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The Unknown Navy: Canada's World War II Merchant Navy [Review]

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The Unknown Navy
Canada's World War II
Merchant Navy

Robert G. Halford, *The Unknown Navy: Canada's World War II Merchant Navy* (St. Catharines, ON: Vanwell Publishing, 1995) 288 pages, \$29.95, (ISBN 1-55125-016-0)

It is with good reason that a recent book on the Canadian Merchant Navy, written by Robert G. Halford, has been titled *The Unknown Navy: Canada's World War II Merchant Navy*. One of the keys to the survival of Britain during the

Second World War was the transport of food, goods and weapons from North America. The struggle to accomplish this, known as the Battle of the Atlantic, has been told many times. Accounts of the chess match between the Allied escorts and the German U-boats as they fought their desperate struggle over the merchant ships has portrayed the merchantmen as mere pawns in a greater struggle. These pawns, however, have a story of their own to tell. The Canadian Merchant Navy, and the industry behind it, played a major role in the Allied war effort.

Early in the war, as the full implications of the U-boat threat began to materialize, the British began to look for options. One of the earliest expedients was the transfer of 25 shallow-draft Great Lake boats in the spring of 1940 to England to replace British coastal ships lost to the Germans. Six of these ships were immediately put to good use in evacuating the remnants of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk. Later in that same year, a mission was sent to North America to seek out ship-building yards to replace the steadily increasing losses. Though the Canadian industry had declined from its heyday in the 1920s, the war had stimulated tremendous growth. The British mission placed an order for twenty 10,000 ton dry cargo vessels followed shortly by a Canadian order for an additional 88 vessels. By the time the last wartime ship was launched, 354 10,000 ton and 43 4,700 ton vessels would be produced. This was in addition to the construction of nearly 500 destroyers, frigates, corvettes and minesweepers for the navy. In 1944, merchant ships were being launched at a rate of almost two per week. To put this in perspective, the 10,000 ton Park/Fort class of merchant ship produced in Canadian yards, which was nearly identical to its more famous American cousin, the Liberty ship, was being produced at a faster rate based on population and at a lower per unit cost. Nearly half of the

ocean-going vessels of the Commonwealth, including those of Great Britain, were built in Canada. Canadian government expenditures and the workforce devoted to the creation of the merchant fleet were larger than those of the aircraft industry. What an amazing accomplishment for a country considered an economic lightweight prior to the start of the war.

The Canadian Merchant Navy evolved into the world's 4th largest wartime fleet with a force of over 12,000 men. The majority of the ships in the fleet were Canadian-built. Over the course of the war, a total of 67 Canadian-flagged vessels were sunk by enemy action. The toll of merchant seamen lost was 1,578, a rate much higher than experienced by the navy. In addition, there were losses not related to enemy action.

The contributions of this fleet are immeasurable. After the war the British government had nothing but praise for the accomplishments of the Canadian Merchant Navy. Rear Admiral Leornard W. Murray, Commander-in-Chief of the Canadian Northwest Atlantic, stated that the Battle of the Atlantic was won by "the courage, fortitude and determination of the British and Allied Merchant Navy." Well deserved praise for the pawns of the "Unknown Navy."

Halford has done a masterful job telling the many diverse stories of the Canadian Merchant Navy. The book is divided into three sections: The first is a complete history of the Merchant Navy from its origins through the war years to its downfall after the war. The second section contains an autobiographical treatment of the author's own merchant navy experiences while the third section, titled, "In Their Own Words," records the personal accounts of individual sailors. This book, written in a clear and forthright manner, should be read by all interested in Canada's role in the Second World War.

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