



War veteran Tommy Jess, 91, at home in Lisburn.

Wartime recalls sank his

Tommy Jess survived D-Day, wartime convoys across the Atlantic and Arctic, a torpedo attack which sank his ship, and hours in a freezing life raft.

And every day this humble 91-year-old thanks God for giving him a long life and a good family.

Tommy lives in Lisburn and is a parishioner of Christ Church. His first job was in Mackie's Aircraft factory and it was during a strike at the factory that he decided to enlist. "Six of us went to Clifton Street but I was the only one to sign up for the Navy. I liked the uniform!" Tommy says.

One of seven siblings, Tommy was the oldest boy. He recalls how his mother cried when he told her the news. "Every time I came home on leave my Mammy would tell me 'Don't forget I am praying for you.' As time went on I realised that her prayers were answered," Tommy says.

After training he was posted on HMS Richmond which was tasked with escorting the Atlantic convoys. His rank was Able Bodied Seaman.

His next ship was HMS Lapwing, part of the Arctic convoys. "We escorted convoys carrying tanks, locomotives and materials to Russia. Winston Churchill described this as one of the worst journeys of the war," Tommy recalls.

In port in Russia, Tommy and the other seamen would watch their cargo unloaded. "It was mostly done by women who were operating the cranes and everything. Shore leave there was ok but we were not allowed to touch the vodka!"

In 1944, between convoys, HMS Lapwing was involved in the D-Day landings. "All shore leave was cancelled so we thought there was something coming off," Tommy says. "We were sent to Scotland to pick up a convoy of American soldiers and we escorted them to Normandy. They landed on Omaha Beach.

"That was the first time I had seen dead bodies. It was not a good sight. They underestimated the German defences, and

Still hoping for Ushadov Medal

Almost 70 years after the war ended, Tommy Jess is still fighting a battle for recognition of the sacrifices he and others made in the Russian convoys.

The UK government has yet to award any Ushadov Medals. Although Tommy believes there may only be two seamen alive now who are due the medal, his application has been refused by the UK Foreign Office, despite being granted in the US, Canada, New Zealand and Australia.

Tommy's medals include the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Defence Medal, the War Medal and the Arctic Star which he received in May 2013. Tommy is still hoping that one day he will receive the Ushadov Medal. "I hope to get it before they have to pin it on my grave," he says.

survivor Tommy the day a torpedo ship in icy Arctic

big mistakes were made.” Tommy voice is quiet.

The Lapwing shelled the German lines. Memories of the events of June 6 1944 are clearly difficult for him. “As I get older I get more emotional, I find it more difficult to think about it,” he says.

Tommy’s ship returned to the Russian convoy, for a fourth trip and then a life changing fifth convoy.

“The journey would usually take eight or nine days depending on the weather. To be honest we were always glad to see the bad weather as we did not seem to get attacked as much,” he says.

The Lapwing by-passed a German base in Norway and headed towards Kola, near Murmansk. “Another day and we would have been in port. We knew there were subs in the vicinity but we did not expect to be hit,” Tommy recalls.

“I was in the forward part of the ship with the gunners’ party. I remember being blown down the deck, but all I got were skinned knuckles. We were hit at 11am on March 20 1945. The last order given was ‘Everyman for himself.’ The bow was rising and I must have jumped 40ft into the water, I did not come up for ages and I swallowed a lot of oil.”

Tommy swam in the freezing waters to a life raft. “I always wore my lifebelt, which was my best friend at sea,” he says. With numb fingers he managed to cut the rope securing the raft to the ship.

“Our ship sunk in 12 minutes. It was snowing at the time and when I looked back I saw the bow go down.”

There were 16 men on Tommy’s raft when the Lapwing sunk. The net bottom of the raft meant there was no escape from the icy water. “There was nothing we could do but wait,” Tommy says.

“I remember seeing a ship coming out of the haze of snow and saying ‘My

goodness,’ because I realised we were going to be saved.”

It was two hours from the sinking of the Lapwing. Tommy felt arms around him as a rope was secured to his semi-conscious body and he was lifted onto the deck of the HMS Savage. Of the 16 who were on the raft after the sinking of the ship, only seven were picked up alive. One died on board the Savage.

“They told me they had to cut my boots off because my feet were so swollen,” Tommy remembers.

‘I thank God every night... He has given me all these years and a good family!’

The German torpedo had smashed into the Lapwing’s engine room, and had destroyed all starboard lifeboats and rafts. Of the 219 seamen on the Lapwing that day, only 61 survived.

“I thank God every night that I am okay,” Tommy says with tears in his eyes. “He has given me all these years and a good family. My faith in Him just gets stronger and stronger.”

HMS Savage transported Tommy and the other survivors to Kola, and from there he



Tommy Jess was serving on the HMS Lapwing when it was torpedoed en route to Russia.

was taken back to Scotland. Tommy was demobbed in 1947, and married Sadie in 1949. The couple have five children and take great joy in their many grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Tommy was a bus driver and later worked for the Ford Motor Company. Before he retired at 70 he was a caretaker at Wallace High School.

Thirty years after the sinking of the Lapwing, another of the six who survived on the raft came in search of Tommy. Scotsman Donald McKinnon took a boat to Larne, looked Tommy up in the telephone directory, and called. Donald, who published a book about his wartime experiences, is now 93, and he and Tommy remain firm friends.

Tommy has been to several reunions of his former shipmates. “The last one I went to I was the only survivor there,” he says. “Many people who had lost sons and grandsons on the ship came up to me to show me their photographs. It was very difficult.

“I lost a lot of friends on that boat,” he adds.



Tommy Jess, second from right at the back, with the other five seamen who survived on the life raft after the HMS Lapwing was torpedoed on March 20 1945. This picture was taken when they arrived back in Scotland.