

THE MERCHANT NAVY

INTRODUCTION

The achievements and sacrifices of Canadians during the Second World War were great and covered a broad spectrum of efforts. Wartime was often a time of great danger, but the danger was not faced only by those in military uniform. Those who served in Canada's Merchant Navy, our country's fleet of transport ships that carried desperately needed equipment, fuel, goods and personnel to Europe and around the world, had to do their vital job knowing that their ships were prime targets for enemy action.

Most of those who served in the Merchant Navy would find themselves as participants in the Battle of the Atlantic, the struggle between the Allies and the Germans for control of the Atlantic Ocean. Merchant mariners showed tremendous bravery on this ocean "battlefield", demonstrating the heroism of ordinary Canadians who chose to risk so much to help protect the rights of others.

- A total of 12,000 men and women served in Canada's Merchant Navy.
- More than 25,000 merchant ship voyages were made during the war.

GOING TO WAR

It was known right from the beginning that Canada's merchant ships would have an important role to play in the war effort. In fact, early information gathered by British intelligence agents about German ship movements led Canada to conscript all merchant ships two weeks before the war actually began. On

August 26, 1939 the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) took control of all shipping. Despite the fact that merchant crews were not compelled to sail on the dangerous ocean passages, most indeed did.

- When the war began, Canada had 38 ocean-going merchant vessels. By war's end 410 merchant ships had been built in Canada.
- Because so many merchant sailors experienced the dangers of mines and submarines during the First World War, they knew firsthand the dangers of wartime shipping.
- Merchant crews were given training at special schools such as the Marine Engineering Instructional School in Prescott, Ontario.

FACING THE "WOLF PACKS"

"Wolf-packs" of German submarines, known as U-boats, preyed on merchant ships, causing heavy losses and high mortality rates for merchant crews. The term U-boat is from the German word for submarines, Unterseebooten (undersea boats).

- To help protect merchant ships, the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) supplied air escorts and the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) organized merchant ships into convoys that were accompanied by armed naval escorts. These escorts included specially designed boats such as corvettes that could outmaneuver submarines.
- German production of U-boats was so efficient that for a time they could turn out U-boats faster than the Allies could sink them.



- The German Navy continued to improve submarine technology during the war. For example, German scientists invented the “schnorkel”, a breathing device that allowed U-boats to charge their batteries underwater and stay submerged for up to ten days. Previously, the submarines had to resurface frequently. This fact helped the U-boats in the face of the Allies’ air superiority and radar systems.

THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC

From the very beginning of the war, German submarines tried to cut supply routes across the Atlantic, threatening the transportation of vital goods and personnel to Britain. Along with the RCN and the RCAF, the Merchant Navy played a key role in the six-year campaign to clear the Atlantic of U-boats. It was far from easy - they faced fierce attacks by German submarines and hazardous, life-threatening weather conditions in the North Atlantic - but they put themselves in harms way in the quest for peace and freedom in the world.

- The Battle of the Atlantic was the only battle of the Second World War that was waged close to North American shores. German U-boats attacked coastal shipping from the Caribbean to Halifax. During the summer of 1942, they even penetrated deep into the Gulf of St. Lawrence and sank ships.
- Early in the war, many merchant ships were lost because escorting aircraft reached the limits of their flight capacity and had to turn back before the ships reached their destinations. The navy helped

solve the problem by building flight decks on merchant ships, and even creating Merchant Aircraft Carriers (MACs) - tankers or grain carriers equipped with a deck and three or four aircraft.

- The Battle of the Atlantic was a battle of technology as well as guns. When the Germans developed acoustic torpedoes that homed in on the noise made by a ship’s propellers, Allied scientists responded in 17 days with a noise-making device towed behind a ship that fooled the torpedo, diverting it harmlessly away.
- Merchant mariners bore much of the brunt of the Battle of the Atlantic. The casualty rate was one in seven, a higher percentage of total casualties than those suffered by any of Canada’s fighting services. Approximately 1,500 Canadians died, including eight women. As well, 59 Canadian-registered merchant ships were lost.

THE LEGACY

The collective experiences and stories of all Canadians during the Second World War, including those in the Merchant Navy, provides us with a proud and lasting legacy that will continue into the country’s future. To learn more about the role our country played in the Second World War, please visit the Veterans Affairs Canada Web site at: www.vac-acc.gc.ca or call **1-877-604-8469** toll-free.

