

Arctic Convoy veterans to be feted on board Britannia tonight



L-R Jack Lawrie and Don Dawkins with an Ushakov Medal

Forty two veterans of the Arctic Convoys are to attend a reception this evening at the invitation of the Consulate General of Russia to celebrate 75 years since the first ship left the west coast of Scotland to take vital supplies to Russian during World War II.

One of those was Jack Lawrie from Leith. Jack (97) was there today with his daughter, with his medals firmly hidden under his outer jacket. He has an Arctic Convoy medal which is one of three he had put on today, but chose to hide them from public view!

It took the Consul General of the Russian Federation for Scotland, Andrey A Pritsepov, to explain to us what the medals were. Jack was wearing a Russian medal which commemorates the 70th anniversary of the Arctic Convoy, another British medal which the Consul General explained was a British Arctic Star medal, as well as the Arctic Convoy medal itself, named the Ushakov medal.

Mr Lawrie explained to us that during the war his ship's home base was Belfast, but to join the Arctic Convoy they started out from Loch Ewe. He said: "It was a very long voyage. We went up the longest way in the convoy, up the Denmark Straits to Spitzberg, Franz Josef Land away up into ice fields and came down by Bear Island where our escorts disappeared. Then we only had four trawlers and two fleet

sweepers left. We were up there for four months.

“I was a naval seaman. On that type of ship you did everything because there was a small crew, and I was on the four-inch gun during our pre-war efforts. We were patrolling during the four months but we didn’t attack any ships. It was a horrible time.

“We thought we would be coming back with what was left of the convoy, but we stayed up there till Christmas Day when we went alongside the cruiser [HMS Jamaica](#) and got some rations. We were starving, as we had run out of rations and were living on Russian bread and dried cod.

“Our sister ship the [HMS Cape Argona](#) was with us along with two fleet sweepers. These minesweepers were bigger than us, although not much bigger!

“I joined up in 1940 when I was 20, and I was 22 during the Arctic Convoy. I came out of the Navy in 1946, and then I went back to sea for another 50 years. After that I went back to being a painter, which is what I was doing before the war started.

Jack was on board HMS Cape Mariato and you can read more about his ship [here](#).



The Consul General of the Russian Federation in Scotland Andrey A Pritsepov shows off one of the Ushakov medals to be awarded to Arctic Convoy veterans.

The Consul General of the Russian Federation in Scotland Andrey A Pritsepov explained that the Ushakov medal is the most highly esteemed Russian military award. “It is named after a Russian admiral Ushakov who never lost a naval battle. He was one of the most celebrated Russian admirals, and the medal is only presented to military personnel for valour in combat. It is one of the highest awards for naval personnel,

and later today we will present three of these to veterans from the North of England in three separate ceremonies here in Edinburgh. I am going to present the medal and give each of them the specially commissioned wristwatch which goes along with it."



Don Dawkins who hails originally from London, but now lives in Oban, was aboard HMS Mauritius when she sailed from D-Day to Scapa Flow, and then they sailed up to Russia with the Arctic Convoy. He was a bit more upbeat about the experience and said: "I was in the navy dealing with all the dots and dashes! It wasn't too bad a trip, a bit up and down, but somebody did fall overboard, although we managed to rescue him. I have the Arctic Convoy medal which my nephew Geoffrey picked up for me last year here in Edinburgh."

The Medal is awarded to the British veterans of the World War II Arctic convoys 'for personal courage and valour shown during the World War II while participating in the Arctic Convoys' in accordance with the Russian President's Decree No 131 of 10 March 2014, and there are 214 veterans in Scotland who have received the Medal.

We also spoke with another Edinburgh resident Lt Commander Diarmid Gunn OBE who has co-written a photo book along with photographer Kenneth Reynolds which is being presented to the veterans this evening. His book captures the stories and anecdotes of many of the veterans of the Convoys. The veterans will also be given a series of specially created gifts including an Arctic Convoy tartan and limited edition whisky.

Winston Churchill called this 'the worst journey in the world' and the idea behind tonight's reception on Britannia, which senior members of the current Royal & Merchant Navy in Scotland have been invited to attend, is to honour those involved in the war effort.

The convoys were a collaboration between Russia and the UK to take vital supplies including food and military equipment to the eastern front. Thousands of Scots took part sailing from Loch Ewe in Wester Ross and the River Clyde to the Russian ports of Arkhangelsk and Murmansk, and thousands of Scots took part. Nearly 400 merchant vessels and 16 Royal Navy warships were lost and over 3,000 young men perished in the icy waters of the North Atlantic.

This evening's event will itself be a collaboration between the Russian Consulate and some Scottish businesses.

The Scottish Salmon Company and Albert Bartletts will help to cater for the evening and will produce a commemorative photo book along with gifts for the surviving veterans.

Scotland is also a home for two Arctic Convoys Memorials – one in The Cove, also on the shores of Loch Ewe, and another one on the island of Hoy on Orkney. Every year representatives of the Russian Consulate General in Edinburgh together with the representatives of the local communities and officials lay wreaths at this memorials on the 9th of May which is celebrated in Russia as the Victory Day.