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WWII Arctic convoy veterans share their memories

During World War II, when Nazi Germany invaded the then Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Western Allies, including the United Kingdom came to its rescue. Thousands of brave Sailors, Airmen and Soldiers risked their lives under indescribably harsh and dangerous conditions to deploy on Arctic convoys, which were transporting some four million tons of supplies and munitions to the Soviet Union between 1941 and 1945. It is estimated that some 66,500 men sailed on these convoys.

Constantly under attack by the German Luftwaffe, Kriegsmarine and U-boats, 104 merchant ships and 16 Royal Navy vessels were destroyed and more than 3,000 Allied Seamen died. Two young men - Mr Joseph Wilkinson (now 94) and Lt Cdr Trevor Gordon Peter Poland (RN, Ret, now 97) - were part of the Arctic convoys. Of UK origin, both are the last two surviving veterans of the Arctic convoys living in South Africa.

Lt Cdr Poland (Ret) had a passion for the sea his entire life and wrote numerous books about the war 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.

In the next two editions Regine Lord provides you with riveting recollections from his book...

HMS WILD GOOSE (U45), the sloop on which Mr Joseph Wilkinson served - photo from the Imperial War Museum: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205120794>



Both Mr Trevor Poland and Mr Joseph Wilkinson were teenagers when they enlisted in the Royal Navy, thrust into the middle of World War II. By the end of the War, the Royal Navy alone had lost 50 758 men with 820 missing in action and 14 663 wounded. They were part of the lucky ones to survive.

Trevor Poland

Lt Cdr Poland joined his first ship, HMS NELSON, in early September 1940. A month later he transferred to the newly commissioned battleship, HMS KING GEORGE V, on which he served until April 1942, initially as Midshipman of the Watch.

As a young Midshipman 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, Mid 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 at the time, the powerful German battleship BISMARCK, the pride of the Kriegsmarine.

For almost two hours, hundreds of shells pounded down on the burning BISMARCK, the last ones at point blank range, before the British ships - running very low on fuel - were ordered to return to port.



TOP: Mr Brian Wilkinson (left) receives a 75-year commemorative medal from Russian Ambassador Ilya Rogachev
BELOW: Lt Cdr Trevor Poland (Ret) proudly displays his 75-year medal



After a final salvo of torpedoes from HMS DORSETSHIRE, 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. Abandoned to their fate, the remaining survivors drowned.

Mid Poland went on to recall his almost-encounter with the sister ship of BISMARCK, TIRPITZ, when HMS KING GEORGE V was part of the fleet protecting the Arctic convoys. At that time Mid Poland's action station was in the starboard forward director, controlling the starboard battery of 5.25-inch guns as Rate Officer.

In early March 1942, TIRPITZ and her escorting Destroyers were spotted leaving one of the Norwegian fjords, Fættenfjord near Trondheim, in order to intercept two Allied Arctic convoys.

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.

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 capping the ship.

Mid 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 Commando training and several 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 Centre 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 being only 19 at the time, then S Lt 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.



King George VI (centre) from Great Britain on a visit to HMS WILD GOOSE on 27 March 1945. Mr Wilkinson is standing third from left

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 and shortly before Christmas 1942, returned home to England unharmed.

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) S Lt Poland asked to be placed instead on HMS MATCHLESS, a fast and powerful Lightning class Destroyer, under Lt Cdr John Mowlam.

Joseph Wilkinson

Mr Wilkinson left school to enlist in the Royal Navy in 1943 at the age of 17. After undergoing basic training, he was trained as a Radio Operator at a special Royal Navy Wireless Telegraphy Training School in Aberdeen, Scotland. His mustering was Telegraphist (Trained Operator).

In April/May 1943, he reported to HMS WILD GOOSE (U45), a Black Swan class sloop under Officer Commanding Lt Cdr David Edward Gillespie ('Dicky') Wemyss, 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 (2 EG), a British anti-submarine formation formed not long before Mr Wilkinson joined the ship.

During World War II, Britain was being supplied with armaments from Canada and North America to help fight Nazi Germany. Aware of this, the Germans sent fleets of submarines, surface ships and planes to intercept and sink the merchant vessels that transported this precious cargo.

In response, the American, Canadian and Royal Navies began to escort these supply ships across the Atlantic. When a submarine was spotted, the job of the escort vessels was to sink it.

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 (German submarines) were destroyed. The human cost was devastating as some 36 200 Allied Sailors and Airmen, 36 000 Allied Merchant Seamen and 30 000 German Seamen perished.

Ships traveling from America and Canada to Britain found it safer to sail northwards along the Western approaches past Northern Ireland to Britain, rather than following the southern route past the Republic of Ireland, which was within easier reach of the German Luftwaffe and Kriegsmarine.

Minesweepers and anti-submarine vessels thus departed regularly from both Larne and Belfast in Northern Ireland to patrol the Irish Sea and the North Channel.

Hence, the young Wilkinson 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 deck when the ship increased 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, 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 Capt 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.

Capt 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. One of them was the 'creeping attack', which involved two ships working together closely.

If the ship's radar indicated that there was a U-boat nearby, one of the ships would maintain radar 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. Once in position, the second ship would release its depth charges.

Another move, the 'barrage attack', involved three ships moving abreast in a line over the target area. Each of them would then simultaneously release a series of depth charges, which were set to explode at different depths. The resulting barrage of explosions one after the other usually destroyed the submarine.

One particularly memorable patrol for the 2 EG happened over a three-week period, from 31 January to 19 February 1944, when they successfully sank 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.

Sinking of the German vessel SCHARNHORST

"The black holes of their open mouths..."

An especially poignant story from Mr Poland's compelling memoirs was his description of the aftermath of the Battle of the North Cape. The destruction and sinking of the German vessel SCHARNHORST left a lasting impression on then Sub-Lieutenant Poland, who was 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 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."

However, 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 him for many years:

"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 their open mouths..."

**To be continued in the next edition
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