

## **Arthur Le Duc**

### **Arthur's Story, as told at the Whitton Wireless School, 1992**

Memoirs of Arthur Le Duc  
Leading Telegraphist  
C/JX 361530 Royal Navy  
Russian Convoys  
1941-45

And attached to

R.A.F Y. Cheadle, Staffordshire, an Out Station to Bletchley Park

Arthur's Story is being taken to the Archives at Bletchley Park this year (1999) by Ex- Naval Lieutenant John Beardmore, Ex H.M.S. Holly, who is giving a talk at Bletchley about his own experiences on the Russian Convoys, 1941-45.

Arthur died in 1994.

### **Arthur's Story, 1992, as told at the Whitton Social Association, Percy Road**

My story starts from when I finished my square basing at HMS Royal Arthur. At this point we vaguely understood we were to be telegraphists and were promptly sent on draft to Brighton. On arrival we were taken to St Dunstan's school for the blind, given a brief lecture by the L/C Gardner on the perils awaiting young men in Brighton at the time and a promise that he would personally take his coat off to anybody getting themselves into trouble. From thence we were taken to Civvy Billets where we were to stay for four months.

The following day we went back to this first St Dunstan's School, where with the instruction from civilian Post Office Operators, we were taught the Morse Code. For the next two months we attended school from 9:00hrs – 14.30hrs receiving Morse the whole time – (no transmitting, no technical instruction) until we reached approximately sixteen words per minute.

At this point we moved onto the second St Dunstan's which was along the sea front for a further two months. By receiving from the Operators – listening to plain language code and figures from Reuter and other stations our receiving speeds were taken to 25-28 and 30 words per minute – at these speeds you do not think or translate, you are listening to another language.

Finally we were tested at 20 words per minute P/L 16 words per minute code and 14 groups of figures per minute. By now of course we find that our work was secret and it involved interception of enemy Morse.

The first stage of our training was over and we moved on to Eastbourne, again civil billets and we attended school at St Bedes, here we were taught German and Italian Naval procedures, my two recollections of this was the tremendous standards of German operators. Two powerful transmitters at Kiel and Wilhelmshaven Kye and Ada transmitted naval code at approximately 18 words per minute and you could not tell whether two transmissions were by human hand or automatic. One noticed temperament, a German saying No was-. an Italian saying No was -. -.-.-.-. . The course being over we were surprised at being given a choice of either home, sea or foreign service. I chose sea (there was in fact only one other choice that was Freetown on the Gold Coast).

For those of us that chose sea found ourselves on draft to Staffordshire, arriving at a small village called Cheadle. At the railway station we were surprised to meet a bunch of Royal Air Force boys and we all piled into one lorry and sang bawdy songs all the way to the Headquarters of the RAF interception service "the Y Service". After normal administration we were allocated civilian billets and told to catch the RAF coach the following morning, I remember the arrival of a naval contingent in Leek caused quite a stir, anyway the coach the following morning contained LAC's, WAAF's civilians and the newly arrived Matelots.

On arrival at the RAF station we were taken in hand by a RAF sergeant by the name of Maurice Spector, he was a grand chap who quickly explained what we were to become and where in all probability we would get our sea time. Our function was to intercept enemy air Morse, Maurice had personally been on some of the worst Russian convoys.

Instruction commenced, we learnt that there were the Bomber groups identified by the letters KG e.g. 1 KG 40 (KG = Bomber Command) there were reconnaissance groups identified by the letter F.

e.g. 1 F 120 (IF 120 (Fligger Reconnaissance). German aircraft had 4 symbol c/signs e.g. TK4D with possibly TK4A & TK4D being ground stations and SAF from J to 2 being the aircraft.

Traffic was 3 SYB fig groups with X 1, X37, 921, 4X1.

The most important daily traffic was from what were known as Zenits.

There was the Arctic Zenit, North Sea Zenit Westa 1, Paris Zenit Zenit, Brest Zenit Zenit.

As we understood these were unarmed aircraft whose function was to operate over a set area every day and transmit weather reports and priority message KR such as convoy sightings. The Zenit traffic was peculiar in as much as they had 3Sym c/signs. The traffic was 3 FIG with X's a code and 5 LTR groups with barred LTR1.

DIF DE LTT C = 0310 = 3 = X7X 921 4X3 = KIWI = AULTO OLADI XSTLT RRFSI NITL = K

R = Repeat message

It was explained to us that it was imperative that the first messages of the day were intercepted as thus enabled the boffin to crack the German code of the day.

Zenith operations usually took place from 3 to 5 in the morning dependant on weather conditions until 8 o'clock – they rattled out a heck of a lot of traffic and at a speed that quickly made us understand why we were taken to such high speeds.

After a couple of days with Maurice we were taken into another room where we sat with a RAF Operator who would pick up some group working. I then realised listening in a class room is one thing, picking up the type of traffic they were listening to was another. At first I could not hear the signals, all I could hear was QRM – anyway it gradually came and we went live as it were. We were split over the three operational watches A, B and C (these were eight hour long watches to give 24 hour coverage) with adjustment of time similar to Navy Dog watches at the weekend.

### **The Room**

Visualise a large room, at one end, a large black board with a comptroller sitting below it but still in a raised position to see every operator. Bill, as I will describe him, was able to plug into every set in the room and relay when necessary to outlying D/F stations. Facing Bill were six lines of operators (about ten to a line), personnel were civilian (PO Men), LAC's, WAAF's and Navy, and at a later date, American Air Force men. At the rear of the lines were operators covering fixed frequencies RFUS, the rest of the room were searching for German aircraft activity, be it Operational, Training or anything suspicious.

Such was the efficacy of the RAF 'Y' Service that one quickly was honed to their razor sharpness. At this point I would mention a German aircraft transmitter had a particular tremulous note. If, for example, whilst searching on the large dial of the HRO one picked up amongst all the traffic continually swamping the air a QSA 1 and just a = and a sound like I have just mentioned it could be sufficient to make you sit on that group for maybe half an hour. If you were right you would yell out the frequency – Bill would plug in on your set to relay to outlying D/F stations. If a identified and wanted you Bill would enter call sign – name of group and frequency against your set on the large board. Your task would be to log and take all traffic on that group as long as it was operative. On received message, hang message on hook, switch on light, traffic clerk would collect.

There was, at one stage, an arrogance to the German which gave him away. To keep his frequency clear a German aircraft ground station operator would send a phoney Military message – (5LTR) code, it was a digression that bored him and he would do stupid things like send it left handed or ABCDE FGHIJ or it was so badly sent that we identified it as a spoof.

The red hot reconnaissance group were much more cagey. I will describe one group, the IF 120 operating from Ymuden in Holland. When airborne if the aircraft wanted the ground station to know he was there he

just touched his key dil dil. The ground station responded dil dil then maybe complete silence for half an hour, then aircraft ground station - ... K aircraft C message ground station R. Finish.

Change of frequency was once or twice daily according to our manual. It could be 10:00 to 15:00 then all change 15:00 to 23:00 then 23:00 to 05:00, these were known as FAG frequencies.

Without doubt the razor edge was keenest in the early hours of the morning when the Zenit made its appearance. The most important was WESTA 1 (the North Sea Zenit). Quite often lists would be sent round with call signs and frequencies, the FAG period and of course, name of group.

As many as a dozen operators could be sitting on one frequency listening for the call sign transmission of the Zenit aircraft. As many as four operators would yell out the frequency at the same time and it would be up to Bill to elect which set had got there first (it was the only time I ever saw Britishers almost come to blows over a Jerry), such was the fierce competition. Particularly during the Battle of Britain, the Luftwaffe had a signal for everything including HH for Heil Hitler. The International code of Q signals was greatly used.

Before dealing with the success of the interception serviced at sea there is one other form of traffic I would like to mention. By this time my wife who was a LACW had been transferred from the Beacons section to the main room. I noticed one morning watch, some interest on the traffic she had picked up and was rather puzzled when I noticed the Wing Commander, with other, was taking an interest, she told me afterwards it was part plain language numbers and what appeared to be grid references. What was even more puzzling was that it was sent very slowly. Within a night or two it became apparent two groups had previously been noted which used call signs of HOR and SCH. Thus was the term Horsch Born.

In order to counter the 1000 bomber raids on Germany the Luftwaffe set up a network of ground stations on different frequencies. The function was to tell German fighter pilots who were airborne, of numbers, directions and areas in which to find the planes of the RAF Bomber Command. As the night fighter pilots were obviously restricted in their cockpits and in darkness, the message was sent slowly and self evident e.g. 20 BAW NW . G 9321 L 7610. The counter measures now followed. During the evening a notice would be put up on the board HORSCH 23:00 – 05:00 dependant on where the raid was.

Operators during this time would search for HORSCH traffic, on identifying, the frequency would be shouted out – the controller would plug in and obtain D/F bearings, HORSCH was identified and put up on the board. The traffic was of little value but what followed was, after a minute or two, a horrible screech come down over your frequency. Yes it was a jamming transmitter. You hurriedly took the phones off your ears and out them on the side of your head where they bounced up and down with the strength of the transmitter – sometimes fractionally moving the dial off centre you could just hear the ground station. It was very satisfying to hear the ground station say QRM 5 QRM 5 Ch Ch. He had given up.

Just digressing a little, at the Battle of Britain time the Luftwaffe was so confident that it used the air quite freely. Its medium frequency signals identified the group and aircraft at a specific airfield. When operational they used signals to say when crossing the French coast – the English coast, over target, bombs roll etc. Radar was very important but at this time so was the ‘Y’ service as it was able to give warning of an impending raid well before radar contacts.

I found quite often that sitting on a training group could be good practice, possibly 3 ground stations and twenty aircraft could keep you busy.

After some months of watch keeping at the station I came in for my first draft. I was in the cinema one evening in Leek with a WAAF (my future wife Helen) when I was tapped on the shoulder by the usherette – enquired of my name and informed a policeman was waiting for me outside. A message from the station, be packed and ready for the following morning. By 11am the following morning I was cleared from the station, ready to go when a last message from Admiralty reduced the draft by half. I was taken off the draft – I was lucky, those that went never came back ... the Luftwaffe had been experimenting with a radar controlled bomb, with no success but on this occasion they did, and HMS Egret (a sloop) was sunk and my mates were lost. So it was back to the room again, but not for long.

Next time I was on watch when I received a tap on the shoulder and the following day was on draft to Scapa Flow.

At Scapa we were based ashore in a nissen hut until a signal would be received deploying a contingent of us to whatever ship was going to be in charge of an operation in Northern Waters. Be it convoy – covering force or a strike of some sort. On board ship we acted independently, answering only to belonging to the ‘Y’ Service, this did at times irritate some ships company.

Our function on passing through the Boom at Scapa Flow was to watch – keep 24 hour watches, searching the aircraft frequency, listening for the North Sea Zenit as he would be the one to pick you up first. His KR transmission backed by a blip on radar would be sufficient to let you know you had been found. If you were with a convoy moving up the Norwegian coast monitoring the ground stations at Stavanger, Trondheim, Bodo, Bardofoss, Tromsø could pay dividends. Movement around airfield would be on a minimum frequency for which the call signs used would identify group and aircraft. As the convoy moved up the coast call signs would be noted at airfields going North until they congregated at the most Northern airfield.

No matter how far North the convoy went passing from the North Sea into the Arctic waters at some point the convoy had to turn east round the top of Norway on route to the North cape and Kola inlet to Murmansk. This was the danger area as far as aircraft were concerned and our endeavours were to search out the operational group and monitor its traffic. The Luftwaffe had become pretty canny at this

stage and it was loath to break W/T silence too often but there were other ways he could give himself away.

Before explaining this I would mention the attitude of the Royal Navy – in the early days when the attacks were most savage it was the RAF Office and operators who went to sea. The Navy did not exactly welcome them or pay much attention to the information they passed over. Possibly the complete immunity with which they attacked the convoy meant such information as was passed would not have made any difference anyway.

In the second phase in which I was involved it was a completely different story. At this time the escort carriers (usually two) would accompany the convoy – this meant air cover for the convoy. In addition the attitude of senior men in command had changed. One man I recall was Admiral Sir Roderich McGrigor.

On one convoy North I was with a small 'Y' party on an escort carrier, HMS Campania, all the way up after our initial sighting by the North Sea Zenit, we had listened to the ground stations on medium frequencies and noted their movements North. It had been noted that a particular experienced and dangerous group the 1 KG 40's were moving North. Loads of ground station traffic was being sent. As moved into the area most suitable for air attack, suddenly all ground stations seemed to go off the air on this particular night, at about 04.00. it was very similar to this conduct on the November convoy. From this lack of W/T activity we deduced a possible attack after break of dawn. The possibility and the reasoning were passed on by our Sub Lio coder to the bridge. Sir Roderick McGrigor, for it was he in charge of the convoy, had all aircraft airborne around dawn and as the torpedo carry JW 88i came in at sea level just after dawn they came in for a terrible pounding – 14 were shot down in 40 minutes.

There would usually be a 'Y' party with the covering force, these were the powerful Royal Navy ships which lay about 200 miles from the convoy, watchful for the Scharnhorst, which they caught, and the Tirnpitz, which lay in Alten Fjord and would not come out. In addition various strikes took place in those waters which warranted a 'Y' service party.

Finally I would mention that it was a very exciting and fascinating side of W/T, particularly when you were on carriers yourself. I sailed on five:-

HMS Formidable

HMS Indefatigable

HMS Pursuer

HMS Vindex

HMS Campania

I was on other ships but I did like carriers.

With the cessation of the German War my involvement with interception on the European Theatre ceased and I suddenly found myself en route to Wimbledon.

It was there that I was taught Japanese Morse, it only took a month to learn. There were more letters to the alphabet and we had to the traffic out in a certain manner. We could listen to Tokyo, Surabaya and Singapore. All I can remember now is that their transmitters sounded tinny, squark and slow – two days after the course finished and we were on leave, the atomic bomb was dropped.