

Obituary: Henry McIntosh "Jock" Dempster, chairman of the Scottish Russian Convoy Club, merchant seaman, RAF intelligence officer

Born: 20 April, 1928, in Montrose. Died: 5 May, 2013, Edinburgh, aged 85

By DAVID MADDOX

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When, on 20 March, Prime Minister David Cameron presented the first Arctic Star medals to the men who sailed in the Russian Convoys, he singled out three men whose commitment and passion had led to the medal's creation after a long struggle for official recognition for the harshest sea campaign of the Second World War. One of those three was Jock Dempster, the former chairman of the Scottish Russian Convoy Club, whose life changed completely when he joined the Merchant Navy as a fresh-faced boy of 16 in 1944.

Dempster, who died on Sunday evening a week after suffering a massive stroke, used to remember his first trip as a merchant seaman as the most profound experience of his life. He sailed from Loch Ewe on the MV San Venancio, a tanker carrying fuel to the Soviet Union forces at Murmansk fighting a desperate battle against the oncoming Nazi German army.

As a tanker, his ship was a target for the German air, battleship and U-boat attacks which had beset the convoys which had been making the Arctic run on the edge of the ice cap since 1941. The conditions were so cold, often -60 degrees centigrade, that if a man's bare skin touched the surface of a ship it would be torn away.

In an interview with The Scotsman he recalled: "The weather was extremely cold and snow showers prevailed. The ship's deck was like a skating rink and we had to take care touching anything metal with bare hands – the skin would be torn off.

"At about 5am, the ship just ahead of us, the Horace Bushnell, was torpedoed. We went to lifeboat stations, and a few minutes later the Thomas Donaldson was torpedoed.

"A periscope was sighted, and all hell broke loose. The guns on the merchant ships opened up – everyone was shouting and yelling. The noise, the absolute bedlam, scared the wits out of me. All of us knew that our ship, a tanker, would be the prime target on the convoy.

"The thought of death didn't frighten me. I was very religious at the time, a firm believer that there was a life thereafter, but I was terrified of being badly burned, losing a limb, or my senses.

"The sloop HMS Lapwing was then torpedoed. The stench of burning metal, the screeching as it was torn apart, the screams of the wounded, filled the air. Words cannot describe my emotional havoc."

He survived the convoy and returned home after eight weeks but his war was far from over. His next ship was the Empire Chieftain which was sent to support the Pacific campaign against the Japanese. He was aboard when the ship became the first to enter the liberated Hong Kong with supplies.

He remembered how he and his crew mates gave up their coats and their cabins to a group of nuns they collected in Hong Kong who had spent the war in a Japanese prisoner of war campaign and “were just skin and bones” when they came aboard.

But it was his experience on the Russian convoys which was to shape his life. In 1947 he joined the RAF having decided that the social life would be better than a life at sea. Soon, though, he became unhappy and tried to leave, but his request was turned down.

But he found a new interest in military life when the RAF offered to train men as Russian speakers for intelligence work and he volunteered. However, his initial requests were turned down with his humble background an obstacle – he would recall how he cut holes in the back of his shoes so they could not be pawned.

Dempster, was one of seven brothers and sisters born in Montrose to George Dempster, who served in the Black Watch. When he was seven his mother, Alice, died, and he was brought up by his 14-year-old sister Ina. He had shown academic promise at South Esk Primary and won a bursary to Montrose Academy but left at 16 with no qualifications.

When he applied to be trained as a Russian speaker he was told: “You can’t even speak the Queen’s English, why do you think you can speak Russian?”

But with the determination which would later serve him well in the campaign for the Arctic Star, Dempster persisted and was eventually granted an interview, at which he showed how quickly he had picked up Russian from his short trip to Murmansk. The academic on the selection board said he had a natural gift for languages and he was selected.

From there Dempster worked hard, studying A-level Russian for the RAF in London, going to night school to pass an O-level in English grammar so he could translate it into Russian, and working as a dish washer at Joe Lyon’s café, which employed several Russians and allowed him to practise his spoken language.

He served in the RAF until 1975 as an intelligence officer. Although much of it involved working against the Soviet Union he developed a love for Russia and Russians which would see him feted in that country, as an Arctic veteran many years later.

After military life finished he married the love of his life Maggie, his second wife, in 1976 and went on to run his own management training company until he retired aged 69 in 1997. But his connection with Russia was far from finished. In 1985 he saw an advertisement in The Scotsman asking convoy veterans to apply for the 40th anniversary medal being awarded by Russia. From there he joined the Russian Convoy Club and struck up a great friendship with Cdr Eddie Grenfell, another former Montrose Academy pupil.

From the early 1990s he and Grenfell led the campaign to persuade the government to create a medal for the Arctic campaign which had been ignored after the Second World War as Russia became the new enemy. Instead the Arctic convoys were linked to the Atlantic Star, a medal created for a separate campaign to keep Britain supplied. The unique qualification period of six months meant that many Arctic veterans could not qualify for it.

The medal campaign lasted for almost 20 years and suffered several disappointments but Dempster, who always led the convoy veterans in their distinctive white berets at the Cenotaph process in London each year, became one of its most recognisable faces.

Then just a month before his 85th birthday the newly created Arctic Star medal was presented to him and other veterans at Downing Street. His final victory came six weeks before his death.

Dempster is survived by his wife Maggie and their daughter Fiona; three daughters from his first marriage Alison, Heather and Sheena; and his older brother George.