



**SUPPLY
LINE**

Somer Oscar James

Merchant Navy

Somer joined the Merchant Navy at the age of 19. As a pacifist, he saw it as a way to serve in the war without killing.



Identification card photograph of Somer Oscar James, Ordinary Seaman in the Merchant Navy.
George Metcalf Archival Collection
Canadian War Museum 20040003-004

A Difficult Choice

Somer was born into a Jewish family in Toronto in 1921. He was a teenager when war broke out, and had a difficult choice to make.

As a pacifist, Somer was against war and did not want to take up arms. In 1940, he decided to join the Merchant Navy, believing this would give him a way of serving without having to kill. Over the next five years, he served aboard 12 ships.

Peril on the High Seas

The Merchant Navy was a dangerous place to serve. Targeted by German forces seeking to sink the ships, merchant sailors faced immense hazards as they moved people and material across the ocean. More than 1,600 Canadians and Newfoundlanders in the Merchant Navy were killed.

On November 5, 1943, Somer was 21 and serving on a merchant vessel called SS *Empire Lightning*. They were docked at a port near Naples, Italy, with a cargo of ammunition destined for **Allied** troops, when German planes attacked.

Fuel on the dock near the ship caught fire. If it spread to *Empire Lightning*, it would set off an enormous explosion. The ship had to be moved, but getting a ship that size away from the dock was no simple matter.

Somer volunteered for the challenging task of removing the ropes that were securing the ship to the dock while fires blazed all around. Once the ship was away from the fire, he helped move other vessels to safety.

For his efforts, Somer was awarded the Lloyd's Medal for Bravery and the British Empire Medal. He was the only member of Canada's Merchant Navy to win both medals.

Life in Canada After the War

In 1945, Somer married Jean Smith, whom he had met in England. A teenager at the beginning of the war, Jean had been sent to Canada to escape the air raids but returned to serve with the Women's Auxiliary Air Force.

They settled in Winnipeg, Manitoba, where Somer became a noted coin dealer. The couple were married for 59 years and had four children. Somer died in 2005.

Vocabulary

Allied

The countries, including Canada, that joined together in opposing the Axis powers during the Second World War. The largest Allied nations were the United Kingdom, the United States, the Soviet Union and China.