

A Close Shave

Engineering Rear-Admiral George Wilfred Le Page DSO, RN



Engineering Rear-Admiral George Wilfred Le Page was born in Guernsey in 1883 and was educated at the Royal Navy Engineering College at Devonport.

He was advanced to Engineer Lieutenant in February, 1907, and would later join the British Naval Mission to Turkey in April, 1911, remaining similarly employed until the outbreak of hostilities with Germany, a period in which he wore an elaborate Turkish uniform with the traditional Fez, and was awarded the 3rd Class of Order of Medjidie, accorded the title of Bey and granted the honorary rank of Corvette Captain.

With the Ottoman Empire in the German camp, staying there was not an option, so he was now sent to Russia.

Russia 1914-18: In September, 1914, Le Page was appointed for duty with the CinC of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, and he joined the cruiser Almaz that October, the commencement of a long chapter of active service in this theatre of war. He assisted at the following operations in the Black Sea:

- 13th March, 1915 - bombardment of Zunguldak in light cruiser Almaz
- 26th March, 1915 - bombardment of the Turkish batteries off the Bosphorus in cruiser Kagul
- 5th April, 1915 - in Almaz during action between Russian and Turkish fleets off the Bosphorus
- 25th October, 1915 - bombardment of Varna in Almaz
- 14th April, 1916 - in Rostilav during bombardment of Rize near Trebizond resulting in fall of latter

Le Page was also present in the Bosphorus action of the 25th April, 1915, when the Russian Black Sea Fleet carried out a bombardment to distract the Turks from the Allied landings at Gallipoli, services which gained him the 2nd Class of the Order of St. Stanislaus.

Having previously been advanced to Lieutenant-Commander in February, 1915, it was proposed that he be granted the acting rank of Commander to 'enjoy the greater confidence of the Russians', a proposal that was approved in October, 1916, the same year in which he was awarded the 3rd Class of the Order of St. Anne 'for distinguished and useful service in time of war and in

active operations against the enemy.’ And to which distinction, in March, 1917, he added the 4th Class of the Order of St. Vladimir.

Attache and Arrest: Latterly burdened ‘with the arduous task of maintaining relations with the Russian Fleet in the Black Sea’ following the abduction of the Tsar, the words of our man in Moscow, Bruce Lockhart, Le Page was scheduled to depart Russia for the UK with charge of a group of British refugees in April, 1918, but the order was rescinded, his experience and fluent Russian being too valuable to lose.

Instead, he was appointed Assistant to the Naval Attache at Petrograd, Captain FNA Cromie, DSO, RN, who described Le Page as a ‘large, self-possessed man with a typical navy beard.’ And the pair of them were quickly embarked upon a programme of anti-revolutionary initiatives and in espionage, one of their visitors being the ‘Ace of Spies’, Sidney Reilly.

Clearly, too, Le Page’s services were much appreciated by our man in Moscow, Bruce Lockhart, as well as by Cromie, who, in May, 1918, pushed for his charge to be confirmed in his acting rank:

‘17th May, 1918. Naval Attache Petrograd brings to notice the valuable services rendered by Acting Engineer Commander Le Page. Our view of his abilities in his present situation does not hesitate to recommend him for confirmation in his rank, notwithstanding that he is unable to express an opinion on Commander Le Page’s abilities as an Engineer’

To which the Admiralty responded:

‘28th August, 1918. Their Lordships are unable to approve of this officer being specially confirmed in the rank of Engineer Commander, but that HM the King has approved of Acting Lieutenant-Commander Le Page being appointed a companion of the DSO in recognition of his services in Russia.’

Two days following this entry on his service record, Le Page was staying at a friend’s house in Petrograd, and was apprehended by the Cheka Secret Police on his way back to the Embassy, the beginning of thirteen weeks of primitive and squalid confinement in the Peter and Paul Fortress, the whole under constant threat of imminent execution. In the event, in common with other British hostages, he was released and given 48 hours to leave the country.

Had he been present at the embassy that fateful day in August, 1918, it may have been a very different story, for the gallant Cromie was gunned down in cold-blood by the Cheka Secret Police, although he did manage to take one or two of his assailants with him, using Le Page’s revolver which he had retrieved from the latter’s office. Cromie was awarded a posthumous CB, the announcement for which appeared in the London Gazette one week before Le Page’s DSO was notified on the 5th October, 1918. It was awarded:

'In recognition of the valuable services rendered by him to the Allied cause in Russia since 1914.'

Naval Intelligence Department and beyond: Assigned to the Naval Intelligence Department on his return to the UK, Le Page remained similarly employed until early 1924, in which period he finally gained advancement to Engineer Commander and was awarded the 4th Class of the Roumanian Order of the Star. He was most probably employed on Russian matters during the period 1919 to 1920, and was later assigned to Coastal Defence Intelligence duties.

Having then attended a refresher course in engineering, Le Page returned to normal duties, gaining advancement to Engineer Captain in December, 1929 and serving as Squadron Engineer Officer to the 1st Battle Squadron between 1931 and 1933. Appointed as an ADC to the King in 1935, he was placed on the Retired List in May, 1936 and died in January, 1940.

Medal Description:

Distinguished Service Order, GVR, silver-gilt and enamel

1914-15 Star (To Eng Lt Cdr GW Le Page, RN)

British War Medal (To Eng Commr GW Le Page, RN)

Victory Medals (To Eng Commr GW Le Page, RN)

Jubilee 1935

Roumania, Order of the Star, 4th Class breast badge, with swords, silver-gilt and enamel

Turkey, Order of the Medjidie, 3rd Class neck badge, silver, silver-gilt, gold and enamel

(Editor's Note: The medal set does not include the Russian medals, were they kept by the Cheka or have they vanished since?)