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### **Albert Edward Robinson**

Stories of the WW2 Atlantic, Mediterranean and Russian Convoys are today mainly of record. Only one of four to me was epic, perchance that I was participant; and that later it took nearly fifty years to discover that the area had been renamed from GALTENFIORD to DONNESFIORD.

Operation 'OPEN DOOR' was the culmination of Norwegian resistance to German occupation of the Norwegian island of SOROY. Many patriots in defiance of reporting for forced labour to the Nazis Regime crossed to the island of Soroy to join their compatriots and lived in highland caves when the Germans torched their villages.

The relief operation of four English naval destroyers of Convoy JA64 were sent from Russia to German occupied Soroy Island and took on board 525 men, women and children. They returned to Russia where the Norwegians were distributed to ships of convoy RA64 returning to England. Some were on ships torpedoed later and sunk but were rescued. This convoy from Kola Bay, Russia to United Kingdom was recognised for the roughest weather of the war of Force 12 atmospheric pressure.

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## ARCTIC CONVOYS

The Navy has never been lacking in such heroes, facing not only the foe of the times but the old and ancient enemy, the sea and elements, steadfastly. Such is the story of the convoys carrying war materials to Russia (Soviet Union) in the dark days of 1941 to 1945. These heroes were men of all services, Navy, Army, Air Force and Merchant seamen of many nationalities --- in vessels of all shapes and sizes carrying fuel, tanks and guns and all the varied supplies needed to wage war against a ruthless enemy. The convoys were made running the gauntlet of U-boat and air attack through what could be described as the worst possible conditions imaginable, in weather of unbelievable severity, come what may. Gale force winds and mountainous seas, with temperatures down to minus 50 degrees were the everyday conditions. Comfort was a word deleted from the vocabulary of the men when to be warm and dry was just a memory. The progress of the convoys, along their 'mean line of advance' was itself a hazard with the zigzag in the mountainous seas resulting in pitch, yaw and roll alternating, as the ships followed the pre-ordained pattern of zigzag without deviation. Anything that wasn't lashed down, below decks, ended up a broken sodden mess. On the upper decks, as the ships approached the Arctic Circle, the seas coming up over the bows broke against the fo'castle coaming in clouds of spray that instantly froze onto anything it touched; ships were a mass of ice from stem to stern – waterline to the triatic stay. Courage was the motivation of the men who sailed the Arctic sea-route to Murmansk and Arkangel – men who saw a fire on the horizon, and knew it was a fellow convoy ship on fire – that heard the loudest bang and knew it wasn't a clap of thunder but a tanker laden with fuel or explosives going up, and the yells and screams wasn't kids at a disco but was their comrades in the water. Life expectancy in the water could be measured in minutes but lift a man out and he almost instantly froze into a block of ice due to the incredible low air temperature. Such were the men who turned out to man the guns when the air-alert was sounded, and had to hose the gun breach with a steam hose before it could be opened to load the weapon to defend themselves from attack from the air – men who slept fully clothed and at times, soaking wet for the duration of the voyage.

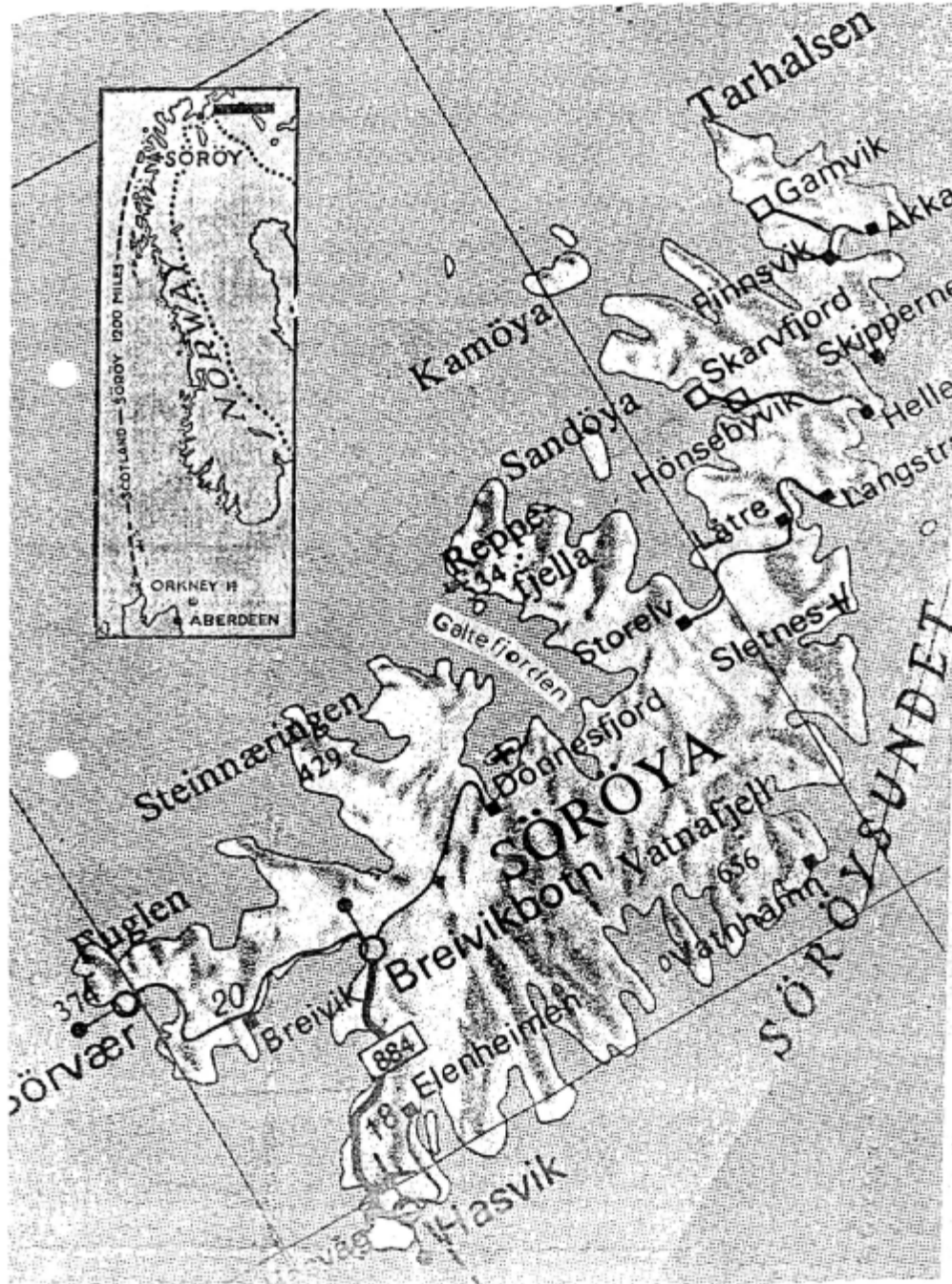
Total cargoes carried via the Arctic sea-route was an overall tonnage of 3,964,231 tons, and included 2,000 locomotives, 5,218 tanks, 7,411 aircraft, 4,000 rifles and machine guns, 1,800 radar sets, 473 projectiles, 8 Torpedo craft, 4 submarines, 14 minesweepers, 10 destroyers and one battleship.

Total value from Britain was 308 million pounds, plus 120 million pounds in food, medical supplies and raw materials – 428,000,000 pounds.

In all 21 Allied warships were sunk and Naval casualties amounted to 1,944 men. Merchant ship losses were 98 ships and 829 men lost their lives.

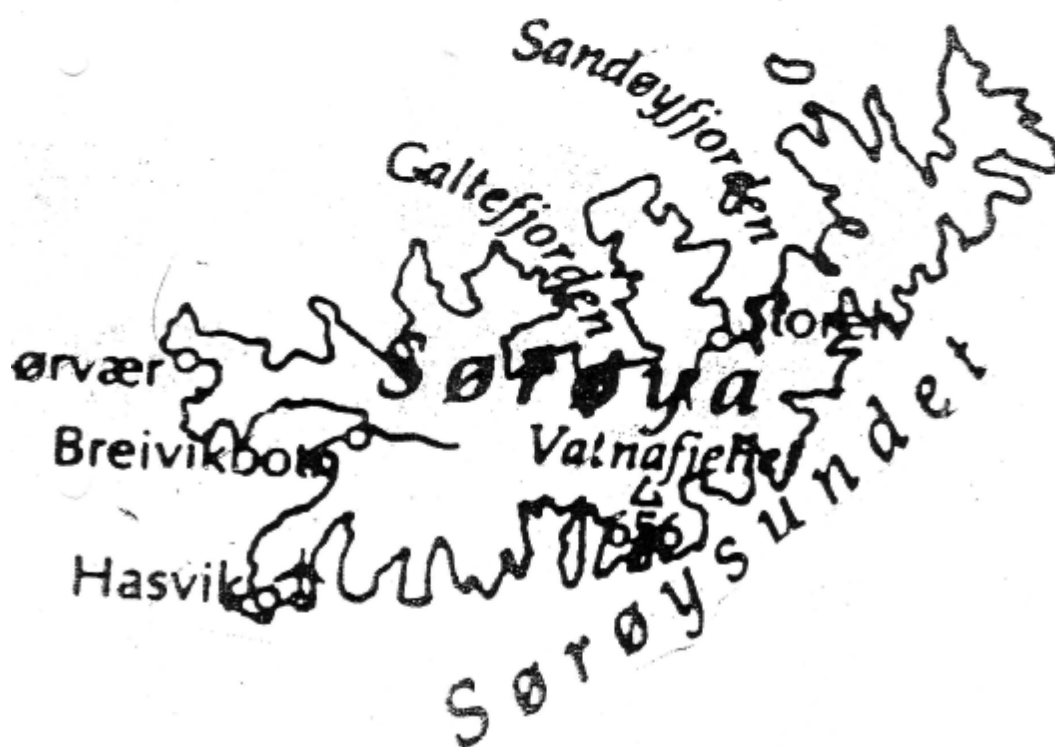
The enemy losses were 2 capital ships, 3 destroyers, 32 submarines and an unknown number of aircraft.

# SÖRÖYA



SÖRÖYA

1945



# SÖRÖYA

1999



SØRØYA GALTEFIORDEN OG DONNESFIORDEN

# SÖRÖYA

## Norwegian Patriots

While the Convoy was in Russia, they heard about approximately 1500 people, all old men, woman and young children who were hiding from the Germans in a cave up in the fjords. The Germans would routinely fly over their site and bomb them, killing a few of them each time.

Four destroyers of the British home fleet, were ordered to execute a daring daylight thrust down a fjord behind German lines at North Cape, to rescue the Norwegian patriots.

The destroyer force, under command of Capt J.H. Allison, steamed sixty miles down the fjord to the Island of Soroy in West Finmark. -Cmdr. E G. Boak of Victoria commanded the Sioux. The other ships were H.M.S. Zealous (Cmdr. R.F. Jessel) and H.M.S. Zest (Lt-Cmdr. R.B.N. Hicks) H.M.S. Zambesi (Capt J.H. Allison)

When the four destroyers arrived, there were only 525 people left. When they saw the Allied Destroyers approaching them, they all came skiing out of the mouth of the cave down the mountain to the ships. It is a sight that Cliff will never forget.

The rescued patriots told how the Nazis destroyed their homes and food in a vain effort to force them into slavery.

The destroyers steamed in unexpectedly, took the Germans by surprise and returned the Norwegians to a British port.

Most of those rescued were women and children who had been hiding in caves and huts on the snow-covered mountains of the bleak island since late autumn moving constantly to keep out of the reach of German patrols which chased them through the bitter Arctic winter. One woman gave birth to a son in a cave only 10 days before she was rescued. Other women carried with them babies born only a week or two before their homes were set afire.

As the Germans began withdrawing the Norwegians were ordered to leave their homes and move south. To make certain the order was obeyed, the Nazis methodically burned down every house on the island, slaughtered all animals and destroyed food stores. The old women, too ill to be moved, were roasted alive in their flaming houses, according to the rescued Norwegians.

The Germans took 1200 of the healthiest men and women away for slave labor, while other patriots took to caves and snow huts and eked out a living through the cold months. Many of them had eaten nothing in the last 12 weeks except some fish and reindeer meat.

As soon as they were taken on board the refugees were given soup and a meal of corned beef and potatoes - the first vegetables they had tasted since their ordeal began.

# Convoy Beat U-Packs, Planes and Gale

**ATTACKED BY TORPEDO-CARRYING PLANES AND PACKS OF U-BOATS, A LARGE CONVOY RECENTLY BATTLED THROUGH A 100-MILE-AN-HOUR GALE TO REACH RUSSIA WITHOUT LOSS.**

On the return trip the attack was resumed with increased ferocity, but 97 per cent. of the ships got back safely.

An Admiralty communiqué yesterday reported that the corvette, Bluebell, was torpedoed and sunk and two other ships sustained damage.

The enemy lost at least one U-boat and 12 aircraft. Seven other aircraft were so damaged that it is doubtful if they reached their

bases. At every turn of the battle 51-year-old Admiral McGrigor, who commanded the convoy and escort, outwitted and out-fought the enemy.

From the start he knew that a bitter fight was inevitable.

When the first torpedo-bomber attack came, our fighters broke up the approaching groups of Ju 88s. Admiral McGrigor manoeuvred the convoy almost nonchalantly, yet time after time he altered course just as the enemy thought they'd got us. And each time they had to try again.

Two days later as the convoy was passing close to the grave of the Scharnhorst, near North Cape, 30 Ju 88s tried their hand.

The attack went on for an hour, but not a merchant ship nor an escort had been harmed.

The Luftwaffe then left the convoy severely alone for the remainder of the outward passage.

But another convoy, with timber and other products urgently needed in Britain had to be brought home.

This proved the tougher fight. All through the night the faint boom of depth charges could be heard.

A large pack of U-boats surrounded the ships, and the Admiral estimated six or seven were actually in touch with the convoy.

## 60ft. High Waves

The battle continued till early next morning, and soon it was blowing a full gale. Seas rose to such heights that neither side could carry on the fight.

Waves more than 60 feet high crashed down on the ships, and the convoy was forced to heave to.

The finest achievement of the whole convoy was the flying of fighters from "Nairana." Her bows were dripping under huge waves. Her screws almost cleared the water each time she tossed up her stern.

Everyone with glasses watched the returning fighters and the heavy flight-deck, expecting the worst.

But through supremely skilful ship-handling and flying, the pilots got down unhurt. They were: Sub-Lieutenants George Gordof, of Helensburgh; Peter Blance, of West Acton; Owen Armitage, of Auckland, N.Z., and N. W. Sargent, of Reading.

The Navy does it again

# RESCUE RAID

Daylight dash  
into Hun-held  
Norwegian  
harbour

RACING in broad daylight down a Norwegian fiord sixty miles behind the German lines at North Cape, four destroyers from the Home Fleet have rescued 525 Norwegians from the clutches of the Nazis.

This is announced in an official Norwegian naval communique this morning.

For three months these Norwegians—mostly women and children—had been hiding in the snow-covered mountains of Sotøy Island. Hunted from cave to cave in terrible weather conditions by German slave patrols, they faced death or forced labour as the penalty for being caught.

When the destroyers arrived the patriots had almost reached the limit of their endurance. Their only food for twelve weeks had been small quantities of fish and reindeer meat. Their clothes were in rags, their children exhausted. The youngest to be rescued was a ten-day-old baby.

A small Norwegian military mission which had been landed earlier had warned these patriots to stand by for rescue.



With both arms broken and her island home many miles away, this Norwegian girl rescued from Sotøy is carried to an ambulance by a British sailor. See other pictures on page 8.





The start of a great adventure and the end of their privations, the inhabitants of the Norwegian island of Soroy trudge and stumble through the snow on their way to the British naval units waiting to take them to Britain. Notice baby carried in a blanket slung over father's back. Right, a little Soroy islander, shy, but safe in Britain.



led by Captain J. H. Allison, H.M.S. Zambesi, the destroyers, with all guns manned, swept down the eight-mile-long Galten Fjord at three o'clock one afternoon. So well timed was the operation that it took the Germans completely by surprise.

A group of enemy armed trawlers and patrol craft were waiting in a neighbouring fjord, but Galten Fjord had been left unguarded. Even if they had discovered the presence of our ships, it would have been too late to interfere with the rescue work.

When the destroyers reached the end of the fjord, they lowered their boats and sent them in to the beaches.

Commander R. F. Jessel, commanding officer of H.M.S. Zealous, said:

"It was a beautiful day. As we steamed up the fjord there was not a sign of life. All we could see was a small boat at the head of the fjord.

"Things looked very suspicious until a man jumped up in the boat and fired a Very light. It was a pre-arranged signal.

"Then followed one of the most impressive sights I have ever seen. Down the snowy slopes on skis came the Norwegians, men and women carrying babies and their few humble belongings, and even the young-

sters were on miniature skis. They were obviously very glad to see us."

In three hours the Home Fleet destroyers had finished their task in the fjord and then came what was considered the most difficult part of the operation. Returning with their human cargoes on board it would not have been prudent—at Captain Allison put it—to risk battle, so all through the long hours of Arctic darkness the four destroyers steamed at full speed to avoid the enemy.

On the crowded mess decks of the four destroyers were bewildered old women in shawls, younger women nursing babies, and weary men, young and old, asleep where they sat.

Trouble from the "survivors' store" were issued to both men and women. The destroyers' crews gave up their

bunks and went without sleep so that the children could lie down. Sailors brought cigarettes and chocolate from the canteen to give to the Norwegians.

Then, shortly after daybreak, having steamed all the time at full speed, the destroyers reached harbour safely.

Most of the rescued Norwegians had stories to tell of their treatment by the enemy.

At the beginning of November last year, the Germans ordered the people to leave their homes and move south.

To ensure this order being obeyed, the Germans burnt to the ground every house on the island. They slaughtered all the animals, destroyed food stocks and scorched the earth 100 per cent. They took away 1,300 men and women—the fittest on the island—for forced labour.

British sailors who went ashore saw the evidence of the destruction for themselves. Petty Officer George Eustach, of

Southend, said, "If I hadn't seen it, I'd never have believed human beings could be so savage. But there it was. Out of the snow you could see dozens of charred stumps of wood—all that remained of a village."

Among the patriots were a young engineer from Oslo and his fiancée, who worked for the same company.

"For the most part," he said, "we had been living in caves and in the snow. There was little food and the Germans kept our rations to the minimum. Things were not so bad if you were working directly for them on building barracks or some such thing, and there was plenty of stuff in the Black Market if you had the money to pay for it. A bottle of brandy cost £20 and fifty cigarettes £4.

"There were many acts of sabotage and some of our people were shot, but the work carried on just the same."

A woman gave birth to a son in a cave only ten days before she was rescued. Others had with them babies born only a week or two before their homes were fired.

In addition to Zambesi and Zealous, the destroyer Zest (Lieutenant-Commander R. B. M. Wood), and the Canadian destroyer Stour (Lieutenant-Commander R. E. O. Bock) took part in the operation.

## Homes burned



Operation 'Open Door': Norwegians from Sørøy after their evacuation from the island in February 1945.



NOW THEY'RE SAFE.—Some of the Norwegian children saved from the island of Sørøy, West Finnmark, who were brought to this country by the Royal and Royal Canadian Navies.



Left: The entrance to Polyamoe from the Kola Inlet—hardly the most inviting destination for the mariner!

Below: The Soviet base at Polyamoe, home for the officers and men of the Royal Navy Mission in the Arctic. (JWM A.20473)



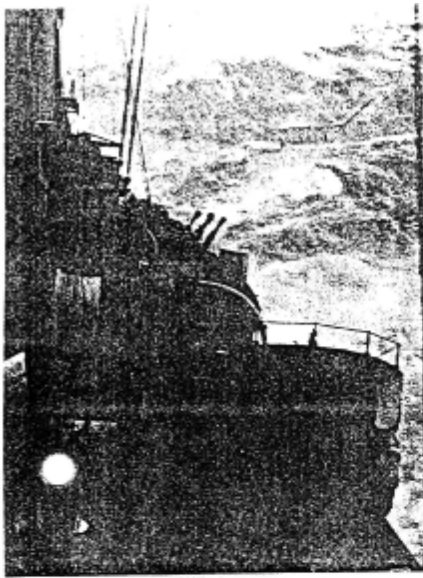
While the escort was at Kola awaiting the homeward-bound convoy there was an interesting diversion when it was decided to rescue the inhabitants of Sorøy. In their search for slave labour, the Germans had raided the island, burned the inhabitants' dwellings and forced the people to take shelter in caves in the hills. The islanders' plight was reported to the Admiralty by the Norwegian Military Mission on the island and action was not long in coming. The Norwegian mission was told to have the inhabitants ready for evacuation, and a Catalina of the Norwegian Air Force landed off Sorøy to warn them of their impending departure. In the afternoon of 15 February Operation 'Open Door' was implemented. The destroyers *Zambesi* (Capt J. H. Allison DSO RN, Senior Officer), *Zealous*, *Zest* and *Sioux*, which had been detached from the convoy, swept up Galten Fjord with their White Ensigns proudly flying—watched impotently by German shore garrisons—and anchored off Sorøy. Five hundred and twenty men, women and children were embarked on the four ships, which returned the way they had come without opposition. The destroyers sailed to Murmansk, the children being plied with chocolate (a luxury some of them had never seen) and being outrageously spoiled during the voyage. The inhabitants were then distributed among the merchant ships sailing back to the United Kingdom with RA.64.

The convoy was very slow in leaving the Inlet, and it was not long before the first U-boat attacks materialized. At 1024 U968 blew the stern off HMS *Lark* and sank the freighter *Thomas Scott*. A third success for the U-boats came in the afternoon when U711 (*Kapitänleutnant* Hans Lange) torpedoed HMS *Bluebell* (Lt H. G. Walker RN). The little corvette, a veteran of so many Arctic convoys,<sup>20</sup> blew up and sank with the loss of all her crew except one.

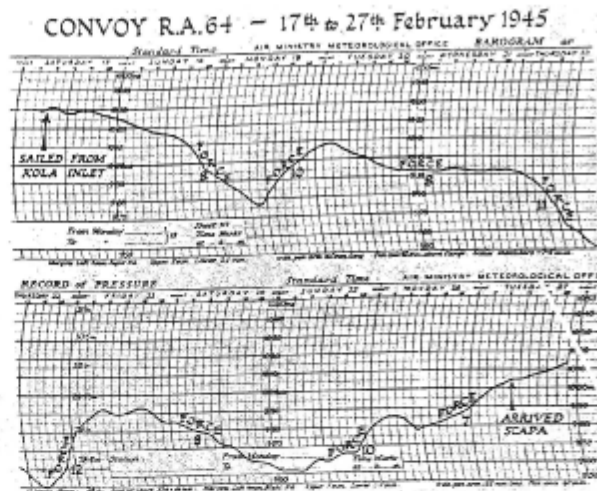
*Henry Bacon*, sinking 50 miles to the east—*Zest* and *Opportune* were dispatched to rescue the 65 survivors, this total including some of the Norwegian refugees from Sorøy.

The gale continued to buffet the convoy for the next two days, reducing its speed to about 3½kts. By this stage nearly all the escorts were running low on fuel, and the destroyers were detached to proceed independently to the Faeroes, fuel, and then return to the convoy as speedily as possible. Fortunately, the bad weather also hampered the *Luftwaffe* and the U-boats, for no further attacks materialized by either. RA.64's sufferings were nearly at an end. On 26 February McGrigor parted company, taking the two carriers and four destroyers with him and leaving the convoy in the hands of Capt R. F. Jessel of HMS *Zealous*. The latter brought the ships down to the Clyde, where they arrived without further incident on 1 March.

The JW/RA.64 pair were the last convoys to endure the full horrors of the Arctic.



Right: RA 64 convoy from Russia. Looking aft from the bridge of *Bellona* in Force 12 gale, 17PM



A copy of the barograph showing atmospheric pressure during the passage of convoy RA 64 from Russia.

RA 64 was chiefly notorious. It was probably the worst experienced throughout the war. The barograph chart illustrated tells the story of the last 10 days in meteorological terms. Photographs, such as those reproduced on pp 122-5 do little to convey the ferocity of a storm such as this. Winds of force 12, the highest rating in the Beaufort Scale, are of 70mph and upwards. At such velocities waves of impressive proportions build up, looking even bigger than they really are when seen from the bridge as the ship slithers and crashes, nose down, into the trough. Each new wave in an unending series comes beetle-browed and crested with froth and foam, seemingly insurmountable. In the dark troughs the spume is blown in parallel streaks and the whole of the surface is pock-marked by the ferocity of the wind.

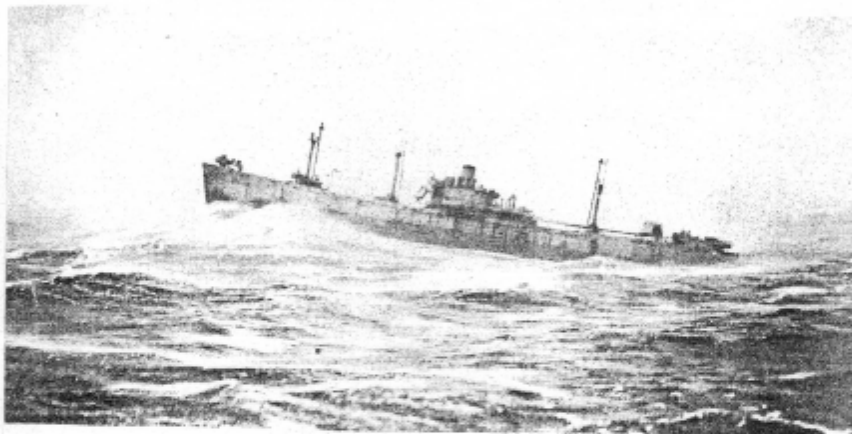
When properly handled, it is only the rarity of a mammoth wave, breaking like surf because of its instability, that has any danger for a well-found ship. It is the sound and the fury, and the violent motion of the

ship, hour after hour, that is exhausting. Anywhere between decks, and especially forward, everything becomes soaking wet with water sloshing over the decks and dripping from every bulkhead in an atmosphere of 100 per cent humidity. The very thought of being pitched out, with the loss of one's ship in action, into this screaming inferno of near-freezing water does not bear thinking of, and indeed no-one ever did think of it, until it happened and then not for long.

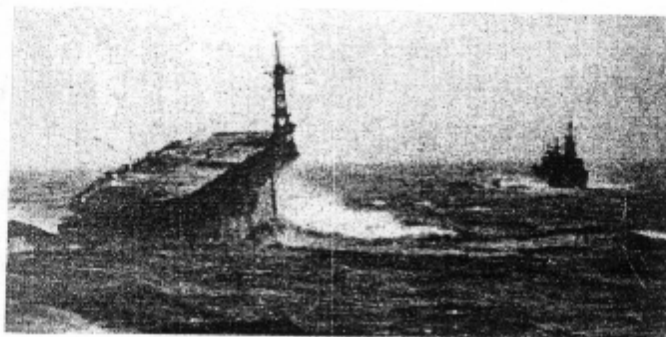
A third and final Russian convoy (JW/RA 66) escorted by *Bellona* with a strong escort of carriers, destroyers and corvettes, made in better weather and longer daylight had a distinctly end-of-term feeling about it. The last ship to be sunk in the war against Germany, the corvette, *HMS Goodall* was torpedoed on 30 April 1945 with heavy loss of life shortly after the start of the return journey. The officers had been onboard *Bellona* only a little while earlier, before sailing, and this was for her also the last, poignant, event of the shooting war.



The roughest convoy of the war, RA 64 from Kola Inlet to UK



A merchant ship in the storm which struck the return convoy RA 64. Winds of up to 70kts were encountered, and many ships were forced to heave-to with engine trouble while others had difficulty with shifting deck cargoes. The freighter *Henry Bacon* became detached from the convoy and was sunk by the *Luftwaffe* - the last ship to be sunk by German aircraft in the Second World War. (IWM A 27518)





The corvette Bluebell Torpedoed 16<sup>th</sup> Feb 1945



This iced-up warship indicates what the merchantmen had to endure on the Russian Run

U387 and U365 were sunk and several German aircraft shot down. Nor were any ships lost from the outward bound JW 64 (34 ships), but two of the 35 returning ships in RA 64 were torpedoed in a series of heavy attacks and a third was torpedoed by a U-boat at the outset of the voyage during which two carrier-borne fighters were lost. The corvette *Denbigh Castle* was hit by a homing torpedo on her way in to the Kola inlet on the very last lap of the outward journey, towed in and beached half-way up to Vaenga. On the return journey another corvette, *Bluebell* was torpedoed and blew up and a third, *Lark*, having herself sunk a U-boat, had her stern blown off.

- . 64. Captain E. Ullring. R. Ner. Navy. . Left Kola Inlet. 17/2/45.  
 1 Ship returned to harbour with weather damage.  
 34 ships sailed.. 4 were lost, 31 arrived Loch Ewe 28/2/45 and  
 Clyde 1/3/45/ (Excludes 2 sunk of Kola before joining R.A. 64.)  
 Remarks.- 1 returned to Kola. 1 sunk by U.Boat. 1 (straggler) sunk  
 by torpedo aircraft; 2 sunk before joining convoy off  
 Kola inlet.. H.M.S. Bluebell sunk by U-Boat-1 survivor.