

# Valour at Sea

## The Merchant Ships

As the war moved forward and allied ocean shipping was strained to the limits, a new policy for a government-owned merchant service had begun to take shape. Canadian shipyards and a rolling steel mill were built and building boomed. By the end of the war, 26 steamships were being built for Britain and 63 were ordered for the Canadian government. These Canadian ships were to form our first national flag fleet, the Canadian Government Merchant Marine (CGMM). It would be operated by the newly formed Canadian National Railway.

As the first annual report of the CGMM explained in 1918, these ships were “intended primarily to cooperate with British shipping in supplying the necessities of war, and in times of peace to provide the means of carrying abroad the products of Canada’s farms, forests, mines and factories, without which Canada could not hope to take full advantage of the opportunity of expanding her export trade.”<sup>6</sup>

However, since the contract for the first ship was placed only in March 1918, no ships were delivered until after Armistice and the end of the war. That meant the fleet of ships played no part in the war.

Their peacetime role was limited too. Designed as general purpose cargo ships, they included a mixture of design variations and fully half fell below 5,100 tonnes dead weight (dwt).<sup>7</sup> They were also slow and coal-fired, and few could carry passengers. They were not economical and one by one were sold or scrapped. Since no government merchant service policy emerged, they were not replaced.

There was one notable exception. In 1920, the Canadian government sponsored a steamship service for passengers and cargo between Canada and the West Indies. Initially CGMM ships were used, but they proved unsatisfactory and five new combination passenger/cargo liners were ordered. Built in Britain, these white ships became famous as the “Lady Boats” (they had been named after the wives of famous British admirals) and, in 1928, the Canadian National (West Indies) Steamships Limited was formed to operate them.

Over the next decade, the Canadian Government Merchant Marine dwindled away, and foreign-flagged ships took over our country’s huge overseas trade and passenger traffic.

# Valour at Sea

## The Second World War

The Second World War began at dawn on September 1, 1939, as the German armies swept into Poland. On September 3, Britain and France declared war. Canada followed on September 10. Canadian coastal defences were quickly manned, militia regiments intensified preparations, and volunteers flocked to enlist. In December, units of the 1st Canadian Infantry Division sailed for Britain; hundreds of thousands more Canadians would follow.

In Europe, after Germany's swift defeat of Poland, a strange lull set in on the Western Front. This period of apparent inactivity from October 1939 to April 1940 became known as the "Phony War."

There was no such lull in the war at sea. It proved all too real from day one, when a German U-boat sank the unarmed British liner *Athenia* on September 3, 1939, on her westward passage to Montréal.

The sea lanes of the world, especially those of the North Atlantic, were a grim battleground. Navigation was hazardous, and sailors in the navy and merchant navy died not only from enemy attack, but from exposure and accidents in the fog and winter gales.

Before the war, it was assumed that even if the Germans again resorted to unrestricted submarine warfare, this threat could be met with comparative ease using new technology combined with convoy and air support. Unfortunately, there were too few naval vessels and maritime patrol aircraft available, as well as a severe lack of both training and technical modernization. There was also the determination and skill of Admiral Karl Dönitz and his German U-boat force.

Once again, the outcome of the war depended on the successful flow of trade: on men, munitions and supplies being carried in converted passenger ships and freighters to and from the ports of North America, Europe, Asia, Africa, South America, Australia/New Zealand and the Far East. This seaborne trade was vital, and it was dreadfully vulnerable.

The lessons of the First World War had not been forgotten, however, and one important element was fortunately in place. The convoy system, encompassing the whole complex business of ship movement and convoy organization, was planned and could be implemented quickly if needed. It was.

A week before war was declared, all merchant shipping was put on war alert and brought under naval control. Shipping on the more important and vulnerable routes was placed in convoy. Halifax was selected as the main assembly point for heavy traffic bound from North America to the United Kingdom.

On September 16, 1939, 18 merchant ships of Convoy HX-1 set out for Britain, closely guarded by HM cruisers *Berwick* and *York* and by the Canadian destroyers *St. Laurent* and *Saguenay* until the convoy was safely clear of the coastal area. Overhead Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) flying boats circled until the convoy moved beyond aircraft range. The convoy then proceeded unescorted until it reached the southwest corner of Ireland where the Royal Navy joined to bring it through the area of greatest danger. Soon, two convoys a week were sailing from Halifax. By the end of 1939, 410 ships in 14 convoys from Halifax had crossed the Atlantic with only three losses. One ship was sunk by a U-boat while in convoy, and the other two were destroyed by mines after their convoys had dispersed.

At first, ships had to be capable of speeds greater than nine knots to sail in the convoys. But as the crisis deepened many old vessels were pressed into service, which meant that the speed of the convoy had to be reduced to prevent these old ships from becoming stragglers – prime targets for U-boats. In August 1940, slow convoys were established and Sydney, Cape Breton, became their assembly port. Armed ships doing 15 knots or more were sailed and routed independently.

North Atlantic convoys sailed in both directions across thousands of kilometres<sup>8</sup> of open and dangerous ocean. A typical convoy of 40 ships might be 10 columns wide with four ships in each column. It would be headed by a flagship, carrying the convoy commodore and, ideally, escorted by warships patrolling its outer flanks. Ammunition ships and tankers, with their highly volatile aviation fuel, were on the inside.

Merchant ships often had deck guns mounted on the stern for defence against surfaced U-boats and aircraft. Later they were given naval gunners or navy/army-trained merchant crews to man the weapons. While they had some defense against German U-boats and aircraft, they were no match for armed German merchant ships. Even the smallest German merchant raider could fire accurate broadsides from more than 10 kilometres – far out of range of the smaller guns of our merchant ships. Also, few cargo vessels could outrun a raider capable of 18 knots.<sup>9</sup>

The convoy system was fraught with difficulties: the presence of mines; the possibility of submarine, surface, or air attack; the risk of collision on sea lanes or approaches crowded with blacked-out, silent ships; and the usual hazards of weather, ice and shoals. The routes had to be carefully planned to avoid danger while meeting tight shipping deadlines.

Protecting the convoy system would be the most essential job the Allied navies would have until the war was won. Week after week, right through to the end of the war, the convoys sailed.

## The Merchant Fleet

In 1939, Canada had only 38 ocean-going merchant ships, each averaging a little more than 6,000 tonnes dwt, with a total of about 290,000 tonnes cargo capacity and manned by approximately 1,450 Canadian seamen. They included 11 vessels – cargo ships and “Lady Boats” – of the Canadian National Steamships Company and 10 tankers of Imperial Oil Limited. Following the outbreak of the war, captured enemy ships and ships of occupied nations were added to the roster.

*The importance of the Canadian Merchant Navy as a lifeline to Britain was major. It has been estimated that a Canadian merchant ship of 10,000 tonnes dwt could carry enough foodstuffs to feed 225,000 people for a week. Cargo could also include clothing, fuel, steel, aluminum, lumber, aircraft, tanks, jeeps, trucks, guns, munitions, and whatever else was required for the war effort. Not surprisingly, merchant ships became prized targets for enemy surface raiders and U-boats.<sup>10</sup>*

There was also a large Canadian Great Lakes fleet. It comprised many ships of 6,000 tonnes dwt or less, including the “canallers” – so called because they were small enough to navigate the pre-St. Lawrence Seaway lock system. In the desperate wartime situation, even they became ocean-going vessels. In all, 133 lakers were transferred from inland waterways to ocean convoy duties. The first 25 crossed the Atlantic in the spring of 1940 to shore-up the hard-hit British coastal fleet. A half-dozen took part in the evacuation of Dunkirk, France, as the German Forces overran France. Only nine of these first 25 survived the war. Other lakers carried bauxite ore from South America to Canada’s aluminum smelters.

Many Canadian seamen sailed aboard ships of foreign registry. For example, 14 Standard Oil tankers under Panamanian registry were managed by Imperial Oil Limited and manned by Canadian or British officers and crews supplied by this Canadian company.

On June 15, 1940, off Land’s End, England, the *Erik Boye*<sup>11</sup> was torpedoed by *U-38* and became the very first Canadian-flagged merchant ship to go down as a casualty of the Battle of the Atlantic. It would not be the last.

As the war continued, Canada’s Merchant Navy was supplemented by new ships pouring from our revitalized shipyards, but it was this early vanguard fleet of Canadian flag and Canadian-managed foreign flag ships that suffered the worst of the losses. In fact, it is estimated that 88 per cent of the casualties suffered by Canadian merchant seamen occurred by the end of 1942.

The merchant fleet was engaged from day one and soon suffered grievous losses in ships and men. By the end of the war as many as 72 Canadian merchant ships would be lost to enemy action – torpedoed, bombed, mined or shelled. Storms at sea, operational accidents and structural shortcomings also took their toll. For example, the *Hamildoc*, a small Great Lakes freighter that was built only for operation in the sheltered waters of the Great Lakes, floundered in heavy seas in the Caribbean in January 1943.<sup>12</sup>

## The Merchant Crews

“The Battle of the Atlantic was not won by any Navy or Air Force, it was won by the courage, fortitude and determination of the British and Allied Merchant Navy.” said Rear Admiral Leonard Murray, Commander-in-Chief Canadian Northwest Atlantic.<sup>13</sup>

*In Halifax, where the major convoys were assembled, the cost was counted in more than tonnage. The toll in human life was mounting steadily, and the harbour city knew only too well the harsh realities of such casualty figures. Seamen whose vessels were hit hard had only a 50 per cent chance of survival. Death by explosion or fire or scalding steam, or by drowning in the malevolent grey waters as a ship was sucked under – all were horrific enough. Harshest of all, floundering men from fatally hit vessels frequently had to be left behind so as not to make sitting ducks of the ships still under way. Drowning sailors had to be abandoned to the cold Atlantic so that the greater number would survive. The harbour was a daily witness to this grim war at sea. Stricken vessels limped back to port, their open wounds slicking the sea with oil. Men who had seen the battle told their appalling stories, while the pace of activity in the shipyards and recruiting stations took on ever-greater urgency.<sup>14</sup>*

The outcome of the war depended on those embattled, rust-streaked ships sailing through the long, bitter years. The merchant seamen who sailed them were true heroes. They hung on and stuck it out during the dark days when they were subjected to fierce attacks against which there was only the lightest defence.

The merchant crews – men of every nationality, thousands of them with homes in enemy-occupied Europe – sailed back and forth across hostile seas facing the prospect of death by freezing water or flaming oil. They had no uniforms or recognition and were poorly paid. Freedom was gone, too, for the ships had to be sailed and these men had to sail them. They sometimes sailed in rusty old tramps, but just as often in highly-flammable tankers or in freighters loaded with ammunition and other dangerous cargoes. With each voyage the odds of survival seemed to grow longer. Still, voyage after voyage, men who had been torpedoed or who had seen ships go down about them sailed and sailed again.

Canadian merchant seamen not only plied the North Atlantic route – they sailed the oceans of the world. They carried their cargoes to and from the ports of Europe, Asia, Africa, South America, Australia/New Zealand and the Far East. They carried foodstuffs and ammunition, clothing and steel, oil and aircraft – whatever was required for the war effort. After Hitler invaded Russia, they sailed the deadly Murmansk Run to northern Russia.

## April 1940 - The "Phony War" Ends

In April 1940, the “Phony War” came to a sudden end when Germany seized Denmark and launched an invasion of Norway. In less than two months the Germans had conquered Denmark and Norway and isolated Sweden.

On May 10, Germany launched its *blitzkrieg* campaigns against the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Belgium and France. With German troops pressing from all sides, the Allied troops in Europe were forced to the English Channel at Dunkirk, France, with the sea as the only hope of escape. Between May 27 and June 4, almost 350,000 men were evacuated across the Channel to England in every kind of vessel that would float, from freighters to fishing boats. On June 22, 1940, France surrendered and Great Britain stood alone against a formidable enemy.

From North Cape, Norway, to the Pyrenees mountain range between France and Spain, stretched a vast arc of coastline from which enemy submarines, surface ships and aircraft threatened Britain's maritime lifelines. In the air, the German air force outnumbered the British three to one.

Now Hitler prepared to launch a seaborne assault against Britain, known as "Operation Sea Lion." Britain was encircled, its army in tatters with its equipment left behind, its fleet hard-hit and stretched too thin.

All Britain prepared for invasion as the German air force, the *Luftwaffe*, flew wave after wave to destroy the Royal Air Force. But Britain's Spitfire and Hurricane pilots held their own, and the Nazi air force faltered from heavy losses. Hitler could not command those 30 kilometres of intervening sea. The invasion was called off.

Britain, however, remained under siege. London and the Channel ports were bombed unmercifully, and the U-boats, with their new long-range capability and their new bases in France, redoubled their efforts to starve the enemy. They attacked convoys and independently-routed ships almost at will. The U-boats, averaging eight on each of the shipping routes, picked off independents and stragglers and made daring single-handed attacks on convoys. The young U-boat commanders, the German elite, competed with each other for tonnage sunk. They were aided by long-range aircraft, the Kondors, which helped to locate and attack the merchant ships. German naval commanders later referred to the summer and fall of 1940 as "the happy time."

In September 1940, for the first time, U-boats began using the so-called "wolf-pack" tactics.<sup>15</sup> At night, groups of U-boats (often six or more) attacked convoys sailing from North America to Britain. A group would position itself across the expected route of a convoy. When a U-boat sighted a convoy it reported and shadowed it while the others moved in ahead. Then they simply swamped the defence, picking their own opportunities to hone in and attack again until their torpedoes were spent. The results were calamitous. As many as 20 per cent of a convoy's heavily-laden ships were sunk.

Meanwhile, the blitz on London went on night after night to shatter its enormous port. The English Channel was closed to shipping after the fall of France and by October, Atlantic convoys were re-routed to the Bristol Channel or north of Ireland to Liverpool and the Clyde Scotland. Some ships were also sent north of Scotland to the east coast of Britain.

It was a fierce fall and winter. Ships carrying cargoes of food and war supplies were being sunk at an alarming rate.

## **Expanding the Merchant Fleet**

The shipping losses were staggering and, with British shipyards heavily committed to demanding naval construction, Britain could not produce new merchant ships at the pace needed to replace those being lost.

It was at this point in the war that Britain turned to the shipyards of the United States and Canada. In October 1940, a British shipbuilding mission came to explore the possibility of replacement tonnage being supplied by North American shipbuilders.

At the start of the war, Canada's shipbuilding capacity had once again become extremely limited. The once-thriving shipyards had been reduced largely to repair work for the tiny fleet of Canadian merchant ships. Although Canadian yards were beginning to expand with orders for convoy escorts and other naval vessels, in all of Canada there were still only four shipyards capable of constructing the large cargo ships required for the Atlantic run.

In the face of the now urgent need, Canada embarked on a massive shipbuilding program. But before these ships could come off the assembly lines, the Atlantic war grew even more desperate.

## **1941 – The War Intensifies**

As the spring of 1941 approached, the enemy stepped up the scale of attack, and shipping losses reached grave proportions. In June alone, more than 454,000 tonnes dwt of shipping, and consequently many merchant seamen, were lost to U-boats.

To counteract this menace, new types of ships were constructed and scientists worked desperately to design new methods of locating and destroying submarines. Canada's navy was augmented by several new types of vessels, of which the corvette was perhaps the most famous.

As enemy U-boats began to probe farther west, the British countered by establishing new bases for ships and aircraft in Iceland and Newfoundland. The Newfoundland bases were made a Canadian responsibility (even though Newfoundland was still a British colony and did not become part of Canada until 1949). By July, the Newfoundland Escort Force, under the command of Leonard Murray, RCN, was escorting convoys as far as 35 degrees west longitude, known as the "Mid-Ocean Meeting Points."

Royal Air Force Coastal Command and RCAF aircraft, flying from both sides of the Atlantic and from Iceland, provided protection for several hundred kilometres offshore.

But the aircraft available at that stage of the war were still unable to cover a vast area in the middle, which became known as the “Black Pit.”

The fate of a slow convoy sailing from Sydney on August 31, 1941, shows us the dangers of the North Atlantic run. Convoy SC-42 was a large one: 62 merchant ships sailed from Cape Breton, and another five linked up from Newfoundland. In 12 columns of five or six ships each, the convoy covered an area of about 54 square kilometres. With a huge perimeter to protect, its escort – comprising only four warships, the Canadian destroyer *Skeena* and three corvettes — faced a seemingly impossible task. Then, just a few days out, it ran into a gale that raged for four days. It brought the convoy to all but a standstill, and forced three merchant ships to drop out.

Late on September 7, as the storm eased, *Skeena* signalled that the convoy was three days behind schedule. Now came even worse news. SC-42 was heading into a concentration of U-boats that was moving westward toward southern Greenland. The British Admiralty, having picked up indications of the U-boat activity, routed most convoys to the south of the German search areas. But because of the long delay in the storm, SC-42 did not have the fuel for such a long detour. It was, therefore, ordered almost due north in an attempt to do an Arctic end run around the submarines. It almost worked, but not far off Cape Farewell, Greenland, it was spotted by a U-boat. The convoy was a prize target – big and slow moving, with only four escorts and no air cover – and Admiral Dönitz hurled the full force of his wolf pack (14 U-boats) against the convoy.

On September 10, at 46 minutes after midnight, SS *Muneric*, the fourth ship in the first column was torpedoed and sunk with all men on board. This was only the beginning. The outnumbered escort (although aided by the arrival of two more Canadian corvettes) was forced to divide its attention between the work of rescuing survivors and fighting off the U-boats. The vicious battle continued for two nights before the arrival of the British escort group.<sup>16</sup>

A total of 15 merchant ships, nearly a quarter of the convoy, were torpedoed in only 48 hours. Only one of them, the tanker *Tahchee*, was saved. The ships went down with 40,000 tonnes or more of cargo, including more than a thousand truckloads of wheat, an equally large quantity of explosives and the chemicals required to manufacture explosives, enough timber to build barracks for several thousand troops, and enough steel and high-grade iron ore to build several destroyers.

Worst of all was the loss of more than 160 merchant seamen, most of them in the iron-ore laden *Muneric* and the explosives-filled *Empire Crossbill*; the cargoes had doomed the entire crews of both vessels. Only two of the other ships suffered substantial loss of life, 10 men or more, thanks to the courageous rescue efforts of the other merchant ships and the corvettes.<sup>17</sup>

Important lessons were learned from what became known as the “Battle of Cape Farewell.” First, stronger escorts, particularly long-range aircraft, were required for North



Atlantic convoys, because even though the escorts showed initiative and courage throughout, they were badly outnumbered and the crews became exhausted. Second, more emphasis had to be placed on group training and improved technology. Also, specially equipped rescue ships fitted for swift recovery of men from the water needed to be assigned to the convoys.

## **North American Waters Under Siege**

Although it was still officially neutral, the United States became increasingly involved in the Battle of the Atlantic. In September 1941, Canadian naval forces came under American “co-coordinating supervision.” The British Commander-in-Chief for North American waters, based in England, was replaced by an American commander located in Argentia, Newfoundland.

However, when the United States officially entered the war in December 1941, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, many of the American ships were withdrawn from the North Atlantic to meet expanding US commitments elsewhere. Unfortunately, this weakened the Atlantic anti-submarine defences. The Canadian destroyers and corvettes remaining in Newfoundland were faced with almost impossible demands on their services.

As winter storms began to batter the convoys, marine casualties from causes other than enemy action also rose steadily. Still routed north toward Greenland, the convoys made two-thirds of their voyage in icy arctic darkness. As ships ploughed on, ice and sleet coated them from stem to stern. Every sailor knew that if his ship were sunk his chances of survival were slim at best. The freezing cold of that black water would kill him in five minutes. There were few rescue ships specially fitted for taking on survivors and caring for them, and life-saving equipment in all of the ships was still inadequate for the conditions.

In January 1942, the Battle of the Atlantic shifted to the Canadian and American seaboards and the West Indies, where Admiral Dönitz suspected shipping would be poorly protected. The Canadian Navy immediately began to sail, shipping in defended groups. Often the only protection available was a single armed yacht, but it worked. Then the U-boats moved their main offensive to the American coast and the Caribbean where ships were still sailing alone, not required by the US Navy to travel in convoy groups.

But it was not just when sailing that the merchant ships were attacked. In September 1942, the SS *Cornwallis* was torpedoed while in Carlyle Bay, Barbados. It was refloated, towed to Memphis for repairs and then, on its trip to Halifax in December 1944, was sunk by a U-boat inside the American 12-mile limit off the New England coast. There were only five survivors.

It became another “happy time” for U-boat commanders, as the U-boats wreaked havoc along the American coastline. Night after night, submarines rose to the surface and picked off merchant ships at will, many of them silhouetted against the undimmed lights

of the shoreline. From January to July 1942, nearly 400 ships were sunk, with only seven U-boats lost. The US Naval authorities, realizing the costly error, gradually built up a convoy system along the eastern seaboard. However, with the shortage of American escorts, Canada's small and already overburdened naval fleet was now called upon to help protect southward-bound shipping.

Canadian escort groups on the Triangle Run shuttled convoys from New York or Boston to Halifax and St. John's, where mid-ocean escorts took over for the run to Britain. Canadians were also called on to protect vital tanker traffic to and from the Caribbean. This tanker traffic supplied the bulk of petroleum products for Canada's civilian and military use.

### The Battle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence

Back in Canada, the U-boat war took on a more immediate urgency. While the RCN and RCAF had been able to limit losses off Nova Scotia and Newfoundland during the first half of 1942, there was still a very large vulnerable area: the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The huge commitments on the ocean shipping routes left very few aircraft and almost no warships to defend the Gulf.

On the night of May 11, just 13 kilometres off the Gaspé Peninsula, a 5,000 tonne dwt freighter was torpedoed. Within hours a second freighter was hit. Suddenly, the war was right at home. The fire and glare from the explosion were clearly visible from land as exhausted survivors from the first ship, the *Nicoya*, a British banana boat now carrying war supplies, were brought to shore. Six men were lost. The crew of the second ship, a Dutch freighter called the *Leto* that was chartered to the British Ministry of War Transport, was picked up by passing ships. Some were clinging to small rafts and wreckage because there had been time to launch only one small boat. A dozen seamen were lost.

Once again the navy organized convoys and the air force kept as many aircraft overhead as they could, but the U-boats continued to take their toll. The crowded shipping routes in the gulf and river, the many deep-water hiding places for U-boats, and the problems of underwater detection equipment in the complex waters seemed to make defence methods ineffective. By early October, seven U-boats had sunk 19 merchant ships and two naval escorts in the St. Lawrence. One of the victims was a 16-year old galley boy from Verdun, Quebec, on his first ship, the SS *Carolus*, which was sunk on October 9, 1942.

Then on October 14, the ferry *Caribou*, which for years had carried passengers between Sydney and Port-aux-Basques, Newfoundland, was sunk, virtually in the middle of Cabot Strait, 64 kilometres short of its Newfoundland destination. Of the 237 people on board, 136 perished.

*The ferry had gone down so quickly that only one lifeboat could be properly launched. A total of 237 people had sailed in Caribou: 73 civilians, 46 crew and 118 Canadian and*

*American military personnel. Only 101 survived. Half of the military personnel and two thirds of the civilians, including at least five mothers and 10 children, were lost. All but 15 of the crew died, which shows the heroic efforts they made to get disoriented passengers clear of the plunging hull. Captain Ben Taverner, two of his sons and five other pairs of brothers were among the crew members lost, ripping the heart out of many families in Port-aux-Basques and Channel, the towns in southwest Newfoundland for whom the ferries had long been a business and way of life.<sup>18</sup>*

Faced with the possibility of many U-boat attacks within sight of land, the government closed the gulf and river to overseas shipping in 1942. It remained until 1944. Only small coastal convoys and warships were allowed in or out.

The loss of access to the port of Montréal significantly hampered shipping from Canada. Not only were such important manufacturers as the Montréal Locomotive Works (which built tanks) located in that city, but it was well served by rail from throughout the Ontario/Quebec industrial corridor. Moreover, the port was the best in Canada in terms of facilities and skilled and abundant labour force, and a ship sailing from Montréal at 10 knots was half a day closer to Liverpool than the same ship sailing from New York.

The result was that the amount of cargo shipped out of Canada fell by more than 25 per cent. This amounted to a victory for the U-boats won at virtually no cost to Germany.

## **The Grimmiest Period**

The struggle entered its grimmest phase in the fall of 1942. As Dönitz scaled back the offensive in Canadian and US waters because of improved defences there, he concentrated large numbers of submarines in the mid-Atlantic. Despite bombing raids on German construction yards and bases, the U-boat force increased. Now, with nearly 300 submarines available – more than 10 times as many as at the outbreak of war – Dönitz was able to send 20 or more against a single convoy.

At first the Canadian escort groups held their own, but as the size of the wolf packs increased and winter storms swept the Atlantic, several convoys escorted by the RCN suffered heavy losses. In November alone, 119 Allied ships were lost.

Our country's navy was expanding rapidly, but it was still too small and lacked the latest weapons and advanced training programs necessary for the enormous commitments. The RCAF's Eastern Air Command did its best to help the beleaguered convoys, pushing its aircrew and aircraft to the limits. It did not, however, have the latest "very long-range" aircraft needed to reach the Black Pit, which harboured packs of U-boats ready to attack.

The Battle of the Atlantic reached its climax in March 1943; in that month the U-boats sent 108 Allied ships – 569,000 tonnes of vital shipping – to the bottom. These figures were lower than in November 1942, but what was most disturbing was that 85 of the ships lost had been in convoy or straggling and most had been sunk in the North Atlantic.

The only glimmer of hope lay in the success the air and naval escorts had, sinking 16 U-boats.

In March, worried senior officers of the British, Canadian and American navies met in Washington for the Atlantic Convoy Conference. One important result of this meeting was that Britain and Canada were placed in complete charge of trade convoys on the northern routes. Rear-Admiral Murray was appointed Commander-in-Chief Canadian Northwest Atlantic, replacing the United States command.

## **The Tide Turns**

Fortunately, the desperate holding actions of the merchantmen bought time for an adequate military buildup. In April and May 1943, the tide finally began to turn as the Allied counter-measures started to come together. A number of factors combined to defeat the U-boat menace. There were now more escorts ships with better trained and more experienced crews, and fitted with improved equipment. Support Groups were formed to come to the aid of a threatened convoy. They consisted of fast ships which, instead of being tied to one convoy, could sail rapidly to any spot to intercept attackers before they could close in on the convoy. They were particularly effective when they included the aircraft carriers converted from merchant ships. Also, the British innovation of small flight decks on merchant ships, equipped with three or four aircraft that flew off as needed, provided additional defence for the convoys. Furthermore, British Intelligence had broken the top secret German code that gave advance information to U-boat commanders.

Most important, the dreaded Black Pit was closed by Liberator bombers, which now provided long-range aerial surveillance. The combination of these powerful new forces was too much for the U-boats, and in May, no less than 41 of them failed to return to their bases.

During June, July and August the destruction of merchant ships markedly declined. Anti-submarine air and sea forces were now on the offensive, forcing the Germans to abandon their wolf-pack tactics that had been so successful earlier in the war.

The turn of the tide in Allied favour did not, however, spell the end of the war at sea. The Battle of the Atlantic still had two long years to run. At times, notably in the fall of 1943 and in 1944, Allied losses increased dramatically. U-boats with new equipment threatened to swing the balance back to the submarines. For example, the schnorkel, a breathing device which enabled the submarines to operate continuously underwater, allowed them to hover close to the entrances to Canadian and British ports.

By March 1945, the German navy had 463 U-boats on patrol, compared to 27 in 1939. They continued to wreak havoc up to the last weeks of the war. Although the U-boats were unable to regain the initiative after May 1943, they had significant successes. A stealthy schnorkel U-boat sank the minesweeper HMCS *Esquimalt* just off the entrance to

Halifax harbour on April 16, 1945. The last Allied ship lost during the war was the merchant ship, *Avondale Park*, torpedoed on May 7, 1945.

## **Meeting the Need**

The number of ships that poured from Canada's shipyards during the Second World War was extraordinary. In fact, it was described by an official of the British Ministry of War Transport as "remarkable, astonishing and magnificent." From the first delivery in December 1941 to shortly after war's end in 1945, Canada produced three hundred and fifty-four (354) 10,000 tonne dwt cargo ships; forty-three (43) 4,700 tonne dwt cargo ships; and six (6) 3,600 tonne dwt cargo ships. They also turned out astonishing numbers of naval vessels: 281 escort ships (destroyers, corvettes, frigates), 206 minesweepers, 254 tugs and 3,302 landing craft.

The achievement is particularly impressive considering that in 1940 there were just four Canadian shipyards with a total of nine berths capable of handling ships of the 10,000 tonne dwt category. By the end of 1943 – at the peak of production – the number of berths engaged in 10,000 tonne dwt construction had grown to 38, operated by ten yards.

Canada-wide, the delivery rate by mid-1943 averaged three per week for 10,000 tonne dwt ships, and when the smaller ships were factored in, the average rose to almost 3.5 merchant ships per week, or one every two days.

This achievement by the Allied shipyards was an important reason for the turn of the tide in the Battle of the Atlantic. By mid-1943 it was clear that, no matter how many merchant ships German U-boats could still send to the bottom, sinkings would no longer outpace the production of new ships.

Equally impressive was the expansion of Canada's shipbuilding industry. From an estimated 2,000 skilled workers engaged primarily in repair work, the workforce grew to 85,000 men and women, 57,000 employed in building or repairing merchant ships with the remainder in naval construction. There was also the large volume of routine and emergency repairs needed to keep this large fleet and those of its Allies at sea.

Canada's shipbuilding industry resulted in a spin-off effect to other businesses as manufacturers were needed to supply component parts – from rivets to engines. Eventually, more than 300 Canadian firms were involved in the program.

The need for shipbuilding was a significant factor in Canada's remarkable industrial transformation during the war.

## **The Park Ships**

Two main types of cargo ships were produced under the Canadian program: those ships built for Britain and named mainly after Canadian forts, and those constructed for Canada

and the Commonwealth and named after federal, provincial and municipal parks. They followed the British designed “North Sands” ships which made them easier to repair; however most, were coal burners rather than oil which later made them a liability. Some of the “Park ships”, as they became known, were built as tankers.

The Park ships began arriving in 1942 and quickly dominated the wartime merchant fleet. Altogether, 176 of these ships hoisted the Park flag at one time or another. The Parks were registered in Canada and operated by the Park Steamship Company, a Crown Corporation that was incorporated on April 8, 1942. On June 30, it took delivery of the *Prince Albert Park*, the first of five 10,000 tonne dwt ships it would receive from Canadian shipyards by the end of that year.

These five were followed by 50 new Park Ships in 1943. In 1944, Park deliveries from the booming Canadian yards accelerated rapidly, reaching 94 – incredibly almost two per week. 1945 brought the surrender of Germany early in May followed by that of Japan in August. With the ending of war, most contracts were cancelled, but another twenty-seven (27) 10,000 and 4,700 tonne dwt dry cargo ships were delivered before the end of the year.

The Park Steamship Company contracted the operation of the ships to private steamship companies and shipping agents, who assumed responsibility for the care of the ships, furnishing the crews, payment of all expenses and collection of revenues. Government wartime authorities determined how the ships were used and where they would sail, and influenced working and living conditions on ship.

On July 6, 1943, the *Jasper Park* was the first Park Ship lost to enemy action when it was torpedoed and sunk in the Indian Ocean. Four of the crew lost their lives. Another three Parks were lost to enemy action – all in 1945. The *Point Pleasant Park* was torpedoed northwest of Cape Town, South Africa, on February 23 with nine lives lost. The *Tabor Park* was sunk while in coastal convoy in the North Sea on March 13 and the *Avondale Park*, with a British crew, went down on May 7. Two others, the freighter *Green Hill Park* and the *Silver Star Park*, were destroyed by marine accidents.

## **Manning the Ships**

Merchant ships were now being produced at an unprecedented rate. But finding the men to take them to sea was not easy.

*Only those who have known both can appreciate the true differences of ocean life in peace and war. A death in battle is not the worst way of going; it's often a swift end, the soul ready. But there's no zest for combat when the sailor, trained to cope with hurricane or iceberg, with reef or traffic or fire, must endure his ship's crawling on imposed course in a drab huddle of strangers. All the while there is the suspense of waiting to see which vessel will be the next to burst into flame or a soaring cloud of debris, leaving a gap in the ranks of floating steel. In convoy the active searover must bind himself on voiceless,*

*lightless, crowded passage to strange secret points. He must bear as trained passivity, week after week, entirely dependent on the competence of a thin escort.*<sup>19</sup>

In the first two years of the war Allied Merchant Navy casualties were disastrous, reaching more than 25,000, most of whom were British. The hoped-for assistance from British crews was simply not available, and the Royal Canadian Navy had already recruited almost every civilian with any seafaring experience, including many of the licensed deck, engine room and radio officers. As well, the army, the air force and the expanding armaments manufacturing industry were competing for any available able-bodied men. As the Canadian fleet expanded, the critical shortage of senior officers was offset in part by many British officers who volunteered to join the Canadian Merchant Navy.

Somehow, approximately 12,000 deep sea merchant seamen were found by war's end. Some were too young to be soldiers, but at age 15 or 16 (some even younger) they joined the merchant ships as seamen or apprentice officers. There were others who were too old for the armed services; men in their forties were common in the merchant navy and occasionally a 70-year-old master, mate or bosun would appear on a Park ship bridge or deck.

In between these extremes of youth and age were the thousands who might be within the age limits for service enlistment but had been rejected for some minor physical shortcoming, or had served and been discharged for various reasons. There were also many who saw the merchant navy as their preferred way to serve.

Ensuring that the merchant ships were fully crewed and sailed without unnecessary delays was a formidable task. The life of merchant seamen was miserable and hazardous, and the chances of survival from a torpedoed and sinking ship were small. During the early years of the war it was necessary to press into service many very old and unsuitable ships that had been laid-up or sent to the breakers yard. The living conditions on these ancient ships were deplorable.

Morale was cracking under the cumulative effects of mounting shipping losses, German successes in war and propaganda, the occupation of the homelands of many of the seamen, and the oppressions of ship-board life. It was all too clear that something was needed to strengthen this crumbling morale. A number of measures were introduced to overcome this serious difficulty and to ensure a degree of control over merchant seamen.

One of these measures was unofficial and came about as a result of the Admiralty's warning that explosives could be planted in ships by enemy agents. To prevent enemy sabotage, the Naval Control Service in Halifax organized the Naval Boarding Service consisting of boarding parties of naval officers and ratings to inspect all shipping destined for the United Kingdom. These boarding parties also inspected to ensure that a ship was in all respects ready for sea. "This meant it must be seaworthy in hull, engines, guns (if supplied), lifeboats and in the minds and hearts of its crew. Battleworthy, in short, and tallied as such by the Naval Boarding Service."<sup>20</sup>

These contacts also offered an unusual opportunity to solve some of the crew problems as well. The navy staff selected to carry out this task were sensitive to human factors and many had pre-war merchant service. During their ship searches they began to hear the complaints and genuine concerns of the merchant seamen. They were able to solve many problems on the spot, and brought the more serious ones to the attention of those in authority. They also helped coordinate volunteer groups led by the Navy League and the Red Cross, which worked to provide decent accommodation ashore between voyages, recreation, and additional comforts to make life afloat less grim. As well, a Merchant Seamen's Club was built in Halifax. These developments helped contribute to the atmosphere of goodwill especially for visiting ships. Most important, members of the boarding parties listened and they helped to give the seafarers a sense of purpose and meaning. They realized that, "if a demoralized sailor realizes he is the hope of millions of people, if someone lets him know by tone or gesture that his work, his sacrifice, is known, then he cannot, but choose to sail again."<sup>21</sup>

The achievements were impressive and helped avert more serious situations. Similar parties were established at Sydney; Montréal; and Saint John, New Brunswick. They later extended to St. John's; Québec; Victoria; Vancouver; and Prince Rupert, British Columbia. In fact, their achievement prompted Britain's Admiralty to adopt some of the same methods in an effort to solve similar crew problems.

In 1941 other major reforms were instituted. A 'Director of Merchant Seamen' was appointed and made responsible for the welfare of the seamen and overseeing their needs. He moved quickly to set up manning pools and training schools. Manning pools, originally set up to provide a ready reserve of seamen to replace crew shortages, were established, first in Montréal, then in Vancouver, Halifax, Sydney and Saint John. Under this system, when a seaman joined the manning pool he was assured of food, lodging and pay while ashore between ships. In exchange, he was required to accept whatever ship he was assigned to, when his name was posted.

Merchant Seaman Order<sup>22</sup> provided that the Naval Boarding Service Officer, with a Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer could remove and detain for up to nine months any crew member they believed might delay a ship's sailing. This Order also applied to masters and officers.

Since so many of the new recruits had never been to sea, a training program was needed. The Canadian government set up training centres where new volunteers were given basic training as unlicensed deck and engine room personnel, and advanced training was provided for navigating, engine room and radio officers, and for ships' cooks.

Two key programs for unlicensed seafarers were at St. Margaret's Sea Training School for Ordinary Seamen and Cadet Officers in Hubbards, Nova Scotia, and the Prescott Marine Engineering Instruction School for engine room personnel. Radio operator training was provided by radio schools approved by the government, such as the Marconi Schools, where the future "sparks," as the radio operators were nicknamed, had either been sent by the manning pool director or had sought out their operator papers on their



own. From these training centres, the recruits proceeded to manning pools to be assigned to a ship.

## **The Toll**

While the convoy routes of the North Atlantic and the notorious Murmansk Run to northern Russia claimed the most ships and men, there were no safe havens anywhere for merchant seamen. Whether in the coastal waters of North America, the North or South Atlantic, the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean or the Pacific, all the waters were dangerous and Canadian ships with Canadian crews traversed them all.

Yet between late September 1939 and late May 1945, a total of 25,343 merchant ships with 164,783,921 tonnes of cargo on board sailed from North America to Britain.

While statistics provide an awesome account of ships and tonnage lost, the true cost of the war at sea was in the human toll. British merchant shipping, the main target of the U-boats lost over 1,300 vessels, and nearly 32,076 seamen.<sup>23</sup> Canadian losses were fewer, but equally tragic. The Royal Canadian Navy's casualties included 2,024 personnel killed, the vast majority in the Battle of the Atlantic; 752 members of the RCAF died in maritime operations. The Canadian Merchant Navy suffered more heavily, losing fully one seafarer in eight of the 12,000 who served in the crews of the Canadian, British and Allied merchant ships.

The Book of Remembrance for the war dead of the Merchant Navy lists, by name, 1,629 Canadians and Newfoundlanders, or others, who served on ships registered in Canada or Newfoundland, who lost their lives in the Second World War. It includes the names of eight women. Many other Canadians, whose names are unknown, died serving on ships of Allied merchant navies. Also, 198 Canadian seamen were taken prisoner when their ships were captured or sunk, often in the very early years of the war. Many spent more than four years interned and eight died as prisoners of war or during repatriation.

## **Epilogue**

The Battle of the Atlantic was the longest battle of the Second World War, continuing unbroken from the first day of the war, September 3, 1939, to the last day of the war in Europe, May 8, 1945. The Merchant Navy was committed from the first day to the last.

In addition to its central role in the Battle of the Atlantic, Canada's Merchant Navy shipped cargo to ports around the world. Inland and coastal shipping formed an integral part of the worldwide trade network on which the outcome of the war depended.

In sheer volume, overseas trade was, in fact, far outstripped by that of coastal trade. And as we have seen, these trade routes were not safe from attack. This was especially true of the ore-trade routes from Wabana, Newfoundland to Sydney, Nova Scotia, the bauxite trade from the Caribbean, the tanker routes from Halifax to ports in the Caribbean and the

Gulf of Mexico, and the supply route to the important air station at Goose Bay in Labrador. There were also important movements up and down the St. Lawrence and between Halifax and Newfoundland, Sydney and Saint John respectively, as well as the Sydney to Port-aux-Basques ferry route that proved so vulnerable.

On the Pacific Coast, thanks to the protected inshore passages and the absence of a serious submarine threat, coastal shipping was comparatively unrestricted. However, our West Coast ports were an asset that was not fully exploited during the war. Ships provided assistance to the war in the Pacific, to the Commonwealth countries of India, Australia and New Zealand. They made voyages into the Atlantic through the Panama Canal, and ships such as the SS *Kensington Park* and SS *Manitou Park* were taken off the Pacific runs for D-Day use. Ships carried priority cargoes such as lumber and other commodities through the Panama Canal, and stopped in the West Indies, New York, Halifax or St. John's before continuing in convoy across the Atlantic. There was, however, a scarcity of ships and, as a result, many of these cargoes simply complemented what was sent by rail across the continent to Atlantic ports.

Women played only a very small role in the Canadian Merchant Navy. Those who sailed the ships were almost exclusively men, but there were a few exceptions. Stewardesses, for example, served on the Lady Boats in the West Indies, and the *Lady Nelson* was converted to a hospital ship, carrying nursing sisters and Red Cross workers. As well, a few Canadian women trained as radio officers and served on ships of the Norwegian Merchant Navy, which joined the Allies after the conquest of that country. Eight women gave their lives, including Hannah Baird who died while serving as a stewardess on the SS *Athenia* on September 3, 1939, becoming the first Canadian service person to die from enemy action in the Second World War.

On the other hand, the number of women employed in Canadian shipyards was significant. For example, at the Foundation Maritime Ltd., Pictou, Nova Scotia, yard alone, 699 women worked at what had previously been considered exclusively male tasks. That yard would eventually account for more than half of all Canadian launchings of the Gray class of 4,700 tonne dwt ships.<sup>24</sup>

Just as the merchant fleet constructed in the First World War almost disappeared in the 1920s, the huge fleet of wartime-built ships of the Second World War was soon dispersed at war's end. While Canadian-owned ships would continue to sail the oceans, most did so under foreign registry.

At the end of the war, there was a strong feeling in Canada that there should always be a Canadian flag merchant fleet that would provide employment to merchant seamen as well as to others in shipbuilding, and the repair infrastructure required to support it. However, the government determined that Canadian flag ships would be costly to operate and, faced with the prospect of subsidizing the operation, allowed the ships to be sold off and transferred to foreign registry. The great Canadian fleet and shipbuilding industry rapidly declined.

By 1950, with the outbreak of the Korean War, there were few merchant ships available to participate in that conflict. Twelve Canadian flag ships sailed into Korean waters during the war, fortunately there were no casualties.

All told, the history of the Merchant Navy in Canada's wars is one of fortitude, courage and achievement. The ships and the volunteers who served on them made the difference between victory and defeat for the Allies. The free world could not have survived without them. Fortress Europe could not have been invaded without them. It is reasonable to conclude, therefore, that there was no battle more crucial to the war than the battle to maintain the sea lanes.

On May 10, 1945, the British Admiralty, sent a message expressing its own, and the Royal Navy's, thanks and admiration to the Merchant Navy:

*...For more than five and a half years side by side with the Allied Merchant Navies in the face of continual and merciless attacks by the enemy you have maintained the ceaseless flow of sea traffic on which the life and strength of this country depend... In this historic hour we think with special gratitude of the many merchant seamen who have fallen in the fight and whose service and sacrifice will always be a proud memory.<sup>25</sup>*

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