

# The Admiral's View



## THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC

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The Battle of the Atlantic was the bitter campaign fought to ensure the flow of vital supplies from North America to Europe in support of the Allied war effort during the Second World War. The German submarine force proved a daunting enemy and Winston Churchill once said: "The only thing that really frightened me during the war was the U-boat peril." At the start of the war, the fledgling Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) was woefully unprepared for this threat. Entering the war with only 13 ships and 3,000 personnel, the RCN answered the call and grew exponentially so that by VE Day the RCN's strength included 370 ships and 100,000 sailors. Against formidable odds, and because of the monumental courage and ingenuity of the sailors, merchant seaman and aircrews, the Allies were ultimately victorious. In

addition to this massive growth in our country's fighting strength, another enormous change was occurring in the very fabric of Canadian society, driven by the need to produce the ships and aircraft that were required to fight the Battle of the Atlantic.

Today, it is difficult to imagine the scale of effort that was required for Canada to be engaged in a conflict such as the Second World War, because it was total war. The Battle of the Atlantic is the only international conflict that has been fought within the sovereign territory of Canada. German U-boats operated all along the Atlantic coast and into the Gulf of Saint Lawrence, and Canadian shipping was sunk within sight of Halifax. This was the longest battle of the Second World War, during which the RCN and Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) escorted more than 200 million tons of shipping and sank 52 U-boats. The cost of victory was high and the RCN lost 24 ships and 2000 sailors. In addition, the merchant navy lost 71 ships and 2000 sailors while the RCAF lost 700 airmen.

The workhorse of the Battle of the Atlantic was the corvette. These vessels were small warships that were only 205 feet long, but they were extremely maneuverable, which made them effective for countering the U-boat threat. Their small size also meant that life onboard was extremely challenging. The North Atlantic is an unforgiving environment, prone to frequent gales and very rough seas. Life at sea in a corvette was very difficult and the sailors demonstrated tremendous courage. They lived and fought this critical battle in cold wet ships; they endured freezing temperatures and stormy seas, all under the constant threat of U-boat attacks.

From the crucible of this total war, Canada transformed from an agrarian to an industrial society. The Battle of the Atlantic generated an enormous demand for warships. Shipyards on both coasts, the St. Lawrence and the Great Lakes built approximately 120 corvettes as well as frigates and minesweepers. In addition to the industrial growth within the country, there was also a significant shift away from conventional gender roles as women moved into traditionally male jobs. The contribution of women in the industrial production of ships was a critical component of the ultimate victory. HMCS *Sackville* is Canada's Naval Memorial and the last of the corvettes that fought the Battle of Atlantic. She is a familiar figure on the Halifax waterfront and stands as a testament to not only the fight at sea, but also to Canadian innovation and shipbuilding.

The Battle of the Atlantic was a defining moment in the history of this country, and Canada was profoundly altered because of the national effort and the economic evolution that was precipitated by it. Today's sailors have inherited the proud legacy of courage and sacrifice which the veterans of this campaign epitomise. Every year, on the first Sunday in May, we remember the sacrifice of those who fought in this pivotal battle. This year marks the 70th anniversary of the Battle of Atlantic and for this reason, we will hold a series of events to commemorate the sacrifices of those who fought for our freedom. These events will include the annual Battle of Atlantic Concert on May 1, a Battle of Atlantic Parade at Sackville Landing on May 2, a Battle of Atlantic Fun Run on May 3, and the traditional remembrance ceremony at Point Pleasant Park on Sunday May 4.

I look forward to seeing you there.