

Correspondence

Supplying Russia during the Great War, 1914–1918

Ann Savours

Little Bridge Place, Bridge, Kent

Received July 2007

Reading Captain Richard Woodman's lament on the lack of an appropriate campaign medal for those serving in British ships involved in the transport of supplies to north Russia from 1941 to 1945 (Woodman 2007), I was reminded of their predecessors in the Great War of 1914 to 1918, when the timber port of Archangel, towards the mouth of the Dvina, together with Vladivostok, were Imperial Russia's only outlets to the sea. Captain R.F. Scott's auxiliary barque *Discovery* was one of a number of ships chartered to the French Government by the Hudson's Bay Company to carry *matériel* from Brest to the White Sea, in peril not only of tempestuous seas, but of ice and the 285 mines laid in that sea by the German auxiliary cruiser *Meteor*, in June 1915.

Stationed at Yukanskie, a 'rock strewn anchorage' under the lee of Cape Svyatoi Nos, at the northern entrance to the narrow *gorlo* or gullet leading to the Gulf of Archangel was one of three Senior Naval Officers of the Arctic Squadron, Captain R.S. Gwatkin-Williams, R.N., in H.M.S. *Intrepid*. He wrote a book containing a vivid and often humorous account of his part in these operations:

To Yukanskie, during the period each year that Arkhangel was free from ice, the whole sea-borne trade of Russia converged fanwise. It was there that ships received their orders, and were swept or convoyed to Arkhangel and the other White Sea ports. Day and night the shipping came and went during

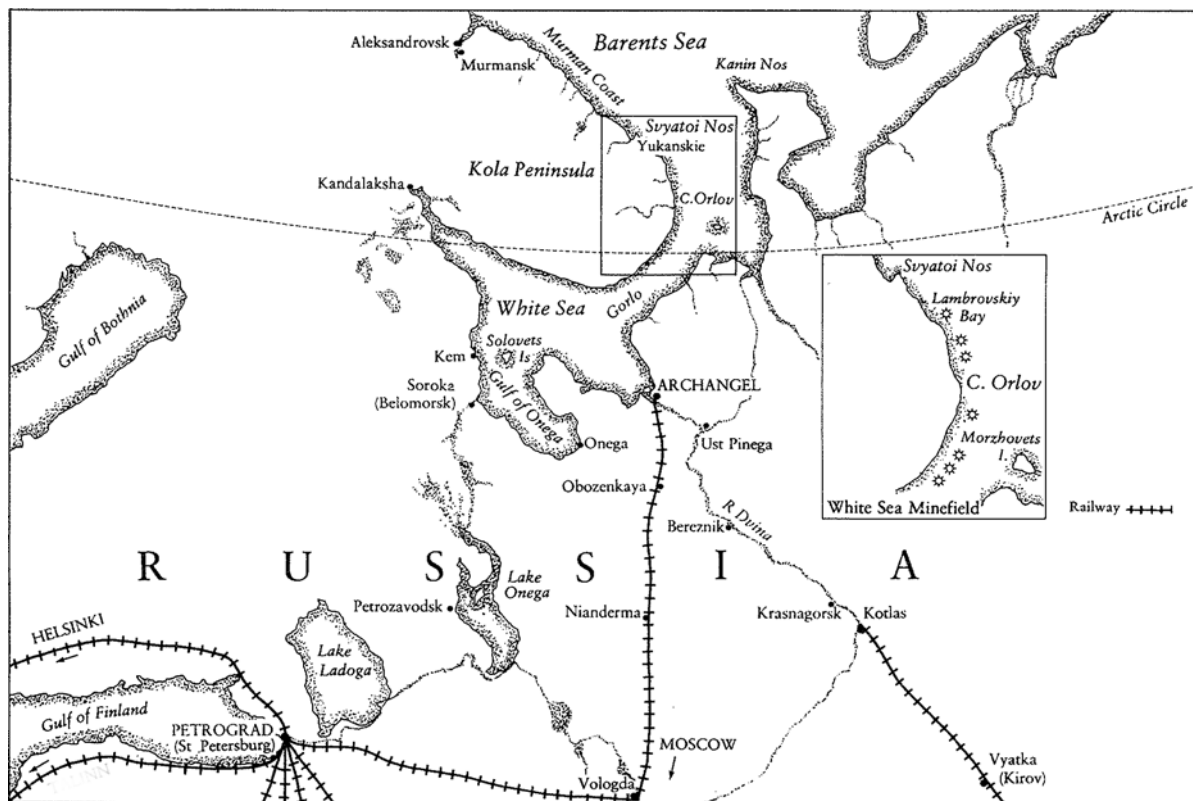


Fig. 1. North Russia, to illustrate the voyage of *Discovery* through the White Sea to Archangel in 1915 (Savours 1992: 142). Map by Vera Brice.

those short golden summer months, and was boarded, searched, questioned and instructed. Many hundreds of ships passed through each season, laden for the most part with coal, guns, munitions and every species of warlike stores; many whose single cargoes were valued as being worth £2,000,000 each. It was only the old *Intrepid* and the other units of the British Arctic Squadron who made this traffic possible, for, by keeping open the mouth of Arkhangel by which Russia received her war food, they enabled her still to keep going as a combatant. (Gwatkin–Williams 1922: 51; Fig. 1).

The archives of the Hudson's Bay Company, Winnipeg, contain the extensive correspondence and logbooks relating to the almost world-wide seaborne operations of the venerable company during the Great War. My 'biography' of Scott's *Discovery* (now berthed in Dundee) provides an account of one small vessel that formed part of them in 1915. After navigating the northern waters patrolled by the Tenth Cruiser Squadron of the Royal Navy, and the White Sea to the mouth of the Dvina, *Discovery* discharged her 500 tonnes of munitions at the Russian Government berth of Bakharitsya. During the voyage bad weather had caused her to labour and strain heavily, the decks, rotten in parts, made a great deal

of water in the bottom, while thirty five tonnes of coal were lost in a storm. Captain W.J. Bartley and the ship's company were paid a war bonus for this voyage.

She escaped being frozen in for the winter at Archangel as well as a violent storm in the North Atlantic on 24 December 1915. The old Scottish whaler *Active* and the brave little *Morning* foundered then, with the loss of all but two lives.

The Hudson's Bay Company agency in Archangel existed for four years under various forms of Russian government. During that period, all the munitions from France for Russia and Romania were transported under the Company's flag. The agency, which had been established in May 1915 in agreement with the French government, was only abandoned when the British government ordered the removal of all British subjects following the Bolshevik Revolution and subsequent events.

References

- Gwatkin-Williams, R.S. 1922. *Under the black ensign*. London, Hutchinson.
- Savours, A. 1992. *The voyages of the 'Discovery'*. London: Virgin Books.
- Woodman, R. 2007. A medal for the Arctic? *Polar Record* 43(226): 285.