



VALOUR AT SEA

CANADA'S MERCHANT NAVY IN WORLD WAR 2

THE FOURTH ARM OF THE FIGHTING SERVICES



In 1939 Canada's Merchant Navy consisted of four fleets: Fishing, Great Lakes, Coastal, and Ocean-Going. This paper addresses the Coastal and Ocean-Going fleets that operated in dangerous wartime waters. Many Great Lakes ships were sent to Great Britain to replace coastal tonnage lost by enemy action and many more were operated under the Canadian flag in the dangerous North American coastal trade as far south as South America.

Prior to and in the early years of the war, the Canadian Merchant Navy operated under similar conditions to the British Merchant Navy. This included similar pay, benefits, manning structure and conditions of service. As the war progressed, a certain amount of Canadianization crept in, particularly with regard to the safety of ships, seafarers and cargo, and the licensing of officers and conditions of service. Canadian merchant shipping operations, however, were always closely integrated with those of Great Britain. The British Ministry of War Transportation had a strong presence at all major Canadian ports.

The Canadian fleet developed quickly during the war going from about 39 ocean and coastal ships and **1,450** seafarers, to about 210 ships and **12,000** seafarers at the end of the war. By 1942, Canada was building its own ships and by the end of the war 403 ships had been built - **183** for the Canadian flag, and 220 for the British flag. The ownership of the Canadian ships rested with the Park Steamship Company, a Crown corporation

under the Department of Munitions and Supply.

The operation of these ships was contracted to private shipping companies and agents, who then assumed responsibility for the care and upkeep of the ships, ensuring the ships were properly manned, payment of all expenses and the collection of revenues. The powerful wartime Canadian and British economic administrations determined how the ships were to be used and where they would trade.

At the beginning of the war few merchant ships were armed but, when it became obvious that these ships were the dedicated targets of the enemy, the government fitted weapons which were primarily manned by naval gunners from the Royal Canadian Naval Reserve (RCNR). Merchant seafarers were required to take gunnery training and supplemented these naval crews.

As a part of Canada's massive war effort, fourteen Canadian shipyards and seven engine manufacturers built the following ships: 403 ocean-going merchant ships, about **100** Coastal and Great Lakes ships, and 21 Maintenance and Repair ships. In addition, Canadian shipyards repaired over **5,000** merchant ships, and built 487 warships and more than **3,500** support ships such as tugs and landing craft.

Of these, there were **188** British-operated "Fort" and **181** Canadian-operated "Park" merchant ships.

Researched by: Max Reid, D. Jenkins and T. Brooks Edited by: Dr. Sarty/Jenkins, Brooks

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Typical Canadian Park [and Fort] Ship

Deadweight (tons of fuel and cargo that could be carried)	10,000
Length (feet)	441
Beam (feet)	57
Speed (knots)	11
Crew	45-50
Naval Gunners	7

The Fort and Park ships were generally identical and the most characteristic product of Canadian shipyards

While there were about **12,000** Canadian seafarers at war's end many more sailed on Allied merchant ships. Another **2,000** RCNR gunners also served on Canadian ships.

For six long years Canadian and Allied merchant seafarers faced the enemy under the most appalling conditions. Weather, U-boats, surface-raiders, mines and aircraft were the principal dangers faced by these seafarers. At least **82** Canadian ships were lost during the war from enemy related action. Others were lost from other wartime related causes such as being directed to sail in conditions, and on routes, for which some of these ships had never been designed.

During the war the Canadian government declared the merchant navy the "fourth arm of the fighting services."

The Book of Remembrance for the war dead of the Merchant Navy lists by name **1,629** seafarers. This figure includes the **461** known Canadian and Newfoundlanders that were lost on Allied or neutral ships, the Allied seafarers who were lost on Canadian and Newfoundland ships, and the 8 Canadians

who died as prisoners of war. A total of **198** Canadians were prisoners of war and most of these were interned for up to 5 years.

It has been estimated that one in ten Canadian merchant seafarers lost their lives during the war; a higher ratio than any of the other three fighting services. Very few of these lost merchant seafarers are buried ashore - most lie at sea in "unmarked graves" with no memorial to attest to their sacrifice.

In 1942, at the height of the Battle of the Atlantic, the British Government was fearful that the high casualty rates might break the morale of the merchant navy. A formal investigation concluded, however, that the morale was "admirable and wonderful" and the seafarer's greatest complaint was the poor food at sea.

This fact sheet is dedicated to the memory of the more than **1,629** Canadian Merchant Navy seafarers (including 8 women) who were killed in WW 2. The first Canadian service person killed in action was Ms. Hannah Baird who died while serving as a stewardess on the S.S. *Athenia* on 3 September 1939.

Further Reading:

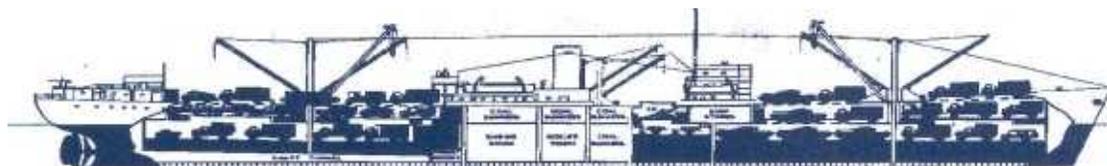
"Valour at Sea - Canada's Merchant Navy," GIESLER, Patricia, Veterans Affairs Canada, 1998;

"The Unknown Navy," HALFORD, Robert G. Vanwell, 1995;

"DEMS at war," REID, Max. Commoners, 1990;

"Convoy," KAPLAN, Philip & CURRIE. Jack Annum Press, 1998;

"A Great Fleet of Ships," HEAL, S.C. Vanwell, 1999.



The Canadian built "Fort Halkett" loaded in February 43 at Swansea Wales with military cargo for Bane, North Africa. This ship was later lost in the Smith Atlantic on 6 August 43