



The Arctic Convoy Club of New Zealand

Newsletter
March/April 2025

Dear shipmates, families and friends

Otaki College Commemorates the SS Otaki with a Memorial Ceremony

Otaki College held its ninth annual wreath-laying ceremony on March 10, 2025, honouring the sacrifice of the *SS Otaki* and its crew. This year's event also marked the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II, providing a solemn opportunity to reflect on the contributions of the Merchant Navy and those who served at sea during times of war.



The origins of this ceremony trace back to March 10, 1917, when the *SS Otaki*, a New Zealand Shipping Company vessel, was sunk by the German commerce raider *SMS Moewe*. In recognition of his extraordinary bravery, the ship's captain, Archibald Bisset Smith, was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross. Since 2017, Otaki College has held an annual event to honour this history and the enduring connection between Otaki College and Robert Gordon's College in Scotland, where Smith was once a student.

The 2025 ceremony gathered dignitaries, students, and military representatives to pay tribute to both the *SS Otaki* and the New Zealanders who served in World War II. Among the distinguished guests were Mr. Tim Costley, MP for Otaki; Mr. Tākuta Ferris, MP for Te Tai Tonga; Mayor Janet Holborow; and representatives of the Royal New Zealand Navy, Air Force, and Army. Veterans, members of the Merchant Navy Association, and local iwi were also present, further reinforcing the deep sense of history and remembrance.

A Solemn and Respectful Observance

The event commenced with the arrival of the Official Party, welcomed by Otaki College Principal, Mr. Andy Fraser, alongside student leaders Keita Broughton-Alp and Logan Boyer. The national anthem, sung with music provided by The Combined Bands of The Salvation Army Levin Corps and Levin & Districts Brass, set the tone for the day's proceedings.

A significant moment of the ceremony occurred at noon, when an RNZAF Harvard aircraft performed a flyover, symbolising the courage and sacrifice of all New Zealanders who fought in World War II. This was followed by keynote addresses, including a speech by Rear Admiral (Retired) David Ledson, who emphasized the enduring legacy of the Merchant Navy.

A particularly meaningful presence at the event was that of members of the Arctic Convoy Club of New Zealand, including President Derek Whitwam, Sydney Wells and Stan Welch (pictured below left to right). These veterans, who endured the perilous Arctic Convoys that supplied the Soviet Union during World War II, were specially acknowledged for their remarkable resilience and service in some of the harshest conditions of the war. Their participation reinforced the strong ties between New Zealand's maritime history and the global efforts of the Allied forces.



Students from Otaki College played a central role in the ceremony, reciting readings, hymns, and commemorative poetry. The traditional exchange of crests between Principal Andy Fraser and Mr. Paul Baggott, President of the New Zealand Merchant Navy Association, reinforced the historical ties between Otaki College and the maritime community.

The Wreath Laying: A Gesture of Respect

The highlight of the event was the wreath-laying ceremony, where representatives from various organizations placed floral tributes to honour those who lost their lives at sea. Government officials, veterans, military representatives, and students participated in this solemn act, acknowledging the sacrifices made by merchant seafarers.

Following this, The Last Post was played by Mr. David Miller, as flags were lowered to half-mast in a poignant moment of reflection. The Ode of Remembrance was then recited in both Māori and English, concluding with the response: "We will remember them."



A Lasting Legacy

The ceremony concluded with a blessing and dismissal led by Reverend Lance Lukin, followed by the departure of the Official Party. Guests were then invited to a luncheon at the Otaki RSA, where further stories and memories were shared.

As Otaki College continues this annual tradition, the *SS Otaki* Memorial remains a powerful reminder of New Zealand's maritime history. It highlights the bravery of those who served at sea and reinforces the special connection between past and present generations.

The presence of Arctic Convoy veterans at this year's event was a poignant reminder of the dangers faced by seafarers in wartime, ensuring that their sacrifices remain an integral part of New Zealand's collective memory. Through this act of remembrance, the community ensures that the contributions of the Merchant Navy and the fallen of World War II are never forgotten.

Our next ACCNZ Events:

24 April 2025 11:30am The Farm Bar and Café, Boulcott Heritage Golf Club, Lower Hutt

25 April 2025 ANZAC Day commemorations nationwide

November 2025 Pre Christmas meeting to be advised

New Arctic Convoys book published



Dr Roderick G. Maclean of Stornoway has released a historical book on the Convoys to Russia, based at Loch Ewe and manned by Gaelic-speaking sailors from the Highlands and Islands. The book, translated from his 2022 Gaelic work "Cha Till Mise", focuses on *HMS Achates*. Professor Ronald Black, retired Senior Lecturer in Celtic Studies at the University of Edinburgh and formerly Gaelic Editor of the Scotsman, calls it a

"splendidly researched and gripping history of the Arctic Convoys."

Obituary

We regret to advise that Marilyn Billing, a long-time Associate Member, passed away on 16 February 2025 after a prolonged illness. She was the wife of George (*HMS Nabob*), who passed away just over a year ago. A private cremation has taken place, with a memorial service to follow at a later date.

Welcome new member

A hearty welcome to Trish Kumar, daughter of the late Bill Megennis (*HMS Norfolk*), as an Associate Member. Members will recall that Bill was a regular attender at many of our events until his passing in 2016 and we are pleased to have his daughter as a member.

Happy Birthday : Stan Welch



Congratulations to Stan Welch (*HMS Apollo*) on celebrating his 100th birthday. Friends and family, including Arctic Convoy veterans, recently gathered at the RSA in Paraparaumu to share in the celebrations.

Arctic Convoy members awarded Norwegian Military Medal

In a recent poignant ceremony in Wellington, two Royal Navy veterans, Derek Whitwam (below image centre) and Stan Welch (below image left), were recognised for their invaluable contributions to the liberation of Norway during World War II. Both veterans were awarded the Defence Medal and the Norwegian Government Commemorative Medal in a gesture that celebrates their enduring legacy.



Derek Whitwam served on *HMS Berwick*, which played a significant role in transporting Norwegian military personnel to Bergen and Trondheim in mid-1945. The ship also created fond memories among Norwegians, hosting local schoolchildren during its visits to Trondheim. Earlier, *HMS Berwick* had been involved in a high-risk mission - Operation Freeman - in November 1944, ferrying Norwegian troops to Murmansk. This mission allowed the troops to join Soviet forces in liberating Eastern Finnmark, a dangerous operation that underscored the Allied commitment to freeing occupied territories.

Stan Welch served aboard *HMS Apollo*, a vessel pivotal to Norway's freedom. On 13 May 1945, *HMS Apollo* transported Crown Prince Olav and other prominent Norwegian officials back to their homeland after years of occupation. Beyond this historic voyage, *HMS Apollo* was instrumental in mine-laying operations along the Norwegian coast during late 1944 and early 1945. Notably, the ship was part of the perilous Operation Spellbinder in January 1945, during which the convoy was met with fierce resistance from German naval forces and aircraft.

The medals awarded symbolize profound gratitude for their efforts. The Defence Medal, crafted by Oslo's J. Tostrup firm, features Norway's national colours and the words "Participant in the struggle." The Norwegian Government Commemorative Medal was established in honour of the 70th anniversary of Norway's liberation, underscoring ongoing appreciation for Allied sacrifices.

This recognition serves as a lasting tribute to Welch and Whitwam, whose bravery and dedication remain an enduring beacon of hope and resilience.



Up Spirits!



Derek Whitwam
President, The Arctic Convoy Club of New Zealand
Tel: (04) 971 4636 or Mobile: (027) 971 4636
Email: atired.92@gmail.com
Web: <http://www.arctic.org.nz>