

# Unseen stories:

## Surviving the Arctic convoys

In this three-part Remembrance Special, blind veteran Alec Penstone shares his fascinating stories from the Second World War with our Military Lead, Tim Eckersley.

### Part 2: Saving lives at sea in a force 15 hurricane

**Tim:** So, Alec, what I'd like to do is revisit the Arctic convoys. Just for any listeners who aren't familiar with the Arctic convoys, they took vital supplies to Russia during the Second World War.

**Alec:** Well, what happened was I went back out in the old submarine as we'd taken a few secret agents across to Norway, and then I was sent off to [shipbuilders] Harland and Wolff in Belfast to stand by a new ship being built there. She was built on the same slipway as the Titanic which didn't give us much hope, but still...

She was an escort carrier; one of the three sisters. There was the Vindex, the Nairana and the Campania. The Campania was the last of the three and she was British built, riveted, and really built for the Arctic waters.

And anyway, I stood by her until all my stuff came aboard. The ASDIC cabinet where I worked [listening out for torpedoes] was just above the bilges, right down underneath the recreation space, two decks down. So, we're about 27 feet beneath the water line in there. The ASDIC cabinet was a small room, with two sets and a telephone in it.

There was a notice in a square box: In the event of the ship being abandoned or captured, the duty operator takes the bolt cutters and cuts the cable, drops it in the dome (which is a secret dome), places a hand grenade in each set and pull the pins out. And you have seven seconds to get up the ladder to the deck above.

So, we all agreed that rather than die in the freezing water, we'd sooner go off with a bang. So, the three of us all had an agreement that we'd stay down there. And that was it.

**Tim:** Seven seconds isn't long, isn't it? You'd have to be pretty quick up that ladder.

**Alec:** Yeah, yeah, and make sure the damage control had opened it from the other side.

**Tim:** So, what life like for you in comparison to being on a submarine?

**Alec:** No comparison at all. You had a nice hammock to sleep in and everything else. Good mess mates and all very, very good. I was there when she was commissioned, and I was there when she was laid off after the war finished in Europe. So, I had a very happy time aboard her.

**Tim:** Yeah, because I did a little bit of research on HMS Campania and she decommissioned, didn't she, around 1945?

**Alec:** That's right. Yeah. Yeah.

**Tim:** And just placed in reserve. So, yeah, I thought you might say that you'd prefer being on the surface ships rather than being on submarines because at least there's no hot bunking [sharing the bunk] is there on a surface ship? That's a bonus.

**Alec:** My experience on a submarine did not encourage me at all to stay on a submarine.

**Tim:** So, I understand as well that you were involved in a Force 15 storm.

**Alec:** That was in February 1945. What had happened was, the war was getting very bad for Germany and the Russian troops were on the outskirts of Berlin at that time. When we got into Murmansk, we had to fight our way through the Kola Inlet, which was only a mile and a half

wide, but heavily mined across there, so we had to be careful going in and out.

But anyway, the whole point about it was that we actually made our way into Murmansk. And while we were there, we heard that a group of Norwegians were going to be taken into Germany as a living wall in front of the German troops with the idea that Stalin wouldn't shoot Norwegians. But we knew the Russians better than that - we knew the Russians would shoot anybody to get back into Berlin.

From then on we decided that we were going to rescue the Norwegians. I was transferred to one of the destroyers. I was what they call a Section Leader. We landed and we beached at low tide, and all these people come. We sent up a red light, and the few Germans that were there just disappeared. They were old men and boys mostly. They disappeared somewhere. We were told not to bring any prisoners back.

And we managed to get all these Norwegians on board on the three destroyers. We took them back to Russia and Stalin wouldn't allow them to land because they didn't have passports. So, we had to distribute them amongst the merchant ships (because they couldn't put them on the Royal Navy ships) ready to take back to England.

The oldest Norwegian was an old lady of 86, and the youngest was a baby born while they were being moved onto the ships there.

The most unfortunate part was that one of the merchant ships that had about 15 Norwegians on board, the Henry Bacon, she developed engine trouble, so she dropped the stern off the convoy. As soon as it was noticed, we sent off our wildcats to have a fight for her because she said she was being bombed by German aircraft which were using her as target practise. When they got there, sure enough the Henry Bacon had been sunk. But all the crew, who were Lascars (from India) - wonderful people - they had given their places up in the lifeboats to the Norwegians.

We rescued every Norwegian, and not one of those Lascars survived. They went down with their ship. They were very, very brave men. Yeah, it's incredible.

**James:** That was when the storm...?

**Alec:** Oh yeah, as we came out of there, we got hit by a force 12 storm, which quickly developed into a force 15.

We lost our speedometer off the flight deck. It took off like an auto gyro. I don't know what the speed was of the wind but, anyway, it was mountainous waves and although I had the engine in reverse, we were being pushed towards the Norwegian coast. For three days, we were going before the gale, although the engines were in reverse.

At about 1600 hours on the third day, the Skipper decided there was going to be a window in the weather, but it wasn't open very far. But when we got to the 1600 hours, we were told to lash, triple lash, everything down on the ship, and I was directed to close the ASDIC cabinet. I thought, well, the best thing to do is just sit in my hammock.

So, I was climbing in my hammock with duffle coat on and my life belt, and I was just swinging around on the hammock. I was just by the embarkation steps which are next to big, heavy six-foot-wide doors. As we turned, a 90-foot wave came and hit us sideways on.

We slid down into the trough for the next wave and had the full force of the wave crash down on the starboard side which burst open the embarkation doors, which were just underneath the flight deck, and hundreds of tons of freezing cold water came straight in. And in no time at all, it had pulled all the lockers off of the deck level, which had been welded to the decks.

So, the lockers were being pushed around as well. I was still swinging in my hammock, and I saw one of these lockers fly across the other side of the ship and hit one of the chaps from the flight deck party who was trying to get into his hammock. He collapsed into the water, which was

about two foot six. And then, we sloshed back to the other side again, in the tilt basin.

When I stood by the Campania at Harland and Wolff, 33 degrees was the point of no return. We actually rolled 48 degrees either side, and we shipped water from both sides. And, of course, the water was like a massive wave inside, and I saw this chap, who I thought was dead. He was floating in the water. Then the high-octane pipes, which we had on the mess deck for high octane fuel, started spilling petrol on top of the water.

And then the ventilating fan caught fire to the petrol. And I'm still in my hammock. But my backside was getting a bit warm, so I abandoned my hammock and I grabbed hold of this chap as he went past me. By sheer luck, I got him on the bottom step of the ladders. And as the ship rolled... well, it just lifted me up to the level of the next deck where I was able to pull him up to there.

I thought he was dead, but anyway, he had a fractured skull. Myself and another shipmate took him down to the sickbay and handed him over and I heard nothing more about him. I never saw him back on the ship again. I just thought he'd died.

But it was only, oh, years later that I had a letter from a gentleman in Aberdeen to say that his father had also been onboard HMS Campania and had suffered a serious accident. The only information he'd got was a Hurt and Wounds Certificate with the name of Abel Seaman, Alec Penstone, as the witness to his accident. Was I the Alec Penstone?

I was able to phone him up and say yes, I was the same one. I said, "Have you got all your dad's papers?" So, he said, "I've got nothing at all except his Hurt and Wounds Certificate." Turns out he died years later in a cycling accident, but he survived the war, and just had the fractured skull.

But, anyway, his son Jim, who was a medic in Aberdeen, came all the way down to the Isle of Wight to see me on his motorbike. We're still in

touch with each other. I was able to get him all his dad's medals and certificates and everything else.

**Tim:** That's brilliant.

**Alec:** Oh, and the Norwegian baby that was born during the exodus from the Soroya? Well, in the seventies, with some of the North Russia Club, we decided we'd try and find what's happened to the baby. We advertised in the Norwegian press and, lo and behold, we found her, and we brought her over to England to give her a holiday with her family.

By that time, she had a family of her own. It was wonderful really to be able to meet somebody who you actually saved. I was very very happy about that.

**Tim:** Oh, that's incredible. When you're explaining the time caught in that storm 15, it sounds like a plot of a disaster film, but of course it's real life.

**END OF PART 2**