

Event to mark 75th anniversary of the Arctic convoys postponed

An event to mark the 75th anniversary of the Arctic convoys due to be held at Loch Ewe this weekend has had to be postponed because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

There were 78 convoys, starting in August 1941, after Germany invaded the Soviet Union and more than 3,000 Allied seamen lost their lives to the freezing conditions and attacks by U-boats or aircraft.

The ships assembled in the easily defended Loch Ewe in Wester Ross and travelled by sea via Iceland to the Russian ports of Archangel and Murmansk.



Eddie Turnbull

They transported four million tons of supplies and munitions in what wartime Prime Minister Winston Churchill described as the “worst journey in the world”.

Eight years ago after a long-running campaign by survivors a decision was taken to award the Arctic Star medal for operational service of any length north of the Arctic Circle (66 degrees, 32’N) from September 3 1939 to May 8 1945, inclusive.

One recipient was Hibernian legend Eddie Turnbull who was posthumously awarded the military campaign medal in recognition of his part in the four-year struggle.

Eddie joined the Royal Navy as a teenager and was assigned to the destroyer HMS Bulldog as a torpedo loader.



Arctic Star

The ship, which had previously played a vital role in capturing U110 and its Enigma Code machine was deployed to the Arctic convoys.

At the time Norway was filled with occupying German Forces and the convoys were attacked on a regular basis by Luftwaffe dive bombers and U Boats. The crew also had to deal with mountainous seas and freezing conditions.

On several occasions HMS Bulldog came under attack and the sailors were aware that one direct hit would result in certain death. During that time Eddie lost several close shipmates and many of his former colleagues who had transferred to other ships were killed in action.

After leaving HMS Bulldog, Eddie was transferred to HMS Alnwick Castle where he served as an Able Seaman responsible for deploying depth charges then HMS Plover where he carried out dangerous work clearing mines until being demobbed in 1946.

He later recalled: "Plenty of records and statistics show how dangerous the convoys were and we sailors were only too aware of the casualty rates, but it is virtually impossible to adequately portray the hardship we went through as we escorted ships carrying vital supplies for the Russian war effort.

"Every journey was fraught with danger and you lived with the constant knowledge that underneath you could be men in submarines trying to kill you and that every sight of an aeroplane might be your last.

"We were really under the cosh round the clock. Every single person on the ship had to be alert to the dangers that were all around us. Each individual member of the crew had his part to play when the ship went into action or came under fire , and you knew that not only might your life depend on the man next to you, his might equally depend on you.

"One of the many things I took from the Navy into my later life: the knowledge that you can't do things for yourself all the time and that teamwork is essential for success. I also learned that practice makes perfect.

"We could never see the point of endless drills the captain put us through – until the day we had to do the things for real and everything went like clockwork. When action stations sounded, you knew exactly what your specific task was.

"I emerged from active service a stronger, better person as

I knew nothing I would face in later life could ever be worse than the dangers I had experienced on the Arctic convoys. We lived under the constant pressure of knowing that we might not survive another hour or day but it all made me tougher.”