

THE ADMIRAL’S VIEW

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Battle of the Atlantic

On 16 April, I had the opportunity to speak with a number of veterans at the Battle of Atlantic Annual Admiral Desmond Piers dinner. Before the dinner, the veterans held a sombre ceremony to commemorate those ships lost and brave men who perished at sea during the Battle of Atlantic. When I looked into their eyes, I had a glimpse into the past and the painful memories that still haunt them today. As the name of each ship was called, a candle was extinguished and a veteran stepped forward to salute those lost at sea. This small but moving ceremony served as a reminder of the brave selfless deeds of those who have gone before us. Their courage and determination must not be forgotten. For those serving in the Navy today - we stand on their shoulders.

More recently, HMCS ATHABASKAN held a small ceremony at sea across the North Atlantic Ocean and closer to the United Kingdom over the exact position of the ATHABASKAN G07, which was lost in action in the English Channel on 29 April 1944 during the Battle of the Atlantic. This is a poignant symbol of the new “watch” respecting our veterans, and serves as another example that we will not forget their brave deeds.

At 11 o’clock this morning, visitors to Point Pleasant Park expecting a quiet walk along the sea wall will instead be greeted by veterans, merchant mariners, sailors, soldiers, airmen and airwomen, local dignitaries and supportive citizens gathered to commemorate the Battle of the Atlantic. Some may not be aware of the significance nor the lasting impact of the Battle of the Atlantic on Canada and our Navy, which is why I have chosen to write about this important historic event.

The Battle of the Atlantic, unlike other historical naval engagements, such as Trafalgar or Midway, was a six-year-long, hard-fought, daily struggle that began on the first day of the Second World War. In essence, it was a marathon, not a sprint. It involved thousands of Allied ships, stretching over thousands of square miles of ocean, in more than 100 convoy battles and upwards of 1,000 single-ship encounters, all taking place in the unforgiving North Atlantic. This battle

was also the only part of the Second World War that reached the shores of North America, with devastating effects in the Gulf of St Lawrence and along the eastern seaboard.

In effect, the Battle of the Atlantic was a tonnage war, with the Allies engaged in a life and death struggle to sustain Britain, and later Russia. At the bleakest period of the Battle, one ship was lost every four hours. By late 1943 the tide had turned in the Allies’ favour, allowing the buildup of personnel and equipment in Britain to mount D-Day, the invasion of Europe.

In many ways the Battle of the Atlantic was the Canadian Navy’s Vimy Ridge. It was a time when every element of our naval institution and indeed the nation was challenged in the crucible of war and from which we emerged victorious. Although Canada started the Second World War with about a dozen ships and 1800 personnel, we grew by war’s end to become the world’s third largest navy, with virtually every manner of ship, crewed and supported by close to 100,000 Canadian men and women.

The legacy left by the Battle of the Atlantic continues to this day in Halifax. The strategic importance of the Maritimes in the Second World War was demonstrated by the rapid expansion in local infrastructure to support the war effort. Much of the wartime experience and infrastructure became the foundation for postwar development of Halifax into a major trading and Navy port.

In closing, I would encourage you the next time you find yourself in Point Pleasant Park to take Sailor’s Memorial Way to the Halifax Memorial and pause for a moment and remember the 3000 gallant Canadians – Regulars, Reservists and merchant mariners – who sacrificed their youth for us. Without their ultimate sacrifice, our lives would be dramatically different today.

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