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Arctic Convoy Veteran receives hero's welcome aboard Russian Missile Cruiser

Article by Regine Lord

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 evident from the reaction of Officers and Sailors when Mr Joseph Wilkinson visited MARSHAL USTINOV, a Russian Missile Cruiser. They immediately recognised the medals he wore on his chest. They greeted him with respectful nods and friendly smiles and some even approached to shake his hand.

Mr Wilkinson is a 94-year-old veteran of the Russian Arctic Convoys of World War II. The visit had been arranged thanks to the close co-operation of Consul Dmitry Polyansky from the Consulate General of the Russian Federation in Cape Town and Russian Compatriots South Africa.

He had been accompanied by his daughter Michele and Dr Elina Komarova-Tagar. The latter is a member of the Russian Club Cape Town, and works on cultural-historic relations between Russia and South Africa. She has been living in Cape Town since 2003.

MARSHAL USTINOV was bristling with antennas and high-tech equipment - an impressive sight - when she visited Cape Town in November 2019. She 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 length of 186m and width of 20.8m, a maximum speed of 34 knots (63 km/h) and a cruising range of 7 500 miles (12 000 km), she can accommodate a crew of 520 and carries enough food reserves for 30 days.

Capt 1st Rank Vladimir V. Kuzmin graciously 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.

As Mr Wilkinson and his entourage was shown around the cruiser, he remarked that it was significantly larger than the sloop he had sailed on during World War II, escorting convoys, 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.



Mr Joseph Wilkinson (centre) flanked by Dr Elina Komarova-Tagar (left) and his daughter Michele Troost with some of the Officers on board MARSHAL USTINOV

He was very impressed by the nature of the armaments on board and the excellent condition of the ship and commented that he had never seen anything quite so shipshape!

Interestingly, 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 MARSHAL USTINOV all the more special.

Over the years, Mr Wilkinson was awarded several medals in acknowledgement of his service during World War II. Since 1945, the Soviet and then the Russian government has issued commemorative medals to mark the anniversaries of 'Victory in the Great Patriotic War 1941-1945'. Both Mr Wilkinson and Mr Poland have received several of these, including, most recently, the 75-year Jubilee medal, which was awarded to some 550 Arctic Convoy veterans in 2020.

Since 2013, it 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 Ushakov medal, which was done over a period of several years. It was a challenging task. By 2019, 100 veterans were still supposed to receive it; some had sadly passed away.

The Russian government had also issued additional medals to mark the anniversaries of 'Victory in the Great Patriotic War 1941-1945'. In 2020, 550 Arctic Convoy veterans, including Mr Wilkinson, were awarded the 75-year Jubilee medal. In the United Kingdom some were awarded this medal in person, but most had to be sent by post.

It is evident that the Russian people continue to hold the men of the Arctic Convoys in very high esteem. This was brought home during Mr Wilkinson's visit to MARSHAL USTINOV, where he was treated with such respect and gratitude.



The Russian Navy's Slava-class Missile Cruiser MARSHAL USTINOV (055) leaving Cape Town harbour against the backdrop of Table Mountain