



Russian Convoy Club of New Zealand

Newsletter
March - April 2022

Dear shipmates, families and friends

Convoy PQ17 remembered during SS Otaki commemoration

by Ian Carson, Editor, Otaki Today



SS Otaki Memorial at Otaki College

The annual event at Ōtaki College to remember the gallantry of SS Otaki and honour the Merchant Navy was this year focused on the fateful convoy PQ17.

Merchant ships in the Second World War convoy from Scotland to Russia were left to the mercy of German forces after the British Admiralty issued the infamous command: "Convoy is to scatter."

The command came after it was feared the German battleship Tirpitz was about to intercept the convoy. The intelligence proved wrong and the 35 merchant ships, unprotected by their naval escort, were picked off by U-boats and Luftwaffe bombers.



Capt. Quentin Randall, RNZN lays a wreath

On one day alone - July 12, 1942 - 12 ships were sunk. Only 11 of the total number of merchant ships were to reach Russia. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill later described it as "one of the most melancholy naval episodes in the whole of the war".

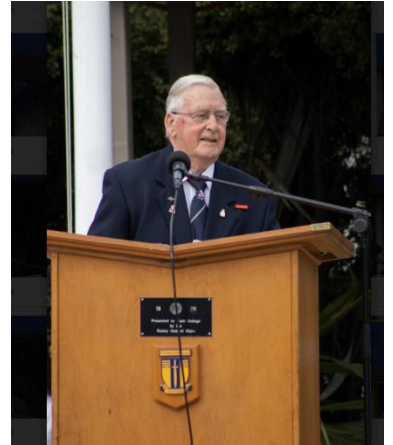
Many New Zealanders, including my own father, were on the convoys that supplied the Soviet Union with war material in its battle against Nazi Germany.

The Russian Convoy Club of New Zealand, now with dwindling membership, is always represented at the wreath-laying event at the college. They are normally accompanied by Russian Ambassador Georgy Zuev, who regularly shows deserved gratitude by laying a wreath alongside

representatives of Great Britain and Germany. The ambassador was conspicuously absent this year after his country invaded Ukraine.

Three members of the convoy association, though now well into their 90s, did attend, including RCCNZ president Derek Whitwam. Derek was the keynote speaker.

He began his address by saying that in 1942, Russia (then the Soviet Union) was an ally against Nazi aggression, though an extremely demanding one. Derek was English and later emigrated to New Zealand.



Keynote speaker: Derek Whitwam

He joined the Royal Navy in 1943, when the convoys were in full swing. After initial training he joined the heavy cruiser HMS Berwick and sailed on his first convoy destined for Russia, JW57, in February 1944. "After ploughing through 60-foot [18-metre] waves we developed machinery trouble and had to withdraw back to Scapa Flow for repairs," he said. "Meeting 60-foot waves head-on is like driving into a brick wall – very difficult to keep your balance."

Like most men on the convoys, he remembers the bitter cold as the ships crept through Arctic waters. "It was very cold, but the only cold-weather clothing we were issued with was two pairs of ankle-length woollen underwear. For washing we had to beg, borrow or steal a bucket, which was used for both bathing and clothes washing." Derek said it was often so cold the ladders would be covered in ice and waves coming over the bow would turn to ice before reaching the bridge.



Arctic Convoy Veteran Stan Welch lays a wreath on behalf of RCCNZ

Ice was a constant worry, not just because of the danger to crew, but also because it could cause machinery to malfunction and upset the equilibrium of the ship. "We were constantly chipping ice from the guard rails and most other areas on the upper deck. In fact, on one convoy the roof of the cruiser HMS Sheffield's A turret at the front of the ship, was peeled back like the lid on a sardine tin."

The men on the convoys often trained with or were friends with men on other ships. In some cases they grew up together and joined the Navy together.

Convoys by their very nature involved many ships, and it was inevitable that some men would look across the heaving waves to see how their mate was doing only a few hundred metres away. One story told to me by a veteran was of waving every morning to his friend on another ship.

One day after their customary salute, this veteran said he suddenly saw the trail of a U-boat torpedo streaking past his ship. It sped on

and slammed into his mate's ship just below the bridge. The ship exploded and sank within minutes. His mate died in the attack.

My own father was on PQ13, serving on HMS Trinidad. A new light cruiser with a complement of 900 men, it was heavily damaged in March 1942 when a torpedo malfunctioned – she torpedoed herself. A total of 32 men died, including Aucklander A C Dick. My dad remembered injured men in the sea gasping for air as oil seeping from the damaged ship floated around them. Incidents such as these are remembered by those who served, and undoubtedly still haunt them in moments of reflection. It's why it's important to honour their service with commemorations such as those at the college.

SS Otaki remembered in college relationship

Many of the British-owned Home boats that linked New Zealand with the United Kingdom were lost during the First World War. Less than a fortnight after war broke out, on 16 August 1914, the New Zealand Shipping Company's *Kaipara* was captured and sunk by the German auxiliary cruiser *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse* near Tenerife. Losses mounted alarmingly in 1917-18. One action stood out, the epic 1917 battle between the same company's *Otaki* and the German auxiliary cruiser *Moewe* ('Seagull').



Sinking of SS Otaki

Both were merchant ships, but there the similarity ended. The newly built 9800-ton *Moewe* carried four 150-mm guns, a 105-mm gun, two smaller pieces, torpedo tubes and mines. All were concealed, for the ship operated disguised as a merchant ship. It carried a highly trained naval crew of 235 and was fitted with sophisticated radio gear. In contrast, the 7420-ton *Otaki* (built in 1908) had been given two Royal Navy gunners to man its stern 4.7-inch (120-mm) gun. At heart, the *Otaki* remained a humble food carrier, crewed by 71 civilians.

The *Moewe's* commander bore the imposing moniker Korvettenkapitan Niklaus Graf und Burgraf du Donna-Schlodien. He had served in the Kaiser's navy since 1896 and had been the navigator of a battleship prior to taking charge of the *Moewe*. The *Otaki's* Scottish master, 39-year-old Captain Archibald Bissett-Smith, was about the same age and an equally experienced seaman, but in the merchant marine.

They crossed each other's paths early in the afternoon of 10 March 1917 off the Azores in the North Atlantic. The *Moewe* had sunk a British freighter that morning and its officers went swiftly to action when they sighted another ship in murky conditions. Squalls and rising seas made pursuit difficult, but the *Moewe* had a slight speed advantage and closed the gap.

Even after the *Moewe* broke out its battle ensign and turned to clear its firing lines, Bissett-Smith refused to back down. Instead, his gunners sent a round sailing above the raider's bridge. In the gunnery exchange that followed, the *Otaki* did surprisingly well. But the British ship had no chance and sank stern-first a few hours later,

still flying its colours and taking Bissett-Smith with it. Five of his crew were killed; the survivors were taken prisoner.

The *Moewe*, though, was also on fire and in danger of sinking. Donna-Schlodien averted disaster by cutting holes in the ship's side to flood a bunker fire.

The *Moewe* spent two highly vulnerable days wallowing on the high seas before it was repaired sufficiently to resume its raids on Allied shipping.

Only after the war, when the *Otaki* survivors were released, did the full heroism of the incident emerge. In 1919, in a rare move, the King awarded Captain Bissett-Smith a posthumous Victoria Cross, the conditions for the award having been met by retrospectively giving him status as a temporary lieutenant in the Royal Naval Reserve. Several other crewmen were also given awards or mentioned in despatches.



Capt. Archibald Bissett-Smith VC

Bissett-Smith and the *Otaki* subsequently entered the folklore of the Merchant Navy. In 1937 his family presented the Otaki Shield to his old school, Robert Gordon's College in Aberdeen. It is awarded to the boy with the highest qualities of character, leadership and athletic ability. To honour Bissett-Smith's connection with New Zealand (as well as sailing for the New Zealand Shipping Company, he had married Edith Broomfield of Dunedin in 1914), NZSC added a travelling scholarship to the prize. The New Zealand government funded the Otaki Scholar's stay in this country. Every year since then, apart from during the Second World War, the Otaki Scholar has visited New Zealand.

In 2017, a special monument unveiled at Otaki College by then Governor-General Dame Patsy Reddy marked 100 years since the sinking of the SS Otaki. The SS Otaki Centennial Monument, featuring a bronze sculpture of the ship created by artist Matt Gaudie, has strengthened the strong bond between Otaki College and Scotland's Robert Gordon College.

Source: New Zealand History



Thursday 31 March @ Lower Hutt RSA

Thursday 25 August @ Lower Hutt RSA

Thursday 24 November @ TBA

Further details will be advised as they come to hand

Up Spirits!



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