

# Battle of the Atlantic

When the Second World War began, German U-boats had a stranglehold on vital shipping routes to Britain. Canada was in the forefront to win control of the high seas.

GARY MCGREGOR  
SPECIAL TO THE SUN

The battle raged for five years, on an ocean as pitiless as the enemy. It was desperate, and decisive. The Battle of the Atlantic turned the tide of the Second World War from imminent defeat to inevitable victory. And the valour of Canadian seamen was central to it.

The victory — and the sacrifice — is commemorated on May 2, Battle of the Atlantic Sunday.

In the spring of 1940, Hitler's armies overran Europe. Britain stood alone. Its survival depended on the Atlantic lifeline: the ships that brought to the island nation much of its raw materials, most of its food and all of its oil. If enough of those ships could be sent to the bottom, the Germans calculated, a starving England would sue for peace and the war would be won.

Winston Churchill was under no illusions: "The Battle of the Atlantic was the dominating factor all through the war... everything elsewhere depended on its outcome."

With the fall of France, the Nazis gained valuable Atlantic ports for their most formidable weapon: the U-boat. In the second half of 1940, German submarines sank a quarter million tons of merchant shipping.

For German Admiral Karl Dönitz and the men who crewed his fleet of 100 U-boats, it was the "happy time." In eight months, 400 merchant ships were torpedoed. Britain's annual imports plunged from a pre-war level of 55 million tons to 35 million by January 1941.

For the rest of the war, the two sides would be locked in a race to build ships and U-boats, and a remorseless struggle to sink them.

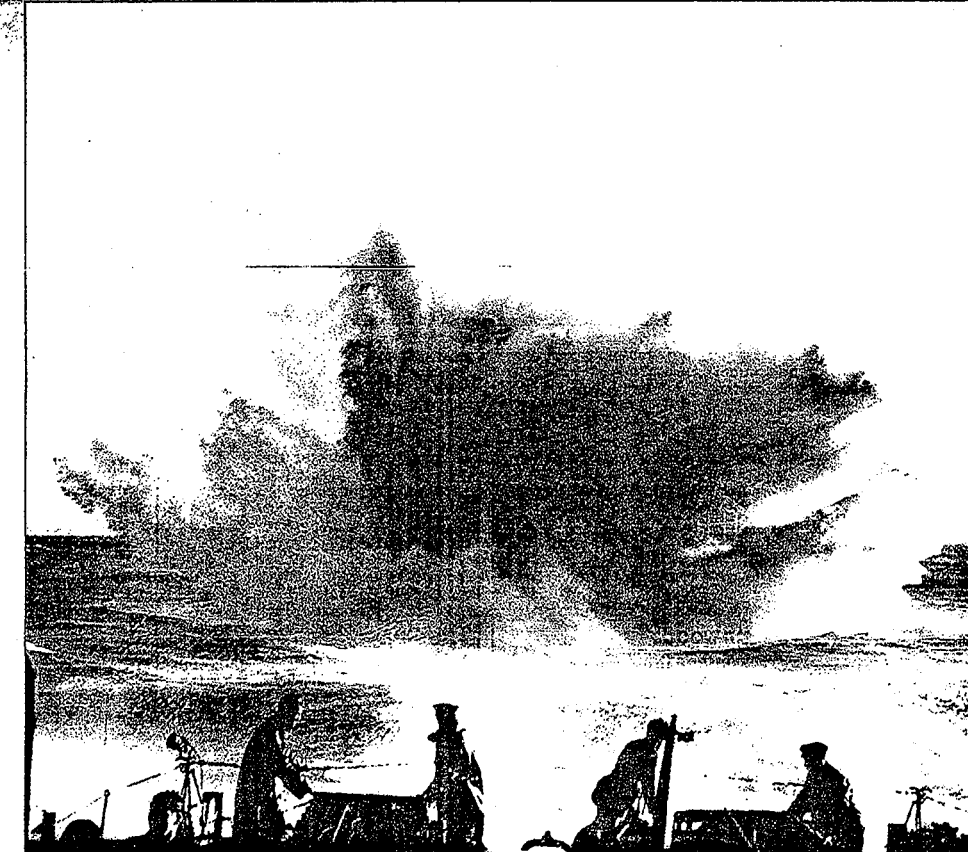
The Royal Canadian Navy began the conflict with a meagre force of six destroyers and five minesweepers. It would grow 50-fold, to more than 400 fighting ships manned by 100,000 officers and crew.

Three luxury liners were bought from CN Steamships and converted to armed merchant cruisers. The 6,000-ton *Prince Robert*, armed with six-inch guns dating from 1896, left her Vancouver shipyard in 1940, "in a very unready state," according to her captain.

Requisitioned fishing boats swept east coastal waters for mines, rather than cod. Canadian agents surreptitiously purchased yachts from owners in the still-neutral United States. Once in Canada, the yachts were refitted, armed with .303 machine guns, and assigned to coastal defence.

But the most pressing need was for escorts. On their own, the deep-laden and slow-moving supply ships were easy targets for the stealthy predators. The convoy system — up to 100 ships arrayed in columns, their perimeter patrolled by navy escort vessels — afforded them at least a fighting chance of surviving the two-week crossing.

Canadian shipyards worked feverishly to construct escorts. Fourteen small (950-ton), seaworthy corvettes slid down the



DEADLY BLAST: A depth charge containing more than 300 pounds of explosives detonates astern of a Canadian frigate.



DON MacKECHNIE: Aboard the HMCS Grou in 1944.



MARTY MCGREGOR: On graduation day from signal school, 1941



MARTY MCGREGOR: The retired naval vet in Richmond, B.C., 1988

ways in 1940. Depth-charges on their sterns were designed to rupture the hulls of submerged U-boats.

Ill-trained, ill-equipped, the Canadians grimly coped. But losses mounted: German U-boats, aircraft and warships claimed 1,299 ships in 1941.

The following year was even worse: nearly 8 million tons of merchant shipping, 1,664 vessels, were lost. Dönitz was achieving his goal: Allied ships were going to the bottom faster than they were being replaced.

By the fall of 1942, he had almost 300 U-boats. Concentrated in mid-Atlantic, beyond the range of Allied air cover, they stalked convoys in wolf-packs of 20 or more submarines. Strategists called the area the Greenland Air Gap. Sailors came to call it the Black Pit.

The North Atlantic could be a fearsome enemy in its own right. In the winter of 1942-1943, nearly a hundred ships went down in monstrous seas. Storms disabled a third of the Allied escorts. In March 1943, a ferocious gale wreaked havoc on two convoys. U-boats feasted on the dispersed

vessels, sinking 22 of the 90 merchantmen and one escort.

The lucky ones ploughed on. Sailors stood watch through snow squalls and sub-zero temperatures. They scrambled across rolling, pitching decks, chipping away ice blocks whose accumulated weight could capsize a corvette. They snatched sleep when they could, on hammocks slung in cramped, reeking messdecks.

Pounding waves snuffed out galley stoves, forcing crews to subsist for days on corned beef and hard tack. Seaside prairie boys alternately prayed to live and yearned to die.

They were always wet, always cold. And always there was the knife-edge suspense: at any moment, the sighted periscope, the wail of action stations, the white wake of a torpedo across the bow, the fire ball of an exploding tanker, the distant cries of survivors in an oil-slicked sea.

Don MacKechnie, of the Vancouver Naval Veterans Association, was a coder aboard HMCS Grou. He remembers "hours of boredom followed by minutes of absolute terror. We could be at

action stations for half an hour to two days. Otherwise, we just tried to keep alert and keep food in our belly." Up to a hundred men were "living in everybody else's sweat." All that, the Burnaby resident noted, "for a buck and a quarter a day."

In 1943, the battle turned in the Allies' favour. Training and tactics improved. New frigates, with improved detection equipment and weaponry, hunted U-boats in independent Support Groups.

Convoys finally got air-cover in the Black Pit. The United States transferred long-range Liberator bombers from the Pacific. The British put makeshift flight decks on merchant ships. Radar-equipped aircraft pounced on U-boats, strafing them before they could dive.

The climactic confrontation came in May, when 60 U-boats converged on convoy ONS5 in mid-Atlantic. Six ships were torpedoed on May 5. The following night, the packs closed in for the kill.

But fog set in, concealing the convoy. A support group raced to the scene. The escorts homed

in on the U-boats with radar, destroying five of them by ramming and depth-charging. Two subs collided in the fog and sank. The dispirited packs withdrew.

Dönitz's losses mounted to 41 U-boats in May alone. The admiral's youngest son, Peter, went down with U-954, sunk by a Liberator.

To counter German acoustic torpedoes, the Allies towed cat gear behind their ships — clanking metal bars that drowned out the propellers.

In April 1944, the frigates *Grou* and *Wasquesiu* broke away from their convoy of 35 merchant ships. Black pennants streamed from their yards: they had asdic (sonar) contact with a submarine.

Marty McGregor of Richmond was MacKechnie's watchmate on the *Grou*. "We zigzagged around and dropped a few ineffectual charges, then were ordered to abandon the sweep and get back to station," recalls McGregor. "Just as we received the message, 'Put out your cat. We've just got ours out; I saw the trail of a torpedo, cross our bow and strike the *Wasquesiu's*

## Battle of the Atlantic Sunday parade & service

**WHEN:** Sunday  
**WHERE:** Waterfront Park, North Vancouver  
**PARKING:** Pacific Marine Training Campus garage, 265 West Esplanade  
**PARADE:** 10:30 a.m. from foot of Chesterfield Street  
**SERVICE:** 11:00 a.m. at the Sailors' Memorial  
**FOR MORE INFORMATION:** Vancouver Naval Veterans Association, 274-8148

cat gear." Bill Gibb, aboard *Wasquesiu*, picks up the story: "We were a little weary of putting out this cat gear and bringing it in again. All at once one of the younger sailors hollered 'torpedo' but we paid no attention to him. Then there was a terrific explosion as the torpedo hit the cat gear. We had more respect for it after that."

On October 16, 1944, HMCS *Annan* exchanged ferocious machinegun fire with U-1006, which had been forced to surface by depth-charges. A torpedo missed the frigate by only yards. Riddled with 4-inch and Oerlikon rounds and blasted by a depth-charge that landed directly on her, the U-boat went down for the last time. Forty-six German survivors were plucked from the sea.

The corvette HMCS *Lachute* was in mid-Atlantic in 1945 when Lt. Ray Hatrick asked a 21-year-old gunnery officer to give Easter Sunday service. The sea was "calm as a millpond," Ray McColl remembers as, "humbled and exhilarated," he gave his first sermon to 60 of the crew. "Most of them had gone to Sunday school. They knew the hymns."

His calling found, the big, affable McColl spent four years after the war on the missionary boat *Thomas Crosby*. In villages along B.C.'s northern coast, his stentorian sermons boomed like the guns of his old warship.

Sunday in North Vancouver, McColl officiates his fourth Battle of the Atlantic service. Among the names on the Sailors' Memorial are two of his friends, lost with 99 others on the *Spike-nard* and the *Esquimalt*.

Canada's navy lost 2,210 sailors and 24 warships in the Battle of the Atlantic. The RCAF lost 752 airmen. One of every eight Canadian merchant sailors — 1,629 people — died.

The Germans paid dearly, too: Seven out of every 10 U-boatmen perished in their "iron coffins."

By war's end, almost 26,000 merchant ship voyages crossed the Atlantic. They bore the 181 million tons of food and material that kept Britain going, and the armies that liberated Hitler's Fortress Europe. Canada's sailors saw many of them across a grim, grey battlefield.

Langley's Bill Royds was a leading seaman on HMCS *Saint John*. "Next to one's own ship, we all had a sense of pride in our mates, our officers, and our ability to withstand the foul weather, the terrible food, the sudden alarms, the incessant training, and the cramped quarters.

"In another life, we might not have been close friends, but on a ship of war there is no room for pettiness. One's life depended on the other man, and he in turn depended on you to do your job."

On May 2, Canada salutes a job well done.

Gary McGregor, son of the late naval vet Marty McGregor, is a Vancouver writer now at work on a book about the Battle of the Atlantic.

# News and Musings...



Gary McGregor (Photo at left), is doing what other people only talk about: he's writing a book about The Battle of the Atlantic. As a son of a RCNVR vet who served in the Battle, you may remember him as the author of the story which appeared in THE VANCOUVER SUN, on Friday, June 30th, 1999. Gary would like to meet and interview any of our members who played a part in the events he's chronicling. He's not interested in major events, per se - just day to day existence, thoughts, rumours, boredom, highlights, and like that.

Gary is trying to relate the everyday lives of the Canadian Navy vets who did the living each day through long months at sea. What he's trying to do is to bring home to his generation, and the generation of our grandchildren, about exactly what it was like on the North Atlantic.

If you'd like to contribute, give him a call: Gary McGregor, at (604) 946-9741. If you're an out-of-town SEA BAG reader, he can be reached at: #222-4845-53rd St., Delta, B.C., V4K 2Z3, by mail.

## SPOTLIGHT



### CANADA DAY FIREWORKS & BARBECUE!

Name:

Address:

Service on RCN / merchant navy ships:

Action Station:

A comment on life in the messdeck:

A humorous or dramatic story?

A memory of V-E Day:

Your most vivid wartime memory:



ABOVE: President George Grant is shown making the presentation of his Certificate of Life Membership to SEA BAG editor, Don MacKechnie, on May 1st.

Your comments are appreciated, and will be attributed, with your permission, in my narrative history, 'White Ensign, Black Pit'. I recognize your generation's great service to our country, and thank you for passing along to another generation your personal memories of Canada's war at sea.

Respectfully,

Gary McGregor

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