

RAAF IN RUSSIA

A bit more than 20 years after the unsuccessful intervention in the Russian North during the Civil War the British returned to the same land as allies. It is noteworthy that Great Britain declared its full support to the USSR on the 22nd of June 1941 just several hours after the beginning of the German invasion, although over the period of time which followed the signing of the Soviet-German non-aggression pact the British had been seriously concerned of the matter which side the USSR would take in the heating World War. They had had their grounds for it: Poland, an ally of Britain had fallen under the German and Soviet strikes after only several weeks of fighting. Soon, in spite of the considerable British moral and material support, Finland capitulated and the Baltic countries and Bessarabia were occupied. All that had happened with a full back up of Hitler. Moreover, during the Winter War the co-operation between the Red Army and Wermacht was in full progress. In the summer of 1940 Soviet icebreakers led the German raider *Komet* through the Arctic into the Pacific and enabled her to strike on the British trade routes. When the Battle of Britain broke out the German aircraft used the Soviet fuel. Whether it was a myth or not, but all that fully corresponded to the articles of the notorious Molotov-Ribbentrop Protocol.

When several months after the beginning of the Soviet-German war the Soviet ambassador in Great Britain [Ivan Maisky](#) appealed to open an anti-German front in Europe, Churchill angrily replied that 4 months ago no one knew whose ally the USSR was going to be on entering the war.

In the middle of 1941 there was no more place for doubts. The USSR needed a lot of assistance to stop the Germans. There was only one way to dispatch supplies to the USSR - across the Northern seas. The Soviet Air Force desperately needed modern aircraft to provide a cover to the Arctic sea convoys, and Great Britain decided to help her ally. In several weeks after the outbreak of the war the 151st air wing of the RAF consisting of two squadrons arrived in the USSR. It was manned by British, Australian and New Zealand airmen. Most of the pilots were veterans of the Battle of Britain (summer 1940). It took only several days to assemble the Hurricane fighters out of units dispatched from Britain by sea. And on the 11th of September the wing made its first sorties and shot down 15 German aircraft. Over a short period of time the Soviet pilots and technicians were taught to handle the new planes. Upon the end of the mission the commanding officers of the 151st air wing, and, amongst them, - an Australian Charlton Haw, received Soviet awards. In November-December the British airmen left the Soviet North by sea. Their convoy was escorted by the Soviet pilots on British aircraft. Amongst them there were the commander of the Soviet Northern Fleet Air Force general Kuznetsov and a famous polar ace Boris F. Safonov who later received two gold stars of the Hero of the Soviet Union and was killed in action in 1943. He claimed most of his victories when flying on British and American fighter planes.



The Soviet polar ace B.F.Safonov with the RAF pilots. On the right side - probably, Charlton Haw, awarded with the Lenin Order (photo from the book "Air Aces", C. Shores)

Many more Australians visited Russia in 1942 in the ranks of the 455th RAAF squadron. The squadron was formed on the 30th of June 1941 out of the Australians who had volunteered to join the Air Force and had been trained in Britain. Their number totaled at about 80. The squadron flew Canadian-made *Hampden* bombers and took part in attacks on German cities and naval ships in October 1941 and February 1942. Of course, there were losses and some pilots lost their lives or became POWs.

In spring 1942 the Hampdens were refurbished into torpedo-carriers and soon the Australians were informed about the oncoming trip to Russia for participation in the *Orator* operation targeted to cover the convoy *PQ-18*. The Admiralty did not want to repeat the tragedy of the convoy *PQ-17*, destroyed by the U-boats and Luftwaffe. But, first of all, the British wanted to protect the convoy from the German surface fleet and, especially, from the battleship *Tirpitz* which was terrifying the Allies during the whole war.

The first group of aircraft heading to Russia consisted of three scouts - *Photospitfires-IV*, then - *Hampdens* and, finally, of nine flying boats *Catalina* of the 210th Squadron which landed, mostly, at the Lakhta air base.

On the 2nd of September the *Hampdens* of the 455th RAAF and 144th RAF squadrons took off and headed eastwards. Several planes were never heard off again due to the harsh weather conditions of the Arctic, compass failures (the flight occurred above the highly magnetic rocks of Scandinavia) and the enemy anti-aircraft fire. One plane lost its course and was shot down near Kirkenes (Norway). The crew managed to land on a beach and was imprisoned by the Germans. (The commander Jim Catanach later on took part in the famous *Great Escape* of pilots of different nationalities from a German POW camp and was shot amongst other 50 airmen captured by Gestapo). One more plane of the 445th Squadron crashed in the Swedish mountains.

The Hampdens landed on different air bases. One crew was enforced to land by the Hurricanes of the Soviet Air Force. Three machines incurred serious damage on landing on rocky Arctic airstrips and were written off. The 144th RAF squadron lost 6 machines during the flight (one of them also crashed in the Swedish mountains).



A Hampden in the air

Thus, having lost 25% of their machine park, the British and Australian airmen scattered all over the Soviet North. All up 23 aircraft remained in flying condition and, finally, they gained together at the Vaenga air base in 40 km North of Murmansk. The only operational sortie from the Soviet air base was made by the RAF and RAAF pilots on Hampdens on the 14th of September. On that day the intelligence reported that "Tirpitz" had made the open sea. The threat to the convoy PQ-18 was obvious and all 23 Hampdens were sent to search for the German naval squadron. The planes were looking for the Germans for 7.5 hours and having found nothing, returned to the base. Here the airmen were advised that "Tirpitz" had returned to Narvic again and its "raid" had been done only for an engine test. The main threat was gone.

During the next stage of the convoy movement the main threat was considered to be connected with U-boats and Luftwaffe, and the task of the cover was allocated to the *Catalinas* and the Soviet long range fighters. The British airmen were lucky - on the 23rd of September the *Catalina* U/210 sank the German submarine *U-263*. Its navigator was an Australian airman - Sergeant N.J. Langdon.

The British and Australian airmen settled in a three storey brick barrack with only one water tap for all. German bombing raids were common, and they had to dig a bomb shelter for themselves. However, a threat didn't come from bombs. During one of the raids the Soviet anti-aircraft gunmen shot down a Soviet fighter, attacking the bombers. The fighter pilot ejected and his plane fell on the barrack and broke through all three storeys. Amazingly, nobody was killed, but several airmen were wounded.

The rules on the base were strict in a full accordance to the war conditions. The Soviet patrols quickly taught the Australians not to wonder around the place. Shooting under the feet was the main warning, and it made sense. Once an Australian was doing a walkabout in the hills away from the base, and a German pilot from a downed plane chanced to be over there as well. Luckily, a German bullet just hit the Australian's steel helmet and ricocheted from it.



Soviet and Australian airmen together. On the left: Bob Raebel, second from the right - Ian Rickard.

Not long before the arrival of the RAF and RAAF pilots in the USSR, on the 25th of August 1942, the Soviet command issued an order with a ban on any contacts with the foreigners. In reality, of course, this order quickly lost any sense, especially when the British command decided to hand the Hampdens over to the Soviets after a training course.

The training went exceptionally fast. The Australians managed to find contact with the Russians easier than proud and secluded Britishers. They quickly noticed the exceptional meticulousness of the Russians in learning to handle the military equipment and their unusual curiosity in regard to everything. Of course, the Russian friendliness and kindness did not stay unnoticed as well as their amazing energy, which was applied by them whenever and wherever. The language barrier was overcome with the help of female interpreters, which frequently had difficulties in translating of complicated technical terms. The Australians noticed that the knowledge of German was the most typical for the Russians, rarer - of French and very rarely - of English. Nevertheless, various subjects were discussed. In particular, the Russians frequently expressed their bewilderment with the presence of Australians in the British Army. They couldn't merely understand what was the point to go and fight so far from home. Once the Russians asked the Australians if they were believers in God. A positive answer caused a strong astonishment, and, despite the attempts of the Australians to stop the discussion, the Russians did their best to convince their allies in absurdity of their beliefs.

Some Russian customs were discomforting for Australians. For example, the manner to request a cigarette, what is not customary in the West at all. Faster than anything, else the Australians learned that "amerikanski and angliiski" cigarettes - "ochen khorosho" (very good). The only available toilet had also occupied a significant place in the Australian recollections about Russia. In the local conditions they allowed themselves to spend in there for no more than three minutes just to avoid frost bite of sensitive body parts.

People always drink heavily at war. The Australians went several times to Murmansk where they partied in the *Arctica* caffee - nearly the only building which survived the endless German air raids. Drinking parties happened in Vaenga as well. Two Red Army political commissars, which "looked after" the Soviet people, participated in them intermittently. Their mission, of course, was not a secret for the Australians. One of the commissars, nicknamed the *Old Sour Puss*, took a decisive role in a major "piss-up" which one Australian and one Britisher ended up in a frozen ditch. A few days later the Australians decided to strike back and during the next "piss-up" permanently toasted the commissar's health keen to make him get into stupor. The commissar was only slightly "warmer" than usual by the end of the party - definitely, he was perfectly skilled in this craft, not the last one in Russia...

Nevertheless, drinking was not the only entertainment in Vaenga. The Australians enjoyed watching the Soviet movies and were really impressed by the high level of cinematography and quality of demonstration. They concluded justly that the Soviet authorities paid a special attention to the cinematography as to a powerful propaganda tool.

Many of the scenes observed by the Australians and later described by them help to add a lot to the understanding of the wartime life in the USSR, especially in the North, the ethics and customs of the then Soviet society. Definitely, it is not a romantic picture, which leaves very few illusions.

The Australians noticed presence of a large amount of prisoners somewhere around Vaenga. Once an Australian witnessed as about a hundred of exhausted prisoners were urged past the airstrip. When asked what was going to happen to them, a Russian standing nearby let the Australian know that the prisoners were going to be shot. The Australians also noticed that the Russians treated the natives of the North as the second rank tribe using them for the hardest and dirtiest jobs. For example, they saw as the indigenous people of the North were made clear the airstrip of splintery bombshells dangerous for the aircraft undercarriage. The natives were moving in a dense lane across the airstrip picking up pieces of steel into big baskets carried on their backs. But one incident was a lot more representative. Once several natives worked in a store and came across boxes filled by tins with special skin protection cream, which was similar to cooking fat. That was a hungry time, and the natives ate a lot of it. Some of them died, the survived were shot for theft.

The Australians also noticed that a human life in the USSR was not a big value. (Because of this reason the British command rejected plans to transfer the RAF and RAAF pilots under the Soviet command). They also were surprised by the cruelty with which the Soviet patrols massacred German airmen ejected from downed planes. But the following accident they remembered especially well: once a Soviet pilot returned from an operation and caught up his wife in bed with somebody. With no hesitation he shot the "offender", threw the corpse out through the window and went into the still warm bed. There were no repercussions towards him after all and he continued his flying service!

The British and Australians admitted that they had left no broken hearts in Russia. They had been strictly warned twice (at home and upon the arrival in Russia) about a complete ban on off-service contacts with women and they observed the order since the term of their duty on the Soviet soil was relatively short - they left Russia in November-December. (Two years later some Australian airmen visited the Soviet North again in the ranks of the 617th Lancaster Bomber Squadron, which was to attack the battleship *Tirpitz* anchored by the Norwegian coast. The attack was made from a Soviet air base Yagodnik not far from Arkhangelsk).



A Hampden with Soviet stars. The preparation for an operational sortie is on the way - Captain Stoyanov is examining a torpedo.

After a few unsuccessful landings on the rocky Northern soil during the training exercises, only 17 *Hampdens* remained in a flying condition. They were handed over to the Northern Fleet Air Force along with the remaining *Photospitfires* (out of three *Photospitfire-VIs* one had been damaged in a dog fight and another shot down above the Altenfjord on the 27th of September 1942). All *Catalinas* upon the completion of the "Orator" operation flew back to England.

The RAF-RAAF mission was successful - the convoy PQ-18 arrived in Murmansk with no losses.

Early in 1943 the RAF command began to develop plans to send the 445th Squadron to Russia again along with a group of *Photospitfires* and *Catalinas*. But this operation was not to take place as the Soviet command agreed on its implementation only provided that the whole air group would be handed under its operation control.

According to the Soviet archives the Soviet-manned Hampdens carried out many successful operations and sank all up 12 German cargo ships. A recent comparison of the German and Soviet archive data showed that the real history was not that bright. Only two German ships were sunk by the *Hampdens* under the red stars and both on the 14.04.1943. A German convoy was attacked by the *Hampdens* in the Kongsfjord and a plane piloted by the Captain Vasillii Kiselev (on the photo to the left) was set afire by flak. He rammed (according to some witnesses, torpedoed) the largest vessel of the convoy - *Leesee*. Shortly after that he was posthumously awarded by the Gold Star of the Hero of the Soviet Union. One more ship was sunk in that attack.



By the end of October 1943 less than 10 *Hampdens* remained in flying condition. By the year 1955 not a single machine had survived. 40 years after two planes found on the bottom of a lake in the Russian North and in the Swedish mountains were rebuilt by the British and Canadians for museums.

Eight years after Vaenga the Soviet and Australian airmen met again, but this time on the opposite sides of the front line - in the skies of Korea.

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