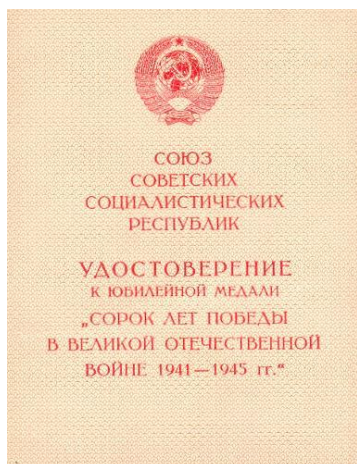


Mr Ralph Hill got in touch with the **Holm Heritage Group** to offer them a chapter from his autobiography, entitled "The Russian Gold Medal and the Arctic Star". A copy of this chapter was deposited amongst the archives of the Department of Documents in the Imperial War Museum, Lambeth Road, London SE1 6HZ, in 1995, but is now also available to view below.

THE RUSSIAN GOLD MEDAL and THE ARCTIC STAR

By Ralph Hill



We arrived in Scapa Flow at 1030 on February 15th 1944, oiled at the oiler, and moored at buoy 26, which happened to be our Pennant Number. Some of the Home Fleet were in, including several battleships. It was pleasant to be able to wash again, and to have some potatoes, and very good bread. We then tied up astern of *Mahratta*, alongside the Destroyer Depot ship *Tyne*, which was as big as a cruiser and carried eight 4.5" guns. She seemed so huge to us that I had the impression that, just as we might *pipe Clear Lower Deck, up whaler*, so they might well have piped *Clear Lower Deck, up Watchman*, and we would have been hoisted onto a pair of their davits.

Next day we were officially listed as a Home Fleet Destroyer, and I went aboard *Tyne* at 1930 for a cinema show. On the 17th I went aboard again for a bath, and later, when aboard for signals, there was an air-raid warning, and they piped Action stations. All hatches were battened down, and all watertight doors screwed shut, the crew transformed themselves into ghosts by donning their anti-flash gear, and the guns were loaded with anti-aircraft shell. I found it claustrophobic, and decided that perhaps small ships were best.

Later the V.A.D. (Vice-Admiral, Destroyers) spoke to us on the upper deck, and we were issued with special khaki fleece-lined coats, thick balaclavas, scarves, and double-thick long grey woollen underpants, and our pipes were all lagged with asbestos. When they also issued dufflecoats to the stokers it was obvious where we were bound.

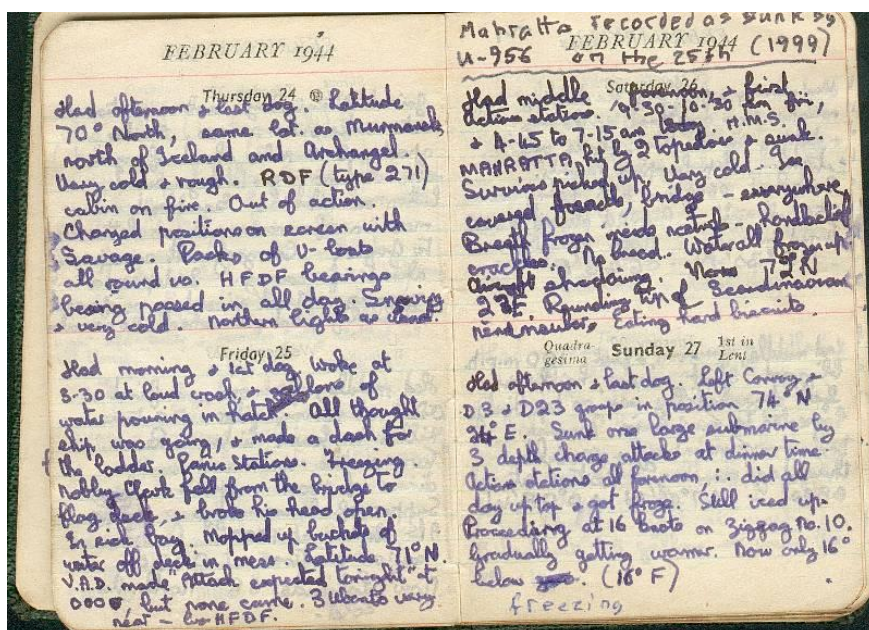
The ships in harbour included the *King George V* Class Battleships *Duke of York* and *Anson*, the Cruisers *Belfast*, *Bermuda*, *Berwick*, *Black Prince*, *Dragon*, *Nigeria*, *Royalist* and *Sheffield*, the Aircraft-Carriers *Chaser* and *Furious*, the Destroyers *Impulsive*, *Mahratta*, *Marne*, *Matchless*, *Milne*, *Obdurate*, *Obedient*, *Onslaught*, *Oribi*, *Piorun* (on loan to the Polish Navy, formerly *Nerissa*), *Seraphis*, *Stord* (on loan to the Norwegian Navy, renamed from *Success*) *Wanderer*, *Watchman*, *Verulam*, the Frigates *Byron* and *Strule*, and the Minelayer *Apollo*.

On the 19th I attended Communion in the Church of St.Christopher aboard *Tyne*. We oiled and went out for *HFD* calibration, and returned to buoy 26. On Sunday 20th Group B1 slipped just before 2000 and sailed, in line ahead. The Senior Officer was now aboard *Strule*, followed by *Watchman*, *Wanderer*, and *Byron*, which was a Yankee sub-buster built without rivets in 14 days. The next pipe was *Hands to wear lifebelts and to remain fully-clothed at all times*. At noon next day we arrived in Skaale Fjord in the Faeroe Islands, and oiled at the oiler. Later the ice of the fjord was again broken by the entry of Groups D3 and B2, - *Captain 'D'* in *Milne*. All around us towered the snow-covered mountains. On the 22nd we joined our convoy of 100 ships, and took up our positions on the Outer Screen, five miles apart and nine miles ahead of the Inner Screen. At one point, by putting the wheel *hard over*, we narrowly missed a surfaced mine.

At that time Stalin was demanding that we should open a *Second Front* - the invasion of Europe, to relieve the terrible strain under which the Russian Army was labouring. We were not ready to do so until June of that year. In the meantime it was essential to continue taking arms and supplies to the Russians, but our route ran the entire length of the long west coast of Norway, which was under enemy occupation, and they had hundreds of deep fjords in which their U-Boats could lurk, and airfields beyond for their bombers. This presented a continuous danger to us, but there was a greater, which we tried not to think about. The enemy also had powerful surface-raiders. The *Scharndhorst* had come out against a previous convoy, and had been sunk, but it was feared that her sister-ship the *Gneisnau* might come out, and we in little ships on the outer screen felt somewhat doubtful about matching our 4" guns against her 16" guns and armour-plate.

On the 23rd we took 70 tons of fuel at the convoy oiler. At 66° 32' North we entered the Arctic Circle. We came to daily dawn action-stations at 0730, and to special anti-submarine action-stations at 1800, having reached 68° North. Next day we were 70° North, having passed the latitudes of Archangel and Murmansk. It was so cold that we could see vapour rising in our wake, our cold steel hull being so much warmer than the sea. Survival-time in the sea would have been only a few minutes. Fire broke out in our ASDIC cabin, putting our 271 out of action, so we were ordered to exchange places with *Savage* on the Inner Screen. There were packs of U-Boats all around us - the Admiralty thoughtfully encouraging us with jolly signals such as, *There are now 20 - 30 - 40 U-Boats in your vicinity*. The number rose to 50 at one time. On the 25th we were awoken by a loud crash, and gallons of water pouring through the hatch. Convinced that the ship was going, there was a dash for the ladder. Nobby Clark fell from the bridge to the flag-deck and broke his head open, and was whisked off to the sick-bay. We had reached 71° North, and V.A.D. made *Attack expected tonight*.

We had a special *HFDF* aerial astern, which looked like a spider's attempt to construct a beehive. Our *Headache Operator*, who was fluent in German, used it to listen-in to the U-Boat Commanders' conversations. Once their talk came through so loud that he felt sure they must be alongside, and in panic he started to run up the Wardroom ladder, but found that something was holding him back. It was his headphones, still plugged into the set below, so he recovered his sense of humour and returned to his post. I learned a little piece of German from him. I asked him the derivation of the term *flak*, and he said it stood for *FlugabwehrKanone* - anti-aircraft fire, though my dictionary gives *Flieger*.



On the 26th *Mahratta* was struck by two torpedoes and sunk. By this time the whole superstructure of *Watchman* was covered in ice formed by the freezing of the spray, and it was steadily becoming thicker. Such a covering can weigh 300-400 tons, and puts a narrow-beamed ship in great danger of capsizing. A ship's siren always leaks a little steam, and an icicle about 17' long was hanging from ours. My breath froze inside my nostrils, and my handkerchief, kept perforce in an outer pocket, crackled when I tried to use it. Those with beards found that the hair around the corners of their mouths froze, obliging them to speak like convicts, without moving their mouths, and any unwary shout caused some agony. At Action-stations for long periods, it was not possible to go below to use *The Heads*, so we kept an iron bucket at the back of the bridge for common use, and it froze solid soon after each contribution. We reached 72° North, 23° East, rounding the tip of the Scandinavian Peninsular. We were continually seeing the *Aurora Borealis* (Northern Lights), - in my opinion a ghastly rather than a beautiful sight.

On Sunday 27th we left the convoy at 74° North 24° East. At noon we sunk a large U-Boat by three depth-charge attacks. When under attack, a U-Boat might put a few cushions and other jetsam into an empty torpedo-tube and fire it out, to rise to the surface and give us the impression that our attack had been successful, but we were aware of all their tricks. I was officially on the Afternoon and Last Dog, but since we were at Action-Stations all the Forenoon I was on the bridge all day, and was well-nigh frozen. Yeoman Hughes said afterwards that I was the only man he had ever seen to be asleep standing up. We were sailing south at 16 knots, and soon we were appreciably warmer, at only 16° below Zero.

A submarine's best method of attack is to take up a position ahead of the target, fine on its port or starboard bow, so to defeat this tactic a ship or a convoy follows a complicated zigzag course. We had a book full of these, all different, setting out the exact times and distances between changes of course, and the exact angle of each turn to be made, and giving the resultant extra time that would be taken to sail from the starting-point of each zigzag to its conclusion. The submarine -commander finds it impossible to calculate what and when the next change will be, and, having taken up his position, may suddenly find his target either veering sharply away from him or bearing suddenly down upon him. On the 27th we were on Zigzag number 10. The higher the speed, the harder it is for a submarine to attack. Since *the speed of the convoy is the speed of the slowest ship*, some convoys can barely manage 7 or 8 knots. At 16 we felt tolerably safe, except from *Gneisnau*.

On the 28th it became steadily rougher, and to add to our discomfort the ice from the deck-head was thawing and dripping into everything. Our course all night was 256°, altered to 225° at 0600, and to 207° at 2000, our noon position being 70°30' North, 06°08' East. Leap-Year Day, the 29th, we celebrated in a 100 m.p.h. blizzard, and up on the bridge we were drenched by sleet, snow, hail, rain, and sea-water, our position at 0800 being 67° North, 00°08' West.

Our plates had suffered from the battering we had taken, and three of our four starboard fuel-tanks were full but unusable through contamination by sea-water, and the port tanks were almost empty, severely upsetting our trim. Still in the 100 m.p.h. blizzard, we were listing up to 60° with each starboard roll. Taking my usual starboard-side route to reach the bridge for the Middle Watch, my feet slipped as I was climbing the vertical ladder and I found myself hanging by my arms clear over the sea. I scrambled gingerly down and went around to the port side, where I found the ladder at an unusually helpful angle.

We had only 16 tons of available fuel left whilst still 45 miles from Skaale Fjord. When we arrived in pitch darkness on March 1st, Yeoman Hughes was hanging on to the two handles of a 30" searchlight, struggling to keep it trained on the entrance, but visibility was too poor to find the official gap in the anti-submarine boom, so

we made our own gap, crashing through just as the engines gave out, and shuddering to a halt at 0615, about one cable short of the anchored oiler. If the searchlight lamp had failed, or if the fuel had given out five minutes sooner, the ship would have been wrecked upon the rocks, and all hands, including this pair, lost.

With no steam there was no lighting, no heating, no hot food nor drink - a veritable H.M.S. *Hypothermia*. In spite of some warm work bailing out the 25 gallons of water from Ten Mess, Thursday March 2nd was the coldest day I had ever endured, and the night was worse. However, I was able at last to go aft and replace our tattered Ensign, which I had been too busy to attend to before. As a result of its valiant flapping in the wind, three-quarters of its length had gone, and the remaining quarter, pierced by a bullet, at the time of writing hangs in my garage.

It was not until noon on the following day that *Strule* could manoeuvre alongside to give us enough fuel to steam that 200 yards to the oiler. Although the fuel was crude oil, black, near-solid, and smelling like rotten eggs, and the filling-hatch was down in the floor of our messdeck, on that day we were mightily glad to see it. However, in coming alongside, *Strule's* great overhanging bows smashed into our whaler resting in its davits, reducing it to matchwood.

Next afternoon the divers reported a mass of tangled steel-wire mesh wrapped around both screws, and at 1800 we sailed with *Strule*, using the port engine only, throbbing and shaking all the way to Londonderry, arriving early on March 6th. I went on leave next day, but my shipmates who remained aboard saw 17 tons of steel-wire mesh cut from around our screws and taken away in several lorries, and the King bought us a nice new whaler. I presume he also bought Skaale Fjord a nice new boom.

In 1985 I received the Russian Commemorative Medal from their Embassy in London. It was not intended to be worn, but ten years later, the *Cold War* having relaxed, the Queen gave us permission to wear it. When it was first in the news, part of my story was published in the *Bexhill Observer*, and as a result I had a call from a fellow-signalman then living in Bexhill with whom I had often communicated officially by ten-inch signal-lamp, and chatted with unofficially from the back of the bridge with a pair of flags, but whose voice I had never before heard. He had been aboard *Strule*, and remembered crashing into us. and another surprise was to find that he had been a survivor from *Hurricane*, which we had sunk on Christmas Day.





ПОСОЛЬСТВО
СОЮЗА СОВЕТСКИХ
СОЦИАЛИСТИЧЕСКИХ РЕСПУБЛИК
13, Kensington Palace Gardens,
London W8

Dear Mr. *W. Hill*

It gives me a genuine pleasure to congratulate you on behalf of the Ambassador of the USSR with the Soviet medal which comes to yourself as recognition of your contribution to our common struggle against Fascism during the last war.

The Medal has an inscription in Russian: 'To the participant of war on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Victory in the Great Patriotic War 1941-1945. Let me remind you that this is not a campaign medal but a commemorative one. As such it is not intended to be worn.

The medal is being forwarded to you by recorded mail within this letter. Would you kindly acknowledge its receipt.

With best wishes for you and your kin.

Yours respectfully,

A. Nikiforov
A. Nikiforov
Counsellor