

10 Facts on...The Battle of the Atlantic



- 1) The Battle of the Atlantic began on September 3, 1939, with the sinking of the Montréal-bound passenger ship *SS Athenia* by a German submarine west of Ireland. Of the 1,400 passengers and crew, 118 (including four Canadians) were killed.

- 2) German submarines (U-boats) were the main threat to merchant and other surface vessels. Some were capable of remaining away from port for three months or more. U-boats carried torpedoes and also laid mines. In June 1941 alone, more than 500,000 tons of Allied shipping was lost to U-boats.

- 3) The first trans-Atlantic convoy of the war sailed from Halifax to the United Kingdom on September 16, 1939, escorted by British cruisers and the Canadian destroyers *HMCS St. Laurent* and *HMCS Saguenay*.

- 4) A typical convoy of 40 ships might be 10 columns wide with four ships in each column. It would be headed by a flagship, carrying the convoy commodore and, ideally, escorted by warships patrolling its outer flanks. Ammunition ships and tankers, with their highly volatile fuel, were on the inside.

- 5) While the convoy routes of the North Atlantic and the notorious Murmansk Run to northern Russia claimed the most ships and men, there were no safe havens anywhere for merchant seamen. Whether in the coastal waters of North America, the North or South Atlantic, the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean or the Pacific, the waters were dangerous and Canadian ships with Canadian crews traversed them all.

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- 6) The Royal Canadian Navy began the war with 13 vessels and 3,500 personnel, and ended it with the third largest Allied navy. At war's end, the RCN had 373 fighting ships and more than 110,000 members (all of whom were volunteers), including 6,500 women who served in the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Services. Aircraft from the Royal Canadian Air Force's Eastern Air Command and RCAF crews in RAF Coastal Command and ships helped sink 50 U-boats.

- 7) A Victoria Cross was posthumously awarded to Flight Lieutenant David Hornell of Mimico, Ontario, for his courage during the Battle of the Atlantic. His Canso amphibious aircraft came across a surfaced U-boat north of the Shetland Islands in June 1944. Although his aircraft had been hit by anti-aircraft fire, and was burning and shaking violently as a result, Hornell managed to destroy the enemy submarine and land the damaged aircraft on the water, where it soon sank. By his leadership he managed to keep most of the crew alive until they were rescued.

- 8) The merchant fleet suffered grievous losses in ships and men. By the end of the war, as many as 72 Canadian merchant ships would be lost to enemy action—torpedoed, bombed, mined or shelled. Storms at sea, operational accidents and structural shortcomings also took their toll. The Merchant Navy Book of Remembrance lists the names of approximately 1,600 Canadian merchant seamen who died at sea during the war, including eight women.

- 9) Some 2,000 members of the RCN were killed during the war, the vast majority of them in the Battle of the Atlantic. Another 752 members of the RCAF also died in maritime operations.

- 10) The Battle of the Atlantic lasted the duration of the Second World War in Europe, which officially ended on May 8, 1945 (VE-Day).