

ARCTIC STAR

BRAVING THE WORST JOURNEY IN THE WORLD

TOM PALMER



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First published in 2021 in Great Britain by
Barrington Stoke Ltd
18 Walker Street, Edinburgh, EH3 7LP

www.barringtonstoke.co.uk

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Illustration © 2021 Tom Clohosy Cole

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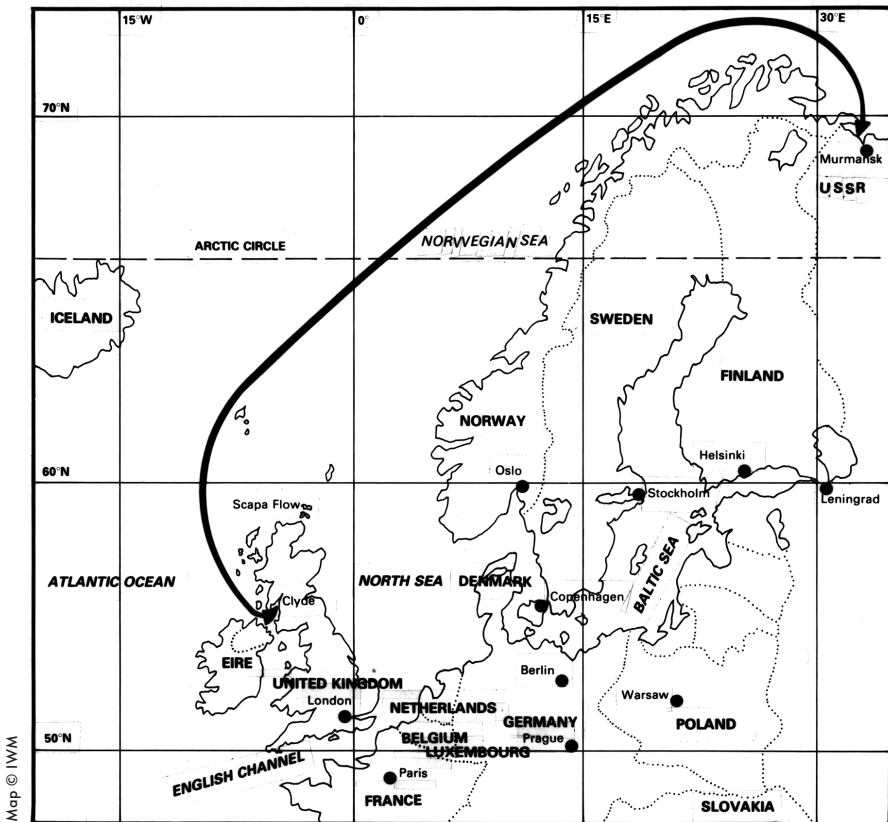
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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library upon request

ISBN: 978-1-78112-971-5

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

*Arctic Star is dedicated to Imperial War Museums and all
its staff as a thank-you for all the help they have given to
me and many other authors*



The Arctic Convoy route from Scotland to Murmansk.







THE FIRST CONVOY





ONE

Norwegian Sea, October 1943

“You do know that some men who go out on deck to clear ice are never seen again, don’t you?”

Frank took a deep breath, ignoring his friend Stephen’s remark to focus on preparing himself for what was coming next.

The wind. The waves. The danger.

Frank had a hammer and chisel in one hand, while his other hand gripped the thick steel wire that ran the length of the ship from bow to stern. There for men to hold on to in rough weather. He could already feel its freezing cold metal through his



thick woollen Arctic gloves as the wind roared wildly around him.

HMS *Forgetmenot* rolled into another deep trough between waves, forcing Frank to reset his feet as the angle of the deck shifted again. And then his ice-chipping team were on the move. Frank, Joseph and Stephen staggered forwards into the storm, attached to each other by a rope – a lifeline.

Frank went first, ignoring the nausea of seasickness. He was immediately struck by a blast of wind so cold it was impossible to breathe. His lungs just couldn't take in the freezing air as he felt his feet slip underneath him on the icy deck. This was madness! But the lifeline did its job – as did his two friends. Frank stayed upright. Just.

Out in the open, the wild ocean rolled and roared and thumped at the side of the ship's metal hull. Frank felt grateful for the warm clothing of his



Arctic kit as shards of ice hit him like a hail of bullets.

There was a name for this ice, like there was a name for everything at sea. *Spindrift*. It was created as the wind whipped the surface water off the tops of the waves and froze it into hard sharp particles.

Frank flinched from the spindrift but kept moving. If he didn't, he knew that over the next hour ice would build up on the deck of the ship, freezing the guns, the lifeboats, the racks of explosive depth charges. Then HMS *Forgetmenot* would become top-heavy and capsize, pitching them all into the sea. The entire eighty-five-man crew would be dead in minutes.

Out of the corner of his eye, Frank could see some of the other forty-seven ships in their Arctic Convoy. No doubt junior sailors like him were having to do the same terrifying job on their decks as they all battled through the storm.



Frank kept his body low to help him balance as he approached the guard rail, which was like a metal fence that ran round the edge of the deck to prevent sailors from falling overboard. He glanced back to see Joseph holding on to his lifeline with a determined look on his face, then Frank began to attack the build-up of ice.

As he did so, the ship seemed to bounce off the waves, making it difficult to keep his footing and raise the hammer, then bring it down on the chisel. But Frank had to keep going. He'd found that work, keeping busy, was the best way to flush away his fear.

Further down the deck, he spotted three men operating a steam hose, melting the ice from around the mechanism of one of the ship's great guns. He figured a steam hose would be more effective than a hammer and chisel, but he would have to make do with what he had.



Using every muscle and sinew in his body, Frank focused on keeping his balance and driving his chisel into ridges of ice. He made good progress – chunks were coming away, some the size of his seaboots. He had the angle of the chisel right and was timing his strikes too, waiting for HMS *Forgetmenot* to crest a wave, then striking down with his hammer before the ship lunged into a trough. It was all about timing. That was the trick.

He took out another five or six large chunks of ice before it happened. One minute his hammer was raised to strike, the next the deck went from under him and he hit his back on something, his head on something else. Then he was falling, somersaulting downwards.

Instinctively Frank let go of his hammer and chisel, hoping they wouldn't spin into the air and take a lump out of him. Then he felt a sudden shock



of cold and wet. Took in a lungful of freezing salty seawater while trying to move his arms. But his heavy overcoat made that impossible and, really, Frank had no idea what was up and what was down, where the surface of the sea was, where the sky was.

But one thing he did now know: he was overboard.

In the sea.

Frank felt terror, his heart pounding inside his chest, his throat gasping for air. Submerged beneath the water Frank could feel his overcoat and boots becoming heavier and heavier, weighing him down, like there was a hand coming from the depths of the Norwegian Sea to drag him to his death.

As he fought for every breath, for his life, Frank could feel the cold the sailors had told him about when a man went overboard. A violent shivering. A numbness. The slowing of the heart.



It was a quick death, they had said. Not a terrible death, so long as you just gave in to it.

Soon Frank's exhaustion overcame him and he stopped fighting.

