

Boatswain Michal Pearson-Przepierczynski
(Mr Michael Pearson)
born 1907 in Zagorow, Poland; died 2000 in Portsmouth, England

Boatswain Michal Pearson-Przepierczynski was born in Zagorow on the 21st September 1907, the son of Jozef Przepierczynski and Michalina Przepierczynska (nee Nowinska).

After finishing school in Zagorow, he became an apprentice at Mr Szumanski's cabinet-making business. By learning a trade, he was able to play a part in re-building an independent Poland. In 1928 he broke the family ties and travelled to the Baltic coast.

He lived on Washington Street during the mad rush of development that was taking place in Gdynia. From his earliest years he had been interested in anything to do with the sea and with yachting. The sound of the sea aroused in him the hope of great adventure. Together with a friend, the young Michal built a yacht and - in spite of the unfavourable weather - the two set off on a mad journey, which ended in the boat capsizing and both of them taking an untimely bath in the Baltic sea. This inauspicious start did nothing to lessen his desire for maritime escapades, but instead his passion for the sea continued to grow.

In 1935 Michal Przepierczynski passed his Master Cabinet-Maker examination in Torun, and he found work at the Polish Naval Workshops in Gdynia. He worked there until the outbreak of the Second World War - 1st September 1939.

Together with others, he defended the city against Nazi aggression, up until the point when he realised it was hopeless. On the night of 13th September, he and Edward Skrzypek, Wladislaw Grabowski, Bruno Wygledacz and Jerzy Lewandowski take the yacht *Strzelec II* and, in the course of two and a half days, steer it to Sweden. After obtaining passports from the Polish Embassy, they are given passage on the Polish ship *Rozewie* which takes them to Great Britain and then to France, where the paths of the five daredevils part for good.

In 1940 Michal Przepierczynski begins service on the *ORP Garland* in his role of 'hydroacoustic' (an instructor in underwater detection). By now, he adds Pearson to his name, because his British colleagues find his Polish surname impossible to pronounce. In May 1941 he transfers to the *ORP Kujawiak*, sailing on the ill-fated convoy from Gibraltar to Malta (of the 13 merchant ships that set out, only 2 just about make it to their destination). His ship is sunk on the 16th June, around 10 nautical miles short of Malta. Boatswain Pearson is rescued from the sea after three hours in the water. He next serves on board the *ORP Slazak*, before ending the war as a sailor in the British Royal Navy.

He had hoped to return to Poland with his English wife, Monica, when the war ended. Unfortunately, news of the fate of his colleagues who had already returned was very disturbing. So when the time came, it was with a heavy heart that he decided to stay in Britain, where his daughter, Irena, by now had been born.

Fifty years after leaving, Boatswain Pearson-Przepierczynski decided to write a letter to Poland. Commander Wieslaw Grabowski, son of Wladyslaw Grabowski, remembers the events of 1990:

“One day in July of that year, I was summoned by my commander, Admiral Andrzej Waga, who handed me a letter from Boatswain Pearson-Przepierczynski, living in Great Britain, who after 51 years of absence from his fatherland wished to visit the Polish navy, and was also requesting the commander to present him with the medals that he had been awarded. To my amazement, and at the same time joy, I realised that this was the person who, with my father, had escaped from Gdynia by yacht. That is how Boatswain Przepierczynski and his British wife came to be guests of the Polish Navy.”

On 8th August 1990 on board the OM *Blyskawica*, the commander of the Polish navy presented Boatswain Michal Przepierczynski with his medals for *Defence of the Polish Nation in 1935, Victory and Freedom in 1945, and Service in the Polish Navy*.

Commander Wieslaw Grabowski recalls:

“It was like honey being poured onto my heart to see the tears in the eyes of his wife, who was watching with admiration as her modest husband was being honoured by high-ranking officers of the Polish navy.”

While in Poland in 1990, Boatswain Przepierczynski also visited Zagorow, where he was reunited with his relatives.

He died in Portsmouth in 2000, at the age of 93.

Translated by
SE Golunski
Portsmouth UK
25th December 2014