

INTERVIEW WITH LAURIE DOWNEY

Several dozens of Australians took part in the convoys heading to the Northern ports of Russia during WWII. They served in the British Navy and merchant ships. Two Australians - Jack White and Phillip Power were mentioned amongst the participants of the ill-famed convoy PQ17 which lost 24 ships out of 35. The Australians were the naval cadets and were trainees on the escort vessels. After destruction of the convoy Phillip Renton became renown for having written an angry letter to the British Admiralty. In the letter he expressed his rage against irresponsible politicians which had ordered the escort vessels to abandon the transport ships.

One of very few Australians - participants of the Russian convoys - lived in Perth (Western Australia). His name is Laurence (Laurie) Downey. He was born in Perth in the suburb of Mosman Park. In the beginning of the war he was a schoolboy and always remembered as guys only few years older than him were leaving for the war. On a wall in his house one could see photographs of the guys from his suburb who never returned home - infantry soldiers, sailors, airmen. He personally knew some of them including several guys from the crew of the *Sydney* cruiser which lost their lives to a man.

In 1943 at the age of 16 Laurie joined a Norwegian tanker *Marathon*. The Norwegian ships, which had not returned to their ports after the Nazi invasion in 1940, were always short of crews and even a teenager could find a job on one of them. Laurie served on this ship for two yrs. He was lucky to see many countries, including Russia (in 1944) and to return home. But many of his colleagues never saw their home countries again - their ships had been sunk by German or Japanese aircraft or submarines.

Laurie Downey wrote several books about his life and political views. You have chance to read an interview with him taken by the web-site author in early 2000 and several pages from his yet unpublished autobiography.



Laurie Downey (1926 - 2004) during WWII (left photo) and in 1999 (right photo)

Laurie, why did you become a merchant, not a Navy seaman?

I was too young for the military service so I joined merchant fleet.

Where did your ship trade before joining the Arctic convoys?

The *Marathon* tanker I went on to Murmansk and Archangel during WWII traded between the Caribbean Islands and the American fuel ports Houston, Galveston, Corpus Christie.

What was your perception of the USSR before 1941? Was it influenced by the anti-communist sentiments in Australia in 1939-early 1941 during the existence of the Nazi-Soviet pact?

Being a schoolboy I didn't think much about politics. But, when studying in a Catholic school, I grew up assured that the "godless communism" was evil and intended to destroy religion. We were taught to believe, that Russia was the motherland of communism which threatened the whole world.

Did this perception of yours change after your visit to Russia in 1944?

No, it didn't, and I felt sorry for the Russian people, which had been deceived by the "godless communism".

How many Russian convoys did you participate in?

I took part in two Russian convoys - JW 61 and RA 62 (the latter - a returning one - VK).

What was the difference between these convoys and others, for example, between Great Britain and the USA?

During the Russian convoys we were attacked by torpedo-carriers and bombers. We were constantly chased by the U-boats, but we didn't see them and only heard explosions of depth charges. During all other convoys I participated in there were only submarine attacks.

Tell us about the most terrible day of war for you.

I'll never forget the 12th of December 1944. We were attacked by aircraft based in Norway. The whole sky from horizon to horizon was lit by gun flashes and machine gun traces. No doubt, that was the most fearsome day of war for me.

What was your impression of Murmansk and Archangel?

I spent only several hours in Murmansk as my ship was sailing further east to Molotovsk - the fuel depot of the port of Archangel. That was where I first met the Russian people. I injured my hand and had to go to the local hospital. The Russians who were in the queue to see a doctor met me very warmly. They let me to the head of the queue as they knew that I was a foreign seaman. In order to thank them I gave them several packs of cigarettes which I had brought as "hard currency" as I was not a smoker. After the doctor treated my wound I ran back to my ship and then returned to the queue and gave the locals several packs with butter, chocolate, bacon, sugar and several tins of canned meat I "had borrowed" from the galley. All that caused kind of a disturbance among the half-starved people. I felt very sorry about them. I was upset that they had to live in conditions incredibly harsh compared to the Western standards. I swore to return to Russia one day, but it happened only fifty years later. I visited Russia in 1966 and came back home with my Russian wife Larissa.

We know that the escort ships of your convoy sank two German U-boats. Would you like to meet the surviving German submariners and would you agree to shake their hands?

Yes, I would want very much to meet the surviving German submariners as I consider them as very brave people who lost 85% of their comrades during the war. I would also want to visit the U-boat Memorial in Germany and lay a wreath in the memory to those who died in the attacks on our convoy in the *U-365* and *U-387* boats.



Norwegian tanker Marathon

[Nicholas Monsarrat](#), the author of [The Cruel Sea](#) novel, probably, the best book ever written about convoys, mentioned several Australians who served on escorting corvettes. Do you know any other Australians - participants of the Arctic convoys?

I know there were other Australians who served in the Arctic convoys, but I haven't had luck to meet them.

To what extent did your military experience influence your decision to become a Catholic priest taken soon after the war?

Indirectly, I believe, my war experiences were somewhat influential in my decision to go to a monastery after the war. I decided to become a monk and to take vow of silence in a European monastery as there were no such monasteries in Australia back then. Five years after I was expelled from the monastery due to my quarrel with one of my superiors I accused in "exceeding of power". I still maintain this accusation and currently address it to the whole Roman Hierarchy: the reasons of it are adduced in my book *Russia 2000*.

FROM LAURIE DOWNEY'S UNPUBLISHED AUTOBIOGRAPHY

We left anchorage on the Clyde for a small inlet to the North of Glasgow called Loch Ewe. This was a convoy assembly area. There were about thirty ships in all that made up convoy number JW 61 and just as we were making ready to sail, a small launch came alongside with the captain who was returning from the Commodore's meeting with the ship captains, a briefing on procedures to follow during the trip to Russia. As the captain climbed aboard, the two Scotchmen jumped onto the launch as it pulled away. Obviously the stories of the fate of many ships on the Russian run had scared them to the point of desertion.

Convoy JW 61 comprised thirty ships plus escorts and departed from Loch Ewe on October 20th. The escort ships included three carriers and several destroyers. The Russian Navy also provided six corvette type escorts.

Rounding the North of Scotland by Scapi Flow, where the North Sea meets the Irish Sea the weather became extremely bad, to the point where nearby everyone on board got sea sick, including the captain who had been at sea for some twenty five years. Once the first attack of sea sickness had passed the subsequent ones were easily shrugged off with but one visit to the side of the ship, and then carry on without interruption to one's duties. They lasted only an hour or so. We were heading at an angle of about forty five degrees into the enormous waves, and Marathon, being a fully laden tanker was very low in the water, she would ride out two waves and plough through the third with a resounding thud that shook all the windows around the bridge. The decks were constantly awash and an occasional wave would throw spray over the funnel. It was the roughest weather I had thus far encountered. In the wheelhouse the floor was wash from spray and the helmsman's wooden mat slithered from side to side of the room if no one was standing on it. I came on the night to do my stint at the wheel only to find the binnacle and the wheel all covered by vomit. I sloshed them down with water from the floor cupped in my hands. Such rough weather made it more difficult for the U-boats to get an accurate line on a potential target. This at least was encouraging. The weather relented after we had passed the Northern tip of the British Isles, and the convoy once again resumed the normal speed of ten knots.

With the strongest escort ever for a Russian convoy, we suffered no casualties, we saw and heard many depth charge explosions and spotted a Dornier reconnaissance plane circling the convoy giving our position to the and based torpedo bombers, but they never rived. Our triple escort carriers must have been an effective deterrent.

The convoy was about for days out from Loch Ewe when our forward bunker tank ruptured, flooding the manila rope locker. Some of the ropes were saved but two had to be discarded and the Chief mate told the bosun to throw them overboard, naturally he assumed the bosun would throw them off the stern, but instead he threw them over the side thinking they would sink immediately. One of them was caught up in the propeller, but no one was aware of this. Suddenly the ship lost speed and slowed from ten knots to about six knots. Then an argument took place between the Chief Engineer and the captain who wanted more revs and was informed he couldn't have them. So there we were looking disaster in the face as we dropped back from convoy and became a "straggler" easy pickings for the trailing submarines. A British Navy destroyer was despatched to come alongside with a loud hailer telling the Captain to keep up with the rest of the convoy. It was getting towards evening, but visibility was still good enough to see the other ships in the distance. Suddenly, the destroyer that had now become our special escort despatched a salvo of depth charges as she raced across our bows no more than fifty meters away. The following explosion gave everyone on board a sense of security in that we were not being left at the mercy of the U-boats. The destroyer returned three times to loud hail the Captain to keep up. As luck would have it, the weather deteriorated and the sea became quite rough causing the convoy to slow down to seven knots. Thus, we were able to keep up, also because the entangled rope was beginning to wear away from the propeller allowing us to gain a few more knots.

The next day the story emanating from the radio room was that during our escapade as a "straggler" the destroyer's ASDIC had picked up sixteen torpedo firings during the night. The rough weather no doubt made it extremely difficult for the U-boats to get accurate bearings on prospective targets. Thanks to be God.

So far so good, but the worst was yet to come. As we approached the Northern most part of Russia the sea narrowed into a bottle neck type entry into the White Sea, this was called the Kola inlet and the German submarines would lie in wait just outside this narrow section and attack the ships as they moved in single file towards Murmansk. JW 61 was extremely lucky not to lose any ships at this point, due to the strong escort and the adequate air-cover at that time.

The majority of the ships steamed into the harbour at Mordvinovsk whilst the tankers sailed further south to the port of Archangel where the oil dock was located. By this time the harbour entrance had frozen over so we were obliged to follow the ice breaker Stalin into port.

The icebreaker Stalin tied up alongside and we had a good look over her and were amazed to discover that one single family ran the whole ship. The Captain was the head of the family, his wife in charge of the domestic side of running the ship, supplies, galley etc., whilst all the sons and daughters, with their respective wives and husbands filled all the other positions. It was also a great opportunity for them to look over Mordvinovsk and I wondered afterwards, if the decision to tie up alongside was not influenced by shortage of food and provisions ashore.

The shore crew or longshoremen were mostly female, as their menfolk were away the front fighting the Germans; they clambered all over the ship coupling the valves and the pipes for the unloading process. A female worker was found dead one morning down between the two ships where she had fallen in a drunken frenzy after having sampled the power alcohol from one of the tanks. She had managed to extract the lethal liquid by lowering a bucket down into the tank and then drinking from it.

The fuel dock where we were unloading was at the entrance to Archangel and was called by the name of Molotovsk. About one kilometre's walk through the snow took us to the centre of the village where the authorities had established an entertainment facility for the visiting foreign seamen. The locals were not permitted to fraternize with us except within confines of the centre, which they called the Interclub. There was music and dancing, a small sparsely equipped kiosk where we could buy a biscuit and a cup of coffee or a glass of vodka. There was also a small cinema adjacent to the main hall. I became friendly with the projectionist and she invited me up into her tiny little projection room above the maddening crowd below.

Being curious, I thought it would be a good idea if I asked Ninichka to take me to her house as I wanted to see how they lived in this part of the world under the Communist system. She agreed, but because of the language problem I don't think my honourable intentions were interpreted by her to mean the same thing. Obviously, these young women at the club who were selected as hostesses needed money, food or provisions for their families and these foreign sailors could provide these things in return for a night in bed. There were stories back on board how this one and that one had woken up in the morning to find themselves in an empty room and all their nice warm winter clothing missing. I was not one of them.

When we left the Interclub for Ninichka's place she walked a few meters in front of me as she did not want to be seen by anyone fraternizing with a foreigner. She would disappear every now and then to conceal herself in a doorway. Then she would cautiously move on again when all was clear. She repeated this operation until she arrived at her apartment block, a two storey wooden building. I was taken by the hand and led upstairs and along a dimly lit corridor to the single room that housed members of her family. Mother and aunt, small brothers and sisters, must have been about seven or eight people in all. There was a large table in the centre of the room, a curtain in one corner that housed a single shower. The sleeping arrangements were a bit cramped, but there was a double bed in one of the corners. Apart from a few words that Ninichka had learned at the club, no one else in the room could speak anything but Russian. Sign language came in handy. Scarcely had I seated when a slight panic broke out between mother and daughter, someone was coming up the stairs apparently, and it would be better for me if I was not there. So, I was taken by the hand and pushed behind the shower curtain and told, by sign language, to shut up whereupon a rather large Russian sailor entered the room and sat himself down on the double bed. The children were all hurried from the room to a neighbour's place across the passage. The lights went off and an arm reached in behind the curtain and dragged me from the room. Whew, I thought to myself, the double bed was a fundraising facility for the family and Ninichka was the breadwinner. I found my own way back to the ship without much trouble as Molotovsk was a fairly small village.

I began to feel sorry for the Russian people for the way they had to live in order to survive and the rigors of winter made things even more difficult. Another example of fund raising I experienced a day or two later when a few of us were taken to a house by one of the hostesses from the Interclub, she was obviously a "pimp" working n commission. I was curious to go along an was surmised to find on entering a large room four girls, one in each corner of the room in bed. My mates made their selection and as the lights were extinguished. I excused myself with the "pimp" who quickly disappeared down the road n far that I might have selected her. These girls were not prostitutes in the strict sense of the word, they were, probably, married women trying to earn a living for their hungry families.

It was while we were still in Molotovsk that had a little accident on deck, the Captain had asked the bosun to fill a drum of petrol from one of he tanks by using a small hand pump and he asked me to help him to lift the drum onto two parallel pipes that ran along the deck, a short lift of about twelve inches. We were both wearing heavy leather fleece lined gloves and as we lifted the drum it slipped on the ice and the rim came down hard n my had amputating the tip of my middle left hand finger. Seeing my blood on the snow made me feel a little squeamish in the stomach. Whereupon the third mate who witnessed the whole thing told me to follow him up to the first aid room on the bridge here he poured me a small glass of brandy. Mindful of my pledge not to touch alcohol until I was twenty five years of age, I pretended to drink t, but on turning to one side I put my hand over my mouth and spat the brandy down the front of m shirt and no one was any the wiser, because the smell alone revived me immediately. At least that I what I thought, but deep down I felt it was rather miraculous.

One of the female workforce took me o the village hospital to the out patients reception area where there were some thirty or forty people lined up in a queue. An old lady stepped forward and took me by the hand to the head of the line. I think she felt sorry for this baby face kid from the foreign ships. She referred to me as "malinki" small child. In response to this act of kindness I took out a few packs of American cigarettes m y pockets, we always carried them as bargaining currency and dieted them all down the line. It made me feel great to see the looks of appreciation on their faces.

Back on board with my finger stitched and bandaged there was not a lot I could do in regards to work around the deck. So I decided to pass the time by reading and trying to learn Norwegian language. The Third mate, who was in charge of the first aid room, was responsible for changing my bandages. He offered to help me learn the language. At least it was his excuse for having me visit his cabin on daily basis. I was still very naive and rather slow to wake up to the fact that his intentions were to develop a much more intimate relationships with me. Finally I got the message when he offered me money. That was the end of my Norwegian studies in his cabin and my hand didn't really need to be attended to every other day

The tanks emptied we set sail behind he ice breaker "Stalin" for the days trip back to the docks at Mormons and there to wait for the next convoy back to the United Kingdom. Being a tanker, Marathon unloaded quickly, the cargo ships took much longer. Shore leave in Murmansk was not much different than Molotovsk, all the building seemed to be of wood and many still bore scars of German bombing raids. Earlier in the war the place was virtually levelled. Here they also had an Interclub for the visiting foreign seamen. It was somewhat larger on account of the majority of ships unloaded here, only the tankers went down to Molotovsk.

During the stopover in Murmansk there was a rumour going around the Interclub that two Merchant seamen had been arrested for fighting with a Communist official and one of his deputies. Apparently this official had passed a rude remark about the British being reluctant to open a second front in Europe and this led to fistcuffs which resulted in these two Russians coming off second best. It was forty years later that I read an account of this incident in Winston Churchill's History of the Second World War. When Churchill heard these two seamen had been gaoled for seven years fro striking a Communist official, he made immediate contact with Stalin and told him in no uncertain terms that unless these two sailors were released immediately and

put on board a British cruiser and sent back to the United Kingdom, he would suspend the Russian convoys. Rather strong language for the Russians who depended desperately on these convoys. The story ended happily and the two sailors were released and returned to England, thanks to Mr Churchill.

The return voyage was in convoy number RA62 which left Murmansk on December 10th 1944 with 29 merchant ships, two escort carriers, a cruiser and several destroyers. The escort left ahead of the convoy to clear the assembled U-boats waiting at the mouth of the Kola Inlet for the ships to file out before forming into the convoy sailing pattern. The second day out U-365 torpedoed HMS Cassandra and blew her bows off with great loss of life, but she was able to make it back to Murmansk for repairs by sailing stern first. Then on December 12th the Norwegian ship Tunsberg Castle was sunk by a mine. That same evening the Luftwaffe entered the fray with an attack by nine torpedo bombers, to no avail with the loss of two planes, one of which came down only hundred meters from Marathon's port bow. This particular raid was my first experience of surface action, up until now everything that had happened was below surface. During the attack the sky was lit up from horizon to horizon with bursting shells and tracer bullets from every ship in the convoy. It was very frightening to say the least because some of the tracers were so close to comfort. My action station was on the bow as ammunition passer to the Bofors gun crew, who claimed to have shared the honour of having shot down one of the two torpedo bombers I remember standing on the deck that night trembling something terrible, my knees shaking and there was nothing I could do to stop them. I have never been so scared in all my life. When I arrived at my post I was temporarily distracted from my fear when I witnessed the final plunge of the German plane so close to our port bow. It was also the first time I had witnessed someone getting killed. His incident was to have a lasting effect on me and would one day be instrumental in teaching me a great lesson. During this battle one of the carrier escort planes sank U-365. The U-boat that was sunk during the passage of convoy RA 62 was U-387 by depth charge attack from HMS Bramborough Castle. With the loss of only one ship the convoy had accounted for two submarines and two planes.

The remainder of the voyage was uneventful and we arrived back at Loch Ewe on December 19th 1944.