Journey to a Far Sea

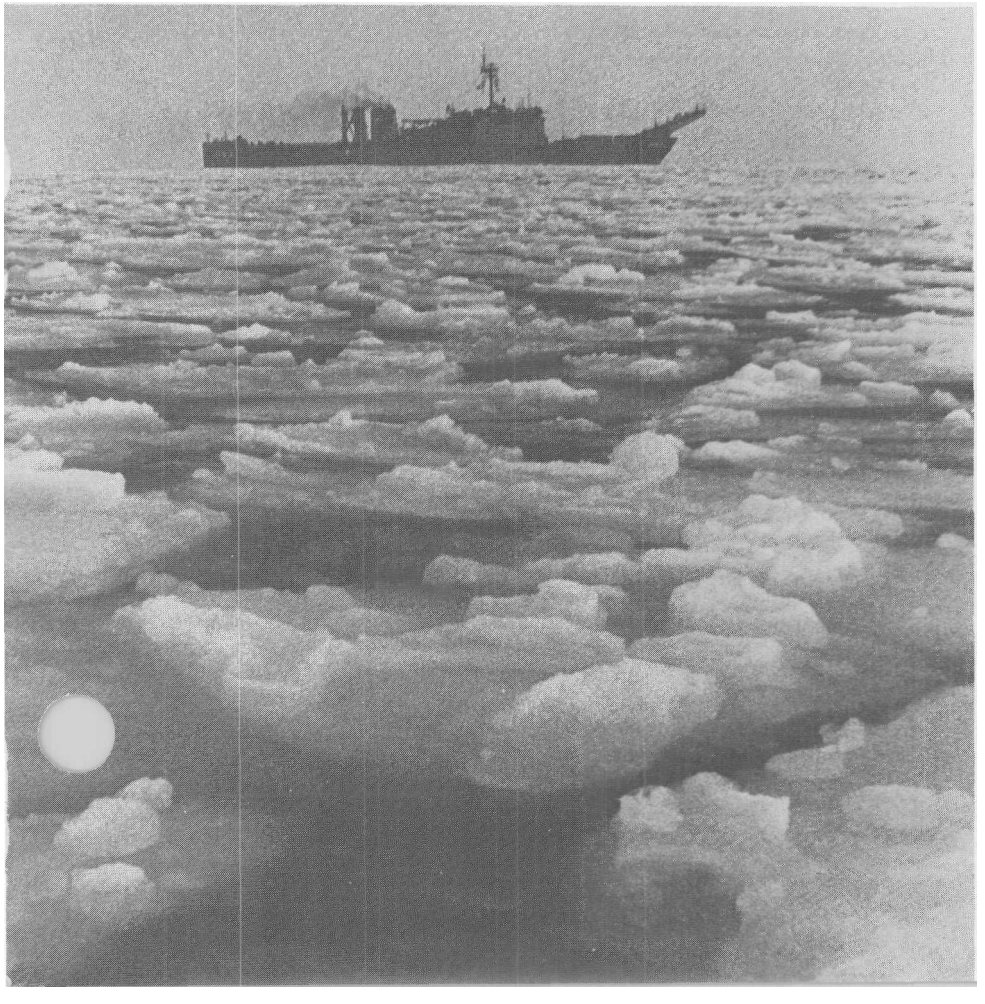
By Captain William D. O'Neil, U. S. Naval Reserve

In March 1981, the USS *Fairfax County* (LST-1193) left her home port of Norfolk, Virginia, without her main battery of marines and amphibious assault equipment; instead, her tank deck held a variety of special scientific equipment, and some of her troop officer staterooms had been converted to laboratories. Her course took her not toward her accustomed deployment areas in the Mediterranean or Caribbean, but to Northern Europe. After a brief port visit in Scotland, the LST headed north, into the Norwegian Sea. Passing the Norwegian North Cape, she moved eastward and entered the Barents Sea. Her mission was to conduct surveillance operations through the month of April.

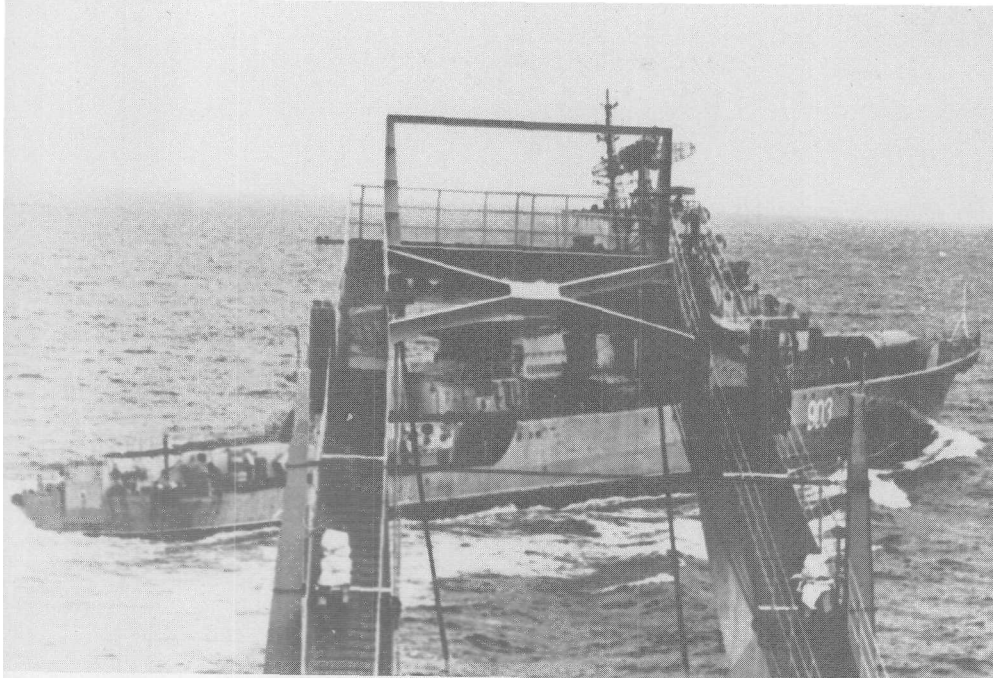
For many years after World War II, U. S. warships rarely visited the remote and inhospitable Barents. In the mid-1970s, however, officers of the Atlantic Fleet (LantFlt) staff realized that the Barents represented an important part of LantFlt's assigned area of responsibility about which they simply had too little knowledge. Of course, modern technical collection systems provide masses of information on climate, oceanography, and military operations in all major ocean areas, the Barents Sea among them. But real understanding of what all this means requires actual operational experience in the area.

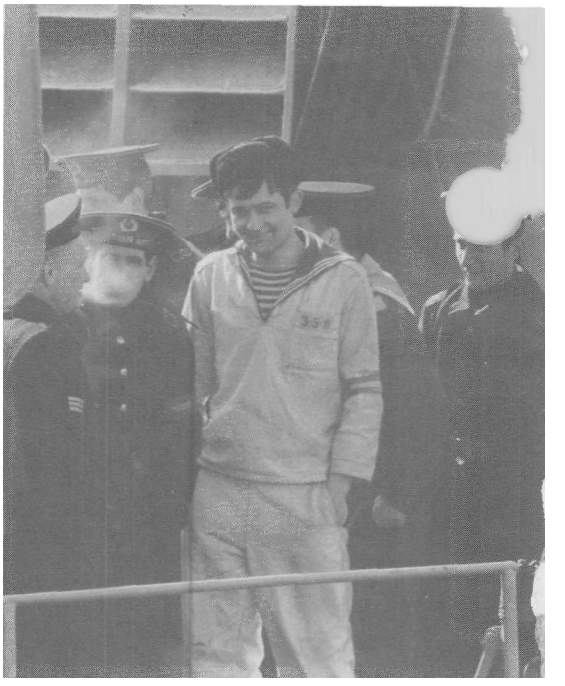
The real trick lay not in recognizing the operational need, but in finding a feasible way to fill it in an era when Atlantic Fleet resources were being stretched to the limit simply to meet existing commitments. Ships needed to be sent to the Barents, but CinCLantFlt had neither the bases in the area nor the spare mobile logistic support forces to support a normal-type deployment to the area. A solution to the problem was found by exploiting the characteristics of the *Newport* (LST-1179)-class tank landing ships.

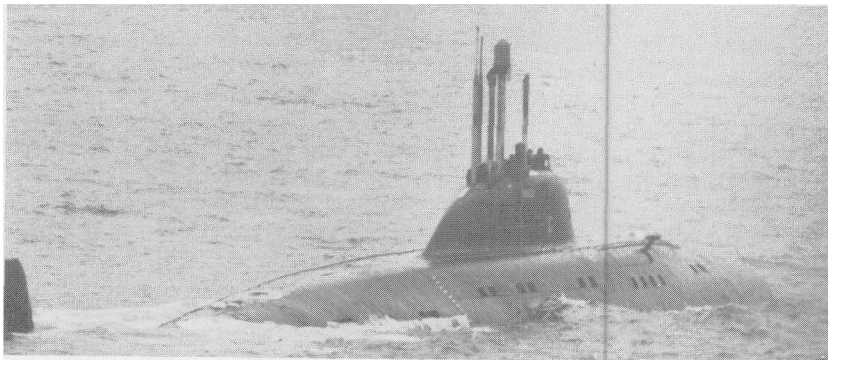
These 20-knot LSTs, with their distinctive bow "horns," have good seakeeping qualities and, without troops on board, can carry provisions and spares for long voyages. Their spacious weather and tank decks provide ample room for any necessary special equipment, and there is adequate extra berthing for operators and observ-



The* Fairfax County *operated for a month in the Barents Sea, a body of water where one expects to find Soviet naval ships—not the U. S. Navy.







The Northern Fleet of the Soviet Navy conducts exercises in the Barents Sea each spring. Last year, the Fairfax County *attended and attracted a great deal of attention—above, a "Krivak" crosses the LST's bow. Other ships in action, included a "Victor" SSN, another "Krivak," a modified "T-58" minesweeper, and a "Poluchat" torpedo retriever. But, regardless of which navy one served in, the frigid temperatures added new meaning to an old term—"Cold War."*

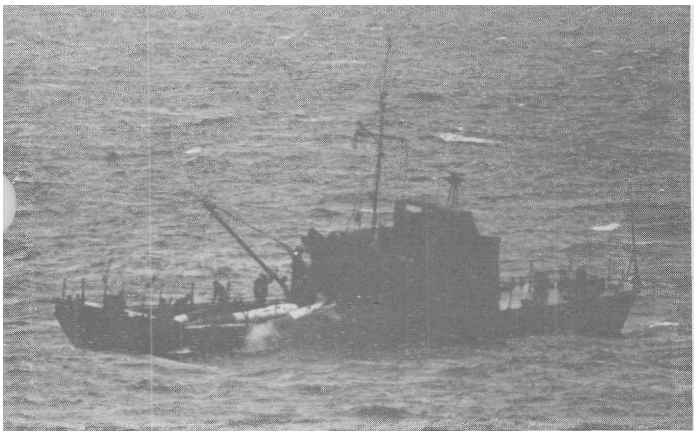
ers. But most important, perhaps, the *Newports*' propulsion system—six diesel engines driving two shafts—is simple, rugged, and reliable. The loss of one or two engines is not critical to safe operations. It is also extremely fuel-efficient, especially at low speeds when half or more of the engines may be shut down, thus making these LSTs among the few nonnuclear warships with the endurance to spend a month on station in the Barents without replenishment.

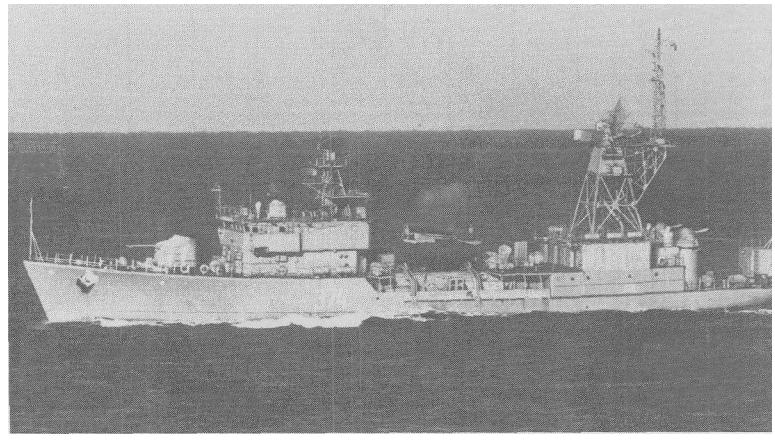
The first LST expedition to the Barents was mounted in the spring of 1978, with one each year being conducted since then. Each voyage has brought some surprises, but preparations have become fairly routine. Special equipment is brought on board for making environmental and operational observations. Special communications equipment is needed, too, for such extended voyages so far from any support. For example, during her month in the Arctic, the *Fairfax County* was in continuous, real-time communications over special circuits with her operational commander in Norfolk. Additional personnel are assigned to the ship to operate and maintain the observation and communications gear.

Much extra effort is devoted to preparing the ship for her long sojourn in some of the coldest and most storm-lashed waters in the world. Everything which can be placed below deck is. Movable gear which must remain topside—including the ship's boats—receives special lubrication and preservative treatment and is provided with extra-strength lashings and heavy canvas covers. All running rigging is greased. Special gear and supplies for snow and ice removal are issued, including a steam lance for attacking heavy ice. Extreme cold-weather clothing and extra space heaters are needed to protect the ship's crew.

The Barents Sea lies near the Soviet Union's Northern Fleet bases, and the U. S. LSTs which voyage there have had good opportunities to see the Soviet fleet at work. The Soviet Navy, by the same token, has proven to be equally interested in the activities of the U. S. LSTs, and has generally kept at least one ship assigned to the U. S. ships throughout their stays in the Barents. In prior years, these duties had been assigned to minesweepers and "Petya"-class light frigates, but these small ships clearly experienced difficulties in staying with the big LSTs in their travels through these stormy waters. In 1981, the watchdog duties fell to two "Krivak"-class frigates, the *Doblestnyy* and the *Rezvyy*. The *Rezvyy* wore pennant number 958, but her mate displayed the Soviet penchant for frequent pennant-number changes: she carried number 903 from 2-5 April, but had number 912 when she rejoined the LST for escorting duty from 14 to 23 April. A variety of other Soviet ships joined the *Fairfax County* for varying periods, but the two "Krivaks" were present almost constantly.

The units observed by the *Fairfax County* showed evidence of increasing levels of professionalism within the Soviet Navy. Many examples of good seamanship were seen, and many of the ships were clearly well maintained. For the most part, the Soviet ships' captains behaved in a courteous and businesslike manner,





but there were some instances of small-minded and unprofessional harassment. On a few occasions, Soviet ships maneuvered much too close to the LST—a ship class not noted for the ability to make rapid course changes. The two "Krivaks," in particular, frequently ran down or picked up U. S. bathythermobuoys used for environmental monitoring and shot at weather balloons.

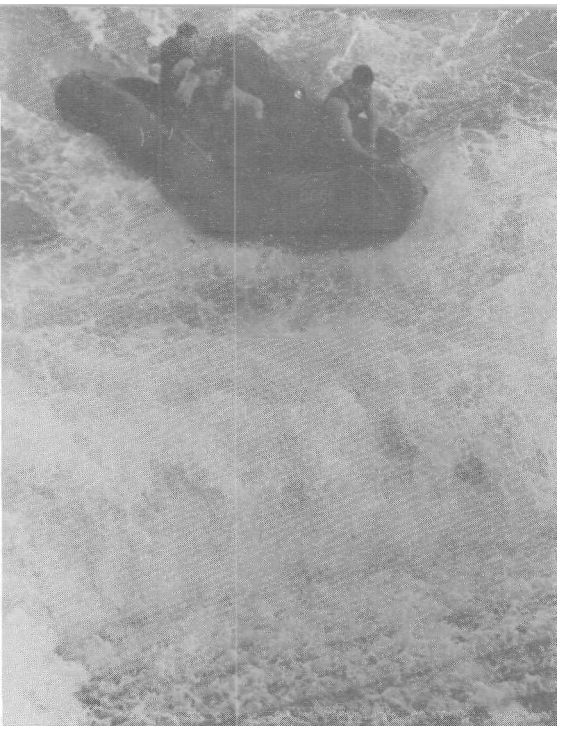
Some previous U. S. Navy visitors to the Barents had encountered difficulties with icing, but the *Fairfax County* faced nothing worse than some moderately heavy snow. The skies were solidly overcast for 17 of the ship's 30 days in the area, with six-tenths or greater cloud cover for another 7 days. Snow or rain fell on 19 of the days, and there were 4 foggy days. Temperatures were generally below freezing, although they often rose a little above freezing during midday. The lowest temperature recorded was 18°F. Seas ran higher than 6 feet on eight days, reaching 35 feet on 17 April, when the LST was off North Cape. Winds were predominantly westerly and northerly; they blew harder than 20 knots for ten days and exceeded 55 knots on two days.

The *Fairfax County* weathered all this with no major damage and only minor discomfort to her crew. Indeed, on several occasions the accompanying "Krivaks" appeared to be enduring much more pitching than the LST. Things, however, were not easy or pleasant for the LST's crew. Topside personnel had to wear bulky cold-weather gear, and even with it, lookouts often could stand no more than 15 minutes without an excessive loss in efficiency. A special communications van had been set on the LST's fantail, and despite special heavy-weather lifelines, it was sometimes impossible to relieve the personnel on watch for hours on end.

Obviously, these conditions were hardly ideal for boat operations, let alone rubber raft operations! Yet a group of explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) personnel, picked for their expertise with rubber raft operations, conducted dozens of launches to examine and recover interesting objects found floating in the water. The skill, fortitude, and courage required for such operations in these conditions speak for themselves. Even more remarkable in its way was the swimmer recovery of a package of spare parts air-delivered to the ship in the storm-racked waters off the North Cape. The LST's stern gate capability was invaluable in supporting these evolutions.

Special attention had to be paid to navigation. Overcast conditions ruled out reliance on celestial navigation for the most part. Omega system fixes proved generally reliable, and a satellite navigation receiver, brought on board for the voyage, was especially valuable in maintaining a handle on the ship's position. The steep Murman Coast provided good radar fixes to ranges well beyond 20 nautical miles. Agreement between fixes and charted positions was generally good, and the ship had no difficulty in remaining well outside the territorial waters of the Soviet Union.

A collision at sea really can ruin your entire day, especially when you are a long way from home. Soviet naval operations generate a great deal of traffic in the Barents and visibility



The* Fairfax County *took along her own retriever—a Zodiac rubber boat with its EOD crew, pictured coming on board through the LST's stern gate.

is often poor, so several special precautions were taken. An imaging infrared set was borrowed from the Army and modified for shipboard operation. Despite limitations inherent in the makeshift, it proved useful in picking out and identifying ships at night and in the frequently encountered hazy and foggy conditions. A closed-circuit TV camera was mounted to look astern, with a display in the pilothouse. This enabled the officer of the deck to monitor goings-on off his stern without suiting up to go out on the bridge wings. The capability was particularly valuable because the shadowing "Krivaks" showed a fondness for trailing along astern of the *Fairfax County.*

The expedition delivered huge quantities of data on the Barents Sea, and those who participated gained a greater understanding of the area. Some of the meteorological data have already been summarized. Many bathythermograph casts were made to improve knowledge of the sound conditions, showing these waters to be generally isothermal with a temperature just above 0°C. Much information was gathered on radio and sonar propagation.

Soviet naval operations in the LST's vicinity were observed with interest. The Northern Fleet clearly was carrying out a vigorous program of exercises, warming up after the rigors of an arctic winter. There were many Soviet naval exercises, including weapons firings. At one point, a cruiser conducted such a realistic fire drill that the *Fairfax County's* crew thought at first that it must be the real thing, and dashed over to the Soviet ship to lend assistance! Another day, the LST's crew had a ringside seat for what seemed to be a major convoy exercise, with 20 or more amphibious ships and escorts apparently beating off submarine attacks.

Like previous LSTs voyaging to the Barents, the *Fairfax County* successfully accomplished her mission of extending and demonstrating the U. S. Navy's global reach. U. S. men-of-war can be expected back in the Barents, and throughout the high seas, as often as needs dictate and resources permit.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This article was prepared with the cooperation of the Commander in Chief, U. S. Atlantic Fleet, and his staff, who graciously arranged the interviews and provided the official reports upon which it is based. The views expressed and the interpretations made here are those of the author, however, and should not be taken as official.*

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