

Stalin's British heroes: The discovery of a forgotten medal reveals the extraordinary courage of the RAF aces who fought for the Soviet Union

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The Messerschmitt was screaming towards him on a head-to-head collision course, but it was Flight-Lieutenant Micky Rook who got his shot in first. He held his nerve, pressed the firing button of his Hurricane fighter plane and the German Me109 exploded in mid-air, disintegrating before his eyes. Another hard-won 'kill' for the RAF in the early years of World War II.

Yet this was no part of the famous Few's dogfight over Kent. The waters beneath Rook's plane were not the English Channel but the icy Barents Sea off Murmansk on the northern edge of the Soviet Union, deep inside the Arctic Circle.

Rook was part of 151 Wing, a little-known RAF group who fought against the Germans alongside the pilots of the Soviet dictator, Joseph Stalin, for four vital months in the winter of 1941. Code-named Force Benedict, its mission has been largely forgotten for nearly seven decades - until the chance discovery earlier this year of a medal awarded to the splendidly named Wing Commander Henry Neville Gynes Ramsbottom-Isherwood, who led 151 Wing.



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Group Captain H N G Ramsbottom-Isherwood was one of only four non-Russians awarded the Order of Lenin

The red and gold Order of Lenin, resplendent with hammer and sickle and a platinum portrait of the Russian revolutionary leader, is one of the rarest ever won by a British serviceman. It had lain untouched at the back of a cupboard in Sussex for years.

At a Sotheby's auction next month it is expected to attract bids as high as £30,000.

The story behind the medal is an extraordinary one. Stalin's Russia and Hitler's Germany had a non-aggression pact - until Hitler tore it up and huge numbers of German forces invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941.

The Russians had been caught on the hop, largely because Stalin himself had ignored many warnings about such an invasion, and now they desperately needed weapons and supplies to stem the Nazi advance.

Stalin urged Winston Churchill, Britain's wartime leader, to send him Spitfires, the RAF's latest and fastest fighter planes. Churchill refused.

Britain was still struggling to keep the Germans at bay across the Channel and needed its best aircraft for that fight. But to show willing to his new ally, he dispatched Hurricanes - 40 of them to begin with, hundreds later.

As trainers and technicians went the men of 151 Wing, made up of two squadrons, Nos 81 and 134. They were officially under the command of Admiral Nikolai Kuznetsov, head of the Soviet Navy and Naval Air Service, and their orders were to undertake 'the defence of the naval base of Murmansk and co-operation with the Soviet Forces in the Murmansk areas'.

In practice, their job was to get the Hurricanes flying, train the Russians in their use, hand them over and return to Britain. But since they were within easy range of air bases in Germany's ally Finland, they would also go into action, escorting Russian bombers to these targets and shooting down as many German aircraft as they could.



Pilots of 81 Sqn at the shelter. On the left is the indicator board showing that Hurricanes R, P, K, and F, are armed and ready for use

Speed was crucial. The ruthlessness and intensity of Operation Barbarossa, Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union, sent the Red Army reeling. It was essential to get the planes to Russia and flying as soon as possible - and before the winter snows began.

The first batch sailed from Liverpool on August 12 in a convoy headed for the port of Archangel, on Russia's White Sea.

Aboard the SS Llanstephen Castle were 16 Hurricanes in crates, with all the spares and kit they would need to get them in the air. The flotilla of ships, codenamed Dervish, was the first of the PQ convoys that later become notorious because so many of their ships were sunk by Nazi U-boats on that run through near-freezing seas to northern Russia.

The second batch, of 24 Hurricanes and their crews, were put on board HMS Argus, an escort carrier converted from a World War I Italian merchant ship.

She sailed from Greenock on August 19. When the Argus reached Murmansk Sound, the Hurricanes were to fly off from its deck and go directly to a remote and windswept airfield at Vaenga, 15 miles north-west of Murmansk on the Kola peninsula that borders Finland.

All 39 were to rendezvous there at a brutally exposed base whose rutted grass strip was open to the bitter winds and snows of the Russian winter. In all, around 550 RAF air and ground crew made this their home for the next four months, a very short time to get their mission completed in temperatures that would go down to -15C, with daylight that varied from 23 hours at the start to three at the end, and rain, mist, snow and ice.

They achieved miracles. Just six days after the Llanstephen Castle docked at Archangel on August 30, three Hurricanes took off for flight testing. Nine days after arrival all 15 were flying, to the delight of the pilots and the Russians. They flew up to Murmansk and the first operational patrols began.

Heading the operation was Wing Commander Ramsbottom-Isherwood, who, despite the overwhelming old-world Englishness of his name, was from New Zealand.

Short, wiry and tough-minded, he was a career RAF flyer in his mid-30s. He was probably the most experienced pilot in the Wing and had been awarded an Air Force Cross for his hazardous duties flight-testing Spitfires, Hurricanes, Typhoons and Beaufighters.



Here was a not-to-be-missed chance for these Battle of Britain veterans to take on the Luftwaffe again in a different theatre of operations

Described as having a mouth like a steel trap he was, as one of his men said, not to be trifled with, although he did have a sense of humour and was known to enjoy a party. Once, in Murmansk, his absence at breakfast was noted after a particularly lively Anglo-Soviet celebration the previous night.

His pilots - many of whom had flown in the Battle of Britain of the previous year - were young and keen as mustard, although a bit surprised to find themselves 170 miles north of the Arctic Circle when they had initially believed they were going to the desert, a subterfuge designed to keep the mission secret before they set off.

Among them were Micky Rook and his cousin, the moustachioed Squadron Leader Tony Rook, both dashing six-footers. There was also one very short man, Flt Lt Jack Ross, who was a formidable flyer, having already shot down five German aircraft. He supervised much of the Russian pilots' flight training.

Vaenga, their base, was on a sandy silver birch-covered plateau a few miles from Murmansk Sound. It lacked concrete runways and tarmacked roads and there were no hangars - the aircraft were scattered in wooden pens screened by branches.

But living conditions were good. The men had brick barracks with solid windows and plenty of wood-fired heating.

On the very first day, the Russian hosts produced a welcoming breakfast that included champagne and brandy - delights that were not, however, to be repeated.

The only complaints came from younger officers who found the daily menu of smoked salmon, caviar and cold ham a poor substitute for the bacon and eggs and sausages they were used to. The youngest occasionally complained: 'Oh, hell, here's that smoked salmon again.'

But they saw their job as more than just assembling Hurricanes for the Russians and training them in their use. Here was a not-to-be-missed chance for these Battle of Britain veterans to take on the Luftwaffe again in a different theatre of operations.



Joseph Stalin: The RAF fought the Germans alongside the Soviet dictator's pilots in the winter of 1941

On September 12, six patrols and escorts went out and 151 Wing had its first skirmishes with enemy planes. Three of the enemy were shot down, but at a price - the loss of sergeant pilot N. Smith, the Murmansk mission's only combat fatality.

His aircraft was hit behind the cockpit. Unable to bail out because the cockpit rail was damaged, it is thought he attempted a crash-landing on rugged ground and was killed. Others flirted with death, as Flight-Lieutenant Rook did when he took on that Messerschmitt, one of six flying in formation. At 7,000ft over Finland, he had become separated from the rest of his patrol and, at first, thought the six planes he spotted ahead of him were his own men. He sidled up alongside them before realising his mistake.

They turned on him. He blasted the first one out of the sky and then dived for home at Vaenga with the other five enemy fighters on his tail. They chased him down to mast height over Murmansk Sound before he shook them off.

As he said later, having landed after one of the stiffest dogfights of his life, he sat sweating in his cockpit for a good five minutes before he could lever himself out. The Germans, he said, 'must have thought I was either bloody brave or bloody foolish'.

In all, Wing 151 carried out 365 sorties during its stay at Vaenga, claiming 11 Messerschmitt fighters and three Ju88 bombers shot down - a very creditable tally, considering how short the mission was. On October 13, the handover of the Hurricanes to the Air Force of the Soviet Northern Fleet started.

On October 26 the first Luftwaffe aircraft was destroyed by an ex-151 Wing Hurricane flown by a Russian pilot. Force Benedict's job was done. It was time to go home.

But before leaving, the Wing organised a farewell party for their hosts. The whisky, gin and port proved too much for the Russians, despite their liking for copious amounts of vodka.

On November 16, an advance party left for Archangel to sail back to Britain.

A fortnight later, Wing-Commander Ramsbottom-Isherwood, Squadron Leaders Rook and AG Miller and Flt Sgt Haw were awarded the Order of Lenin, the only four British servicemen so honoured in the whole of World War II.

In the list of Russian honours, the only one higher is the Order of Victory, and only one of those was awarded to a Brit - Viscount Montgomery.

On a fine spring day in late March 1942, the four were invited to the Soviet embassy in Kensington where Ivan Maisky, the ambassador, presented them with the medals.

The importance of the event for Anglo-Soviet relations was shown by the presence of Clementine Churchill, representing the Prime Minister Winston Churchill; Sir Archibald Sinclair, Britain's Air Secretary; Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal, the Chief of Air Staff; and Air Marshal Sir William Sholto Douglas, head of fighter command.

Ramsbottom-Isherwood was also awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross for his Russian exploits. He later flew in the Far East and survived the war, rising to the rank of group captain. Afterwards, he became commanding officer at Martlesham Heath RAF base in Suffolk.

On April 24, 1950, he took off in a Meteor jet fighter, then just coming into service, for a test flight. Over Kent, he ran into blinding snowstorms and icy conditions.

He flew over West Malling at 200ft and headed for RAF Manston. At 10.45 the aircraft dived into the ground four miles east of Tonbridge and disintegrated, killing him outright.

Extreme icing was the likeliest cause of the accident. At only 44, the man who had led Force Benedict through the wintry skies of Northern Russia had died in conditions similar to those he and his men had encountered and overcome in distant Murmansk.

His medal, along with his other awards, stayed with his family. His wife remarried and went to America. She is now dead. His only child, India, just 10 when her father died, had little interest in medals. Eventually she settled in Rottingdean, on the East Sussex coast. She is now frail and in her late 60s.

In February she moved to Somerset to be looked after by friends.

While her house was being cleared, a plastic bag containing her father's long-forgotten medals was found at the back of a cupboard.

In it were his AFC and DFC 37 - and that rare and elusive Order of Lenin. From that find has emerged a rarely remembered story of World War II bravery and the odd, forgotten campaign fought by the men of 151 Wing in a remote, cold corner of the Soviet Union.