

“‘A Most Melancholy Naval Episode’: PQ17 and the Murmansk Convoys of the
Second World War”

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Winston Churchill was once asked why he never started any of his speeches by saying what a pleasure it was to address whoever his audience happened to be. He responded that to speak in public was often an honour, but it was never a pleasure. As a somewhat reluctant public speaker myself, I would normally agree with this sentiment. But in this case, it is an honour and a pleasure to stand in for my uncle, Dr. John Collins, who not only survived being torpedoed and sunk off the American eastern seaboard in early 1942 but also overcame the hardships and hazards of the infamous *Murmansk Run*.

The Artic Convoys to Northern Russia beginning in August 1941 were arguably the most dangerous convoy series of the Second World War. Not only were they targeted by Germany’s formidable U-boat fleet but also the *Luftwaffe* and *Kriegsmarine* surface units based out of German-occupied Norway. And, should your ship be sunk beneath you, survival in the sub-zero temperatures of the Artic Circle was usually measured in mere minutes. The most notorious of the Artic convoys, and the one that best demonstrates the dangers thereof, was the infamous PQ17.

On 27 June 1942, convoy PQ17 consisting of 35 merchant ships plus escort sailed from Iceland for the port of Archangel, in the Kola Inlet, off the Barents Sea, Russia. The convoy’s close escort was EG1, under Cdr. John Broome RN, which included six destroyers, 11 corvettes, minesweepers, and armed trawlers, plus two anti-aircraft auxiliaries. The First Cruiser Squadron, commanded by Rear Admiral Louis Hamilton RN, consisting of the British cruisers HMS *London* and *Norfolk*, the American cruisers USS *Wichita* and *Tuscaloosa*, and two RN and two USN destroyers, provided further

distant cover. As additional protection, the convoy was also tracked by Home Fleet units under Admiral John Tovey RN.

Despite this formidable escort, U-456 sighted PQ17 on 1 July after which the convoy was shadowed continuously and attacked by Luftwaffe bomber and torpedo aircraft. Meanwhile, British air reconnaissance late on 3 July confirmed that the Nazi superbattleship *Tirpitz* and heavy cruiser *Hipper* had sortied Trondheim for the Norwegian Sea, destination unknown.

On July 4, expecting the German heavy units would attack PQ17 from the northwest, the Admiralty instructed Hamilton's cruisers along with the Broome's destroyer escort to form a barrier force, at the same time ordering the merchant ships to scatter and make to Russian ports as best they could. Unfortunately, in their ensuing attempts to reach safety, including painting their ships white and hiding out amongst islands and iceflows, PQ17's survivors were picked off one by one by German air and U-boat forces. Of the initial 35 ships that left Iceland on 27 June, only 11 reached their destinations.

Over 150 merchant seamen lost their lives in the Battle for PQ17, and multiple officers and men of the Merchant Navy were honoured for gallantry and/or distinguished service (some posthumously), including two George Medals, six Orders of the British Empire, six British Empire Medals and two King's Commendations for Brave Conduct.

The slaughter of PQ17 clearly demonstrated the difficulty of transporting war supplies by sea to the Soviet Union, especially during the perpetual daylight of the Arctic summer. Stalin did not believe so many ships could be sunk in one convoy and openly accused the Western Allies of lying about the losses. Thus, PQ17 actually worsened

Soviet-Allied relations over the short term, despite the value of the supplies that did make it through. The disaster also caused strain between Britain and her American ally. PQ17 was the first joint Anglo-American naval operation under British command and its failure so infuriated US Admiral Ernest King, already something of an Anglophobe, that he withdrew TF 39 (of which *Wichita* and *Tuscaloosa* formed part) from the Atlantic theatre and sent it to the Pacific. The PQ17 episode continued to colour Anglo-American naval co-operation for much of the war.

The *Murmansk Run* was suspended until September 1942 when PQ18 (the last of the PQ series) set out for Northern Russia. The convoy's defence scheme was revised, with a very strong close escort of sixteen destroyers and the first of the new escort carriers, HMS *Avenger*, equipped with twelve fighters.

Ultimately, forty-two convoys were run to Murmansk and Archangel during the Second World War and 85 merchant ships and 16 naval vessels were lost along the way. Nevertheless, upwards of 1400 supply ships made it through to the Soviet Union, all carrying critical war material, thus sustaining that country's offensives on the Eastern Front.

And so tonight, we recognize the brave men of the Allied Merchant Navies - including my Uncle John - and those of the Royal Navy, Royal Canadian Navy, and United States Navy, who kept the supplies flowing to their (generally un-appreciative) Soviet ally and endured such tremendous hardships and hazards on the infamous *Murmansk Run*.