



MERCHANT NAVY COMMEMORATIVE THEME PROJECT (MNCTP)



NEWS RELEASE

**TODAY WE COMMEMORATE
MERCHANT NAVY DAY IN CANADA, THE
UNITED KINGDOM, AUSTRALIA, AND NEW ZEALAND**

SEPTEMBER 3, 2020

Today – Mr. Stéphane Ouellette, President and Chief Executive Officer, Merchant Navy Commemorative Theme Project (MNCTP), joined Canadians and the international community in remembering the sacrifices and contributions made by the Allied Merchant Navy and American Merchant Marine Veterans during the First and Second World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam.

On September 3, 1939, on the day that the United Kingdom and France declared war on Germany, the passenger ship S.S. Athenia was torpedoed by U-30, while on patrol in the northwestern sector of Ireland. The ship was carrying 1,103 passengers, including approximately 500 Jewish refugees, 469 Canadians, 311 Americans, 72 British, along with 315 of her crew. However, 98 passengers and 19 of her crew were killed. Fifty-four were Canadian, 28 were American, including Canadian Stewardess Hannah Baird. Incidentally, the first casualties of the Second World War were Canadian and American civilians.

During the Second World War, a total of 25,343 merchant ships, with 164,783,921 tons of cargo on board, sailed from North America to Britain. The Royal Canadian Navy gave to the struggle over 2,000 dead and 24 warships. More than 900 RCAF and Canadian Army personnel were also lost. Over 2,199 Canadian Merchant Navy Seaman were killed in both World Wars. Moreover, more than 250,000 American Merchant Marine sailed the treacherous oceans of the world. Over 6,835 American Merchant Marine were killed and over 11,000 wounded. In addition, 604 Merchant Mariners were taken prisoners of war, resulting in 61 casualties within POW camps.



(Merchant seamen and navy men: survivors of two torpedo sinkings reach St. John's, Nfld., in September 1942.)

Quotes

"On this day, we honour our veterans of the Merchant Navy and remember the crucial role they played in securing victory in Europe. They faced years of relentless attacks from German U-boats trying to cut Allied supply lines. Yet, with an unwavering commitment to the war effort and to ensuring allied forces received necessary supplies, the Merchant Navy made trip after trip with the knowledge that their vessels were key targets for the enemy. We must never forget the many sacrifices they made in the name of freedom, peace, and democracy."

– The Right Honourable Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada (from [PM Merchant Navy Day Greetings' Letter](#))

"From the outbreak of war until victory was declared, Canada's Merchant Navy ships played a vital role in transporting supplies across the Atlantic support of the Allied effort in Western Europe. But in the face of enemy U-boats, warplanes and surface vessels, that support came at an awful cost. Thousands of our Merchant Mariners were killed. Countless others were wounded. Today, we remember their sacrifices on the North Atlantic, and the important role they played in bringing an end to the Second World War."

– The Honourable Lawrence MacAulay, Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence

"Every year, on September 3, Canadians take a moment to remember the courage and determination of our Merchant Navy. Throughout major world conflicts, Canada's Merchant Navy transported vital equipment, fuel, goods, and people around the world. During the Second World War alone, more than 25,000 merchant ship voyages were made. But those efforts came at a heavy cost. During the Battle of the Atlantic, approximately 1,500 Merchant mariners lost their lives. Let us always remember the service and sacrifice of our brave women and men in uniform and never forget those we have lost."

– The Hon. Erin O'Toole, Leader of Canada's Conservatives and of the Official Opposition

"Approaching the day of the commemoration of the sacrifices of the Canadian Merchant Navy, in the name of the Holy Father, I wish to assure you and all the present members, of a special remembrance in his prayers for the souls of the men and women who lost their lives serving their countries in the Allied Merchant Navy during the Second World War.

"Commemorating the 70th anniversary of [World War II], Pope Francis expressed the wish and the hope that the entire human family, learning from the tragedies of the past and faced with the current conflicts around the world "may persevere in the search for the common good and in promotion of a culture of peace" (General Audience - May 6, 2015)."

– Monseigneur Maurizio Bravi, Chargé d'Affairs, Apostolic Nunciature in Canada, in the Name of His Holiness Pope Francis (September 1, 2015)

"As an Island Nation, we in the United Kingdom still depend heavily on the great trade routes of the sea. ... During the Second World War, that vital lifeline came very near to being severed. The stark courage of the sailors of the Merchant Navy should never be forgotten, and I write to assure you of my prayers of thankfulness for all that our forebears and elders achieved, despite their great suffering."

– The Most Reverend and Right Honourable Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury (July 21, 2017)

"The sacrifices made those who served in the Merchant Navy -- those who returned and those who did not, were made without question or thought of self-interest. They answered the call from their governments for all hands on deck. They made one of the most important contributions: providing support to military personnel and civilians. God has given to us the gift of memory that we might keep alive the memory of those who were lost. And memory is the only way to do that. There are no cemeteries where we can go to pay tribute to their sacrifice. On the high seas, there are no graves. And when we answer God's final call, we know that our brothers and sisters who have gone before us will fulfill their duty, and greet us with the words of compassion and friendship, of peace and love: "Welcome home!"

-- Rev. Dr. Brian Graham, MTh, DDiv, Principal Chaplain, Allied Merchant Navy

"As we commemorate Merchant Navy Day, we remember the courage, determination and bravery demonstrated by Canada's merchant sailors throughout the First and Second World Wars. These proud mariners, our brothers and sisters in maritime service, answered the call when the very outcome of two world wars depended on the successful movement of troops, munitions and supplies over the oceans of the world. Not unlike our frontline workers battling COVID-19 today, on whom we all depend so greatly, they too risked their lives with little protection against an enemy that was often unseen. They served during times of great risk, enduring harsh conditions at sea with enemy ships, planes and submarines hunting them. And so today, we recognize the great contributions of our merchant sailors, and honour their remarkable acts of heroism and sacrifice, for which we owe so much."

-- Vice-Admiral Art McDonald, Commander, Royal Canadian Navy

"Members of the Merchant Navy provided inestimable service and sacrifice to our country. Merchant Navy Day is an important way to give thanks for their selfless acts of bravery which contributed mightily to our freedom today. We will remember them...always!"

-- Vice-Admiral (Ret'd) Larry Murray, Grand President, The Royal Canadian Legion

Associated Links

- [Minister of Veterans Affairs and Minister of National Defence mark Merchant Navy Veterans Day and the 81st anniversary of the beginning of the Battle of the Atlantic | News Release | Veterans Affairs Canada | September 3, 2020](#)
- [Merchant Navy Historical Sheet | Veterans Affairs Canada](#)
- [Valour at Sea – Canada's Merchant Navy | Veterans Affairs Canada](#)
- [The Battle of the St. Lawrence | Veterans Affairs Canada](#)

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