



CANADA REMEMBERS

THE MURMANSK RUN



Canadians served in many areas around the globe during the Second World War. One of the lesser-known places was on the Murmansk Run. This dangerous convoy route saw Canadian Merchant Navy and Royal Canadian Navy seamen sail into the Arctic Ocean to deliver war materials to the Soviet Union.

THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC

The war at sea was a critical aspect of the Second World War. With much of Europe occupied by the Germans, most of the equipment, fuel and food desperately needed for the Allied war effort had to come from North America. This meant it had to be shipped across the Atlantic Ocean.

Germany understood the importance of these supply lines and did its best to cut this flow of materials. In a game of cat-and-mouse upon which the outcome of the war depended, the Allies looked for ways to protect their merchant ships while the Germans looked for better ways to sink them. This “Battle of the Atlantic” was the longest battle of the Second World War, lasting from the first day of the war in September 1939 until the last day of the war in Europe in May 1945. It was a dangerous battleground and one of the most perilous areas was the Arctic supply route to the Soviet Union.

THE SOVIET UNION

Early in the Second World War, Germany invaded and occupied many of its neighbouring countries in mainland Europe. Germany and the Soviet Union had secretly signed a non-aggression pact agreeing that they would not attack each other, but Germany invaded the vast country in June 1941 and soon pushed deep into

Soviet territory. With this turn of events, the Soviets joined the Allied powers and agreements were quickly reached to send supplies in order to assist them in their fight against the invaders. The western Allies knew that if the Soviet Union fell, Germany could then turn its full military might to the West.

The Soviets desperately needed weapons, fuel and supplies, especially after their country’s most-industrialized areas had been captured by the Germans. Getting these supplies to them, however, would not be easy. Land transportation routes were cut off and the best sea routes were blocked by the enemy. Shipping supplies to the Soviet Union via the Indian or Pacific Oceans was a very long trip. That left the Soviet seaports on the Arctic Ocean as the fastest way to deliver goods—but it was also the most dangerous.

THE MURMANSK RUN

Beginning in the late summer of 1941, a total of 41 Allied convoys sailed to the Soviet ports of Murmansk and Archangel during the war. The Arctic convoys delivered millions of tons of supplies from the United States, Great Britain and Canada, including aircraft, tanks, jeeps, locomotives, flatcars, rifles and machine guns, ammunition, fuel and even boots. From the beginning, Canadian merchant sailors served on Allied ships making the runs. These ships departed North American ports such as Halifax or New York and sailed to the northern Soviet Union, usually via Iceland or Great Britain. This route became known as the Murmansk Run. The Germans threw the full weight of their air force and navy against the convoys as they neared the coast of occupied Norway. Attacks by more than a dozen enemy submarines (known as

Escorts and merchant ships at Hvalfjord, Iceland, before the sailing of Convoy PQ 17 to Murmansk. Photo: Imperial War Museum A-8953

U-boats) and hundreds of planes simultaneously were common. Indeed, more than 20 percent of all cargo on the Murmansk Run was lost and one convoy lost 24 of 33 ships at a cost of 153 lives. It was so dangerous that strict orders were given that no merchant ship was allowed to stop, even to rescue sailors who fell overboard. These unfortunate men had to be left behind.

Harsh weather and the Arctic ice pack took a toll as well. Many of the runs took place in the winter to take advantage of the almost constant darkness in the northern seas. The temperatures were frigid, the winds strong and the waves sometimes 25 metres high. Sea spray would often freeze immediately on the ships' upper surfaces, creating a heavy coating of ice which could cause a ship to capsize if not quickly chipped away. Using onboard equipment and even walking on deck in such conditions was a great challenge.

Beginning in October 1943, Royal Canadian Navy destroyers and frigates also became involved in the Murmansk Run as convoy escorts. They participated in about 75 percent of the subsequent convoys until the end of the war a year and a half later. Remarkably, no Royal Canadian Navy ships were lost.

SACRIFICE

The danger of the Murmansk Run was great and many Allied seamen lost their lives in the effort to help supply the Soviet Union. The Merchant Navy Book of Remembrance in the Peace Tower on Parliament Hill records the names of the Canadians who died

on the Murmansk Run, among the more than 1,600 Canadian Merchant Navy men and women who lost their lives during the Second World War.

THE LEGACY

In the end, the courage of the Canadian and other Allied sailors—along with advances in tactics and technology—helped the Allies triumph in the battle at sea. But it would be far from easy. The sailors of the Canadian Merchant Navy and Royal Canadian Navy helped keep the convoys running so the war could eventually be won. These brave men and women were some of the more than one million Canadians who served in the cause of peace and freedom during the Second World War.

CANADA REMEMBERS PROGRAM

The Canada Remembers Program of Veterans Affairs Canada encourages all Canadians to learn about the sacrifices and achievements made by those who have served—and continue to serve—during times of war and peace. As well, it invites Canadians to become involved in remembrance activities that will help preserve their legacy for future generations. To learn more about Canada's role in the Second World War, please visit the Veterans Affairs Canada Web site at www.vac-acc.gc.ca or call **1-866-522-2122** toll free.

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