



Military Despatches

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Surviving the Arctic Convoys

Remembering the heroism of the Arctic Convoy veterans of the Great Patriotic War. Article and photographs by Regine Lord.

This year, 2020, marks the 75th anniversary of the end of the Great Patriotic War.

This is the term used in Russia and some former republics of the Soviet Union to refer to the conflicts between the then Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, from 22 June 1941 to 9 May 1945, along the Eastern Front of World War II.

In honour of this day, Russia traditionally celebrates Victory Day on 9 May every year. This year, however, due to the global coronavirus pandemic, the celebrations were delayed until 24 June 2020.

This date had been chosen to recall the day, 75 years earlier, when the victors of the Great Patriotic War celebrated with a parade along the Kremlin Wall. In his speech, Russian President Vladimir Putin promised to remember the heroism and courage of those who fought during the Great Patriotic War and World War II:

“Dear veterans, our gratitude to you is immeasurable. You have proven with your life and your fight how important it is to be able to defend the values of peace, humanism and justice. We will do everything in our power to ensure that the memory of your heroic accomplishments never fades. It is our duty of conscience and our responsibility to the present and the future.”

Over the last seven decades,

the government of the Russian Federation has awarded numerous medals to these military veterans, two of whom happen to live in Cape Town! Mr Joseph Wilkinson (94) and Mr Trevor Gordon Peter Poland (97) are the last two surviving veterans of the Arctic convoys living in South Africa.

On Monday 21 September 2020, the Russian Ambassador to South Africa, His Excellency Mr Ilya Rogachev travelled from Pretoria to Cape Town especially, to award the Jubilee medal commemorating “75 Years of Victory in the Great Patriotic War 1941– 1945” to Mr Joseph Wilkinson and Mr Trevor Poland.

It is particularly fitting that they received these medals just a few days before South Africa held its annual Heritage Day celebrations on 24 September. We owe these men – and all their compatriots, many of them

also just young lads barely out of school – an enormous debt of gratitude, and it is appropriate to remember and honour what they did.

The Arctic convoys operated between Iceland and Britain, and northern ports of the Soviet Union – specifically Murmansk and Arkhangelsk. Nazi Germany had launched its invasion of the Soviet Union with Operation Barbarossa on 22 June 1941, thus creating the Eastern Front.

This operation involved a staggering number of about three million soldiers along a 2,900 km long front with 600,000 motor vehicles and over 600,000 horses for non-combat operations. Faced with this onslaught, the Soviet Union had called on the West for assistance.

The United States thus began ferrying supplies of tanks, fighter planes, fuel, ammunition, raw materials and food, etc., to the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union as part of the so-called Lend-Lease Agreement.

The route through the Arctic was extremely hazardous, and many ships and their crews perished in the icy waters during battles with the German *Luftwaffe* and *Kriegsmarine*. But these supplies provided an extremely important lifeline for the Soviet Union in their resistance to the Nazi invasion.

The government of the Russian Federation has thus award-





HELLO: His Excellency Ambassador Ilya Rogachev, the Russian Ambassador to South Africa, awards the Jubilee Medal commemorating “75 Years of Victory in the Great Patriotic War 1941–1945” to Mr Joseph Wilkinson.

ed medals to many of the men who served on these Arctic convoys, in grateful acknowledgement of their heroism.

A Soviet medal dating back to 1944, the Medal of Ushakov, honours all Naval personnel and officers for bravery and courage in naval theatres of military operations.

It is named after Fyodor Ushakov, an 18th century naval commander who never lost a battle and is in fact the patron saint of the Russian Navy.

Since 2013, this Medal of Ushakov has been presented to a number of foreign recipients too, specifically for personal courage and valour shown during World War II while participating in the Arctic convoys.

In 2014, according to British sources, 3,300 Arctic convoy veterans were found, and President Vladimir Putin signed an

order to decorate them with the Medal of Ushakov. It was a challenging task and took several years.

By 2019, 100 veterans were still supposed to receive it; all were at an advanced age and some had sadly passed away in the interim.

The Russian government has also issued various medals to commemorate the anniversaries of “Victory in the Great Patriotic War 1941-1945”. Both Mr Trevor Poland and Mr Joseph Wilkinson have received several of these, i.e., the 40-year medal, the 50-year medal, the 60-year medal, the 65-year medal, the 70-year medal, and now the 75-year commemorative medal. In 2020, 550 Arctic convoy veterans were awarded the 75-year Jubilee medal; in the United Kingdom, some were awarded this medal in per-

son, but most had to be sent by post.

It was a crisp spring day, when Ambassador Rogachev and his wife Elena Vysotskaya met with Mr Joseph Wilkinson at the Oasis Retirement Resort at Century City. Mr Wilkinson’s son Brian and his granddaughter Emma-Jane, as well as Dr Elina Komarova Tagar, a member of the Russian Club Cape Town, were also in attendance at this special occasion.

Later that afternoon, the Ambassador and his wife visited Mr Trevor Poland at his home in Constantia, to hand him his medal in person too. These meetings had been organised by the Russian Consulate General in Cape Town.

As the Ambassador congratulated Mr Wilkinson on receiving this special Jubilee medal, he gratefully acknowledged the sacrifices that he and his fellow military veterans had made during the Second World War II; speaking on behalf of the Russian people, he emphasised sombrely, “We remember.” Reflecting on the significance of this event afterwards, the Ambassador stated:

“We made tremendous efforts to defeat the Nazis, millions sacrificed their lives on the altar of the Victory. Russia remembers all heroes of the Second World War – both Soviet and Allied forces. The lessons of that scary time must never be forgotten and any attempts to rewrite history must be prevented without any delay.”

In the spirit of this project to remember, several young Russian journalists, Anastasia Shkitina and her team from

BRICS TV, produced a special documentary this year, titled “Unknown Stalingrad”. It is freely available on YouTube.

In the preceding months, they had interviewed numerous World War II veterans from the five BRICS countries – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. They included Mr Joseph Wilkinson and fellow World War II veteran Mr Sydney Ireland, who celebrated his 99th birthday on the 9th of March 2020.

In August 2020, this documentary won First Prize in the VIIth International Patriotic Film Festival in Kazan, Russia.

The documentary’s title is a reference to the Battle of Stalingrad (23 August 1942 to 2 February 1943), in which Nazi Germany fought the Soviet Union for control over the city of Stalingrad.

The defence of Shanghai (1937) was referred to by Danish journalist Peter Harmsen in his book as “Stalingrad on the Yangtze”; the Battle of Kohima (1944) between Japan and besieged British and Indian troops was described as “Stalingrad of the East” by authors Martin Dougherty and Jonathan Ritter; and even the battles at Monte Castello in Italy (1944-1945) and at El Alamein in Egypt (1942) have been compared with Stalingrad, thus making this an enduring symbol of World War II.

The awarding of these 75-year Jubilee medals is therefore a good opportunity to remember – and honour – the military service of Mr Trevor Poland and Mr Joseph Wilkinson.

Born in July 1923, Mr Trevor

Gordon Peter Poland entered the Royal Naval College at Dartmouth as a Cadet in January 1937 at the age of 13, and was only two months past his 17th birthday, when he joined his first ship, HMS Nelson, in early September 1940. A month later, he transferred to the just-commissioned battleship HMS King George V, on which he served until April 1942, initially as midshipman of the watch.

Mr Trevor Poland had a passion for the sea his entire life, and wrote numerous books about it over the years. His memoirs of serving in the Royal Navy, available on Amazon, are titled *Hands to Action Stations – Memoirs of a Very Young Naval Officer (1939 – 1945)*. The subtitle describes it, fittingly, as “The Story of a Boy becoming a Man in the War that shook the Globe.” It is a compelling narrative that provides an extraordinary eyewitness account of some of the most significant actions of World War II.

As a young midshipman, for instance, he participated in the naval blockade of Brest harbour in occupied France, which successfully prevented the two German battleships Scharnhorst and Gneisenau from sailing into the Atlantic in March 1941, in order to disrupt Allied shipping convoys between the United States and Europe. Royal Air Force bombers repeatedly bombarded both vessels while they were in dry dock, delaying their repairs and their return to service.

Two months later, on 27 May 1941, Midshipman Poland in his role as tankey (navigator’s

assistant) observed the action from the bridge of HMS King George V, as they, together with HMS Rodney and the two heavy cruisers HMS Norfolk and HMS Dorsetshire, relentlessly pursued and destroyed the largest warship in the world, the powerful German battleship Bismarck, the pride of the Kriegsmarine.

Some days earlier, the Bismarck had departed from northern Germany, accompanied by the heavy cruiser Prinz Eugen. Both had sailed far north into the Norwegian Sea, before looping southwest towards the Denmark Strait between Iceland and Greenland. Pack ice reduced the width of the strait, and bad weather limited visibility; nonetheless, the two ships were picked up by the new radar onboard the British heavy cruiser HMS Suffolk and then HMS Norfolk, another heavy cruiser. Several hours later, they were approached by the huge battlecruiser HMS Hood and the smaller newly commissioned battleship, HMS Prince of Wales. Both sides began firing. When the two British ships turned to fire broadsides at the two German vessels, HMS Hood was hit, sinking within minutes. The other three ships all incurred damage to varying degrees.

In his memoirs, *Hands to Action Stations*, Mr Poland recalls learning that, of the crew of 1,418, only three men onboard the HMS Hood had survived when a direct hit from one of the Bismarck’s salvos caused the ship’s magazine to explode and rip apart the ship.

One of the survivors was a



HELLO: His Excellency Ambassador Ilya Rogachev and his wife with Mr Trevor Poland [Photo by Russian Embassy]

midshipman he knew who had been one term below him at Dartmouth. One of the shells hitting the HMS Prince of Wales during the same engagement had killed another midshipman and a tankey (his counterpart) on the bridge. As HMS King George V and HMS Rodney approached the Bismarck for the final confrontation on 27 May 1941, Mr Poland's thoughts were:

"At any moment three battleships would be hurling broadsides weighing over fifteen tons at each other. Though I had no doubt of the outcome of the battle, it was inevitable that someone would get hurt in the process. The fate that had befallen my opposite number in the 'P.O.W.' was too close for peace of mind." (Location 1202)

It was a sobering thought, but one that he successfully put aside during the heat of the battle itself. For almost two hours, hundreds of shells pounded down on the burning Bismarck, the last ones at point blank range, before the British ships – by then running very low on

fuel – were ordered to return to port. Realising their inevitable fate, the German sailors detonated scuttling charges and began to abandon their ship. After a final salvo of torpedoes from HMS Dorsetshire, the Bismarck sank beneath the waves. Of her original complement of 2,400 sailors, only 115 survivors were picked up by various ships in the area. The remaining survivors perished in the sea, abandoned to their fate.

Sometime later, while studying the casualty list in the Times newspaper, Midshipman Poland he had a sudden realisation of his own mortality:

"Virtually half of my immediate friends and contemporaries killed in just one day. I studied the list more closely. There were many more names from my term on the list [at Dartmoor] but from other houses. ... If so many of my immediate friends could go in one day like that, I wondered what hope the rest of us had of surviving." (Location 1306, and Location 1340).

During September and October 1941, Midshipman Poland served on the Tribal class

destroyer HMS Punjabi for six weeks, protecting the Russian Arctic convoys en route past the coast of Norway. Here he was second officer of the watch; he really enjoyed his brief time on-board the destroyer.

Mr Poland also recalled his almost-encounter with the sister ship of the Bismarck, the Tirpitz. At the time, HMS King George V was part of the fleet protecting the Arctic convoys. Mr Poland's action station was now in the starboard forward director, controlling the starboard battery of 5.25-inch guns as rate officer. In early March 1942, the Tirpitz and her escorting destroyers were spotted leaving one of the Norwegian fjords, Fættensfjord near Trondheim, in order to intercept two Allied Arctic convoys – QP 8 (homebound) and PQ 12 (outbound).

Although the German ships came under attack by torpedo bombers from the aircraft carrier HMS Victorious, they managed to elude the rest of the fleet, including HMS King George V, and return to safety. The Tirpitz was only put out of action completely in November 1944, while stationed at Håkøya island in Tromsø fjord, Norway, when British Lancaster bombers scored two direct hits with Tallboy bombs, causing a massive explosion and capsizing the ship.

Mr Poland's participation in Operation Torch in November 1942 is described in absorbing detail in his memoirs. He had left HMS King George V in April 1942, having been promoted to Sub Lieutenant, before undergoing Comman-

do training and several short courses in preparation for Operation Torch. This was the Allied invasion of French North Africa; the French colonies in the region were formally aligned with Germany, but with mixed loyalties, and it was anticipated that they would ultimately support the Allies. American General Dwight D Eisenhower thus planned a simultaneous three-pronged attack on Casablanca (the Western Task Force), Oran (the Center Task Force) and Algiers (the Eastern Task Force). While the American troops carried out the assault itself, naval and air support came from the British.

Despite his young age (he was only 19 at the time), then-Sub Lieutenant Poland found himself unexpectedly in command of a flotilla of landing craft, ferrying American servicemen to the beaches near Algiers, and thereafter marching his crew to Algiers after their landing ship *Strathnaver* had sailed away, leaving them behind. A few days later, he again led his flotilla for the landing at the port of Bougie, during which they came under relentless aerial bombardment by the Luftwaffe. He survived unharmed and, shortly before Christmas 1942, returned home to England.

At the end of December 1942, he was originally appointed to HMS *Wild Goose*, the same ship that Mr Wilkinson would join some months later in April/May 1943. However, their paths did not cross, as then-Sub Lieutenant Poland asked to be placed instead on HMS *Matchless*, a fast and powerful *Lightning* class destroyer, under

Lieutenant Commander John Mowlam.

His fellow recipient of the 75-year commemoration medal, Mr Joseph Wilkinson, born in July 1926, had left school to enlist in the Royal Navy in 1943.

After undergoing basic training, he was trained as a radio operator at a special Royal Navy Wireless Telegraphy Training School in Aberdeen, Scotland; his rating was Telegraphist (Trained Operator). Mr Wilkinson too was only 17 years old, when he reported to HMS *Wild Goose* (U45) under Commanding Officer Lieutenant Commander David Edward Gillespie ('Dicky') Wemyss in April/May 1943. It was a Black Swan class sloop, on which he served as a radio operator for most of World War II. HMS *Wild Goose* was part of the Royal Navy's 2nd Escort Group (referred to as the 2 EG, 2nd EG or 2 SG), a British anti-submarine formation formed not long before Mr Wilkinson joined the ship.

During World War II, the United States and Canada supplied armaments to Britain, by sending convoys of large merchant ships across the Atlantic Ocean. The Germans tried to intercept and sink these with their own fleets of surface ships, planes and submarines. The American, Canadian and Royal navies responded by escorting the supply ships across the Atlantic; these escorts included minesweepers and anti-submarine vessels.

During the long drawn out Battle of the Atlantic, some 3,500 merchant vessels and

175 Allied warships were lost, and 757 Axis U-boats were destroyed. The human cost was devastating: some 36,200 Allied sailors and airmen, 36,000 Allied merchant seamen and 30,000 German seamen perished.

The young Mr Wilkinson thus found himself on HMS *Wild Goose* in the middle of the storm-tossed Atlantic, with the small sloop rolling and pitching, and the waves crashing onto the deck sounding like torpedo explosions down below. Initially, he did not have a bunk or a hammock, but slept on the lockers in the mess at the front of the ship; it was uncomfortable, and he frequently slid off onto the wet and dirty floor when the ship picked up speed or the waves became heavy.

He was grateful when he was finally allocated a hammock, as this stayed more or less level, no matter how much the ship was tossed about.

As a radio operator on HMS *Wild Goose*, Mr Wilkinson spent most of his time at sea listening for inter-escort messages with one earpiece, and for convoy messages with the other.

The 2 EG under the command of the legendary Captain Frederic John ('Johnnie') Walker was the most successful anti-submarine unit of World War II, destroying 24 German U-boats during its two years of active service.

Captain Walker had an uncanny instinct for locating submarines and anticipating their moves. Some of the tactics he conceived to hunt for U-boats were subsequently used in naval warfare for many years.



HELLO: Some of the commemorative medals from the Russian Federation received by Arctic convoy veteran Mr Joseph Wilkinson.

One of them was the ‘creeping attack’, which involved two ships working together closely. If the ASDIC sonar indicated that there was a U-boat nearby, one of the ships would maintain ASDIC contact and slowly guide the second ship into position above the U-boat, while trying not to alert the target that it had been spotted.

ship would release their depth charges. The ‘barrage attack’ involved three ships moving in a line abreast over the target area; each of them would, at the same time, release a series of depth charges, set to explode at different depths.

The resulting barrage of explosions right after each other usually destroyed the submarine. One particularly memo-

orable patrol for the 2 EG happened over a three-week period from 31 January to 19 February 1944, when they successfully sunk six German U-boats in the Atlantic, southwest of Ireland. Shortly after this, in March 1944, the 2 EG was assigned to Arctic convoy JW 58 and return convoy RA 58.

Several German U-boats along the route were despatched to the depths of the icy seas before they could do any damage.

This particular convoy (JW 58) included the USS Milwaukee, a four-funnelled American cruiser, which was a gift from President Theodore Roosevelt to Joseph Stalin as Leader of the Soviet Union. On receipt by the Soviets, she was commissioned as the Murmansk and performed convoy and patrol duty in the Arctic Ocean until the end of World War II; thereafter, she became a training ship. A few years later, in March 1949, she was returned to the United States, and scrapped.

To be concluded in the January 2021 issue of Military Despatches.