

# Convoy to Murmansk - PQ 15

by

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Class of 1940

c. 1998

# Convoy to Murmansk PQ15

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Walt Hesse

## I. Outbound

A driving early morning mist pressed on the ships as they glided from the harbor to the waiting sea. Tension was in the air. We were sailing into the unknown, into harm's way. The time was April 1942; the place Halifax, Nova Scotia.

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The SS MORMACREY was one of many merchant ships scattered from horizon to horizon, seeking their station in the forming convoy. The sea was choppy, but not rough and the visibility was fair. Destroyers and destroyer-escorts scurried along the outer fringes of the fleet probing for lurking U-boats. Out of the confusion, order gradually emerged and the 48 ship convoy materialized.

In Baltimore, Maryland, I signed on the SS MORMACREY in late March as Third Assistant Engineer. The ship was being refitted to carry cargo to Murmansk, Russia. She was of World War I vintage and resembled hundreds of other freighters of that era.

Part of the refitting included the installation of two 30-caliber machine guns on the wings of the bridge and two 50-caliber machine guns on the stern. A four inch surface gun was mounted on the stern as anti-submarine protection.

The weapons were manned by a navy gun crew of seven enlisted men, led by an Ensign, a ninety-day-wonder, fresh out of school. With the exception of a second class gunners mate, the enlisted men came directly from boot camp.

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While in Baltimore, a former maritime academy classmate, George Treffs, came aboard. He had signed on as Fourth Assistant Engineer. We hightailed it downtown for a few beers and to play the game, "What ever happened to old whatzis name?" I was delighted to have a friend aboard.

Following the refitting, a mixed cargo of foodstuffs was loaded, including butter, powdered milk, dried fruit, and beans. In addition to food, the cargo included jeeps, howitzers, cannon and small arms. Tanks were loaded on deck and securely lashed down to prevent shifting in rough seas. Finally the ship moved to the outer harbor, far from civilization. There, three hundred tons of explosives were loaded into the forward hold. Since it was assumed some of the ships would be lost en route, each ship carried some hazardous cargo.

One commodity not listed on the cargo manifest was present. Fear. We were unaware of its presence until later in the voyage. However, at this early stage an undercurrent of apprehension pervaded the crew. The prospect of U-boat attack, of being cast adrift in an open boat for an extended period, or being hurled into the frigid north Atlantic waters was a major concern.

Loading completed, the ship sailed for Halifax. Traveling without escort at a maximum speed of 10 knots, the ship arrived at its destination without incident. Despite calm seas and moonlit nights, ideal for U-boat activity, we eluded any contact. In Halifax we joined numerous other ships in the harbor and waited for further orders.

The following week, ships' captains were summoned to a conference. There they met with the Commodore assigned to guide the convoy to Reykjavik, Iceland. They received information on departure time, position in the convoy and other pertinent orders.

The following morning the ships moved from the anchorage in prearranged sequence. By noon the convoy was assembled, eight abreast and six in a column.

The convoy sailed approximately northeast toward Reykjavik at the speed of the slowest ship which was about seven knots. Three destroyers escorted the convoy, one zigzagged ahead, one to port and one to starboard. The seven knot speed was considered sufficient to outrun any U-boat of the era, so an escort vessel to the rear was considered unnecessary. Maximum speed for a submerged WW II U-boat was about 7.5 knots, but could maintain this speed for only a short distance. Cruising speed submerged was about four knots.

Maintaining station in the convoy during the daytime in clear weather was no problem. Each ship maintained a prescribed distance behind the ship ahead and abreast of the ship to port and starboard. Nighttime was another matter because a total blackout was enforced. No lights were permitted. Smoking on deck was strictly prohibited.

Radar was a new development in 1942 and only the Commodore's ship was so equipped. Keeping station at night without radar was difficult, but not impossible. Each ship trailed a small float or towing spar. The towing spar created a tiny wake visible at night to the ship astern. To detect vessels to port and starboard required a vigilant watch for the bow wave and for the dark silhouette against an inky dark sky. The Commodore used his radar to assist ships to maintain station.

During periods at sea, our Captain never left the bridge, eating his meals there and catching short catnaps on a cot as conditions permitted. Average in height, middle aged, and with a trace of gray in his hair, he was usually seen with a stubble of beard and red-rimmed eyes from lack of sleep. He lived every minute with the burden of his responsibility and was dedicated to bringing his ship safely to port.

The risk of encountering a storm or fog was to be expected in any crossing of the North Atlantic. In wartime convoys, the hazard was increased due to the closeness of the ships in convoy. During a storm or foggy night, all points of reference were lost and the Commodore had difficulty keeping the convoy intact. During one storm several near collisions occurred. When the weather cleared the convoy was in shambles. Once, on a foggy night, the lead ship on the outer starboard column, gradually veered off, leading the entire column away from the convoy. It required the combined skill of the Commodore and the destroyer captains to return them to their proper positions. It was something of a miracle that the convoy arrived intact at Reykjavik.

One week's stay in Reykjavik provided us with respite from the stress of being at sea in wartime. The harbor was filled with ships waiting for new convoys to be formed and to depart. Some were bound for England, some for the Mediterranean area, some for return for North America, and some, like us, for Russia.

As far as sightseeing was concerned, we saw no more of Iceland than could be seen leaning against the rail of the ship. The Icelandic government did not permit seamen to go ashore and while we felt this to be unreasonable, we knew the Icelanders had sufficient reason for their action.

## **II. In Harm's Way**

A convoy's departure from port is as ritualistic as a minuet. Our Captain attended the Commodore's conference, the spare boiler fired, and the main engine and auxiliary equipment were inspected. The following day the convoy assembled.

The convoy leaving Iceland consisted of 36 ships in a six by six pattern. The SS *MORMACREY* was in the second column from the port side and the fourth ship in the column. Fourteen escort vessels, including two British cruisers, shepherded us to Murmansk. Initially we were assured by the number of escorts, but soon doubts began to haunt us. Were they trying to tell us something? Why so much fire power?

One odd feature of the convoy had us burning with curiosity – the four unarmed trawlers trailing the convoy. The Chief Mate soon enlightened us as to their function.

“Well boys, that’s what we depend on to pick us up if we get knocked off.”

This news along with the inflated size of the escort, chilled us. We were sobered by the implications of the Chief Mate’s comments.

The Chief Mate, an older Scandinavian man, handled ship’s maintenance and cargo management. He was our principle source of information. In his view the better informed we were the easier we could cope with events.

The convoy steamed north along the west coast of Iceland, crossed the Arctic circle, then pressed on northeast toward Bear Island in the Norwegian Sea. The weather was favorable, but almost twenty four hours of daylight exposed us to greater risk from U-boat and Luftwaffe attack. Near Bear Island the convoy pushed southeast into the Barents Sea around North Cape of Norway, occupied by the Germans.

Off North Cape we suffered our first air attack. A few minutes to eight P.M., as my watch came to an end, the alarm bells clanged throughout the ship. Planes attacked with a suddenness that left us stunned. When George arrived to relieve me, I blurted out “What the hell is going on, George?”

“We’re being attacked by planes.”

“Ours or theirs?” A stupid question.

“Okay, George, you got the watch. We’re turning 58 revs. I’ll be down to let you know what’s going on.”

I scrambled up the ladder. On deck was chaos. Gun fire erupted from the ships. Germans darted in from every direction. Only four planes attacked us, but it seemed like many more. Most of the action concentrated on the vulnerable corners of the convoy. Our position was better protected. Despite this, one plane showed disdain for our defenses and flew low between our column and the adjacent column. This was the gun crew’s first opportunity to fire in combat and it revealed how ineffective our fire power was. No planes were downed. Several bombs were dropped, but no hits were scored. As suddenly as the raid began, it ended. I did my duty with regard to George. I went down the engine room, told him what had happened, and got out of there.

The Second Mate succumbed to the stress brought on by this and subsequent actions. Normally of a dour disposition, he became withdrawn and shunned social contact with his fellow officers. He spoke to no one except in the performance of his duty on the bridge. His watch coincided with mine, but we seldom conversed other than his calls for a change in engine speed to maintain station in the convoy.

Conjecture in our conversations ran high on the possibility of future raids and the consensus was that German planes would return. The voyage from this point on proved anything but dull. We suffered over 150 air raids before we saw Iceland again.

Our reaction to the alarm bell became automatic. The gun crews scurried to their assigned posts, a routine repeated many times. Those not on watch congregated on deck to see the action. We wore steel helmets and heavy weather clothing and were ready to abandon ship at a moment's notice. Our valuable papers, with us at all times, were wrapped and sealed in oilskin. It was amazing how few of our possessions had value in life-threatening situations.

Early in the voyage one of the 50 caliber machine guns proved defective. The gun jammed after firing two shots and all attempts by the gun crew to repair it were futile. When air raids became common, the Second Engineer volunteered to man the gun despite its defect.

Following the first raid the two British cruisers left the convoy at full speed. Rumors ran rife. Scuttlebutt had it that the convoy was to be bait to try and lure the German pocket battleship, TIRPITZ, out of her lair where she was skulking in the Norwegian fjords. Supposedly tailing us was a British aircraft carrier and an American battleship which, along with cruisers and other naval craft in the vicinity, were determined to sink or seize the TIRPITZ. The TIRPITZ was a menace. She could appear on the horizon, and with her big guns, destroy a convoy with impunity. It was vital she be put out of commission. The rumor was never confirmed.

None of us were the same after the first raid. Even the Chief Mate, ever the optimist, had deep lines of stress in his face. The slightest sound, a dropped hammer, the sound of running feet, sent shivers of dread through each man. We slept with our clothes on, never undressed except to shower. Mealtime was no longer leisurely nor a time for conversation. We deserted the officer's mess as soon as food was bolted down. Four hours in the engine room was an eternity. We lingered no longer in the engine room than was necessary. Conversations were whispered. We became introspective as events forced us to consider our own mortality.

Two days out of Murmansk it snowed and the air raids ceased. Several units of the Soviet navy met us and on May 30, 1942, we arrived in Murmansk.

### **III. Murmansk**

At the entrance to the Kola River, Soviet pilots boarded the ships to guide us upstream to the anchorage at Murmansk. The river, about a mile wide at the anchorage, is bordered on both sides by low hills. Murmansk is on an inlet on the west bank of the river several miles south of the anchorage. Officials boarded us at the anchorage to check manifests and our papers.

Progress of the “valiant, glorious Red Army” against the evil forces of fascism was reported in vivid detail. Actually, the “glorious Red Army” was barely holding its own around Stalingrad. The front lines were only thirty miles west of our anchorage. We wished the “glorious Red Army” well and hoped they held the Germans at bay, at least until we got out of there.

The “glorious Red Air Force” and shore batteries were supposed to protect us from air raids, but we were soon disabused of that. Air raids began as soon as the weather cleared. However, now it was a contest between the German and Soviet planes in aerial combat. Most of the bombing was concentrated in the town and docks area. Only occasionally were ships at anchor attacked.

Shortly after anchoring a barge came along side to unload explosives. Ships with explosives were prohibited from docking until all hazardous materials were removed. At the same time we received information our ship would not be docking immediately. Due to bomb damage, docking facilities were limited and we were among the last of our convoy scheduled to unload cargo. As a consequence other ships in our convoy departed for home without us. We were forced to wait for another convoy to arrive and unload, a delay of several weeks. This was a bitter pill to swallow.

While at anchor, we received an invitation from a British corvette anchored near us. The invitation was for several officers to join British officers for an after dinner drink. The First and Second Engineer and I accepted.

The British were delighted to discover that the Second Engineer came from the West (Seattle) and that his grandparents had journeyed west in a covered wagon. His stories were entertaining and momentarily our problems disappeared especially after several rounds of drinks. The British view of our west was highly colored by Hollywood and they readily believed anything.

Another convoy arrived with news of additional sinkings. Shortly after their arrival we shifted to a dock to discharge our cargo. Extensive bomb damage was evident in the port area. Partially sunken ships were visible. Prospects for our stay at the dock was ominous. Fortunately, a dense cloud cover reduced the number of raids and those that did occur were directed at the town and other docks. It appeared we had "lucked out." Or had we?

While at the dock, number three boiler burst a tube. Water and steam filled the fire box rendering the boiler inoperative. Number two boiler, also on the line, provided ample steam to maintain operation of auxiliary equipment while in port. The impaired boiler was shut down and allowed to cool for a day, after which we entered it to survey the damage. One of the tubes was ruptured and seven more were found defective. Three days of hard labor repaired the damage and the boiler was back on line. Number one boiler, the cold boiler, was inspected and several defective tubes were found and replaced. Number two boiler, still on the line was not inspected, an omission we were to regret later.

While in port the First Assistant, George, and I took advantage of the opportunity to visit Murmansk about a mile from the docks. An air raid occurred on our first visit. Although not in imminent danger, a young soldier motioned us into the doorway of a nearby building with the barrel of his machine gun. We complied.

Murmansk was a medium sized town with multi-story buildings occupying several square blocks in the downtown area. These were four or five stories high and were government or apartment buildings. At the center of town broken glass and masonry from bomb damage littered the street. Surrounding downtown was an area of log houses on unpaved muddy streets. Water for domestic use was supplied from hydrants spaced along the streets. There apparently was no indoor plumbing.

No stores, no bars, no amenities of any kind were visible. The First Assistant was of Russian extraction and spoke fluent Russian. Through his linguistic ability we were able to locate a hotel where tea was served. I mailed a letter and sent a telegram to my wife to let her know I had arrived in Russia intact. The telegram arrived a month later and the letter got there five months after I arrived home.

That afternoon we were directed to a house where Russian movies were shown to American and British seamen. The entry led to a room where several women, apparently the residents, were seated near the stove that served as central heating. We were directed into the main room. Chairs were lined up facing a screen. No other furniture was visible. A projector sat on a table with film threaded and ready to go. Windows were covered.

The film was a wartime epic, crude and amateurish by American standards. Among the main characters was a Soviet general who resembled Stalin and a German general made up to look like Hitler. Spies were exposed by the hero who led the final charge that won the war. Some of the scenes were improbable. One scene had the hero on foot pursuing a wagon drawn by a team of horses in full gallop. He not only captured the wagon, but overcame the three occupants who waited in turn to be subdued. In another scene, the frustrated hero toppled a six inch diameter tree with a back-handed slash of his sword. Rambo could take lessons.

On another occasion we had the opportunity to attend a concert performed by Soviet army personnel. The music, played on Balalakis and other indigenous instruments, was excellent. Culturally, the concert was the high point of our stay in Russia. Tickets for the concert were given to us by a Navy Lieutenant, who occasionally visited us on board ship. We were uncertain as to the reason for his visits, but he appeared delighted to find an American (the First Assistant Engineer) who spoke Russian since he had only a minimal command of English. Like many people we met in foreign countries, he was eager to practice his English. He was also interested in how we lived in America and did we know any movie stars. On his visits we made ham sandwiches and hot tea which may have been an added inducement.

Army troops unloaded our cargo and women played a major role in the unloading. They fueled tanks and jeeps and drove them off the dock. In ten days the cargo was discharged and ballast put aboard. A barge loaded with rocks, about fifteen hundred tons, was loaded into the ship's holds overnight. This was sufficient to keep the propeller under water and to provide steerage way. The ship returned to the anchorage to wait for the homeward bound convoy.

By this time we had become inured to the constant threat of air raids. We followed a routine of eating, sleeping and performing necessary engine room maintenance. For relaxation in the evenings we played cards in the officers mess, usually Hearts or Hi-Lo Jack. The games became rowdy and this helped to ease the tension.

Another invitation to a British destroyer-escort for an evening of drinks and conversation was offered and accepted. On this occasion the Third Mate joined us. He had heard accounts of our previous soiree and didn't want to miss out on this one. He came from Arkansas and swore if he made it back he'd "hole up" in the Ozarks for the duration. As a Southerner he added spice to the party with his stories of moonshiners during prohibition.

Later in the evening as we were celebrating, a seaman poked his head in the officer's mess and quietly announced to the Captain, "Air raid, sir." The Captain thanked him. In a few minutes several officers excused themselves and went to their posts. We excused ourselves and returned to our ship in the Captain's gig while the raid was in progress. We were unconcerned as the alcohol we consumed put us beyond caring too strongly about anything.

Air raids continued unabated each day. During one raid three planes made a pass over the town and were unable to reach their primary target because of anti-aircraft fire. They turned toward the anchorage and selected a ship as their secondary target. The ship, owned by the same company as ours, was anchored about a half mile from us. Two bombs struck her in the engine room and she slowly settled to the bottom. A fireman and an oiler were killed in the engine room, the remainder of the crew got off safely. Some came to our ship and, since I had sailed with the Second Mate before, I invited him to share my cabin. He had stepped into the lifeboat without so much as getting his feet wet. But, besides the clothes on his back, all he managed to save was his sextant and his papers.

A few days later, we became the target. As we watched three Stukas, dive bombers, headed toward the anchorage. We watched with interest, then with growing consternation, as we became aware they were heading for us. Our apprehension increased as we saw them come overhead then begin to dive. The rattle of gunfire, the whine of the diving planes and the scream of the falling bombs were nerve-racking. I ducked into the officer's mess for shelter. The only shelter this provided was to block out the sight of the diving planes. I pulled my helmet tight over my head and, to myself expressed the ridiculous thought, "I wonder what it's like to be dead?"

Three bombs exploded. The explosions reverberated through the empty holds of the ship, shaking it from bow to stern. The planes came out of their dive and disappeared over the hills. The gunfire ceased. The sudden quiet was deafening. The disturbance in the water told the story. We had been bracketed. One bomb landed a short distance forward of the bow and one on each side of the ship. No damage, but it scared the hell out of all of us.

The Second Engineer was jubilant. He had manned the defective gun, pulling the trigger, expecting to fire two shots. Instead the gun fired and continued to fire. He thought he may have hit one of the planes. We didn't share his exuberance. In the past few weeks we had become a little cocky and this attack sobered us to the realization that we were still vulnerable.

#### **IV. Homeward Bound**

Shortly following our near miss and to our great relief, word was received that we were scheduled to leave. We were to run the gauntlet around North Cape again, but it was the only route out. The convoy assembled as before, 36 ships in a six by six pattern, with a large escort. We sailed northwest to round North Cape. Three days out, four days, five days. A great deal of tension, but no action. A German reconnaissance plane sat on the horizon pacing us. We encountered a low lying fog that hid all but the tops of the ship's masts. There was concern about being seen and not being able to see.

Late on the fifth day, we heard gunfire in the distance, a great deal of gunfire. The Germans had found the Murmansk-bound convoy, PQ-17 and were more intent on sinking laden ships than empties. Some of our escort was detached and sped to the assistance of the other convoy. From accounts we heard later, the Germans were making a desperate attempt to cut the supply route to Murmansk. Their ships and planes were sent out resulting in the sinking of 23 ships out of a 36 ship convoy. There was a loss of 153 men.

Our convoy continued on to Reykjavik. The evening prior to reaching port, we crossed the Arctic Circle and were sailing south along the west coast of Iceland. The wind was up and the sea was choppy. As I was cleaning up after coming off watch, I hear someone running along the deck shouting, "They're sinking around us!" In less than a minute I was dressed and rush out on deck in time to see the ship behind us up-ended and going down. A wolf pack. The German reconnaissance plane had reported our position and direction and German U-boats were lying in wait for us. The roughness of the sea reduced the ability of the escort to detect U-boats. It also decreased the accuracy of the torpedoes.

The U-boats positioned themselves to send a spread of torpedoes into our convoy with the hope that some would strike. This time the U-boats were lucky. Four more ships went to the bottom. The ships at the head of the convoy sped up when they saw ships to the rear sinking. The convoy is in disarray. It's every man for himself. Each ship increases speed to the maximum as the convoy breaks up. By noon the next day the surviving 32 ships reassemble in Reykjavik harbor.

The leg from Reykjavik to New York seemed easy compared to the terror we experienced before. But we still had a few problems. For one, we were running out of food. Fresh fruit and vegetables had been gone for several months. Fresh meat is almost gone and staples were in short supply. However, the Chief Steward assured us he can get us home without starving. He tells us he can make a three-foot stack of pancakes with one egg, a cup of flour and a hell of a lot of beating.

Our other problem is more serious. We are running out of water, both for drinking and feed water for the boilers. It became necessary to eliminate showers, laundry and the use of water for anything other than drinking and cooking. To save boiler water, number three boiler is cut off the line and we sail along on two boilers which is sufficient to maintain the speed set by the convoy. The water from number three boiler is to be transferred to the extra feed tank as per the Chief Engineer's instructions. It was the second engineer's responsibility, but he was a cautious man. He merely lowered the level of the water in the boiler so the water was not visible in the water gauge.

Five days out of Reykjavik, number two boiler blew a tube. We cut it off the line and reduced speed to one or two knots, all that one boiler would sustain. The convoy steamed ahead and we watched the ships disappear over the horizon. One of the escort vessels drops back with us, circles us several times, checking for U-boats that may be following the convoy looking for stragglers. The escort vessel then wished us luck and rejoined the convoy. We were on our own.

When the tube blew, the Chief checked the water in the feed tank to see if there was enough to fill number three boiler. The Chief is a small man, about five feet six inches, partially bald and with a feisty nature. As the trip wore on he became more irritable and was almost never seen in the engine room. This suited us fine as it made for a more harmonious operation. When he discovers the water missing, he flies into a rage. Where was the water from the spare boiler? In a few minutes the second engineer reveals his secret, quickly fills number three boiler to the proper level and has the oil burners lit. The Chief Engineer storms out of the engine room sputtering and fuming.

Normally a boiler of this type takes twenty four hours of slow heating to go on the line. The Second Engineer took an enormous risk and had the boiler on the line in four hours and we were on our way. Heating a Scotch boiler too fast can cause it to explode and we would have been in real trouble. Our luck held out and we caught up to the convoy the next day. The remainder of the trip to New York was made without further incident.

How does it feel to return to the safe normal world? We had been accustomed to a high stress environment and each man reacted to the circumstances in his own way. As we entered the safety of Long Island Sound we felt the tension slowly ebb. Men who hadn't spoken to each other in months, laughed and joked together. Strangers became friends. By chance, I met the Second Mate on deck at 5:30 A.M. while at anchor in the Sound. He apologized for his behavior, explaining he thought he would never see his wife and two daughters again. That thought was more than he could handle.

The ship docked the next day. As soon as the relief crew arrived we quit the ship without a backward glance. Each man went his separate way.

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**Walter H. Hesse** - Born, December 17, 1920. After graduation from high school in 1938 he entered the New York State Merchant Marine Academy (now SUNY Maritime College.) He graduated from NYSMMA in 1940 with an engineering license and sailed on merchant ships until 1942, when he went on active duty in the Navy as an Ensign. He sat for and passed the examination for his Chief Engineer's license in 1945. In 1946 he went on inactive duty from the Navy.

In 1948 he returned to school and earned a bachelor's, master's and doctoral degree, the latter two at Cornell University. He taught for one year at the University of Nevada in Reno and then moved to California State Polytechnic University in Pomona California where he taught until his retirement. Even though Dr. Hesse received his Ph.D in Agronomy at Cornell "for the last 20 years I taught astronomy which I volunteered for when the university was rapidly expanding and someone was needed. I had taken some course work earlier, and then to bring myself to up speed in astronomy, I took

courses in astronomy, astrophysics, relativity and cosmology. I also wrote several books in the subject which were published.”

Dr. Hesse went on full retirement in 1986 and moved to Washington State where he currently resides by a lake near Monroe. A widower since 1996, after 55 years of marriage, Walter has a daughter in Seattle and a granddaughter in Spokane.

Dr. Hesse is the author of the following books: *Astronomy: a brief introduction* (1967); *The earth and its environment* (1974); *The light at the end of the tunnel: a guide to pollution problems* (1972); and *Our evolving universe* (1977). He also was co-author of: *Space science* (1970).

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**George Treffs** - New York State Merchant Marine Academy graduate, Class of 1940.

[3]

**SS MORMACREY (ex-WEST CALUMB)** - Built 1919 by the Los Angeles Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Corporation. Measuring 410' long, the MORMACREY was one of the vessels constructed for the United States Shipping Board during World War I. It had a reciprocating engine and three Scotch boilers.

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## END NOTE

**Further reading in the Luce Library collection relating to the Murmansk Convoys** - *Convoys to Russia: Allied convoys and naval surface operations in Arctic waters 1941-1945*, by Bob Ruegg and Arnold Hague (World Ship Society, 1993); *The destruction of Convoy PQ 17*, by David Irving (Simon and Schuster, 1969); *The arctic convoys*, by Brian Schofield (MacDonald and Jane's, 1977) ; *The Russian convoys*, by Paul Kemp (Arms and Armour, 1987).