Convoy PQ17 assembles at Hvalfjord, Iceland, June 1942. PQ17 was ordered to scatter as the Admiralty feared an attack by the German battleship Tirpitz. The merchant ships were attacked by U-boats and aircraft, and only 11 out of 34 reached Russia. In all, 153 merchant seamen died. In the background is the Soviet tanker Azerbaijan, whose mainly female crew saved their ship after she was bombed and set on fire.

Arctic convoys - The Murmansk Run

RN Northern Ireland - In Remembrance
In April 1940 Nazi Germany occupied Norway under the pretext of defence of its nationals from the British invasion. On June 22, 1941 Germany attacked the USSR. The Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin, demanded help. On July 12, 1941 the Soviet Union and Great Britain signed the treaty on ‘mutual assistance’ against Germany.

The western Allies provided supplies. The most direct route was by sea, around northern Norway to the Soviet ports of Murmansk and Archangel.

In September 1941 Allied convoys commenced running to the Arctic port of Murmansk. (With the exception of several months in 1943 the convoys to the Soviet Union ran from 1941 until the war’s end).

The northern route of less than 2,500 miles was practical, but it crossed the cruelest seas of all, the Arctic Ocean. This Arctic route became known as ‘The Murmansk Run’.

The route passed through a narrow funnel between the Arctic ice pack and German bases in Norway, and was very dangerous, especially in winter when the ice came further south. Many of the convoys were attacked by German
submarines, aircraft and warships. Convoy PQ17 was almost destroyed.

Conditions were among the worst faced by any Allied sailors. As well as the Germans, they faced extreme cold, gales, and pack ice. The loss rate for ships was higher than any other allied convoy route.

Over four million tons of supplies were delivered to the Russians. As well as tanks and aircraft, these included less sensational but still vital items like trucks, tractors, telephone wire, railway engines and boots.

Although the supplies were valuable, the most important contribution made by the Arctic convoys was political. They proved that the Allies were committed to helping the Soviet Union, whilst deflecting Stalin’s demands for a 'Second Front' (An Allied invasion of western Europe) until they were ready. The convoys also tied up a large part of Germany’s dwindling naval and air forces.

For the gruelling years of the Second World War the Soviet, British, American, Canadian, South African and other military and merchant sailors ploughing the Arctic seas within the Convoys
discharged their allied duty with honour. They endured the fire miles of the World War II, and supplied arms, ammunition, food and thousands of tons of other strategic cargo to Soviet Russia, essential to our war effort.

The hard stats

Between August 1941 and the end of the war, a total of 78 convoys made the perilous journey to and from north Russia, carrying four million tons of supplies for use by Soviet forces fighting against the German Army on the Eastern Front.

In summary, about 1400 merchant ships delivered vital supplies to Russia. 85 merchant vessels and 16 Royal Navy warships were lost. Towards the end of the war the material significance of the supplies was probably not as great as the symbolic value hence the continuation of these convoys long after the Russians had turned the German land offensive.

On the whole these convoys delivered about 4,5 million metric tons of cargoes, which is about one fourth of the western allies’ total aid. The cargoes included over 7,000 airplanes, about 5,000 tanks, cars, fuel, medicines, outfits, metals and other raw materials.

RN Northern Ireland - In Remembrance
Frozen hell: Sailors chipping away the ice and snow from the deck of H.M.S. Vansittart while on convoy escort duty in the Arctic in February 1943

The Allied seamen showed true heroism in their long and perilous sea passages in convoys, being constantly attacked by enemy forces in the appalling weather conditions of the Arctic. The bravery of these men and women who unsparingly fought for the victory will be always remembered and respected.

The convoy system

Originally convoys started to be used at the beginning of the war in 1939. The system of
convoys provided for formation of large groups of merchant ships under the escort of military vessels for making sea trips. Such a system is organizationally complicated and hardly effective since the speed of any convoy does not exceed speed of its slowest ship.

On ‘The Murmansk Run’ a convoy set off each month, except in the summer when the lack of darkness made them very vulnerable to attack.

On the other hand, in the darkness of the Arctic winter, when the sun never rose, keeping station was difficult for the poorly equipped merchant ships, so there was always a danger of ship-to-ship collision. Sailing around the northern tip of Norway, the convoys would be exposed to one of the largest concentrations of German U-boats, surface raiders and aircraft anywhere in the world.

Strict orders forbade the halting of any ship for even a moment for fear of being attacked by prowling German U-boats, and individuals who fell overboard or survivors seen adrift on the waters had to be ruthlessly ignored. Each delivery of arms was an epic achievement, described as undertaking the impossible.
Notable convoys

Some of the convoys are particularly notable.

On August 12, 1941 the first convoy 'Dervish' departed Liverpool to Scapa Flow. It was composed of 6 British and a Dutch merchant ship. It reached Archangel with no losses on August 31 and delivered 10,000 tons of rubber, 3,800 depth-bombs and magnetic mines, 15 'Hurricane' fighters and other equipment.

At first the Allied convoys went unnamed and unnumbered. After several round trips were successfully completed, a coding system was established. All convoys bound for the Soviet Union were designated 'PQ' and those returning were designated 'QP'. The name of the officer who was monitoring convoys in the British Admiralty was P. Q. Edwards, his initials 'PQ' were used to mark the convoys heading outward and QP - homeward.

On September 28, 1941 the first of the PQ-convoys made up of 10 merchant ships under the escort of a cruiser and 2 destroyers departed Iceland to Archangel and reached it safely on October 11, 1941.
By the end of 1941, seven convoys had delivered 750 tanks, 800 planes, 2,300 vehicles and more than 100,000 tons of general cargo to the Soviet Union. Convoy PQ-8 was attacked by a U-boat but came to Murmansk on January 19, 1942. By early February 1942, 12 northbound convoys including 93 ships had made the journey with the loss of only one ship to a U-boat.

During 1941 the enemy did not put up serious resistance to the convoys in the Arctic still setting hopes on blitzkrieg. After the failure of the offensive on Moscow, Germany started a systematic fight against convoys by means of its fleet, submarines and air force.

By the beginning of 1942 Germany additionally deployed in the arena one of the worlds’ best battleships - Tirpitz, two heavy cruisers, 10 destroyers and later another battleship and cruiser, plus 260 Luftwaffe military aircraft. Most of the time all these forces acted simultaneously by delivering massive strikes at the convoys.

**PQ17 - a horrendous loss**

By the end of June 1942, PQ-17, the largest and most valuable convoy in the history of the run, was formed up and ready to sail for Murmansk.
Appalling cold: Snow and ice covered the upper works of all ships. Some 3,000 servicemen were awarded bravery medals for taking part in the daring campaign and Archangel. Its cargo was worth a staggering $700 million. Crammed into bulging holds were nearly 300 aircraft, 600 tanks, more than 4,000 trucks and trailers, and a general cargo that exceeded 150,000 tons. It was more than enough to completely equip an army of 50,000.

It sailed from Iceland on June 27, 1942. Thirty-five cargo ships were escorted by six destroyers and 15 other armed vessels. One ship was a catapult-armed merchantman that carried a
Hawker Hurricane fighter which could be launched to intercept enemy aircraft and perform reconnaissance. Due to the threat from German surface ships, the convoy was ordered to scatter on July 4, and the escorts were withdrawn rather than risk their loss.

The toll taken on the abandoned convoy was horrendous. Only 11 of the 35 merchantmen that left Iceland finally made it to the Soviet Union. Fourteen of the sunken ships were American. More than two-thirds of the convoy had gone to the bottom, along with 210 combat planes, 430 Sherman tanks, 3,350 vehicles and nearly 100,000 tons of other cargo. More than 120 seamen were killed and countless others were crippled and maimed.

PQ-18 was the last convoy of this series which became the largest convoy formation. It departed on September 2, 1942 and was escorted by more than 30 military vessels, including 1 cruiser and 14 destroyers, as well as 2 tankers, 4 trawlers and a salvage ship. In total 51 vessels took part in this operation. 27 transport ships of PQ-18 delivered 150 thousand tons of cargo to Archangel which equaled to the total cargo amount supplied in 1941.
In November 1942 the convoys’ marking was changed for the reasons of secrecy to the following identifiers: JW for the journey to Russia and RA for the return journey.

By the end of 1942 well over a million tons of Allied shipping had been sent to the bottom of the Atlantic. 85 U-boats had gone there too. Slowly but surely the Battle of the Atlantic was turning the Allies’ way.

In January 1943 a great success was achieved. The convoy JW51B was attacked by the cruiser Hipper and the pocket battleship Luetzow, but the allied escort was able to drive off the attacking forces. After this victory, convoys ran regularly, with breaks from March to November 1943 and in the summer of 1944, until the end of the war. A total of 14 convoys sailed to Russia from November 1943 to May 1945 with only 13 ships lost altogether.

U-boats were losing their effectiveness as Allied submarine-hunting techniques improved through 1944. The battleship Tirpitz, always more potent as a threat than actual weapon, was finally sunk at her Tromso anchorage by RAF bombers on 12/11/1944.
Four Northern Ireland men in ill-fated HMS Lapwing

James Bickerstaff from Castlereagh, Edward Close from Banbridge and Henry Gordon from Belfast were lost in HMS Lapwing on ‘The Murmansk Run’ escorting one of the last convoys in the closing months of the war. Thomas Jess of Lisburn was amongst the sixty survivors.

Lapwing, a 1460 ton escort sloop, was completed and delivered to the RN in 1944.

Convoy JW65 made up of 26 ships left the Clyde estuary on 11/03/1945. Its principal protector was
The crew photograph taken on board Lapwing after a Church parade late May 1944 in Grenock, prior to preparations for participating in the D-day landings.

The Seventh Escort Group of which Lapwing was part.

Despite the fact that the Russian army had almost reached Berlin, the German navy and airforce kept up their attacks on the Arctic convoys. The Germans detected Convoy JW65 by radio transmissions and then ordered a number of U-boats in its direction.

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On 23/03/1945 very dense snow showers and rain squalls grounded the convoy’s air patrols and the Russia land-based fighter cover was also affected. The Germans took advantage of the weather and during this wind of opportunity the US ship Horace Bushnell was sunk. Three hours later the convoy encountered the second line of U-boats.

At about 1235 Lapwing was struck amidships by a torpedo from U-968. She broke in half and sunk within 20 minutes. The sinking took place about six miles off Cape Kildin on the Kola inlet. U-968 then sank a further US ship, the Thomas Donaldson.

The convoy then proceeded to Murmansk without further loss.

Thomas Jess was a gunner on Lapwing. He was blown 10 yards across the deck when the torpedo struck the destroyer.

"The explosion just lifted me off my feet, skinning all my knuckles," he said.

“But I was lucky as I always wore my lifebelt, which was my best friend at sea. Other fellows were more careless. There was one poor man
Survivors photographed in Greenock, Scotland on their return March 1945. Thomas Jess - back row second from right

who tried to make his way below for his lifebelt but he never got back up on deck."

After the torpedo ripped through the ship's hull, he stayed at his post until the abandon ship order was given. Then he jumped into the freezing sea and was lucky enough to be pulled onto a raft that had been thrown overboard by the crew.

"There were about 16 of us on the raft when we set off and then one by one they fell off in the cold. I fell unconscious while we drifted for at
least two hours...There were just six of us pulled on board HMS Savage when we were rescued... ...And one of them died on the deck of HMS Savage. I'll always remember that man,"

**No losses on final convoy**

The last convoy left on May 12, 1945, arriving at Murmansk on May 22, 1945. It had no losses. Between August 1941 and the end of the war, a total of 78 convoys made the perilous journey to and from north Russia, carrying four million tons of supplies for use by Soviet forces fighting against the German Army on the Eastern Front.

**HMS Belfast**

The last surviving British warship which participated in the Arctic Convoys is HMS Belfast, moored on the Thames opposite the Tower of London. Victory Day commemorations and award ceremonies for UK veterans of the Convoys are held aboard. In 2010 a restoration project for HMS Belfast was conveyed by a number of Russian companies.
ROLL OF HONOUR
ARCTIC CONVOYS

BICKERSTAFF, James

CLOSE, Edward

DUMIGAN, John Beattie
RN. Convoy Signalman. C/JX 234041. S.S Fort Bellingham. Died 25/01/1944. At 00.16 hours on U-360 (Becker) fired a spread of three FAT torpedoes at the convoy JW-56A in the Barents Sea north of North Cape in 73°45N/24°48E and heard three hits. In fact, the only ship hit was that of the convoy commodore Cmdr I.W. Whitehorn RN, the Fort Bellingham (Master James Ninian Maley). It fell behind the convoy, where she was sunk by U-957 with a T-3 torpedo at 06.53 hours the same day. The master, the commodore, four naval staff members, 22 crew members and seven gunners were picked up by HMS Offa (G 29) (LtCdr R.F. Leonard, RN) and landed at Murmansk. Two crew members were taken prisoner by U-957. 18 crew members, 16 gunners and two naval staff members were lost including JB Dumigan. Son of John and Martha

RN Northern Ireland - In Remembrance
Dumigan; husband of Rhoda M. Dumigan, Carrickfergus. Chatham Naval Memorial, Panel 76

GORDON, Henry

McKEOWN, William
RN. Telegraphist. D/JX344845. Died 21/08/1944. The Black Swan-class sloop HMS Kite was escorting a convoy to Russia when it was torpedoed by U-344 on 21/08/1944. 183 died. Only nine members of the crew survived as Kite sank almost immediately. Son of William and Martha McKeown, Antrim town. Plymouth Naval Memorial, Panel 88.

WEIR, John Dennison

ARCTIC CONVOYS THEY SERVED

BULLICK, William Joshua
CUNNNINGHAM, Joseph Irwin  
RNVR. Surgeon Lt. Cmdr. RNVR, MBE (Military). He served on destroyers and cruisers during the Battle of the Atlantic, North Russian Convoys, and the Mediterranean. He was decorated by King George VI for heroism at Flensburg, where the ammunition dump exploded a few days after the war ended. As a physician he put his life in great danger to save the lives of others, who shortly before had been his enemies. Following VE Day he was reassigned to the Pacific theatre. He was en route when the war ended, but as a result made his first visit to Victoria, BC. Post war he worked in Newfoundland and the wilds of northern Manitoba, Hudson Bay and Resolute Island. Born only a few yards from the sea, he always loved the ocean and sailing. He sailed single-handed across the Atlantic in 1952 (westward) and 1957 (eastward) in his 25 1/2 foot boat, Icebird, becoming the first Canadian and only third in the world to do so in both directions. At the end of the fifties he "settled down" as one of the doctors and a member of the diplomatic corps in various Canadian Embassies overseas. In Vienna, Austria, he met his wife, Edith, whom he married in 1958 in Salzburg. Their first home was on the aptly named Paradise Walk in London. After moves to Germany, Finland, Holland, Austria and Scotland, and now with four sons, they settled in Victoria in 1972. He had a strong faith and loved to serve as an Elder in the Presbyterian Church of Canada. He was described as, “A wonderful father, loving husband, distinguished veteran, sailing pioneer, respected elder, man of humility, integrity and great faith.” Died 15/11/2009. Born Portrush 14/07/1916 to William Irwin Cunningham and Margaret Cunningham (nee Irwin). MB BCh QUB 1938.
DEMPSTER, Harry  
RN. Russian convoys. North St., Newtownards

EAKINS, Charles Roberts  
RNVR. Lt. Cdr. Joined before the war. Served entire war in corvettes in the Atlantic and Arctic convoys. Torpedoed in Empire Byron on the way to Murmansk in PQ17. He was one of a handful of survivors to be rescued by HMS Danillo a week later and ended at Archangel. He then served on convoys to Malta. His eventful war ended as Officer I/C guns in Admiralty. Uncle of Arthur Eakins, RAMC TA.

GALLAGHER, Patrick  
Served 1934 - 48. Joined HMS Ganges. In war served in HMS Norfolk, county class heavy cruiser, and was involved in hunt for the Bismark in 1941. Later served in HMS Norfolk on Arctic convoys. Received the Arctic Star on 04/12/2013 when he was aged 94. From Limavady. Resident of Glasgow. Brother of Hugh Gallagher, Limavady RNA.

HANLON, George  
RN. Served in a number of theatres of operations including Arctic convoys. LOL 9 Clounagh, Portadown.

HARTIN, John  
L/Sig. Served 03/40 - 06/46. HMS Meteor in September 1942 was deployed as part of the escort for the Arctic convoy PQ18 to the Soviet Union and the return Convoy QP14. Following the return from the Arctic, in November 1942, Meteor acted as part of the destroyer screen for the Home Fleet during Operation Torch, the Anglo-American invasion of French North Africa. Operations Pedestal and Torch. Founder member Limavady RNA.
HIGGINSON, Isaac  
RN. Volunteered aged 17. Served 1934 - 1948. Serving in HMS Black Prince, he was one of the hundreds of men who helped protect a vital supply link to the Russian front during the war, on what Winston Churchill called the worst journey in the world. Seventy years later in July 2013 at the age of 95, he received his Arctic Star at an RBL parade in Ballyclare marking the 97th anniversary of the battle of the Somme.

Later he was in HMS Valiant, eight days out of Cape Town South Africa, when the ship was torpedoed and sunk by a German submarine. Issac years later commented that he felt very lucky to be alive having clung to a tiny balsa raft with two others for what seemed an eternity. Sixteen hours later the submarine surfaced and escaping execution they ended up as internees in a prison in Casablanca. Issac got his long awaited leave nine months later when the Americans arrived and released them. During his 14 years in the Navy he also served with the Duke of Edinburgh, Prince Philip. Ballyclare

JESS, Thomas  
RN. Gunner. Arctic convoys. HMS Lapwing survivor. See above. Thomas Jess lived in Lisburn

MAYNE, WS  
AB. Gunner. On board HMS Pozarica, a converted merchant man and A.A. ship which accompanied the ill-fated convoy PQ. 17 to North Russia. He is mentioned among survivors of 'P.Q. 17 - Convoy to Hell' by Harry Ludlam and Paul Lund. It was Mayne who first spotted a large number of German seaplanes landing on the sea before coming in to attack. On another occasion his vigilance in spotting an attacking Heinkel 115 resulted in the aircraft being shot down.

RN Northern Ireland - In Remembrance
McCULLAGH, JDR
Lieutenant Commander. VRD. In September 1939 appointed to HMS Revenge. Engaged in North Atlantic escort duty and took part in a bombardment of the French coast after German occupation. In November 1941 appointed to HMS Cairo A.A. cruiser, and continued in this ship until August 1942 on North Atlantic escort convoy duties, including trip to Murmansk to convoy Russian V.I.P's. To Mediterranean in the spring of 1942, again on convoy duties from Gibraltar to Malta ('the club run'). Many air and submarine attacks until Cairo was finally sunk by torpedo in August, 1942, he was carried overboard when serving as quarters officer 'Y' turret when the stern was blown off, being one of the only two survivors out of the gun's crew of eighteen. He sustained fractured skull and leg injuries. Sick leave August 1942-November 1942, after which he was appointed to shore duties at Brighton. June 1943 to November 1943 appointed H.M.S. Slinger, an aircraft carrier employed on North Atlantic escort duty. Between November 1943 and June 1944 served as staff officer in the operations room at H.M.S. Boscawen, Portland. November 1944 appointed to H.M.S. Jewel and was engaged in minesweeping in the North Sea. Served in the Ulster Division post-war.

McFARLAND, Thomas James
Signals. Served 01/41 - 03/46; 53 - 54. RNPS Arctic convoys. Limavady RNA

SPARKSMAN, Norman
STEWART, James
RN. 1941 - 46. A native of Londonderry. Involved in "Operation Fuller", serving in one of the MTB's sent out to intercept the Brest Squadron when they forced the channel in Feb. 1942. (Operation Cerberus - which was to return them to German "home waters"). He also did some of the early PQ runs to Russia, and was part of the naval component of the Bruneval Raid the aim of which was to capture German radar parts and operatives. Night actions fought against E Boats in the Channel ("Off the Texel") and D-Day. In May 45 he was mustered as a member of a boarding party which took several U-boats from Loch Ryan to Lisahally on the Foyle.

Known as “Bob”, he was one of four brothers who served during the war. Two did not return. James died when his Halifax was shot down in September 1943. He is buried on Ameland, Donald died in Japanese hands in April 1944, a POW since the fall of Hong Kong.

James joined the RUC in 1946 - serving until 1976. Severely injured by a booby trap bomb following his retirement. On recovery he returned to work for the NI Police Authority until retiring in 1982. Died 1998

TEGGARTY, Frank
RN. Act. Petty Officer. MiD. In HMS Bergamot, a Flower class corvette. Served in S Atlantic, N Atlantic, Russian convoys (MiD), and Mediterranean. Father of Rev Karl Teggarty. Christ Church, Kilkeel WM

HELP REQUESTED
Please send names of Ex RN/RM/WRNS who served in either of the world wars. Details also appreciated.

RN Northern Ireland - In Remembrance
CIRCULATION - Please share ‘Brave Report’ with your former service colleagues - and we will post direct to them if they simply send an e-mail to: houston.mckelvey@btinternet.com, placing Brave Report in the message bar, and give their name and former arm of service, and if they are members of the RNA or RBL, having knowledge of their branch would be appreciated. There are specific areas where we need information from!

PUBLICATION NOTES
Please note all the material in Brave Report is copyright.
Brave Report is collated and published by The Very Rev. Dr Houston McKelvey, OBE QVRM TD.

Dr McKelvey served as chaplain for 29 years with 102/105 (Ulster & Scottish) Regiment, Royal Artillery TA; for 20 years as Chaplain to the RBL - Northern Ireland Area, and for a period as chaplain to the Belfast Branch of the Burma Star Association. He was involved in the life of HMS Caroline and HMS Hibernia. He was appointed an Honorary Chaplain to the RNR. He is a Past President of QUB Combined Services Club.