



Military Despatches

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Not a military genius

Ten of Hitler's biggest mistakes

Feared and respected

Three World War II British legends

You are what you eat

Military ration packs from around the world

Operation Babylon

Iraq's nuclear reactor - now you see it, now you don't

For the military enthusiast

Surviving the Arctic Convoys (Part II)

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

On 7 April 1944, mere days after their arrival, convoy RA 58, with 36 merchantmen, departed from the Kola Inlet and made its way back through the Arctic Sea, reaching Loch Ewe in Scotland a week later, on 14 April 1944.

Although they were attacked on the return journey, neither ships nor U-boats were sunk on either side, making this an extremely successful trip. At more or less the same time, a Fleet Air Arm attack was launched on the heavy German battleship, *Tirpitz*, which was stationed in *Altafjord*, northern Norway, incapacitating the just-repaired ship.

After its stint in the Arctic, the *2 EG* returned to the Atlantic for several months, before being sent down to the South-Western Approaches, an area off the south coast of Ireland, in order to participate in Operation *Nephtune*, the invasion of Normandy, on 6 June 1944. As Radio Operator and Leading Telegraphist on *HMS Wild Goose*, Mr Wilkinson was thus also involved in the historic D-Day landings.

After the end of World War II, *HMS Wild Goose* was assigned to the Persian Gulf Division of the East Indies Station; here she served until 1954. Mr Wilkinson was posted to an aircraft carrier that had been converted to a troop ship 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 an active member of the Ex-Servicemen's Association, and worked for the Old Mutual Insurance 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. After World War II, Mr Poland spent two years on a destroyer in the Mediterranean, based on the island of Malta and operating in Palestine, Trieste and Greece. After two years in the East Indies Fleet, covering the area between Mauritius and Singapore and with a short visit to South Africa, he returned to the United Kingdom where he received minesweeping training and served on several other vessels, ultimately being promoted to Lieutenant Commander. He left the Navy in 1956, and worked in the family business in Lloyds' for 12 years until 1968. He spent around 18 years ocean racing in the United Kingdom, the Mediterranean, the South Atlantic, the Caribbean and America, and participated in three trans-Atlantic races from Cape to Rio. After 1989, he relocated to Cape Town, where he has since given many lectures at charitable events and continued researching and writing books.

The Arctic convoys being commemorated by the 75-year

Jubilee medals transported some four million tons of supplies and munitions to the Soviet Union between 1941 and 1945. Thousands of brave sailors, airmen and soldiers risked their lives under indescribably harsh and dangerous conditions, constantly under attack by the German *Luftwaffe*, *Kriegsmarine* and U-boats. More than 3,000 Allied seamen died, and 104 merchant ships and 16 Royal Navy vessels were destroyed. It is estimated that some 66,500 men sailed on these convoys.

Some 334,000 South Africans joined World War II as Volunteers (211,000 Whites, 77,000 Blacks, 46,000 Coloureds and Indians). The Commonwealth War Graves Commission has recorded 11,021 known South Africans who died during World War II. About 3,000 South Africans served in the Royal Navy during World War II, and many joined the Royal Navy directly.

It is important to remember that many of those who were so suddenly thrust into armed conflict were young men, some barely out of school. Both Mr Poland and Mr Wilkinson were just young lads, teenagers really, 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

Mr Trevor Poland with his medal and certificate presented to him by Russian ambassador, his Excellency Ambassador Ilya Rogachev.



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, sailors and airmen did not return home to their families and loved ones. By the end of World War II, the Royal Navy alone had lost 50,758 men killed in action, 820 were missing in action, and 14,663 had been wounded in action.

An especially poignant story from Mr Poland's compelling memoirs was his description of the aftermath of the Battle of the North Cape, during which the Scharnhorst was destroyed and sunk. This had left a lasting impression on then-Lieutenant Poland, just 20 years old at the time:

"Then I heard it. The eerie screaming of a large number of men in the water and in a state of fear if not of panic; the same terrible screams I had heard at Bougie over a year ago. ...

We could see the black holes of their mouths as they screamed. ... So we stopped, in the height of an Arctic gale, in pitch darkness and amid heavy snow flurries, and not least, the threat of U boats which would certainly be in the vicinity."

But, in the middle of their rescue operation, the Captain received orders to join up with the fleet, and they had to abandon the rest of the survivors to their inevitable death in the icy Arctic waters. The memory of this clearly haunted the young Lieutenant many years later:

"Now, as I write this many years later, I imagine that I can still hear those eerie and ghostly screams, still see the black holes of the open mouths."

Watching wartime footage from the various battles and actions that the sailors and soldiers of World War II participated in, as well as watching and reading interviews with numerous veterans, does not fully capture their experiences, but does give some glimpses and insight. The

powerful battleships with their huge guns firing thunderous salvos that rocked the boats on the heaving seas, the ear-splitting explosions of shells all around them, the sight of their shipmates and friends being injured and killed, and the realisation that their own shells, bombs and torpedoes were causing just as much damage to the enemy, would certainly have left a lasting impression on these young men. The fact that they survived, and emerged as kind, compassionate, humble human beings, despite having personally witnessed so many atrocities, is remarkable and testimony to the resilience of the human spirit.

But let their stories also be a cautionary tale of the horror, destructiveness and devastation caused by war and armed conflict. Let us instead do all we can to foster peace, harmony and cooperation around the world.