



**Rear-Admiral RP Welland, DSC&Bar, was recently awarded posthumously the Arctic Star Medal for participating in operations North of the Arctic circle during World War II. Here is an extract from his memoirs, *This Will Have to be Enough*, giving an account Russia Convoys JW 66 and RA 66 that were the last convoys of the war.**

Wilf Lund  
Venture Historian

=====

When we arrived back in Greenock a message awaited, the Commodore in charge of operations 'Requested my attendance'. In naval parlance this meant 'You are to be here'. In a briefing room were six Russian naval officers, the British Commodore, his Chief of Staff, and me. The Russians were my age, smartly dressed and had the same rank stripes as the Royal Navy and us. The Commodore explained there were sixteen new, US built, patrol-boats lying in Greenock, they had been turned over to the Russians and were to sail to join up with a convoy to Murmansk. Haida was to escort them. We would be fitted out with special fuelling equipment to make the voyage possible. I met Lieutenant Nickoli Ivliev who was assigned to ride with me in Haida as a liaison officer. He spoke excellent English. With him would be a Russian signalman who had some grasp of our language.

Three days later we sailed from Greenock [on 16 April, 1945]. By that time I had met the captain of each Russian boat by having them on board for drinks. Patterson and Phillips and many of the Chiefs and PO's had become familiar with the engine-room crews and upper deck people. We brought each boat alongside to show them how we would refuel at sea while underway.. Gordie Welsh acquainted them with the route to Russia. The signalmen learned enough of each others language, in Morse, to be able to make some sense. Lieut Ivliev was the only professional Russian officer, all the others were reservists doing their bit for the motherland. They were almost too enthusiastic.

Haida led the way out of Greenock. As dark settled on the first night we were a neat little flock of ducks; two rows of eight with mama Haida two hundred yards ahead. The misty hills of Scotland stretched away to port and starboard as we passed through the Minches channel. We passed the Orkneys and Scapa Floe in good order. Now it was open ocean to the Faroe Islands, speed 14 knots, course 010. We had 1,700 miles to go; through the North Sea, into the Arctic Ocean, around the top of Norway, into the Kola inlet, past Polyarno and into Murmansk. A piece of cake.

An East wind blew up, gathering speed to forty knots, stirring up steep choppy waves that caused the ducklings to stray. As the night wore on our radar had only eight on the tube and some of those blips could be Scottish fishermen. We had gone 150 miles and I had already lost half of them, which Welsh extrapolated, "All sixteen will be lost by noon tomorrow, 1,500 miles short of delivery."

I remember that as the night when the sun was stalled below the horizon for a week. Finally a grey windy dawn emerged with only three boats in sight. I went alongside the senior Russian's boat and had Nickoli yell at him through the loud-hailer. Russian is a strung-out language, they never use ten words when fifty will do. I was sure the horn's battery would go flat before the simple message was understood, "You lead these on course 010. I will find the others. Goodbye."

The senior captain was six foot three, Lieutenant Ivanovich Gorski, whose real vocation was that of

operatic tenor at the Bolshoi Theatre, as I later discovered. He waved a theatrical farewell as I turned Haida back toward Greenock to locate the missing.

“Maybe they don’t want to go to Mother Russia.” said Ray Phillips.

“Do we?” said Welsh.

“Shut up.” Said I.

We found the stragglers taking shelter in the lee of several different small islands and got them to follow. As the second night descended all boats were back in formation, steering to the north at 14 knots. We were only a hundred miles short of the plan and no one had drowned. I told Ivanovich to follow me, keep up, and burn a light on the stern of each boat so stations could be held. Nickoli questioned me about the lights giving the positions to German submarines, but I told him it was a chance that had to be taken. I did not tell him that no sane U-Boat captain was going to waste a torpedo on a 110 foot motor boat.

When dawn finally arrived Haida was towing two boats and had dropped another hundred miles behind plan. Their engines had just stopped so I decided to tow them. It was a long night with a lot of shouting. There was nothing wrong with their courage, tenacity, or will to do the right thing. Just with their skill; they couldn’t tie a knot properly or even get out of the way of a towing hawser. But they were big and strong and willing.

Patterson went on board one and found the fuel tanks full, all that needed doing was to open a valve and let the fuel transfer to the ready-use tank. Patterson put one of his stokers into each boat for the next day. The fuel system was very clearly described in the engine manual in flowing prose. In English.

The weather worsened, the boats couldn’t keep station at any speed, but the Faeroe Islands were not far off. We charged about shooing boat after boat into the shelter of the port, Thorshaven, and told them to anchor and wait. I decided we were going to have a day of rest in the calm. Nobody had drowned, 1,400 miles to go, 250 miles behind plan and counting.

“It would be a good idea for your crew to know our people”, said Nickoli Ivliev, “We have a long way to go” Of course it was a good idea; I wished I had thought of it.

By mid morning we had all sixteen Russian boats alongside with gangways to Haida’s upper deck. Ray Phillips, always a party promoter, suggested a noontime issue of rum as a good starter. We had plenty of it, in gallon jugs. So it was served in the naval tradition, on the open deck from a ten-gallon wooden cask with brass lettering saying “God Bless the King.”

The sun shone. Musical instruments magically appeared. Russians formed circles and danced, musicians played Kalinka,. Russians sang. Canadians and Russians danced. Russian cooks and ours exchanged hats and served food. All officers gravitated to our wardroom. Our piano never had a greater workout, more than one Russian was a pianist, all of them sang.

A Russian officer quietened the party, “And now I present Ivanovitch Gorski”. Whereupon the senior officer, Lieutenant Commander Gorski made his entrance. He was stripped to the waist, a red-rag bandana on his head, and waving a sword. He bowed to us, flourished his sword, gestured to his pianist, and then sang; Pinafore. In English ‘I am the Master of the Queen’s Navy.’ This from a star tenor of the Bolshoi. His huge voice took the paint off the bulkheads or whispered like a breeze. He sang pieces we knew, he threw in Kalinka for me. Three of the Russian officers were expert at Cossack dancing. One comic from the Bolshoi kept us laughing for half an hour. The party wasn’t only in the wardroom, it was going from the foc’s’le to the quarterdeck, it included everyone on board all the ships, about 350 of us.

It was the best ship-party of the war.

The rum and the vodka didn’t get into the fuel; we sailed for Russia at first-light, perhaps with many headaches.

The weather held fine, a west wind helped us along. Fuelling and provisioning the boats became routine. Cooks exchanged their best efforts at cake and bread, passing it over on heaving lines. Gorski’s boat made a special omelet for me, and it arrived hot with a jigger of vodka.

The Germans always attacked convoys going to Russia; Ju88's bombers could easily reach a convoy from their air-bases in Norway. The U-Boats also gathered near the entrance to the Kola inlet, the gateway to Murmansk, The naval intelligence service were forecasting air attacks and up to twenty U-boats off northern Norway. The Germans must have known at this time they were going to lose the war, but they were not giving up.

We and our sixteen Russian boats had made up the lost time. We were scheduled to join up with a full convoy, the rendezvous point was to the south of Bear Island, just inside the Arctic circle. This convoy's escort was unusually strong, eight destroyers and twelve corvettes. In addition there was a small aircraft carrier, loaded with Firefly aircraft that could handle a JU 88 and also rocket-attack surfaced submarines. This escort force was under the charge of an R.N. commander, 'Egg' Burnett. He had been one of my instructors at the Anti Submarine school four years earlier, and we had met in Londonderry several times when I commanded Assinboine.

As soon as the chief yeoman could raise Burnett's ship on the flashing light I reported in with my flock of ducks. I was expected.

"Do your Russian friends have ping?" he flashed.

"No ping," I replied, "Their max speed is 18 knots and they are full of fuel. They have 20mm guns. They don't do English, but I have a Russian officer who does."

"Suppose we put eight each side of the convoy for entering and tell them to stave off aircraft. You tell them as I don't do Russian" This was typical Burnett; making me feel good. He didn't have to get my opinion.

Burnett flashed his entering plan: The 22 ships in the convoy would form two lines, spaced 500 yards apart, with ships keeping 400 yards apart, speed 12 knots. The Russian boats would patrol outside the convoy lines, zig zagging at 16 knots, prepared to fight off aircraft and run down periscopes. Burnett said 18 U-boats were known to be waiting our arrival. He assigned 3 destroyers to range up and down the convoy sides at Asdic speed, 18 knots. He sent one of the destroyers to the offshore convoy side to make smoke, and sent me to make smoke on the inshore side. He stationed the corvettes around the convoy. The plan was simple to execute, made sense, and I liked Haida's role; high speed smoke maker.

At dawn the convoy of 22 merchant ships formed into two lines, they would remain in that formation until they passed the harbour gate at Polyarno. The ships were carrying 80 aircraft on their decks, 200 tanks stowed below decks, four ships carried 50,000 tons of aviation gasoline, In addition there was 100,000 tons of other equipment. The convoy's load would probably be known to the Germans, they might even know which ship carried what. The spying services of both sides had become quite proficient at this stage of the war.

On board Haida we got ready. All hands had eaten breakfast; every one had changed into clean clothing. (To reduce infection if wounded) Face masks, ear plugs, and metal helmets were carried by those exposed or near the guns. All boilers were coming on-line; the electrical supply was split between generators, damage control shores and pumps were placed. Sound-powered phones were run and tested; emergency steering was made operational. The doctor and his sick-bay were ready with morphine; the cooks had made five hundred sandwiches. Every man was at a fighting position or had a ship-saving duty. We would have only hand-held food for the next sixteen hours. We were as ready as we could be. It was the 25<sup>th</sup> April 1945.

The fight started on the seaward side of the convoy. A flight of German aircraft was detected, probably JU 88's bombers.

The carrier launched her fighters, the Fireflies, and they disappeared on their mission. The weather was perfect for both sides; hardly any wind, clear blue sky, and daylight was lasting 16 hours.

. One of the planes reported engine trouble and soon ditched, not far from Haida. I sped to the position and spotted the two-man crew in their orange dinghy and took the ship to it. One of the Russian boats arrived a few minutes later. Ray Phillips and his upper deck crew had the downed airmen in Dr. David

Ernst's sick bay in minutes. They were wet but unhurt.

Haida's job was to shield the convoy from submarines by laying a smoke screen. The smoke should lie parallel to the convoy track and about a mile clear. An added feature to make difficulties for the U-Boats would be our 36-knot propellor noise; it that would spoil their 'ears'.

Laying smoke is an exercise in geometry. The convoy was steering 040 at 12 knots, the wind was from 170 at 15 knots. Haida's speed was to be 36 knots. What course should be steered to lay smoke parallel to the convoy's track? And where would be the best places to drop smoke-floats? A solution is required for each of the to-and-fro courses. Haida could make funnel-smoke, which was black; chemical smoke from a generator, which was white, and from smoke floats that could be dropped over the side or burned on deck.

Gordie Welch was still messing around with the problem when I set the first course. I had been chewed out six years earlier, as a midshipman in Emerald, when my solution to a similar problem was judged a non-starter. So I told the helmsman to steer 020, and ring up 360 revs.

We needed to go fast, starting at the rear of the column of ships, going up to the front of the column, turning around and doing it repeatedly. The aim being that no convoy-ship was visible to a submarine. It is always a good day for the crew of a destroyer when circumstances allow the engines to be run-up. Patterson had come to the bridge and asked me if he could tune the ship to get maximum speed. He said he had pumped our last fifty tons of fuel into the forward tanks to keep the bow down, he had also moved thirty tons of fresh water forward. Our forty-tons of diesel was mostly gone, having fuelled the Russians. So the ship was as light as she would ever be; the sea was calm. Why not see how fast she could go?"

Full speed was considered to be 380 propellor revolutions per minute, the speed this produced depended on the weight of the ship. At full load 380 revs gave her 36.5 knots. But today we were 600 tons lighter, so more than 380 revs should be possible and what speed would that produce? The engineers gradually built the propellor revolutions up to 408. The bow wave was higher than the fo'c'sle. She heaved through the swells, up and down the convoy line. I ordered smoke only when there were blanks in the wall that obscured the convoy. Occasionally I ducked through it to show the convoy ships why the weather had changed! Their deck hands waved at us.

Gordie Welch and I agreed that we reached 39.6 knots. Patterson said it just had to be 40! Ray Phillips said it was just wonderful, but his crew would have to repair both funnels as the paint had burned off. Killjoy!

We got the convoy into Kola inlet. No ship was lost. They sailed on in the sheltered waters to Murmansk. It had been a different escort trip, and with a nice flourish at the end!

(This convoy was numbered JW66. A German report of its arrival off the Kola inlet, published quite recently, stated that twenty-one U-boats were gathered to intercept it. The U-boats did not claim to have torpedoed any ships 'Owing to the strong escort force.')

We docked in the naval port of Polyarno and said goodbye to our Russian guest, Lieutenant Nickoli Ivliev. He had become popular with us in his two-weeks aboard. His cool method of dealing with the gang of inept reservists who manned the boats got unanimous praise. Never again did we see the singing, dancing, Russians or their boats; they were sent to a different port to ours. That was a disappointment because Ivanovitch Gorski of the Bolshoi had promised to take me elk-hunting.

In 1996, fifty one years after the above event, retired admiral Nickoli Ivliev wrote me a letter. He asked if I remembered him; he hoped our friendship still existed. He said he had followed my progress through the ranks and knew I commanded our fleet during the Russian/Cuban crisis in 1962; he was pleased the 'cold war' was finished. He said he would always remember the voyage from Scotland to Russia as a high point in his career. He said he was now ill and unable to travel. I wrote back, but have never received a reply. We were the same age. It was a high point in my career too.

The return-convoy, RA 66, consisted of 24 ships and sailed on the 29<sup>th</sup> April, [1945]. The Canadian

destroyers Iroquois, Huron and Haida were again part of the escort force. It was known the U-Boats intended to strike hard and that up to sixteen were in the area. The same tactics were employed by Egg Burnett: highly-active defence, smoke, random depth-charge drops, patrolling aircraft. At one point of our high-speed smoke-making a signalman on the bridge yelled, "Torpedo tracks" and pointed. Seeing torpedo tracks (wakes) can be a reality or a porpoise or just plain imagination. But it was my practice not to quibble if anyone of the bridge crew reported it. I instantly ordered "Port 30", to comb the tracks and so reduce the chance of being hit. I fired a ten-charge pattern where the submarine might be, then resumed smoke-making.

In a recent German account of the naval-war the submarine U-427, commanded by Lieut. Gudenus, fired two torpedoes at Haida on this occasion! So I guess the signalman saw what he saw and probably saved the ship. Lieut. Gudenus also reported hearing 678 depth-charge explosions as several corvettes and frigates hunted for him and others. In this affair our forces sank two U-boats, and lost none of the convoy. As a further PS to this, and during the past month, (May 2003) I have heard more of Lieut Gudenus. His son, named Stefan, sent me an e-mail when he read Haidas' internet website ([hrc@sympatico.ca](mailto:hrc@sympatico.ca)) of my account of this event. Stefan reported that his father is now 81 and in good health and sends me his regards. I responded in kind and congratulated both of us for not killing each other on 29<sup>th</sup> April 1945. Stefan's e-mail is ([stefan.gudenus@tortec.at](mailto:stefan.gudenus@tortec.at))

That convoy, RA 66, was the last convoy of the war. Note that Gudenus was 23 when he tried to torpedo me and I was 26 when I tried to sink him.