



### Lt Cdr Roy Francis (36-39)

Roy Francis was born in Essex. His father, a colonel in the Berkshires, served with distinction in both wars, and was a friend of Baden-Powell, the founder of scouting. His mother was an accomplished painter. After Conway, Roy entered the RN as a midshipman in 1939. He was aboard the cruiser *Manchester* in the Med when, in July 1941, she was hit by the first aerial torpedo launched by the Germans. While *Manchester* was under repair, he moved to the *Duke of York*, which, after Pearl Harbor, took Churchill across the Atlantic to confer with Roosevelt.



Promoted sub-lieutenant, Francis joined *Edinburgh* to escort convoys to Murmansk. On its second run, only seven ships got through; ice and severe weather forced 16 back and one was sunk by U-boats. On 26th April 1942, 17 ships in convoy QP11 left Murmansk. For two days, German aircraft, destroyers and U-boats relentlessly attacked *Edinburgh* which was carrying gold ingots. Eventually, she was crippled by torpedoes, one of which blew off her stern, killing 10 teenage midshipmen and throwing Francis across the deck. Still under attack, *Edinburgh* tried to return to Murmansk slowly under her own power until, on 2nd May, three destroyers engaged her near Bear Island. *Edinburgh* damaged the *Hermann Schoemann* so severely that her crew scuttled her but a stray torpedo hit *Edinburgh*, leaving her held together only by the deck plating and keel. The crew abandoned ship, but gunfire and depth charges failed to scuttle her. Then the destroyer *Foresight* sank *Edinburgh* with her last torpedo. Francis walked onto a rescuing vessel without getting his feet wet and was taken back to Murmansk, then Reykjavik and home.

Reassigned to the corvette *Waveney*, he 'did the Cruel Sea' as navigator on Atlantic convoy duties. In November 1942, *Waveney* joined the defensive screen for the Operation Torch landings in North Africa. Defying orders, Francis opened fire on what he thought was an Italian torpedo bomber. A sister ship signalled they risked being hit. However, in the morning, the aircraft's crew were spotted in their dinghy. In October 1943, Francis transferred to the frigate *Papua*, patrolling the western approaches. In February 1945, *Papua* was one of four frigates which sank the *U-1014* off Malin Head. That November, he moved to boom defence vessels, and was given his own ship. In 1949, he commanded *Barndale* in trials to find whether all parts of a ship were equally vulnerable to radiation after a nuclear blast. Gamma rays were pumped into the WWI cruiser *Arethusa*, with unexpectedly encouraging results. Two years followed clearing mines off Sierra Leone. In 1955 Francis conducted an operation as hazardous as it was confidential. The Americans were staging tests to ascertain whether nuclear triggers for atomic bombs could explode if an aircraft carrying them crashed, detonating the bomb itself. Various types of triggers were cased in concrete spheres and dropped on Orford Ness from different heights, but



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one fell into the sea. Francis, commanding *Uplifter*, was sent to recover the trigger. Strict secrecy meant Francis and his second-in-command had to spend every night in isolation at RAF Martlesham. The trigger was successfully recovered.

Francis left the RN in 1956 in a cull of lieutenant-commanders who were just short of their pension. Settling in Norfolk, he launched a company building boats on the Broads. He built a railway in his garden for fun, and with his son a medical student and his daughter training to be a ballerina, he took a portable track to fêtes and fairs to help pay the bills. He modelled for life classes at Norwich School of Art and also started producing cakes commercially.

Early in the 1970s, Norfolk County Council asked him to solve traffic congestion between Wells and its beach by building another railway. He constructed a mile-long 7¼" line along the flood bank between Wells Harbour and Pinewoods. It was washed away twice; each time he rebuilt it himself. In 1979, Francis took on a greater challenge after walking the course of the old branch line to Wells, closed in 1964. He determined to construct a 10¼" gauge line between Wells and Walsingham and set about excavating filled-in cuttings and laying more than 7,000 sleepers. The Wells-Walsingham Light Railway opened in 1982, the train fittingly hauled by a steam engine named *Pilgrim*. Running from a station at Wells half a mile south of the original to another at Walsingham, just short of the old Great Eastern station, now a Russian Orthodox church, it is said to be the longest line of its gauge in the world. He ran the four-mile line himself until past 90, forsaking home every summer to sleep in the signal box, keeping his food in a hammock to be safe from rats. A year ago, he handed over its operation to Nick Champion, husband of his granddaughter, who is having a memorial plaque cast around the 'Whistle' board at one of the railway's bridges, so that every passing train will pay tribute.

He became a leading campaigner against the MoD's refusal to award a campaign medal (until the Arctic Star was instituted in 2011) or to let Arctic convoy veterans accept Russia's Ushakov Medal. Told he must not accept the Ushakov, Francis said: 'The Russians want to give us a bravery medal, not a campaign medal - there's a big difference. Why can't our government bend the rules when the Australian, Canadian, New Zealand and American governments have?' Francis received his Arctic Star in 2013 from the Countess of Leicester, a family friend. The same month, President Putin forced the issue over the Ushakov medals by arriving at the G8 summit with a bagful; Lady Leicester gave Francis his in hospital the weekend before he died, after a dash to the Russian Embassy to fetch it.

Roy married Marie Bartlett in 1942. She survives him, with their son and daughter.

*Thanks to The Daily Telegraph*

