

DAILY  **POST**

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 1, 1987



Johnny and Molly Calkin share a moment together at their front gate.

It's a long way from the hell of the Arctic supply convoys to Himatangi Beach, where 63-year-old Johnny Calkin has washed up to see out his retirement years. Ironic though, because he still can't swim yet there he lives, beside the seaside. The memories of one of those convoys came flooding back last week when the Soviet Union embassy tracked him down to present him with a gold medal to commemorate the North Atlantic campaign of World War II. For £12 a month he put his life on the line in 1942 to help see through vitally-needed war material as the Russians struggled to throw back the invading Nazis. Even today Calkin isn't sure why he went to sea at the age of 15. Says the London-born cockney: "To get away from mum, I suppose. I always was the black sheep of the family." It was almost a decision that cost him his life when his ship was one of the many to fall victim to a U-boat torpedo. Across the whole of Britain only about 200 medals have been given out by the Soviet Union, a handful in this country. They're a measure of the few who came back from the convoys. Alister Browne talked to Johnny Calkin about his convoy.

Fear saved cabin boy

Johnny Calkin reckons his fear of water saved his life on the morning of September 13, 1942.

That was the day a German U-boat got his ship off the Norwegian coast.

The night before the U-boat wolf pack had swarmed around the Murmansk-bound convoy, dispatching the heavily-laden merchant ships to icy graves with clinical efficiency.

At sunrise they were joined by bombers and about 11.30am the Empire Beaumont — on which Mr Calkin was serving as an 18-year-old cabin boy — was hit by a torpedo.

Mr Calkin remembers seeing the bombers arriving overhead. "I said to someone, 'whose are they, theirs or ours?' Back came the reply, "Theirs, you silly bugger."

Blue flashes

The ship in the next lane was hit — two blue flashes and it was down in minutes. The ammunition it was carrying saw to that.

Then it was the turn of the Empire Beaumont.

Mr Calkin, who was aft on the deck, recalls a shudder running the length of the ship and vast amounts of steam suddenly filling the air.

The torpedo had apparently struck somewhere in the region of the engine room. Mr Calkin rushed in search of a lifejacket. It was "too sissy" to be wearing one at the time. Then it was to the lifeboats by rope down the side.

Too scared to jump

"I was too sacred to jump out to the ropes but the captain told me if I didn't he would push me."

No way was he going to take his chances in the water — he'd never learned to swim, so it was the boats or nothing. Six crewmen who did jump over the side froze to death.

The sea was a deathtrap which nurtured icebergs so big that to the inexperienced they looked like land. Panic it was, says Mr Calkin, that seized the half-dozen who leapt to their doom. They were young and hadn't been told any better.

Lifeboat drill was a joke.

Mr Calkin doesn't remember ever having a drill on any of the ships on which he sailed.

It wasn't long before Mr Calkin and his fellow survivors were picked up by the convoy's rescue ship.

Then they had to wait for the SS Copeland to pluck a group of Americans off a raft first. They'd apparently got hold of some liquor from somewhere because they seemed to be roaring drunk, singing at the tops of their voices.

Then it was time for Mr Calkin and his mates to fling themselves into the nets trailed by the Copeland, which before the war was the Scotland-Ireland ferry.

Getting rescued was almost as hazardous as being torpedoed. The trick was to jump into the netting as the ship rose on the swell — but Mr Calkin remembers mistiming it and flinging himself off the lifeboat as the Copeland lurched into a trough.

The Copeland was crammed with 500 survivors from the convoy and carried on to the entrance of the White Sea, near Murmansk.

"Being so young I don't think I was as scared as I might have been," says Mr Calkin. "Besides there wasn't time. But you still said your prayers..."

After his seven days on the rescue ship he transferred to a destroyer which was to escort 14 surviving merchantmen from the three previous convoys back to Britain. Eight got home — the rest were victims of the U-boats.

During the long return home the convoy was shadowed by a German reconnaissance plane reporting the ships' position to the wolf packs.

Most of the time it stayed well out of gunfire range but at one point it made a low-level swoop over the destroyer Mr Calkin was on, which failed to open fire.

This sparked a signal from the convoy commander which asked: "Whose side are you on, theirs or ours?"

"It was great being on a destroyer," said Mr Calkin. There was a lot of depth-charging during the trip, although he doesn't recall any successful hits.

At one stage the destroyer had to finish off a merchant ship which was on fire after being torpedoed.

The remains of the convoy finally got back in November and Mr Calkin took survivors' leave from his first and last voyage to the Soviet Union — where he never set foot.

The rest of Johnny Calkin's war was somewhat less eventful although he saw more action on board a collier plying the English Channel.