THE HELL THAT MEN CALLED MURMANSK

THE 2000-MILE RUN TO THIS SOVIET PORT PROVIDED U-BOATS WITH AN UNPRECIDENTED KILLING GROUND. FOR CONVOYS WITHOUT ADEQUATE SEA AND AIR PROTECTION, IT WAS A TRIP TO HELL AND BACK.

BY ROBERT LUND

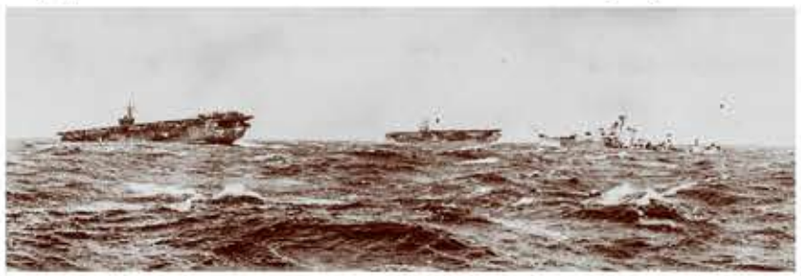
The deadly risk of the Murmansk Run is portrayed in this photograph of Convoy PQ17 under attack. To supply the Soviets, 104 Allied merchant ships and 18 warships were lost with over 3000 personnel killed. Russia lost 30 merchant ships and an unknown number of personnel. Germany lost five surface ships, 31 submarines, and an unknown number of personnel in convoy attacks. Over four million tons of supplies were delivered to the Russians by the Arctic convoys — none of which the Russians ever paid for. It is interesting to note that the Soviets have stated the supplies were never enough to meet their demands.

I had been leaning on the bar for almost an hour listening to this character tell about how he had won the big war almost single-handed. Being naturally polite and older than I was once, I didn't tell him what I was thinking — that I've never yet met a man who has really gone through any prolonged hell who is interested in talking about it. Finally this guy gets around to me and asks what outfit I was in during the war.

"Merchant Marine," I said, and waited for the inevitable reaction.

"Merchant Marine! Boy, you were the guys who had it made. All that money and nobody shoving you around and giving you orders."

I stood quiet, sort of listening to my inner reaction, and I was happy to find that I didn't even get mad any more. His opinion didn't matter, and I had got involved in too many arguments with stupid people like him to try it again. But it set me thinking. I realized, with some surprise, that it had been 40 years to the month since I had come back from the long run up Bloody Alley, past Torpedo Junction, and around Bombers' Corner. It was February 1943 when we finally limped back into New York. I called for another drink in memory of the monumental drunk I had gone for then. I had thought I would never forget, and now I had to dig around in my memory for the details — the name of the ship and the names of some of the guys that had made the voyage.



This convoy plowing through Arctic seas had heavy protection in the form of Royal Navy carriers HMS *Emperor* and HMS *Strike* as the ships head to the Soviet Union. A Royal Navy destroyer is at the right providing anti-submarine protection.

Almost everybody in the Army or Navy who saw action will always claim that his theater of operations was the toughest, but among merchant seamen there was never any argument. For pure unadulterated hell there wasn't any time or place to compare with that long, bloody run to Murmansk. Books have been written about the North Atlantic, but always about the brave men on the escort ships. Robert Carse was the only one whoever really tried to tell the story of the Merchant Marine, but even he couldn't get the public to believe we were heroes. We were always civilians with big pockets to hold all the dough we made, and no one ever took count of the more than 10,000 men and over 1200 ships that died in the North Atlantic and the icy waters of the Barents Sea. Ten thousand dead and twice that many badly hurt, but the ships kept coming and the job was done, so what does it matter?

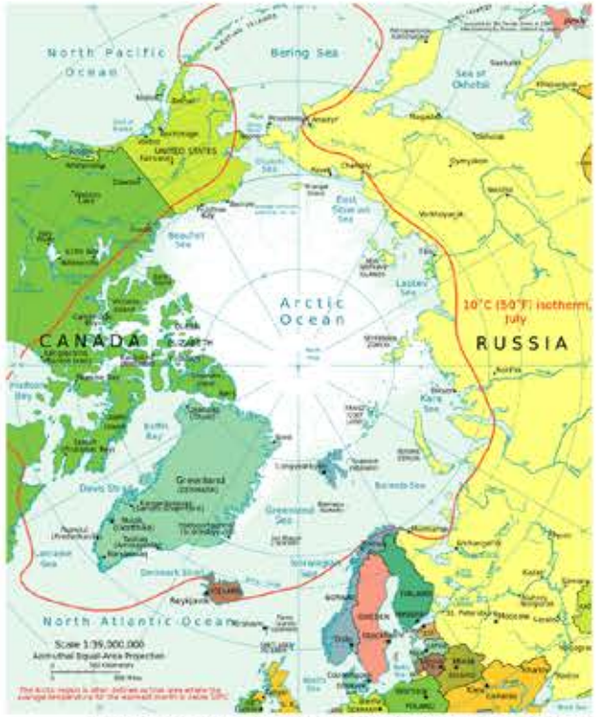
Every man in every war has known that sick feeling that comes just before action, a gnawing at the stomach and a longing for a nice convenient hole to hide in. But once the action starts and you have a gun, grenade, or some sort of weapon in your hand to hit back with, it's not so bad. On a ship in convoy you plodded along like one of a herd of cows moving through a pasture filled with wolves, and it was a case of how many the wolves could pull down before you got to the safety of the barn, and you couldn't even run for it. It takes a certain type to stand that kind of tension day after day. I don't know how many men made one trip to sea with the Merchant Marine, and then joined the Army, Navy, or the Marines but there were a lot of them.

The voyage began at Baltimore. She was a Liberty ship just out of the yard, a virgin ship with practically a virgin crew. I had been sent down from New York to join her. A couple of years before, a seaman could hardly get a kind word from anyone but another bum, but now a seaman, and especially one with a mate's or engineer's ticket, was treated like a rich relative. I had a third engineer's license and the company I had been working for sent me down as second.

I felt easier when I met the skipper and the chief. The captain was a Norwegian named Peterson and a good oldtime seaman. The chief, God rest his soul, was a tough old codger who had spent 30 years at sea. His name was John Paar and he was as brave and as fine a man as I have known. The chief mate only had a second mate's ticket and the second and third mates had thirds. The first assistant was a Lakes man and had just got his ticket salted. I was second with a third's ticket and the third was just out of Fort Trumbull with a brand-new third's ticket. Among the crew the only men who had been to sea before were the bo'sun, one AB, an oiler, and the chief cook. The rest were fresh from Sheepshead Bay, except for Sparks who was out of radio school. Not much experience but better than most. There was such a shortage of trained seamen, so many men had died that first year that some ships were going out with just two or three experienced men aboard, and somehow they made out. The Navy gun crew was fresh out of boot camp and as green as grass. The gunnery officer was a lawyer from Minnesota and seemed to be a nice sort of guy.

The captain had brought the ship up from the yard after her trial runs, and then had gone home for a few days. When he came back and saw the cargo plans, he blew up. They had put light box stuff in the hold, heavy machinery in the 'tween decks, and had six 80-ton locomotives to go on deck. He screamed bloody murder, but they went right on loading. Then he called a friend who was a Maritime Commission inspector. The inspector showed up just as they were ready to load the last locomotive. He took one look at the cargo plans and began to scream and people started running in all directions looking for the loading boss. When he came aboard the Maritime inspector really ate him out. "Why, you dumb bastard, haven't you got sense enough to know that this ship would capsize in the first sea, loaded like that? Unload it and we'll do it right this time."

They discharged the ship, or most of it, and we got another week in port. It was a good thing because it gave us time



Map illustrating the Arctic region through which the vital convoys would have to sail.

Heavy ice was a common condition on the Murmansk Run and made the operation of deck equipment extremely difficult.