithfully on *HNoMS Thorodd* throughout the war. The St Bernard was even promoted to mascot of the entire Free Norwegian Forces and, when he died in 1944, was buried with full military honours in Montrose, where there is a statue in his honour. Another notable character was Oscar, a black and white cat found floating on a board after the *Bismarck* was sunk. The lucky moggy was taken aboard *HMS Cossack* but when that too was sunk he was rescued by the *Ark Royal*, where the crew renamed him 'Unsinkable Sam'. Unbelievably, he would once again survive when the *Ark Royal* went down, being picked up from a floating plank – his rescuer observing that the cat didn't look scared, just really angry! His reward was to live out his retirement peacefully in a seaman's home in Belfast.



*Oscar aka Unsinkable Sam!
Credit: RACC/Club 21 collection*

RACC/Club 21 is a real McKessock family affair, with Anna conscripting, ahem, enlisting husband Callum and daughters Lydia and Trudy into 'active service' too. And, in line with the convoy's feline tradition, they are 'ably' assisted by Salty the Ship's Cat, a wee black bundle of mischief who has achieved her own international following through regularly featuring in the club newsletter! The family run the club from their home in Dundee, which is very appropriate given Dundee's naval history and direct connection with the convoys. The submarines that accompanied the convoys were based in Dundee – the submarine base dates back to WWI, and in WWII housed British, Dutch, Free French, Norwegian, Polish and Russian crews – and the wartime Norwegian naval headquarters were at 172 Perth Road. One of the club's main roles is arranging and attending the various memorial services that are held annually, including at Dundee, Errol Airfield (Russian pilots were secretly trained there), Montrose (Norwegian ships were based there), Loch Ewe and Edinburgh. RACC/Club 21 has also represented the convoy veterans at international conferences held in Iceland and Russia. The Russian Federation are hugely supportive of RACC/Club 21 and convoy veterans generally. Consular officials attend all memorial events and ensure that convoy veterans are represented and acknowledged at the various Russian Federation Immortal Regiment ceremonies in Moscow and St Petersburg. Further recognising

On the lighter side of convoy life, there were animals on board many of the vessels, and not just cats and dogs

Credit: RACC/Club 21





Arctic Convoy Veterans' Reunion. Credit: Stuart Brighton

Aircraft carrier HMS Premier.
Credit: RACC/Club 21 collection



Scotland's contribution, an annual Immortal Regiment event was also initiated in Edinburgh last year. Most of these events are generally held in May or September, though some rescheduling will obviously be necessary this year, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2012, the Russian Federation officially requested permission from the UK Government to award the Order of Ushakov medal to British Arctic Convoy veterans – one of their highest military honours. In true British style, this request was denied – quelle surprise! However, the following year the British authorities came up with their own medal for convoy veterans, the Arctic Star, and once they'd got that up and running they decided it was OK for the Russians to award theirs too! More than 3000 veterans have now been awarded the Ushakov, a beautiful solid silver medal named after Fyodor Ushakov, the most famous Russian naval commander of the eighteenth century, later proclaimed patron saint of the Russian Navy. Only veterans whose names appeared on an official MoD list were considered by the Russians, but Anna continues to discover other



Dundee International Submarine Memorial. Credit: Wikimedia Commons

veterans who are entitled to consideration. "I've recently passed a list of 22 living veterans to the Russian Embassy and they're working through that and contacting those veterans for the current Memorial Ushakov, which is a new medal for 2020/21. Through emails and the newsletters, we've managed to get Ushakovs presented to the families of veterans who were on the original list but who may have passed away or moved into a nursing home or whatever. If the Russians have a medal waiting for a veteran it can still be claimed. The Arctic Star can be applied for, even posthumously. Families often only find out when dad or grandad passes away and they find things in the attic, I hear that all the time. At first the British were only giving the Arctic Star to veterans, then to widows, but now it's moved onto families. It took me ages to get my own dad's medal – in the end it took a chance meeting, at a memorial event, with the naval officer who just happened to run the medals office, to hurry things along. He got me the medal within 2 months – excellent!"

It's always a wee bit humbling, and inspirational, to discover people like Anna McKessock, working away quietly on projects and causes that are unknown to most of us yet absolutely precious to the people involved, in this case Russian Arctic Convoy veterans and their families. To know that her efforts are equally valued by the Russian Federation, recognising the historic links and friendships between the Scottish and Russian peoples, is also reassuring. We are continually told by the British and American establishment that everything Russian is bad, and yet... here we have Vladimir Putin signing decrees on a regular basis to award one of his country's highest honours to foreign nationals. Being 'o independent mind', iScot readers will no doubt appreciate that gesture for what it truly is, respect. За нашу дружбу – to our friendship!

iScot Magazine readers who would like to learn more about the Russian Arctic Convoys and the RACC/Club 21 can visit the club website: <http://www.racc.me.uk>

Any reader who would like help in applying for the Arctic Star for a family member, or would like to know more about the Order of Ushakov medal, can email Anna McKessock at: admin@racc.me.uk

Can I come too?
Credit: RACC/Club 21 collection



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