

Recent Royal Navy award: The Edward Leicester Atkinson prize

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Commentary

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Abstract

More than 100 years have now passed since Scott's *Terra Nova* expedition to the Antarctic, which was quickly followed by the First World War. Out of the events of those times emerges the name of Edward Leicester Atkinson, the Royal Navy Surgeon and Antarctic explorer who was a member of the scientific staff of Scott's expedition, and who went on to serve in the First World War. In his honour, the *Edward Leicester Atkinson Prize* will be awarded annually to a Royal Navy Medical Officer who displays the values of leadership and moral courage during the New Entry Medical Officer course, either at Britannia Royal Naval College or the Institute of Naval Medicine.

Following the publication of the biography of Edward Leicester Atkinson (Tarver, 2015), interest in his life and career has now been taken on board by the Royal Navy. Surgeon Vice Admiral Alasdair J. Walker (OBE QHS FRCS), Royal Navy Surgeon General, in consultation with the Worshipful Company of Barbers in the City of London, together with the Institute of Naval Medicine have created the *EDWARD LEICESTER ATKINSON PRIZE*. This is an annual award to be made to a Royal Navy Medical Officer who displays the values of leadership and moral courage during the New Entry Medical Officer course, either at Britannia Royal Naval College or the Institute of Naval Medicine.

The Prize is in honour of Surgeon Captain Edward Leicester Atkinson, the Royal Navy surgeon and Antarctic explorer who was a member of the scientific staff of Captain Scott's *Terra Nova* Expedition 1910–1913, and who went on to serve in the First World War. As a member of Scott's expedition, Lieutenant Atkinson was in the sixteen-man polar party that set off south for the South Pole. On his return to base, after reaching the polar plateau, he found himself as the senior naval officer in command for much of 1912 and a winter of crisis, when 11 members of the expedition failed to return to base. He led the search party that found the tent containing the bodies of Scott, Bowers and Wilson. Following his experiences in the Antarctic, he served in the Dardenelles during the First World War and on the Western Front, where he was wounded. Later, in a naval disaster in Dover Harbour, he saved the lives of five men. Throughout his service career, his values of leadership, compassion and moral courage shone brightly.

The Prize, consisting of a paperweight, along with a cash prize, is kindly donated by the Worshipful Company of Barbers, which has a long association with the Institute of Naval Medicine.

In 1920, Atkinson himself was the recipient of the *Chadwick Naval Prize*, an award for specially assisting in promoting the health of men in the Royal Navy. The award, the *Chadwick Gold Medal* and the sum of £100, was instituted by the Chadwick Trust created by the will and codicil of the late Sir Edwin Chadwick KCB (1800–1890). Chadwick was a social reformer and civil servant. He was a Commissioner of the Poor Law Enquiry, which enquired into the employment of children in factories. He published a report on the sanitary conditions of the labouring population and did much work in the areas of public health and sanitation.

The inaugural award of the *Edward Leicester Atkinson Prize* took place on Wednesday, 15 November 2017, at the Barber-Surgeons Hall, in the City of London. The Prize was awarded to Surgeon Lieutenant Andrew Loftus RN, 42 Commando, Royal Marines, based at Plymouth (Fig. 1). He was chosen from a total of 17 medical officers on the intake.

In the magnificent surroundings of Surgeons Hall, the Worshipful Company of Barbers hosted the ninth *Charles Bernard Lecture*. The Master, Anthony Hoskinson, welcomed the complement of Institute of Naval Medical personnel to this biennial event, which was inaugurated in 2001. The memorial lecture reiterates the special relationship between the Royal Navy and the Worshipful Company, being hosted alternately between each organisation's home venue.

To mark the 35th anniversary of the Falklands War, a number of senior naval medical officers were present, including Professor Jim Ryan and Surgeon Lieutenant Commander Jowan Penn-Barwell, who jointly presented the memorial lecture. Also present was Major



Fig. 1. Portrait photograph of Surgeon Lieutenant Andrew Loftus.

General Michael Ian Eldon Scott (CB CBE DSO), who in 1982 was the Commanding Officer of the 2nd Battalion, Scots Guards and who led the assault on Mount Tumbledown.

A brief summary of the lecture tells that in 1512 King Henry VIII appointed the Worshipful Company as the first regulatory body of the Royal Navy Medical Services. This requirement evolved and in 1649 a Royal Charter decreed that every Royal Navy ship sailing from British ports should carry a surgeon who had been examined and approved by the Court of the Assistants of the Company. Charles Bernard was elected to be an examiner of surgeons in 1700 and Master of the Company in 1703. An influential figure in the long history of the Company, amongst other achievements he successfully lobbied for the Sheriff of London to be dismissed for failing to provide sufficient bodies of executed criminals for dissection!

Recognition by the Royal Navy of the adventurous and distinguished service life of Surgeon Captain Edward Leicester Atkinson for his participation in the 'heroic age' of polar exploration, and afterwards during the First World War, serves as a splendid example to those entering the Royal Navy today, and will stand as a compliment to the life of a naval hero from times past.

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