HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The Role of the Merchant Navy in the Second World War

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Historical Overview

The Canadian merchant navy, part of civilian industry in peacetime, was integrated into military operations during the Second World War. Its civilian crews played a crucial role in maintaining supply lines throughout the Battle of the Atlantic and the war at large. Logistics and transport were vital to military success, since moving munitions, food, supplies, and troops was a necessary component of Allied victory. Recognizing this, Germany's forces targeted trans-Atlantic supply lines with U-boats, ships, and aircraft to hunt and sink merchant vessels and their precious cargo in order to starve their enemies into submission.

Control of Merchant Shipping in War

Wars are fought on more than military fronts alone as maintaining logistical networks and transportation corridors are essential parts of military planning. On August 26, 1939, Canadian and British authorities placed civilian merchant shipping under control of the Royal Navy (RN) and Royal Canadian Navy (RCN). This decision brought Canada's entire merchant fleet, consisting of 37 privately owned ships, under government control. The fleet employed 1,450 sailors and had a total carrying capacity of about 227,000 tons, including cargo, fuel, and supplies.

Weeks later, on September 3, 1939, before Canada had entered the war, a German submarine sank the passenger liner SS Athenia sailing westward from Europe to Montreal. Among the 128 dead were several Canadians, including merchant navy stewardess Hannah Baird from Verdun, Quebec. She is one of the first Canadian casualties of the Second World War and the first of the merchant navy, highlighting the dangers of merchant shipping in wartime.

Protection

To safeguard shipping, Canada and Britain quickly implemented a convoy system across the Atlantic Ocean. This practice involved herding ships together in convoys to sail with military escorts forcing German submarines to search vast stretches of ocean for fewer and better protected targets. Canada and Britain also began arming merchant vessels, providing them with defensive guns and sailors from their respective navies to protect the ships and their crews. By 1942, merchant sailors required mandatory gunnery training with the expectation they undertake a combat role to defend themselves and their cargo during attacks.

While sailing in convoys and defensively arming vessels helped, the ferocity of the U-boat menace was unrelenting and expanded rapidly in 1940, with 43 Canadian and Allied ships lost in just three convoy attacks in the mid-Atlantic. As Germany introduced long-range submarines, they began hunting deep into Canadian coastal waters off the St. Lawrence in 1942. By the end of October 1942, U-boats had sunk 19 merchant vessels within sight of Canadian shores. Among the dead was 16-year-old John Milmine from Verdun, Quebec, killed on his first ship, the SS Carolus torpedoed near Bic Island on October 9, 1942. Despite these steep losses, the merchant sailors and their military navy partners kept supply lines open while facing constant danger from enemy U-boats, difficult weather, and harsh living conditions, especially during violent winter storms in the North Atlantic.

Control and Expansion

The Canadian government realized that protecting merchant ships from enemy attacks wasn't enough to sustain merchant shipping during the war. As a result, it introduced new controls over the merchant sailors, passing laws that allowed them to be jailed for nine months without a trial and sentenced to hard labour if they refused sailing or delayed a ship. The state also built merchant barracks — or housing — for the merchant sailors to provide them a place to rest on land. This helped with morale while also ensuring a steady supply of workers, which was increased by the introduction of government-led recruitment and training programs to support the expanding fleet.
Over time, Canadian Federal Government's actions saw merchant sailors treated less like civilians and increasingly like military service personnel. Despite this, the merchant navy was never recognized on par with their military counterparts. Without the recognition that accompanied uniformed service, merchant sailors remained civilians in the eyes of the state and were the 'Fourth Arm of the Fighting Services' in name alone.

In 1941 the Canadian government began building government-owned standardized 10,000 deadweight ton cargo ships known as "Park" ships. Each of these ships was capable of carrying enough food to feed 225,000 people for a week, or could be used to transport fuel, steel, aircraft, tanks, guns or other wartime supplies as needed. This helped ensure that enough ships remained in service during the period of highest shipping losses from 1939 to 1943, and until new technology and better strategies turned the Battle of the Atlantic in favour of the Allies. By war's end, the Canadian merchant fleet had grown to 176 ships operating under the Park Flag. In terms of personnel, merchant navy forces swelled to surpass 12,000 sailors, expanding rapidly from its prewar total.

Despite protection and control of merchant shipping, Canadian merchant sailors continued to suffer casualties until the war's end. On May 7, 1945, hours before the German surrender, the Canadian Avondale Park was torpedoed on the east coast of Scotland by submarine U-2336. Men and women of Canada's merchant navy were amongst both the first and last casualties of the war.

Contributions, Sacrifice, and the Struggle for Recognition

Canada's role in Allied shipping was vital to victory, with crews delivering over 165 million tonnes of cargo, including food, fuel, munitions and supplies, from North America to Britain between September 1939 and May 1945. The cost in terms of loss of life was equally steep as Germany sank roughly 4,800 Allied merchant ships, totalling 21 million gross tons and killing 40,000 sailors, including 1,629 Canadians — about one in eight of the 12,000 Canadian sailors who served.

The civilian crews, working without the recognition that accompanied military service, endured five and a half years of enemy assaults on some of the most treacherous ocean waterways of the world. Despite this, as civilians working in a warzone, they were denied veteran status and access to benefits at war's end, and it would take the state over fifty-five years to compensate and recognize them as veterans of the Second World War.

Starting in the 1980s, surviving merchant navy sailors mobilized a campaign to secure recognition of their essential war service and to challenge the state's definition that excluded them as veterans of the war.

The merchant navy veterans slowly banded together, gathered wartime accounts, and built alliances with established veterans' organizations. They argued that the dangers they faced and the extensive control the Government of Canada had over their service during the war entitled them to be recognized as veterans. By 1992, their efforts succeeded in gaining official veterans' status, a landmark achievement in reshaping the nation's military legacy, but one that still saw them treated in separate legislation. Full status as equals in existing veterans' legislation, as well as compensation for benefits denied, arrived only in 2000.

In 1994, the Canadian government dedicated a Book of Remembrance commemorating the merchant navy fallen. And as a final effort to ensure their wartime contributions would be preserved, the federal government declared September 3 as Merchant Navy Veterans' Day in 2003, honouring the anniversary of the sinking of the SS Athenia.