**INDEPENDENT MEDAL REVIEW**

**Possible medallic recognition for service on the Arctic Convoys**

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Signed:



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**AIM**

The aim of this paper is to recommend whether, after nearly seventy years, all those who served on the Arctic Convoys in the Second World War should retrospectively be awarded specific medallic recognition. The background in brief is that it was decided at the time that service in the Arctic Convoys, in which around 87,000 naval personnel and merchant seamen sailed, should be regarded as qualification for the Atlantic Star, with six months set as the minimum qualifying period. This has since been contested in different ways, and the campaign for specific recognition of Arctic Convoy Service has had significant public and other support. After intensive consideration under the previous Labour Government, an Arctic Emblem was created, but without the status of a medal. The veterans’ representatives did not accept that this met their demands, although around 10,000 took up the offer. Sir John Holmes’ recent review recommended that this should be looked at again as a matter of urgency, along with some other long-standing campaigns, and that current ‘rules’ should not be regarded as a bar against revising decisions if certain criteria were met. The government accepted these recommendations.

**HONOURS AND DECORATIONS COMMITTEE POSITION**

Over many years the Ministry of Defence and the Honours and Decorations Committee has taken a clear and consistent position against the issue of an Arctic Star, despite considering the issue on more than one occasion. This position has been based on the following factors:

1. The ‘sanctity’ of the Five Year Rule, which had been endorsed by His Majesty the King in 1948, that no changes should be made to decisions about the issue of medals/clasps once five years had elapsed. This principle was confirmed by the Honours and Decorations Committee in 2002 (HD 7752) and in 2007 (HD7877).
2. The effect of the Double Medalling Rule i.e. an individual may not be awarded more than one medal in recognition of the same period of military service.
3. The need to maintain the Risk and Rigour Principle that deployed personnel should have been “exposed to arduous conditions in excess of what might normally be expected.”
4. The undesirable aspects of trying to change the decisions of those who were in authority at the time, knew the situation at first hand and who, after detailed consideration, made decisions regarding medallic recognition.
5. The fact that in 1944, and again in 1946, service in the Arctic Convoys was reviewed and the decision made to include this service in the qualification for the Atlantic Star.
6. The fear of setting undesirable precedents and thus opening a Pandora’s box of claims for numerous other medal reviews.
7. The cost of producing more medals at a time of extreme financial pressure, particularly given the difficulty of identifying those who might qualify for a new medal and the additional administrative effort this would require.
8. The undesirability of apparent political intervention in medal decisions, with the risk of undermining the authority and traditionally non-political role of the Honours and Decorations Committee.
9. The awkwardness for the Monarch of going back on previous decisions.

**THE CASE FOR THE AWARD OF AN ARCTIC CONVOY MEDAL**

Since 1946 many Arctic Convoy Veterans have felt aggrieved that there has been no separate recognition for their Arctic Service, although this did not become an organised campaign until the 1990s when, with the ending of the Cold War, they believed that there could be a more sympathetic view of their role in helping Russia.

Claims for the award of a separate Arctic Convoy Star have been based on the following factors:

1. The Barents Sea is 800 miles from the Atlantic and most war histories, including those sanctioned by the MoD, treat it as a separate campaign.
2. The Arctic Convoys made a huge contribution to the war effort as, if Russia had collapsed at that time, the prospects of winning the war would have been significantly reduced.
3. While not in any way diminishing the hardships and hazards of the Atlantic Convoys, the Arctic Convoys were subjected to uniquely appalling weather conditions and such an intensity of enemy air and sea attacks that they merit separate recognition from service in the Atlantic.
4. Casualty rates were very high - the Royal Navy lost two cruisers, seven destroyers and eleven other warships, the Merchant Navy lost 104 ships out of a total of 581.
5. A significant number of those who sailed in the Arctic Convoys and endured great risk and rigour in the process finished up without any medal to recognise this service because they did not qualify for the Atlantic Star, or even in some cases the 1939-45 Star.
6. The fact that many who reached Russia and were unable to return for long periods, either because of lack of shipping or because they were in hospital, had their time ashore discounted for qualification for the Atlantic Star, although sick sailors in the Home Fleet could count their time in hospital for qualification
7. The fact that in some other theatres the period for qualification for a Campaign Medal was one day, as opposed to the six month condition for the Atlantic Star.
8. The fact that the British government agreed they could wear one award given by the Russian Government for their part in the Arctic Convoys, but has been very difficult about proposals for other Russian awards, including a recent Russian wish to give veterans the high-level Ushakov medal, accepted by other concerned countries but rejected by HMG.

## **PUBLIC SUPPORT**

## Since the 1990s the veterans’ campaign for a separate medal has attracted considerable sympathy from the public, the media and in Parliament. The sustained nature of this public pressure is unique amongst other campaigns for retrospective medallic recognition. It has been demonstrated in the following ways:

1. The public: in 1997 a petition with 15,000 signatures was handed in at 10 Downing Street requesting an Arctic Award. In 2004 a similar petition contained 42,000 signatures.
2. Parliament: there have been numerous Parliamentary Questions over the years on the issue of a separate medal for the Russian Convoys. There have also been at least three Early Day Motions requesting an Arctic Convoy Medal, which have attracted significant cross party support.. In September 2011, the MP for Moray and SNP Defence Spokesman Mr Angus Robertson promoted a well-attended debate on the Arctic Convoys in the Scottish Parliament and stated: “To be blunt it would be helpful if the UK Government would issue a medal while there are still veterans alive to issue it to.”
3. Politicians: a number of significant public figures and politicians have expressed sympathy for the campaign, usually when out of office. Two past leaders of the Conservative Party, when in opposition, reportedly promised the Arctic Convoy Veterans a separate medal once the party was in office.
4. Press: a number of national newspapers have expressed support for the idea of a separate medal for the Arctic Convoy veterans. The ‘Portsmouth News’ have been particularly vocal on their behalf, with the strong support of local Portsmouth MPs.

# ARGUMENT

1. There is no question that service in the 76 Arctic Convoys, which consisted of 368 Royal Navy ships and 581 Merchant Navy ships, amply fulfils the requirements of the Risk and Rigour Principle. In March 2005, for example, Prime Minister Tony Blair wrote: “British Arctic convoys supplied the USSR with material aid without which our Ally would have found it difficult, if not impossible, to survive, let alone maintain the fight on the Eastern Front. The men who served on the Arctic convoys did so under the harshest of conditions.”
2. The issue is therefore whether the decision, taken in 1944 by the Admiralty and confirmed in 1946, was reasonable and justified, namely that a Star which was primarily intended to commemorate the Battle of the Atlantic should be extended to include ships of the Home Fleet (Scapa Flow) which took part in the numerous operations unconnected with the Atlantic, including the ships of the Arctic Convoys.
3. While there is no remaining written evidence of the discussions at the time, this decision seems to have been taken more because the ships concerned came under the same overall Commander, and it was administratively simpler to have the same medal awarded to them all, than because of a conscious decision that the Arctic Convoys did not merit separate recognition. Other Second World War medals also group campaigns spanning different geographical areas, but this is arguably the most obvious example of an anomaly. Not only was the geographical area completely separate and distinct from the Atlantic, but the purpose of the Convoys, ie supplying Russia, was also quite separate and distinct from the purpose of the Atlantic Convoys, namely to keep Britain supplied. The decision provoked an immediate reaction from Arctic Convoy Veterans, which has ultimately resulted in the sustained effort we have seen for separate medallic recognition by every means open to them. It has been a long campaign, which has achieved exceptional and positive public support.
4. If a separate medal is instituted, a degree of “Double Medalling” could in theory occur for those whose service in the Arctic counted towards qualification for the Atlantic Star. But it is unlikely that more than a very few, if any, qualified for the Atlantic Star **solely** on the basis of service in the Arctic because the rigour was such that very few made the necessary number of convoy trips. Those who received the Atlantic Star therefore also had service in the Atlantic or similar, and would in fact be receiving medals for two separate kinds of service.
5. As regards cost, a fresh look at the figures, with the help of the Navy Historical Branch, has served to reduce previous estimates of the numbers involved and the consequent cost of a new medal. For example, a note from the Ceremonial Secretary in November 2004 to the Honours and Decorations Committee states: “there would be nearly 200,000 in line for an Arctic Convoy Medal.” A paper presented to Prime Minister Blair, also in November 2004, states: “The cost of a new medal is estimated at £14.25 million for the R.N. and similar again for the Merchant Navy… it costs £150 per serviceman, and all next of kin could apply.”
6. The fresh look suggests that the following basis for qualification be used:

**Dates:**  1 August 1941 – 8 May 1945

**Geographical Area:** North of the Arctic Circle (i.e. excluding non-Arctic Convoy operations)

**Those eligible:** Imperial and Commonwealth Citizens

##### **Time to qualify:** One Day

This results in a much reduced figure of some 87,000 -- RN 75,000, MN 12,000. This figure will probably be reduced further as some men may have served on two different ships. If we add that claims for the medal should be by application from those who consider they are entitled, as was the case for the issue of the Arctic Emblem, this is likely to reduce the work involved, since not everyone will apply, even if the Next of Kin are entitled to do so, as they should be. Volunteer Organizations have also offered to help reduce administrative costs, and may be able to help in some areas.

1. The fears of setting undesirable precedents, or opening a Pandora’s box, by agreement to a new medal are readily understandable. However, as Sir John Holmes has concluded, such concerns cannot be taken as an absolute bar to re-opening decisions in all cases if exceptional circumstances can be demonstrated. Moreover, while there are statements supporting respect for the rules, there are others that acknowledge the desirability of flexibility. On 31 January 1944, for example, in relation to the rule prohibiting British Servicemen from accepting foreign awards, Mr J.M Martin, Principal Private Secretary to the Prime Minister, wrote to Sir Robert Knox of H M Treasury about the King’s acceptance of General Eisenhower’s offer to present the American Service Ribbon with Stars to six British Commanders: ‘The King agreed with Mr Churchill that the rule to which he referred, like any other good rule, should be liable to exceptions, and intimated that he would always be ready to consider a submission recommending departure from it in really special circumstances.’

#### SIR JOHN HOLMES’ REVIEW

The key part of the conclusions of Sir John Holmes’ review is as follows:

“There should remain a strong presumption that decisions should not be reopened more than five years after the events in question concluded, but where circumstances can be shown to be exceptional, there should be greater readiness to review previous decisions than has been evident in the past. Some of the cases set out by the campaigners from whom we heard … seemed to reflect a prima facie case for a fresh and independent look at their claims…we certainly see a requirement to take a proper, independent look at some of them.

The exceptional circumstances referred to above should include the following:

* 1. Evidence that the issue was never properly considered at the time.
  2. Significant new information becoming available that had not been considered previously.
  3. Facts relied upon during the original decision-making process being shown to be unsound.
  4. The original decision appearing to be manifestly inconsistent with those for other similar campaigns;
  5. The decision appearing to have been taken for reasons which have nothing to do with risk and rigour;

The existence of a long standing campaign for a review cannot be a reason for reopening a decision by itself, but the degree of public, press, political or other support is a factor which should be taken into account, since it tends to suggest there is a prima facie case for another look.”

### **CONCLUSION**

I believe that the Arctic Convoys case should be considered in the light of (a) and (c) above, as well as the following paragraph about the relevance of public, press and political support. The essential points are that:

1. The Arctic Convoy operation was a separate and distinct campaign, geographically and in every other way, from what was happening in the Atlantic, and should have been considered in that light. There is no evidence that it ever was.
2. Some personnel received no recognition for their service on the Arctic Convoys, because of the way the criteria were drawn up and worked in practice.
3. The campaign for a separate medal has been long, well-argued and well-supported, in public, press and parliament alike. A change of mind in this case will certainly be well received.

The case for a separate medal is certainly not an open and shut one, as the successive decisions by the HD Committee in the past show. But I conclude that there is a strong case which should now be accepted. I believe that, in the light of the widespread support for the campaign, and the advanced age of those involved, a rapid decision is needed. I also believe that the circumstances are exceptional enough that a favourable decision will not lead to **irresistible** pressure to yield to lots of other campaigns, all of which should be looked at strictly on their merits, though I have to acknowledge that a favourable decision will increase pressure and expectations in some other quarters.

# RECOMMENDATION

Although there are many advantages in maintaining the Five Year Rule when considering retrospective medallic recognition, the decision to award the Atlantic Star for service in the Arctic Convoys was not reasonable or well justified, even in the circumstances of the time. This anomaly has been recognised not only by the Arctic Convoy Veterans themselves, but also by many thousands of members of the public and their representatives in Parliament. It is my recommendation therefore that the Honours and Decorations Committee recognise the lack of logic in combining the Atlantic Campaign with the Arctic Convoy Campaign and be requested to propose to Her Majesty that, in line with the statement by King George V1 that “ A good rule should be liable to exceptions in really special circumstances,” all those who served in the Arctic Convoys should be awarded a new medal called The Arctic Convoy Star, on the basis of the qualifications set out above.

I also recommend that, in the context of the separate look at double medalling for overseas awards being undertaken by Sir John Holmes, there should be readiness to reconsider the Russian wish to award the Ushakov medal.