

Russian museum to honour Irishmen who served in deadly Arctic convoys

<https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-40722717.html>



A group photograph of Merchant Seamen of several nationalities including Irish who were imprisoned by the Germans. It was taken prior to March 1943 in Milag Nord Internierten Lager (internment camp) located near Bremen. Prisoners were grouped at random for these photographs which were then given to each prisoner to send home to give the impression of normality.

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SEAN O'RIORDAN, DEFENCE CORRESPONDENT

A new museum just opened in Russia is to honour men born in the neutral Irish Free State who manned vital supply ships known as 'Arctic Convoys' during World War Two to the then USSR.

The supply missions were extremely dangerous with thousands of seamen killed by German U-Boats, dive-bombers and ferocious seas.

The Russians will honour several Irish merchant seamen, including one who went on to serve after the war as the most senior officer in the Irish Naval Service.



Peter Mulvany, pictured in Clontarf, April 24, 2021

Russian authorities were well aware of the involvement of British and Northern Irish crews in the convoys, but didn't suspect there was anybody from the South on them because of our neutrality.

It came about following a chance online encounter with some Russian people living here and Peter Mulvany, a Clontarf-born former merchant seaman and Irish Naval Service seaman.

Mr Mulvany is a well-known seafaring historian and the Russian authorities contacted him.

The response they got so delighted them they are to put a section in the new museum dedicated to the Irishmen's efforts and will fly the Republic's tri-colour next to it.



Peter Kavanagh's 1947 ID Card as an Irish Naval Service Cadet.

Pride of place amongst the Irish at the new museum at Smolensky Prospekt in St Petersburg will go to former Commodore Peter Kavanagh, who served as Flag Officer Commanding the Irish Naval Service from 1973-1981.

On many occasions, he was lucky to escape with his life on the convoys.

The Dublin-born man served as a third officer on the SS New Westminster City.

"It formed part of Convoy PQ13 which sailed from Iceland in March 1942, and in the following weeks on its 2,000-mile passage to North Russia was scattered by severe Arctic gales and attacked by German bombers, U-Boats and destroyers," Mr Mulvany said.

Following the sinking of his ship in Murmansk port, Kavanagh transferred to the Empire Starlight, but she was severely damaged during an air-raid a few hours later.

"For the passage home to Britain, Kavanagh was assigned to the SS Harpalion. On April 13, 1942, off the North Cape, she was sunk by an aerial torpedo and he was rescued by a lifeboat from HMS Fury. Six of the 19 ships from PQ13 which sailed during March 1942 were lost. Upon reaching Murmansk a further three ships — Empire Starlight, Lancaster Castle and New Westminster City — were sunk during bombing raids on the port."

Months later, Kavanagh received a communication from 10 Downing Street which read: 'By the King's Order the name of Peter Kavanagh, Third Officer, SS New Westminster City was published in the London Gazette on September 15, 1942, as commended for brave conduct in the Merchant Navy. I am charged to record His Majesty's high appreciation of the service rendered, signed Winston Churchill, Prime Minister.'

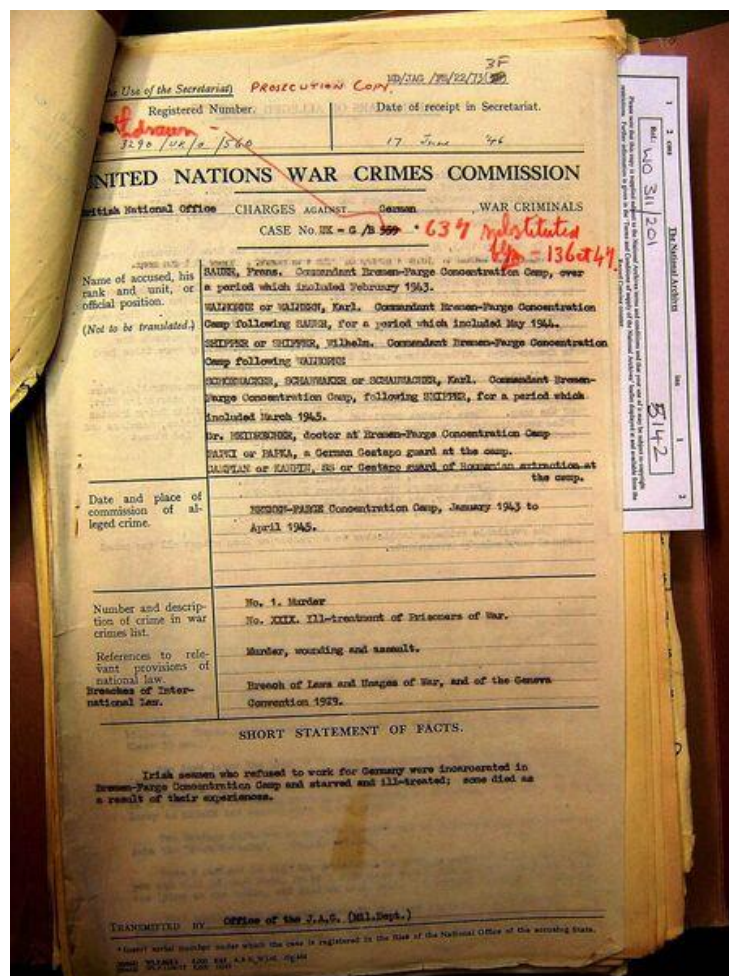
Kavanagh subsequently went on to join the Irish Naval Service in 1947, rising to become its top officer. He died in May 1981.

The Russians will also honour Able Seaman William Knott, who was on board the SS Earlston when it was sunk on July 5, 1942.

Ill-treatment

“On his return to Ireland at the end of the war, Knott contacted the British government to complain about the ill-treatment he and other Irishmen were subjected to in the Arbeitslager Bremen-Farge (German prisoner of war camp) from 1943-1945,” Mr Mulvany said.

On May 30, 1946, Knott, in a sworn affidavit submitted in evidence to the Bremen-Farge War Crimes Trial in Hamburg, stated: 'On May 17, 1942, I joined the SS Earlston as AB (Able Seaman) at Glasgow. On about May 27, 1942, we left Glasgow and arrived in Iceland on June 1. We left Iceland bound for Russia and on July 1 were attacked by enemy (German) aircraft and these attacks continued off and on until July 5, when our ship was sunk by bombs and torpedoes.'



War crimes charges on the treatment of Irish born merchant seamen captured on the Arctic Convoy route, submitted in the Bremen-Farge War Crimes trial 1943-45

He said the ship's skipper, Captain Stenwick, was taken on board one of four submarines, which surfaced close to the sinking ship. The rest of the crew were in one lifeboat, and after 10 days at sea, landed at North Cape, Norway.

They were soon captured and taken to a prison ship at Oslo and later to Aalborg, Denmark.

They were then taken to Marlag and Milag Prisoner of War camps arriving there by the end of August 1942 and their brutal treatment at the hands of the Germans is detailed in the War Crimes Files at the British National Archives in Kew, London.

Able Seaman Thomas Murphy was another who joined the cause:

Born in Dublin, he served on the SS Earlston, which was sunk by the Germans on July 5, 1942.

Murphy suffered from frostbitten legs and was treated in the German-administered Lazarette Hospital in Hammerfast, Norway until July 28.

“Two days later he departed Tromsø and boarded Lazaretteschiff (hospital ship) ‘Birka’ and arrived in Schleswig.

“He was later transferred to the adjacent Milag Nord Merchant Seamen’s Internment Camp. He died in Bremen on April 27, 1944, and is buried at Rheinberg Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery in Germany.”

Slave labour

Mr Mulvany pointed out that on January 27 1943, 32 Irish-born seamen were removed from Milag Nord (Merchant Seamen’s Internment Camp) by the Gestapo and taken to an aircraft factory in Bremen where attempts were made to persuade them to become free workers for the Nazi regime.

“The Irishmen refused to sign up and were moved to Hamburg where the Nazis tried again to persuade the Irishmen to work on German merchant ships. Again they refused,” Mr Mulvany added.

The refusal resulted in them being transferred to the Bremen-Farge Arbeitslager camp where they worked as slave labourers constructing a U-Boat bunker.



Headstones at Rheinberg Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery in Germany. Marking the resting place of some of the Irish seamen, including Able Seaman Thomas Murphy, that lost their lives after being captured on the Arctic Convoy routes to the USSR in WWII.

“By the end of the war five Irishmen had lost their lives as a result of ill-treatment at that camp, which included Able Seaman Thomas Murphy of the SS Earlston,” Mr Mulvany said.

Mr Mulvany decided following his many years of research to found the website <http://www.irishseamensrelativesassociation.ie>.

It is dedicated to many Irish-born merchant and military seaman who served all around the world.