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# CANADA'S MERCHANT SEAMEN

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# Canada's Merchant Seamen

**The Hon. LIONEL CHEVRIER, Minister of Transport**

No body of men has contributed more to the prosecution of the war effort than those gallant seamen who man the ships of the Allied Merchant Navies, and to which Canada's contribution in ships and men has grown from small beginnings to now play a substantial role.

It is necessary to divide Canada's shipping activities into three categories, viz:—

- (a) Foreign-going shipping
- (b) Coastal and Home-Trade shipping
- (c) Inland waters (Great Lakes) shipping

Each is of great importance to the transportation of war supplies. The foreign-going ships and some of those in the Coastal and Home trades pursue their voyages in enemy infested waters. It is in regard to the Seamen manning the ships in contact with the enemy that this statement refers.

As the Minister responsible for the Transportation systems of Canada, I think a statement from me will reassure the public that this Government has been most solicitous for the welfare of our Merchant Seamen and I will demonstrate the practical form in which this has been given effect.

## **An Unarmed Force**

It is necessary at the outset to record that Merchant Seamen are all volunteers and are engaged in a civilian capacity. Many people believe that the service is an

enlisted one, similar to the three Armed Forces. This is not so, Seamen themselves are opposed to the regimentation or control that would naturally follow enlistment in a uniformed force.

Nevertheless, all of us know that those Seamen whose voyages and duties bring them in contact with the enemy, undergo desperate risks and hazards. The dangers they encounter are comparable with those experienced by the average man in uniform.

At the outbreak of the war in 1939 there were only 37 Canadian registered ships engaged in foreign voyages. These ships gave a good account of themselves but nearly half of them have been lost by enemy attack. The number of Canadian Seamen employed on these original ships was approximately 1,400.

Before the War, many other Canadians, with an urge for the adventurous life of a Seaman, engaged themselves to serve on vessels of Allied Nations. When war commenced our Eastern Canadian ports became the terminal of the Atlantic supply line, and opportunities for engagement on ships became increasingly available; many more Canadians offered themselves for service and joined such ships.

## War Time Problems

Very early in the war period it was appreciated that to maintain the regularity of sailings and avoid delay in the dispatch of supplies, the following three major problems must be solved:—

*Firstly.*—Deficiencies in crews, caused by casualties such as sickness, injury and even desertion became a matter for extreme anxiety, as sometimes the lack of one man with special qualifications could and did cause delay in sailing, with the consequent missing of convoy; therefore, what

was needed was to create a reserve of trained Seamen ready at Eastern seaports to fill any crew deficiency.

*Secondly.*—The profession of a Seaman requires a considerable degree of experience and knowledge, and to provide such reserves of men capable of assignment to the various grades of sea-going duties, it was thought essential to establish Schools of Instruction for beginners and to provide tuition for men capable of advancement.

*Thirdly.*—Our Eastern ports soon became the havens of safety and rest to the Seamen maintaining the life line so essential to the fighting fronts. Thousands of ships and many thousands of Seamen of all Allied Nations appeared in our ports for the first time. It was quickly apparent that extraordinary measures were necessary to provide facilities ashore for rest, relaxation, recreation and welfare of officers and men and to receive and care for survivors landed after shipwreck, etc.

### **New Government Directorate**

Following recommendations by a Committee appointed by the Government to study the whole situation, steps were taken to establish Merchant Seamen Manning Pools; to set up Training Schools and facilities as found necessary; and to encourage, assist and co-ordinate the extension of facilities for welfare of Seamen in Canadian ports.

On May 19th, 1941, Order in Council P.C. 14/3550 was passed and read in part:—

*That the Merchant Marine, on which our seaborne commerce depends, is, under present conditions, virtually an arm of our fighting services, and the*

*provision of Merchant Seamen, their training, care and protection is essential to the proper conduct of the war, and vitally necessary to the keeping open of the sea lanes on which the successful outcome of the present conflict so largely depends.*

An officer known as the Director of Merchant Seamen was appointed to place these new measures into operation and the new Branch commenced operation at once with the following result:—

1. *Merchant Seamen Manning Pools* were erected and placed in operation in succession at Halifax, in September 1941; Montreal, January 1st, 1942; Saint John, July 1942; and Vancouver in May, 1942.

Manning Pools admit medically fit and trained foreign-going Seamen (officers and ratings) who are offered the basic pay of their rank and full board and lodging, provided they undertake to accept assignment to Canadian foreign-going ships as directed. Thus serving not only the purpose of maintaining reserves of trained Seamen but also offer Seamen who agree to join a Pool with continuous pay and a home between ship engagements.

Some substantial additional benefits to Seamen have been subsequently offered to encourage Pool membership; these will be described later.

It is of interest to record that the United Kingdom Authorities asked us to accommodate in our Manning Pools in Canada the very large reserves of United Kingdom Seamen which have since passed through Canada to man new tonnage that Britain acquired from Canadian and United States shipyards. Many thousands of Britain's Seamen have sojourned in these Manning Pools and others, including shipwrecked men, have also been taken care of.

2. *Training facilities* were established as follows:—

(a) There was set up at Hubbards, Nova Scotia, the St. Margaret's Sea Training School where an intensive course of seamanship is provided to trainees, who, on graduation after 13 weeks, enter the Manning Pools as Junior Ordinary Seamen, or as Apprentices (Cadet Officers).

(b) A Marine Engineering Instructional School was established at Prescott, Ontario, to give 6 weeks practical training to stokehold and engine room ratings.

Both schools are residential and trainees receive remuneration during the periods of study.

(c) Free tuition is available at a number of centres, to men with the necessary experience and qualifications to enable them to procure Certificates of Competency either as Navigating Officers or Marine Engineers.

During tuition basic pay and board and lodging are supplied.

(d) A scheme was devised to train Wireless Operators, and a selected number of young men were placed under tuition at various Radio Colleges in Canada. The maximum duration of the course was 12 months and during the period of study students received subsistence payments of \$60.00 per month. When qualified they received a Second Class Certificate of Proficiency. On graduation they received a refund of their tuition fee and were placed under agreement with a Manning Pool to serve at least 2 years at sea.

(e) Opportunity was taken to place suitable men in the Manning Pool kitchens to receive

training as ships' cooks. While so engaged appropriate pay and board and lodging are given.

3. *Welfare*.—As I have indicated an unprecedented situation arose with respect to the welfare of Seamen whilst their vessels were loading war supplies in our ports. Men were tired after long ordeals. The home countries of many of them were occupied by the enemy. The British ports where the vessels unloaded were under frequent bombardment. Attacks by submarine, surface raiders and by aircraft were encountered at sea and in ports abroad; furthermore the interminable blackout was nerve racking. Many societies and their countless supporters were endeavouring to render assistance but it was necessary to co-ordinate all facilities and to create a uniform plan.

It was evident, that equally with the Armed Forces, Merchant Seamen would appreciate well found clubs, where they could secure respite from life aboard ship; a night ashore in a clean bed, proper meals, canteen facilities and entertainment. It was a fact that at some important ports no facilities at all were available, at others the existing establishments were taxed beyond capacity.

The provision of social amenities of such a nature has been the prerogative of private enterprise. A nation-wide organization with a maritime appeal was found in the Navy League of Canada. This body was invited and readily agreed to provide Allied Merchant Seamen's Clubs wherever it was indicated such Clubs would be necessary. Exclusively for the use of Merchant Seamen there are now in operation by the Navy League of Canada nine Allied Merchant

Seamen's Clubs and four Clubs for Merchant Navy Officers. It would be tedious to recount the multifarious functions these Clubs have assumed but the scope of the work can be gauged by the fact that in the last year more than two million men have used them.

While these Seamen's Clubs are a private enterprise they obviously are not self supporting and the Navy League, though they undertook their creation and operation at the outset without Government help, are now assisted from public funds to the extent of further capital costs and operating deficits. This is in line with the assistance now given to Auxiliary Services catering to the Armed Forces.

A vast number of other welfare facilities are provided to our Merchant Seamen by other voluntary societies including of course the Canadian Red Cross Society, the Salvation Army, Women's Naval Auxiliaries, Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire, the Catholic Women's League, Knights of Columbus, the Y.M.C.A., the Canadian Legion Educational Services, etc., etc. Ditty bags, books and magazines, woollen articles, games and so on are distributed to Seamen of all our Allies in great quantities. Entertainments, dances, movie shows, sports meetings are frequently arranged and numerous private sources contribute in a variety of forms.

Canada does not lag behind any country in this form of recognition to Allied Merchant Seamen.

### **Expansion of Merchant Navy**

As Canada's immense shipbuilding programme took form, it was decided to retain many of the new cargo ships for service under the Canadian flag. The Training

Schemes and Manning Pools I have briefly described assumed added importance and from time to time decisions to increase the fleet of Canadian operated ships were only made possible by the progress made in training men and recruiting qualified Seamen through the Pools. We have now the largest merchant fleet in the history of the Dominion and Canada will shortly be operating nearly 180 large ocean going cargo vessels requiring 12,000 skilled Seamen of all ranks to man them. This large manpower compares with only 1,400 Seamen employed at the outbreak of war.

I said at the outset that Canadian Merchant Seamen are civilians and that entry to a Manning Pool was voluntary. With the large fleet of vessels now to be kept in operation it is necessary to be assured of a steady supply of Seamen qualified to sail in them.

**Benefits to Pool Members.**—To offer further inducement to Seamen to serve continuously, a new form of Pool Agreement was introduced on April 1st, 1944. This agreement provides that if a Seaman will undertake to serve as directed for two years, or the duration of the war, whichever is the lesser, he will be entitled to:—

1. A War Service Bonus of 10% of his total earnings at the end of each 12 months of actual service.
2. Two days per month cumulative leave on pay at the end of each year.
3. Round trip rail transportation between a Pool and his home at the low cost of one third of the one-way fare.
4. Basic pay for a maximum of 12 weeks if incapacitated for sickness or injury.

While a large number of men have subscribed to this new agreement, there are still some who wish to retain the traditional liberty of a Seaman to seek an engage-

ment independently. It is hoped, however, that the substantial benefits will encourage the majority to enroll.

**Remuneration.**—There is some misconception as to the remuneration of Merchant Seamen. The wages paid on the Crown-owned ships are substantially better now than those generally prevailing at the outbreak of war, as the following comparison will show:—

<i>Able Seamen</i>	1940	1944
Basic Wages .....	\$52.50	\$ 89.93
War Risk Bonus .....	13.12	44.50
	<hr/>	<hr/>
Total .....	\$65.62	\$134.43

### War Time Benefits

While Merchant Seamen are employed in a civilian capacity it has been found equitable during the war to make appropriate provisions for their protection, as outlined below.

**Income Tax Concessions.**—The Government has agreed that War Risk Bonus received by Merchant Seamen is free of income tax and in such cases the value of a Seaman's subsistence is not computed in taxable income. In effect this amounts to a relief from income tax on a minimum of approximately \$70.00 per month of income; this means that practically no married Seaman below the rank of an officer is liable to tax.

**Pensions and Compensations.**—Compensation for damages or injury as a result of enemy action is paid by the Government on a basis comparable with equivalent rank in the Royal Canadian Navy. For instance, the Master of a Canadian foreign-going ship ranks as a Commander of the Navy, the Chief Officer (or mate) as a Lieutenant Commander, and so on. This compensation is made in the form of a pension to widows with allowances for dependent children; disability pension for permanent injury; compensation for loss of effects; and the payment of a detention

allowance equal to pay and war risk bonus if a Seaman is held by the enemy.

Furthermore, should a Canadian Seaman be receiving compensation for injury from enemy action, while serving on a vessel of an Allied Nation and such compensation is lower than the Canadian scale, the difference is made up by this Government.

Merchant Seamen who are receiving pensions for disability from enemy action are entitled to participate under the Veterans' Land Act, under the Veterans' Insurance Act, and are entitled to vocational training if unable to follow the profession of a seaman.

**Civil Re-Establishment Act.**—The right to civil re-establishment applies also to men who left civilian employment to serve in the Merchant Navy.

**Hospitalization and Treatment.**—Under the provisions of the Canada Shipping Act, a Sick Mariners Fund was established which provides medical care for any Seaman landed from his ship for treatment or hospitalization. This fund is financed by the levy of a small tax on tonnage but its benefits have been greatly extended to cover Canadian Seamen brought back to Canada for treatment.

**Merchant Seamen Special Bonus Order.**—The Government has studied the possibility of extending rehabilitation benefits to Canadian Merchant Seamen. While it is not considered justifiable, having regard to the terms of employment and remuneration of Merchant Seamen, to make available to them benefits on the scale provided members of the Naval, Military and Air Forces, it is deemed advisable and equitable, in consideration of the essential services rendered by them, involving hardships and risks in many respects comparable to those met with by members of the Forces, to offer certain additional benefits to those who have served in dangerous waters and are prepared to serve for the duration of the war if required. Such benefits should not be of a nature which would encourage

Seamen to leave the industry at the end of the war to seek employment in other fields as the services of many skilled Seamen will be required if Canada is to maintain a Merchant Marine after the war. The following additional benefits are to be made available to our Seamen:—

At the termination of hostilities, a "special bonus" of ten per cent of total earnings for service at sea will be paid to any Seaman who has served on a Canadian ship for at least six months in dangerous waters since September 10, 1939, subject to qualifying under the following general requirements: that he enrolls in the Merchant Seamen Reserve; or has signed a Manning Pool Agreement to serve for the duration of the war; or is permanently employed at sea for the duration of the war by the operator of a Canadian ship; or, having served since September 1939, is prevented by medical reasons from further service; or a Canadian Seaman who is permanently serving since the outbreak of war in the United Kingdom Merchant Seamen Reserve Pool.

Full details of the applications of the Special Bonus will be found in Order in Council P.C. 3227 of May 3, 1945 which also embraces other benefits, viz:—

Merchant Seamen eligible to receive the special bonus are entitled to participate under the Veterans' Insurance Act;

Railway transportation from Canadian port to place of permanent domicile in Canada will be provided on completion of service at sea;

Facilities for courses of instruction will be provided to men otherwise suitable to enable advancement in the profession of Seamen.

**Other Benefits to Seamen.**—Consideration is constantly being given to the possibility of introducing new measures to improve the conditions of our gallant Merchant Seamen, whose numbers have grown so greatly in the last two years. It is intended by means of a

special provision to cover foreign-going Seamen under the provisions of Workmen's Compensation Order, with the object of providing this necessary protection where Provincial Acts do not cover the occupation of Seamen.

### **Conclusion**

It is therefore evident that great strides have been taken to build up the manpower for a powerful Canadian Merchant Marine. The Government has shown itself fully sensible of the importance and valour of the gallant men who man our ships and subject to the limitations imposed by the civilian status of the Merchant Navy will continue to ameliorate their conditions.

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