

THE RAF IN NORTHERN RUSSIA 1918-1919



by Air Commodore Phil Wilkinson

A pair of Snipes at the front of a North Russia line-up that included DH9As and 1½ Srutters. Major A. Kazakov was killed in E6350.

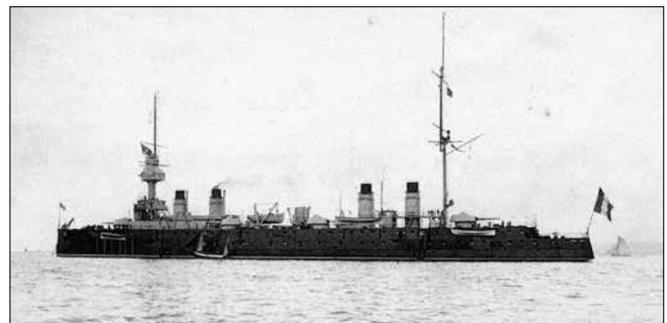
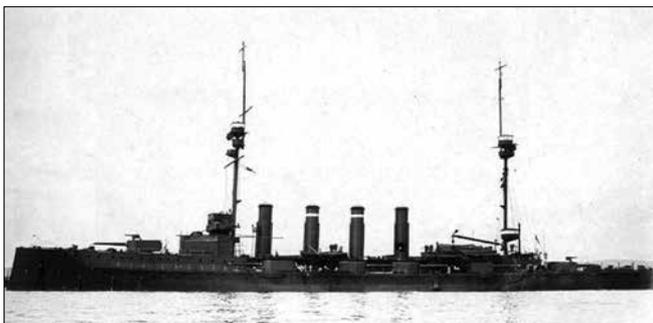
:Gareth Morgan

THE NEWLY-BORN Royal Air Force was active during the Intervention into the affairs of post-Revolutionary Russia. This article deals with the complex challenges faced by British (and many other Allied) forces as they fought and died in the inhospitable North of that country.

There may seem an incongruity of launching men and machines into action at the time of the November 1918 Armistice, but operations in (and for) Russia, not least the delivery of military supplies, and shipment home of raw materials through the main ports (Murmansk and Archangel in the North and Vladivostok in the East), were well under way from as early in the war as 1915. The Second World War's Arctic Convoys were merely a re-run, complete with similar hazards and losses, not a new idea.

A well-placed attaché staff (Major General Sir Alfred Knox, the senior attaché, had been appointed to Petrograd in 1911, and on outbreak of war he was designated as principal British liaison officer to both Court and Imperial Military Staff¹) kept open the main lines of information flow between capitals and War Cabinets. Military advisory and training Missions were inserted into Russia, to provide support to the Russian ally, and to ensure productive use of materiel shipped in such large quantities – by the beginning of 1917 Britain was shipping some three million tons of equipment annually. Thus, long before November 1918, it was clear to London that there needed to be some effective safeguard against German manoeuvres under the terms of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty of March 1918. There should be no easy transfer of German divisions from their eastern front to add to the weight of attack in their spring offensive in the West. Nor should there be any pillaging and/or transfer of those considerable logistic stores that were now gathering dust in both Murmansk and Archangel. Thus, as a first action, came the deployment of a batch of Royal Marines for shore duty, under the orders of the Royal Navy's North Russia Squadron Commander, Rear Admiral Thomas Kemp. Let his despatch set the scene in precise detail:²

The main naval support for Rear Admiral Kemp's actions in the Murman Province, HMS Cochrane and the French armoured cruiser Amiral Aube, with its distinctive funnel arrangement.



SIR:

I beg you will lay before Their Lordships the following despatch dealing with Naval affairs in North Russia during the year 1918:

In December, 1917, it was decided to withdraw from Archangel all Naval elements. I therefore embarked these in H.M.S. 'Iphigenia' on December 19th, together with as many British subjects as could be induced to leave, arriving at Murmansk next day.

The position, whether regarded from a political or military point of view, was very simple. The complete breakdown of the Russian Military system had left Russia open to German invasion. This reacted on the naval position in Murmansk.

It was, nevertheless, decided to retain an allied footing in Murman Province, which afforded the only means of physical communication with European Russia. This decision in itself involved no ulterior motive with regard to the internal policy of Russia. Such elements of Russian life as were friendly to the above aims were to be welcomed, and such as were hostile were to be opposed. This, put in simple terms, was the gist of my instructions. At the same time I was given plainly to understand that the military situation elsewhere did not admit of the despatch of an expedition, and that I must do my best with the naval forces at my disposal, together with the assistance of such units of Allied Military Commissions, etc., which rendezvoused at Murmansk from time to time for despatch home.

The same process applied to Pechenga, the nearest important Russian harbour to the Norwegian boundary. In order to hold Kola inlet it was necessary to hold Pechenga, since the occupation of the latter by a hostile force would have turned it into a German submarine base. Finland was then dominated by Germany, and the possession of Pechenga affording a northern outlet was a Finnish aspiration. All indications tended to show that a German Finnish movement against the place was in contemplation.

With these considerations in view I begged to be sent an