



Military Despatches

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Turning back the clock

When the Russian missile cruiser Marshal Ustinov berthed in Cape Town harbour, she welcomed aboard a 93 year old World War II Arctic Convoy Veteran. History had come a full circle. Regine Lord was there to record the event.

During the last week of November 2019, Cape Town welcomed several warships from two of South Africa's BRICS partners – the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China.

They had come to participate in Exercise Mosi, the first trilateral naval training exercise involving the South African, Russian and Chinese navies in the Southern African oceans.

The theme of Exercise Mosi was to promote safe navigation and maritime economic security, by developing good relations between the three nations, improving interoperability, and training a multinational task force able to counter security threats at sea in order to ensure regional maritime peace, security and stability. It included surface gunnery exercises, helicopter cross-deck landings, assistance to vessel in distress

simulations, anti-piracy and boarding operations and disaster control exercises. The ships' crews also participated in various military social and cultural activities and tours onshore.

From the South African side, the SAS Amatola (F145) Valour-class frigate, the SAS Drakensberg (A301) fleet replenishment ship, and the SAS Protea hydrographic survey vessel were joined by the Chinese Navy's Type 054A frigate Weifang (550), as well as the Russian Navy's Slava-class missile cruiser Marshal Ustinov (055), the Kaliningradneft-class medium sea-going tanker Vyaz'ma, and the Project Sliva sea rescue tug SB-406.

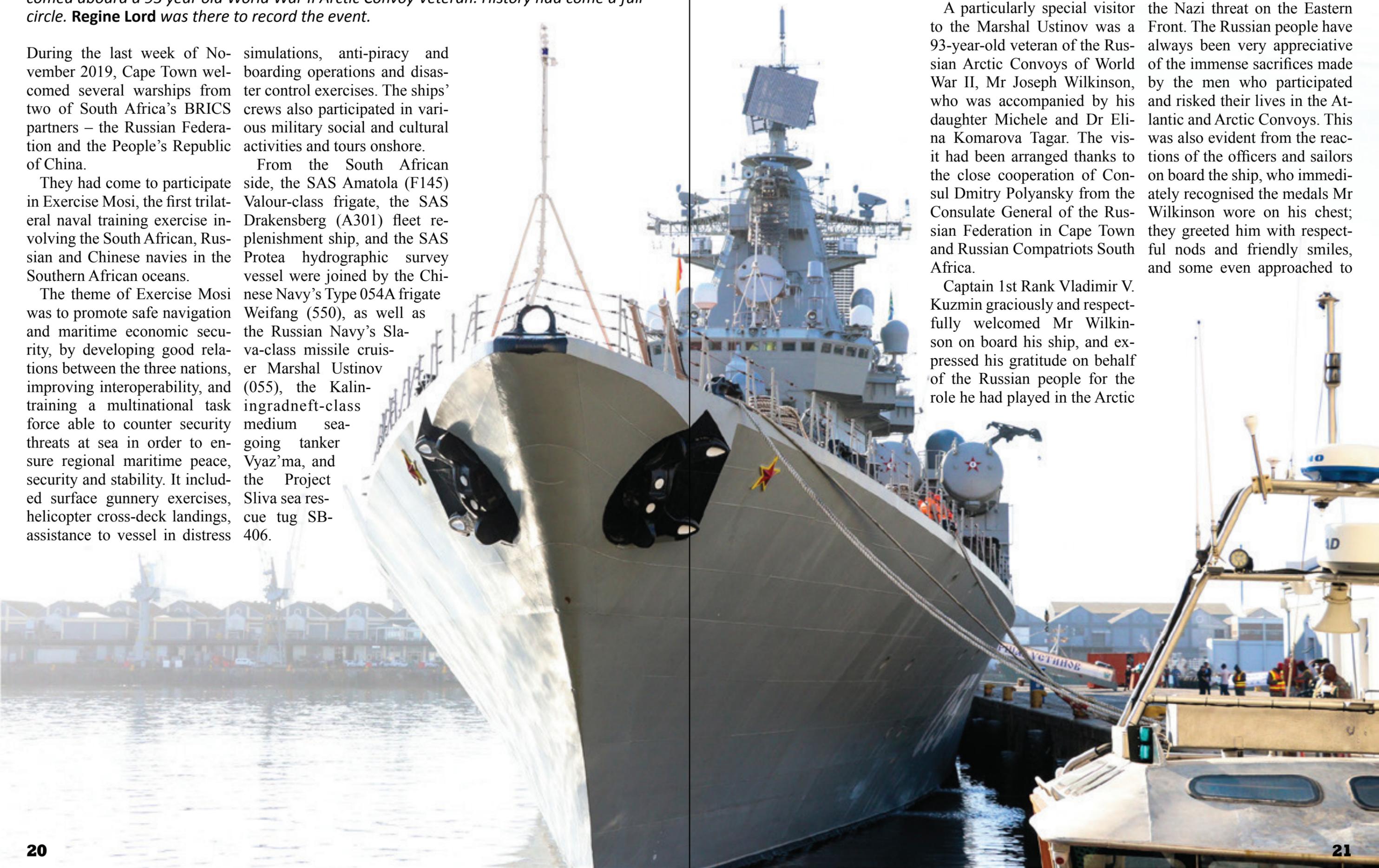
The three warships – SAS Amatola, Marshall Ustinov and Weifang – were berthed at Jetty 2 in the Victoria & Alfred Waterfront, right in front of the

luxury Table Bay Hotel. All three were open to the public on Tuesday, 26 November, attracting a steady stream of curious visitors, local and overseas.

A particularly special visitor to the Marshal Ustinov was a 93-year-old veteran of the Russian Arctic Convoys of World War II, Mr Joseph Wilkinson, who was accompanied by his daughter Michele and Dr Elina Komarova Tagar. The visit had been arranged thanks to the close cooperation of Consul Dmitry Polyansky from the Consulate General of the Russian Federation in Cape Town and Russian Compatriots South Africa.

Captain 1st Rank Vladimir V. Kuzmin graciously and respectfully welcomed Mr Wilkinson on board his ship, and expressed his gratitude on behalf of the Russian people for the role he had played in the Arctic

Convoys. These convoys had come at a time when the Soviet Union was in desperate need of both military and humanitarian supplies, in order to repel the Nazi threat on the Eastern Front. The Russian people have always been very appreciative of the immense sacrifices made by the men who participated and risked their lives in the Atlantic and Arctic Convoys. This was also evident from the reactions of the officers and sailors on board the ship, who immediately recognised the medals Mr Wilkinson wore on his chest; they greeted him with respectful nods and friendly smiles, and some even approached to



shake his hand.

Mr Wilkinson and his entourage were given a tour of the deck of the cruiser.

Bristling with antennas and high-tech equipment, the Marshal Ustinov is an impressive sight indeed. It is named after Dmitry Fyodorovich Ustinov (1908 to 1984), a former Soviet Minister of Defence. With its fearsome attack missile weapons (the 'Volcano'), air defence missile systems ('Fort' and 'Osa-M'), anti-aircraft artillery systems ('AK-130' and 'AK-630') and anti-submarine weapons, the cruiser is designed to repel airstrikes and destroy surface ships, underwater targets and coastal targets, as well as to protect and defend convoys and airborne troops during sea crossings.

With a maximum length of 186 metres and a maximum width of 20.8 metres, a maximum speed of 34 knots (63 km/h) and a cruising range of 12,000 km (specifications from the ship's display poster), it can accommodate a crew of 520 and it carries enough food reserves for 30 days.

As he was shown around the cruiser, Mr Wilkinson remarked that it was significantly larger than the sloop he had sailed on during World War II, when he and his shipmates participated in the Atlantic and Arctic Convoys, which transported tanks, fighter planes, fuel, ammunition, raw materials and food from the United States, Canada and Iceland to Britain and onwards to ports in the north-western Soviet Union.

He commented that he was amazed at the nature of the ar-



CHINESE NAVY: The Chinese Navy's Type 054A frigate Wei-fang (550)

maments on board and the excellent condition of the ship, and that he had never seen anything quite so shipshape!

Interestingly, the Marshal Ustinov is assigned to the 43rd Missile Ship Division of the Russian Northern Fleet, whose homeport is at Severomorsk, a town located on the Barents Sea along Kola Bay, not far from Murmansk.

The Arctic Convoys, which operated between August 1941 and May 1945, delivering military hardware and supplies to Murmansk and Archangelsk, ended mainly in this area of Kola Bay. This historic connection made Mr Wilkinson's visit to the Marshal Ustinov all the more special.

During a subsequent interview, Mr Wilkinson graciously shared some of his life story with me, focusing especially on his military service during World War II.

In the next edition of Military Despatches we will be bringing you the full story of Mr Wilkin-

son, including his experiences on the Arctic Convoys, the Atlantic Convoys, D-Day, the time he met King George VI, and his own part in history. It is an article that should not be missed.

Authors Note: With much gratitude to Mr Joseph Wilkinson for sharing his life story with me so generously; I am also indebted to his son Brian and daughter Michele for their gracious assistance and feedback, and for giving me access to their archive material. And I am very grateful to Dr Elina Komarova Tagar for arranging the visit to the Marshal Ustinov and her feedback on this article.

Photo Credits:
Regine Lord



WELCOME ABOARD: Captain 1st Rank Vladimir V. Kuzmin shaking hands with Royal Navy veteran Mr Joseph Wilkinson.

BELOW: Captain Kuzmin welcomes Dr Elina Komarova Tagar aboard.

