

# NAVY NEWS

Vol XXXIX No 4 2020  
Dec 2020 - Jan 2021  
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# 75-YEAR Commemorative Medals

Article and photos by Regine Lord\*

This year 2020 marked the 75th anniversary of the end of the Great Patriotic War. This is the term used in Russia to refer to the conflicts between the then Soviet Union and Nazi Germany from 1941 to 1945 along the Eastern Front of World War II. Russia traditionally celebrates Victory Day on 9 May every year but this year delayed the celebrations due to the global coronavirus pandemic.

On Monday 21 September 2020, the Russian Ambassador to South Africa, His Excellency Mr Ilya Rogachev, awarded Jubilee Medals to two Arctic Convoy veterans living in Cape Town - Mr Joseph Wilkinson (94) and Mr Trevor Gordon Peter Poland (97).

It is particularly fitting that the two 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.

It was a crisp Spring day when Ambassador Ilya Rogachev called on Mr Joseph Wilkinson at his home in Cape Town. His son Brian and granddaughter Emma-Jane, as well as Dr Elina Komarova-Tagar, a member of Russian Club Cape Town, were in attendance on this special occasion.

Later that afternoon the Ambassador, accompanied by his wife Elena Vysotskaya, visited Mr Trevor Poland and handed him his medal.

Both Mr Wilkinson and Mr Poland were just young lads when they enlisted in the Royal Navy and were immediately thrust into the middle of World War II. Like so many youngsters of their age, they had read and heard much about the thrill and excitement of military service, and specifically of an adventurous life at sea.

And like many of their compatriots, they felt compelled to enlist, and willing to risk their lives to protect their homeland against the threat of Nazism and Fascism. Unfortunately, many thousands of these soldiers never returned home to their families and loved ones.

Born in July 1923, Trevor Poland entered the Royal Naval College at Dartmouth as a Cadet in January 1937 at the age of 13. He 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 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.

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.



**TOP: From left Mr Brian Wilkinson, son of recipient Mr Joseph Wilkinson, Ambassador Ilya Rogachev and granddaughter Emma-Jane Wilkinson**  
**BOTTOM: Recipient Mr Trevor Poland honoured by the Ambassador; in the background is the Ambassador's wife, Mrs Elena Vysotskaya.**



Mr Wilkinson, too, was only 17 years old when he reported to HMS WILD GOOSE (U45) in April 1943. She was a Black Swan class sloop, part of the Royal Navy's 2nd Escort Group, which protected convoys in the Atlantic and the Arctic against German submarines.

As Radio Operator, Mr Wilkinson spent most of his time at sea listening for inter-escort messages with one earpiece, and for convoy messages with the other. He was also involved in the historic D-Day landings.

Mr Wilkinson was drafted to an aircraft carrier that had been converted to carry troops and travelled through the Mediterranean and the Suez Canal many times, bringing back troops and equipment from the East, including Singapore and Burma.

After demobbing in 1947, he moved to South Africa, fell in love and married. He and his wife had four children. He became active in ex-service associations and was in the employ of a financial services company for 38 years until his retirement.

Fellow Royal Navy veteran Mr Poland, too, made his way to South Africa, though he took a more round-about route. He left the Navy as Lieutenant Commander in 1956, worked in the family business in Lloyds' for 12 years, and spent the next 18 years ocean racing around the world.

Since settling in Cape Town in 1989, he has lectured at charitable events, and has continued researching and writing books.

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