

Correspondence

A medal for the Arctic?

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Ever since the end of the Second World War men who served on ships, both naval and merchant, which were involved in the transport of war materials to north Russia between 1941 and 1945 have sought recognition for their service with an appropriate campaign medal. They have failed to achieve this through a complicated muddle of government policy, ignorance and cold-heartedness.

In July 1941, Hitler launched the German army against the Soviet Union. These two disparate countries had in 1939 carved up Poland between them and the unexpected onslaught took the Russians by surprise. After the fall of France, the occupation of the Low Countries, Denmark and Norway, followed by the entry of an opportunistic Italy into the European war on the German side, Operation BARBAROSSA was the first event to give hope to Great Britain. Churchill had an ally in the unlikely person of Joseph Stalin and, having failed to alert the Russian leader to the imminent invasion of the USSR, the British premier sought to assist the Russian people in their great struggle by shipping to the ice-free ports of north Russia everything that could be spared from a beleaguered Britain trying to re-equip after the disaster of Dunkirk.

To this end a series of convoys were pushed through the Barents Sea to carry supplies to Archangel and Murmansk, the former closed by ice during the winter and the latter less than a dozen miles from German air-bases in Norway. Unlike the convoys traversing the north Atlantic, these Russian convoys were under threat from heavy warships of the Kriegsmarine, constant reconnaissance and aerial attacks by bombs and torpedoes from the Luftwaffe, as well as omnipresent U-boats, all of which were conveniently based in northern Norway. To this has to be added two other factors. First, they proceeded into a constricted funnel of navigable water circumscribed by land to the south and ice to the north; and second, they received only a little help from the Russian authorities who were ideologically unsympathetic. The only ameliorating factor that assisted what was considered a strategic impossibility was that in the winter, when the room for manoeuvre was limited, there was little daylight.

The ordeals through which individuals went to bring some measure of support to the Russians are too numerous to mention, but they are full of horrors. The worst convoy disaster of the war overtook Convoy PQ17 in the Barents Sea in the summer of 1942, due to an incorrect

appreciation of the movements of the German battleship *Tirpitz* and the bungled drafting of a signal from the Admiralty to the admiral commanding the heavy escort accompanying PQ17.

But this was a campaign separate from the trade convoys that formed the heart of the Battle of the Atlantic and, although many American, and many Russian, vessels took part, unlike the Allied struggle against the U-boat in the Atlantic, the Russian convoys were a series of operations run entirely by the Royal Navy (Woodman 2004).

In seeking a campaign medal it was this distinction that the veterans wanted recognised. Unfortunately the immediate descent of the Iron Curtain across Europe and the transformation of the Soviet Union into the post-war ‘enemy’ called the fact of wartime support for Russia into question. Quite why the sacrifice of British seamen of both the Royal and the Merchant Navies should be so overcast is an open question. Moreover it is a surprise that, in the wholesale issuing of campaign medals after the war by Attlee’s staunchly Labour government, the success, and despite the losses and the reverses, they were a success against heavy odds, these Arctic convoys were simply set aside. Officialdom claimed them to be merely an extension of the Battle of the Atlantic, waving protests



Fig. 1. Arctic badge.

to the contrary aside with the assurance that veterans were entitled to wear the Atlantic Star. In fact it was possible to have served in Arctic convoys yet fail to qualify for the Atlantic Star, a fact that rankled along with the knowledge that Russian convoys were not integral to the great struggle in the western ocean.

Every year since, the veterans in their distinctive white berets have marched past the Cenotaph devoid of any distinguishing campaign medal that sets them apart.

Then, last year, the government relented and gave these old heroes. . . a lapel-badge, the design of which comprises

a red circle inside a white star (Fig. 1). Proclaiming it was righting an ancient wrong this shoddy treatment denied them the medal to which they have a claim. As one veteran remarked ironically to me after parading at the Merchant Navy Memorial on Remembrance Sunday 2006, 'I've got my badge, but it reminds me of the Japanese flag.'

Reference

Woodman, R. 2004. *Arctic convoys, 1941–1945*. London: John Murray.