



## INTRODUCTION

Following the Second World War, Sir Winston Churchill wrote: “The only thing that ever really frightened me during the war was the U-boat peril.”<sup>1</sup> Britain was almost completely dependant upon outside shipments for many of its foodstuffs, and much of the materials needed to fight the war. Churchill understood that Nazi U-boats (as the Germans called their submarines) represented a vital threat to the essential Atlantic lifeline between North America and Britain. Breaking this lifeline might knock Britain out of the war and wreak havoc with efforts to establish a ‘second front’ in France and drive the Nazi’s out of Western Europe.

*Their supreme sacrifice in both wars ensured the lifeline of men and of supplies without which victory could not have been ours and without which we would not now enjoy freedom.*

Book of Remembrance - The Merchant Navy

In both the First and Second World Wars, the men of the Allied merchant navies faced the daunting task of supplying that sea-borne lifeline. Against almost overwhelming odds, not only from U-boat attacks, but also from the perils of storm, surface raiders, air attacks and mines, they transported millions of tonnes of food, munitions, petroleum and troops across the oceans of the world.

This booklet is dedicated to the men and women of the Canadian Merchant Navy. Their courage, fortitude and determination in two world wars kept their ships sailing through the terrible years of unparalleled loss. In particular we remember the more than 2,100<sup>2</sup> men and women who gave their lives so that we could have the peace and freedom we enjoy today.

*“Few knew the colossal tasks these unsung heroes achieved. They were overshadowed by the epics of fighting men who had done no more and probably less. Only their families really knew. If they came home – which thousands failed to do – they soon had to go out and face the same conditions... A merchant seaman could fortify himself with nothing but hope and courage. Most of them must have been very afraid, not for days and nights but for months and years. Who is the greater hero, the man who performs great deeds by swift action against odds he hardly has time to recognize, or the man who lives for long periods in constant, nagging fear of death, yet carries on?”*

- Alan Easton in *50 North: An Atlantic Battleground*

## **The First World War**

On August 4, 1914, following the German invasion of Belgium, Britain declared war. In 1914, when Britain was at war, Canada was at war.

On October 3, 1914, the First Canadian Contingent left for England in the largest convoy ever to cross the Atlantic. Also sailing in this convoy was a contingent from the still separate British Dominion of Newfoundland. Over the course of the war, more than 650,000 Canadians made that fateful crossing. More than 66,000 did not return.

After initial rapid advancement, the war in Europe ground to a halt as two great enemy armies became deadlocked along a 960-kilometre front of impregnable trenches. For the next four years there was little change. As attack after attack failed, and hundreds of thousands were killed, the Western Front settled into a bloody stalemate.

In this setting, the war at sea took on a vital and dangerous role. The very outcome of the war depended on the successful movement of troops and goods over the oceans of the world.

The shipping of tens of thousands of troops and a mountain of guns, munitions, horses, supplies and other provisions was a major component of Canada's naval effort, one that pushed the country's resources to the limit. From an average of 45,000 tonnes of cargo a month in 1915, shipping from Canada increased to 351,000 tonnes a month in 1918.

Although our country had a noteworthy merchant fleet in earlier periods, by 1914 Canada's fleet had practically disappeared. On top of this, there was virtually no capacity for building new ships. The Canadian naval service, meanwhile, consisted of fewer than 350 men and two old ships. So when Prime Minister Robert Borden cabled London to ascertain what naval role Canada could play, they responded that any aid would be so minor it would have no impact, and it would take too long to build ships. It was agreed that Canada's war effort would be best concentrated on the army. Britain's Royal Navy would look after the protection of Canada's coasts and shipping in Canadian waters.



THE SAILING OF THE FIRST CONTINGENT, 1914. (PAC6701)

Our country's merchant sailors, however, were engaged from the beginning and for the duration. Canada's merchant fleet was all but gone, but the skilled Canadian and Newfoundland crews that had sailed them were not. These crews formed a significant part of the quarter million men<sup>3</sup> who, at the outbreak of the First World War, manned the 12,600 steamships serving Great Britain and the other Commonwealth countries around the world.

The war at sea began as a struggle between two powerful navies, the British Royal Navy and the German High Seas Fleet. They were engaged in a struggle to control the seas for the transportation of the vitally-needed troops and goods. The great rival fleets met only once, in the Battle of Jutland off the coast of Denmark in 1916. The British suffered heavily in this encounter, but the lasting result of this battle was that the German High Seas Fleet never again ventured in force from its North Sea bases. German U-boats did, however, continue to take a great toll on Allied shipping throughout the war.

The British Royal Navy was able to retain control of the surface of the oceans and blockade merchant shipping to German ports. British warships were able to eliminate German "merchant raiders" (armed merchant vessels that attacked Allied shipping), although not before they had sunk 54 British ships. As well, the Admiralty took steps to deal with the deadly mines that had been strewn in the waters around the British Isles. They employed counter-mining, hunted the mine-layers and enlisted an ever-growing fleet of mine-sweepers.

But Britain's command of the sea by a superior surface fleet was not enough. Striking directly at trade was an awesome new weapon, the submarine, which Germany used to try to bring Britain to its knees. The German U-boat fleet preyed on Allied and often neutral ships, sank merchant ships on sight, and threatened the supply lines the Allies depended on. However, in 1915 the Germans made a reluctant promise not to sink ships without warning, following the protests of the United States who had not yet entered the war.

This agreement greatly reduced the effectiveness of the submarine as a weapon, and by the end of 1916 the Allies' own blockade of German sea supply lines was severely hurting the Germans. Their economy was severely strained by the blockade and because the German armies were deadlocked in stalemate on the Western and Eastern fronts. In January 1917, Kaiser Wilhelm II, the country's leader, was convinced that Britain could be starved in five months if U-boats were allowed to engage in unrestricted submarine warfare.

Even though it meant taking the risk that the United States would enter the war, on February 1, German U-boats resumed attacking merchant ships from all countries without warning. The submarine campaign suddenly entered a new and more menacing phase.

The ruthlessness of the land war now found its counterpart at sea. In the early stages of the war, crews of the merchant ships were allowed to take to the lifeboats before their ship was sunk. The U-boats, however, relied on surprise, attacked without warning and were too small to take survivors. The crews were now abandoned to their fate. These new tactics dramatically decreased the chances of sailors surviving a U-boat attack.

The German policy was effective. Allied shipping losses mounted, reaching a peak in April 1917 of 788,183 tonnes of cargo. In three bitter winter months, 800 ships and 8,000 seamen were lost. In fact, one-quarter of the ships on the transatlantic run were sunk over this period. By spring, losses were so great that British Admiralty analysts predicted the destruction of the merchant fleet by November. Losing the merchant fleet would mean the defeat of Britain.<sup>4</sup>

Fortunately, the submarine campaign did not achieve this dire outcome. The Allied adoption of a convoy system, together with new anti-submarine devices, gradually overcame the submarine menace. Also, in April 1917, the United States declared war on Germany and its allies. The United States' vast armada of merchant and military ships eased the burden on the Allied merchant navies.

A convoy consists of a group of ships sailing together in a group, escorted by warships if possible. Unlike a scattered stream of independent ships, convoys could be routed around areas where U-boats were known to be hiding. Ships gathered into convoys meant the U-boats had to search a vast ocean for fewer independent targets. In fact, 30 ships in a convoy are not visible from much farther away than a single ship. To attack a convoy meant risking a fight with the escort. Furthermore, convoys could be reinforced with surface and air escorts when they entered a dangerous area.

Eastbound convoys gathered in Halifax and Sydney, Nova Scotia, and were escorted seaward by the small ships of the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN). Royal Navy (RN) and United States Navy (USN) cruisers and auxiliary cruisers served as ocean escorts. Destroyers and aircraft met them in the approaches to British waters to hold off the U-boats. In May 1917, the first convoy safely reached Britain.

By August, outbound ships from Britain were also in convoy. Sinkings dropped below half of those in April, and by October losses of ships in convoys were less than one in a hundred, one-tenth the rate of independents. U-boats might slip in for torpedo attack, but the old days of sinking ship after lone ship at will, or by boarding and scuttling, had ended.<sup>5</sup>

However, this new strategic victory had dangerous consequences. With fewer unescorted ships in European waters, the U-boats had to search farther afield for their targets. With the United States in the war from April 1917, North American waters became new hunting grounds for the German submarines.

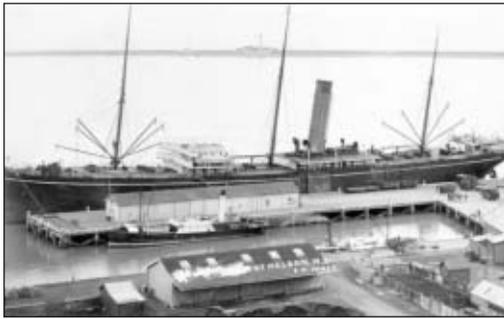
Fortunately, the course of war on the European battlefield began to change. By the middle of 1918, the British blockade was having a serious effect on the German war effort as well as on German morale. In the spring of 1918, a determined German offensive had been turned back, and by early September the Allies were advancing on every sector.

The war ended on November 11, 1918.

### **The Merchant Ships**

As the war ground on and allied ocean shipping was strained to the limits, a new policy for a government-owned merchant service had begun to take shape. Canadian shipyards and a rolling steel mill were built and building boomed. By the end of the war, 26 steamships were being built for Britain and 63 were ordered for the Canadian government. These Canadian ships were to form our first national flag fleet, the Canadian Government Merchant Marine (CGMM). It would be operated by the newly formed Canadian National Railway.

As the first annual report of the CGMM explained in 1918, these ships were “intended primarily to cooperate with British shipping in supplying the necessities of war, and in times of peace to provide the means of carrying abroad the products of Canada’s farms, forests, mines and factories, without which Canada could not hope to take full advantage of the opportunity of expanding her export trade.”<sup>6</sup>



BRITISH MERCHANT SHIP, SS *KUMARA*, DOCKED IN NEW ZEALAND, MAY 1916. (CREDIT UNKNOWN)

However, since the contract for the first ship was placed only in March 1918, no ships were delivered until after Armistice and the end of the war. That meant the fleet of ships played no part in the war.

Their peacetime role was limited too. Designed as general purpose cargo ships, they included a mixture of design variations and fully half fell below 5,100 tonnes dead weight (dwt)<sup>7</sup>. They were also slow and coal-fired, and few could carry passengers. They were not economical and one by one were sold or scrapped. Since no government merchant service policy emerged, they were not replaced.

There was one notable exception. In 1920, the Canadian government sponsored a steamship service for passengers and cargo between Canada and the West Indies. Initially CGMM ships were used, but they proved unsatisfactory and five new combination passenger/cargo liners were ordered. Built in Britain, these white ships became famous as the “Lady Boats” (they had been named after the wives of famous British admirals) and, in 1928, the Canadian National (West Indies) Steamships Limited was formed to operate them.

Over the next decade, the Canadian Government Merchant Marine dwindled away, and foreign-flagged ships took over our country’s huge overseas trade and passenger traffic.

## **THE SECOND WORLD WAR**

The Second World War began at dawn on September 1, 1939, as the German armies swept into Poland. On September 3, Britain and France declared war. Canada followed on September 10. Canadian coastal defences were quickly manned, militia regiments intensified preparations, and volunteers flocked to enlist. In December, units of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Division sailed for Britain; hundreds of thousands more Canadians would follow.

In Europe, after Germany’s swift defeat of Poland, a strange lull set in on the western front. This period of apparent inactivity from October 1939 to April 1940 became known as the “Phony War.”



**THE *LADY RODNEY* ON THE ST. LAWRENCE RIVER AT QUEBEC CITY. THE *LADY RODNEY* WAS ONE OF TWO LADY SHIPS TO SURVIVE THE SECOND WORLD WAR. DURING THE WAR, SHE OFTEN CARRIED CANADIAN SOLDIERS TO EUROPE. (MARITIME MUSEUM OF THE ATLANTIC, N10822)**