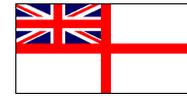


# Salute to the Navy's Centennial

## World War II – Part 1: The Atlantic Campaign



### Introduction

The Battle of the Atlantic which lasted 2,075 days, was the longest campaign of the Second World War. It pitted Allied navies against German and Italian naval forces, especially submarines, in a battle to safeguard the essential flow of shipping between North America and Europe.

On any given day 125 merchant vessels were sailing in convoy across the North Atlantic. It was during these treacherous, stormy crossings that Canada's navy matured. The RCN escorted 25,343 merchant vessels carrying 181,643,180 tons of cargo to Europe. Without these supplies, the war effort would have collapsed.

From a pre-war strength of only 1800 personnel, the RCN grew into a force of over 100,000 with more than 400 ships, eventually providing 47 percent of all convoy escorts. The RCN participated in the sinking of

31 U-Boats and 42 other enemy warships at the loss of 24 of its own ships and almost 2000 lives.

Rear Admiral Leonard Murray, Commander-in-Chief North-West Atlantic, whose photo appears in



Gallery 3 - Model of HMCS *Chambly*, a *Flower* class corvette. CWM19730285-001

Gallery 3, would become the only Canadian to hold an Allied theatre command during the war.

Gallery 3 of the Canadian War Museum provides the visitor with an interesting and multi-media memorial to the RCN's magnificent contribution to the ultimate victory in this pivotal campaign.

### Corvettes

The visitor to Gallery 3 is greeted by a large backdrop depicting the *Flower* Class Corvette HMCS *Battleford* – an appropriate welcome given the quintessential role that the corvette played in Canada's part in the battle. The *Flower* Class is also evident in a detailed model of HMCS *Chambly* which sank U-501, the first U-Boat sunk by the RCN in World War II.

*Flower*-class corvettes were used extensively by the RCN during the Battle of the Atlantic, operating 111 Canadian-built and 4 British-built ves-



Gallery 3 – Boarding of *U-744*. Painting by Lt Thomas Charles Wood, 6 March 1944. CWM19710261-4844

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## Life on a Corvette

Service in *Flowers* in the North Atlantic was typically cold, wet, and uncomfortable. Every plunge into an oncoming wave was followed by a cascade of water into the well deck amidships. Men at action stations were drenched with spray, and water entered living spaces through hatches. The interior was constantly wet and condensation dripped from the deckhead. The head (toilet) was drained by a straight pipe to the ocean; and a reverse flow of the icy North Atlantic would cleanse the backside of those using it during rough weather. In the winter months, ice became a serious stability problem as can be seen from the picture of HMCS *Brantford* in February 1944.

Men slept on lockers or tabletops or in any dark place that offered a little warmth. They had a reputation of having poor sea-handling characteristics; rolling in heavy seas with complete 80-degree rolls (40 degrees each side of the normal upright position) being fairly common - it was said they "would roll on wet grass". Many crewmen suffered severe motion sickness until they acclimatised to shipboard life.



Ice on HMCS *Brantford*, February 1944. CWM 20020045-1664

sels during WW II. In all, Canadian shipyards produced 294 of these vessels. The remainder of those built in Canada was used by the RN and other allies. Canadian industry built 8,653 ships of all kinds

during the war, an astounding feat considering the almost complete absence of a shipbuilding capability at the outset of the war.

Nine RCN *Flower*-Class corvettes were lost during World War II, most due to enemy action, the rest to collision with Allied warships and merchant ships. RCN *Flower*-class corvettes are credited with participating in the sinking of 15 German submarines. Success for the *Flowers*, however, should be measured in terms of tonnage protected, rather than U-boats sunk.

Central to the display is a video presentation that gives the visitor the impression of being on a ship's bridge and which provides some impression of the magnitude and complexity of convoy operations and some idea of the daunting forces of nature faced by the naval and merchant navy personnel crossing the North Atlantic.



Gallery 3 – Corvette Bridge. [HMCS *Galt*] Painting by Lt Donald Cameron MacKay. CWM 19710261-4211

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**Gallery 3 – Men on Carly Float. Painting by Cdr Harold Beaumont. CWM19710261-1042**

## Life and Death in the Atlantic

The perils of war on the North Atlantic are underscored by a Carly float that reminds the visitor that survivors of a ship sinking could only expect to survive for a matter of minutes in the frigid waters unless they were lucky enough to be picked up by another ship or to clamber aboard a lifeboat or Carly float.

The experiences of two individuals sum up the harsh realities – Stoker William Fisher who survived along with 50 of his shipmates when the destroyer HMCS *St Croix* was sunk. They were picked up by HMCS *Itchen*, only to find themselves back in the water when *Itchen* was herself sunk. Fisher was the only survivor of the *St Croix* crew picked up by the *Itchen*.

Petty Officer Joseph Bertrand Alphonse Bedard, a cook whose medals are on display, was not so lucky. He did not survive the sinking of the corvette, HMCS *Shawinigan* that was lost with all hands on 25 November 1944 when she was torpedoed by U-1228.

The gallantry of Canada's sailors is distilled into the experience of Chief Petty Officer Max Bernays who was awarded the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal (CGM) for

his devotion to duty during the ramming and sinking of U-210 by HMCS *Assiniboine* and whose medals are displayed in the Gallery. This was one of only two CGMs awarded to the RCN in World War II.

## The U-Boat Enemy

The U-Boats were a formidable enemy and the display provides a variety of artifacts from the German submarine service, noting the terrible price it paid for its depredations on Allied shipping. Of 1162 U-Boats built during the war, 751 were lost and 30,003 U-Boat sailors lost their lives at sea, a 75% fatality rate unmatched by any other military force in the war.

There is a model of U-190, a Type IX-C/40 submarine which sank the *Bangor* class minesweeper HMCS *Esquimalt*, the last RCN ship to be sunk in the war, and which herself, surrendered to the RCN at the end of the war.

## War in the Gulf of St Lawrence

The Gallery devotes attention to how the U-Boats brought the war into Canada's back yard – Newfoundland and Labrador and the Gulf of St Lawrence. There are descriptions and pictures on their efforts to land spies and to rescue prisoners of war from Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick, and how U-537 landed a weather station on the Labrador Coast. The actual weather station may be seen in the LeBreton Gallery.

The sinking of the armed yacht HMCS *Racoon* in the Gulf of St Lawrence by U-165 on 6 September 1942 with the loss of all hands and the destruction of the corvette HMCS *Magog* by U-1223 on 14 October 1944 are examples of how close the U-Boats brought the war to Canadian waters.

There is even a description of the U-Boat that fired a torpedo at St John's harbour on 3 March 1942. Fortunately, it failed to sink the city!

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## Technological Advances

Gallery 3 provides examples of the technological advances that contributed to the final Allied victory in the Atlantic - including the introduction of improvements in the rudimentary ASDIC (sonar) and advances in the anti-submarine weaponry - from the basic depth charge to the hedgehog anti-submarine weapon; and, finally, to the Squid anti-submarine mortar. An example of the latter can be seen in the LeBreton Gallery.



**LeBreton Gallery – Squid Anti-submarine mortar. CWM 197606561-026**

were designed to remedy defects in the corvette design, such as a lack of range, speed, and sea-keeping ability.

There is a model of HMCS *Swansea* in Gallery 3 and many of the improvements are evident in the details of the model. *Swansea* was the RCN's most successful sub-killer - taking part in the sinking of four U-Boats: U-247, U-311, U-448, and U-845.

## Intelligence

The RCN played an important role in gaining vital intelligence of U-Boat dispositions. Gallery 3 describes the actions by HMCS *Oakville* and HMCS *Chilliwick* that involved the boarding of U-94 and U-744 after they were attacked and brought to the surface, and their unsuccessful attempts to recover the Enigma code machines.



**Gallery 3 – Model of HMCS *Swansea*, a *River* Class frigate. CWM19660023-001.**

## Conclusion

It is difficult in a museum setting to convey the harsh weather and sea conditions with their constant discomfort, punctuated by the call to action to locate and destroy an elusive enemy hiding in the depths and possessing the ability to strike with a variety of deadly weapons of its own.

The Canadian War Museum, in its portrayal of the Battle of the Atlantic has utilised a variety of media to build a comprehensive picture for the visitor. The result is a remarkably moving tribute to the men and ships of the Royal Canadian Navy that fought and won this long and crucial battle.

Although the Battle of the Atlantic was the principal undertaking of the RCN in World War II, it was by no means the only one. The next supplement in this series will examine the other campaigns and theatres of that war in which the men, women and ships of the Royal Canadian Navy were involved.

### FCWM Naval Fact Sheets

More in-depth coverage of some topics mentioned in this Supplement can be found in Fact Sheets produced by the Friends of the Canadian War Museum.

These Fact Sheets can be viewed on our web site:  
[www.friends-amis.org](http://www.friends-amis.org)

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