

THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC

THE STORY OF BRITAIN'S WWII FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL

During almost six years of WWII between 3 September 1939 and August 1945 there were many battles. Most lasted a few days, some several months and others longer.

Britain's wartime Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, was well aware of all the battles fought during that dreadful war. He was quoted as describing one that was bitterly fought in the Atlantic Ocean as the one battle that caused him 'the most concern and anxiety'. Britain's survival in its' struggle to continue the war against Nazi Germany absolutely depended on the outcome of this battle.

Churchill named it 'The Battle of the Atlantic'. It commenced at about 7.30 pm on Sunday, 3 September 1939, the first day of the war. A German submarine, U-30, commanded by 26-year-old Kapitanleutnant Lemp, one of 30 submarines Adolf Hitler had despatched to the Atlantic in anticipation of war between Germany and England, was patrolling some 250 miles west of the Hebrides.

Hitler had earlier claimed to his staff that he knew that Britain was weak and absolutely unprepared for war. Thus, his invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939 was not likely to provoke Britain to go to war in order to honour the pact she had made with the Government of Poland.

Earlier that fateful 3 September, after Germany had failed to withdraw its' troops from Poland by 11am London time as demanded by the British Government, at that time headed by Prime Minister Neville Chamberlin, described as 'the Birmingham Gentleman', he declared that a 'state of war existed between Britain and Germany'. Hitler was, much later, reported to be surprised when the message reached him. At that time, it did not suit him to have a war with England.

German U-boats had been put on notice that if war was declared their role was to prevent merchant shipping arriving or departing British ports. This had been a significant feature of action by Germany during WWI. The design and capabilities of German submarines had been dramatically changed and improved since Hitler had come to power. Strangely enough, Hitler had decreed that if war broke out this time, the U-boats were not to attack passenger ships. It was said that he did not want to antagonise neutral countries, especially America, whose citizens may become casualties.

Shortly after 7.30pm that first day the U-boat 30 lookout reported to the Captain below that he had sighted a large steamer approaching in the gathering dusk. There was a brisk sea running so, when Captain Lemp examined it in U-30's periscope he later claimed that he wrongly assumed it to be an armed auxiliary cruiser. In fact, it was the British 14,000-ton passenger ship 'Athenia' which, earlier that day under the command of Captain James Cook had rounded the northern tip of Ireland and was steaming westwards into the Atlantic on a course to Canada.

Aboard the 'Athenia' the Captain reassured his passengers that they had nothing to fear about the war as he was sure his ship was immune from enemy submarine attack under international law. However, in accordance with standard procedure, lifeboat drill had been conducted.

Without taking further steps to confirm if the ship was armed, 'Lemp' decided to prepare for an attack. Shortly afterwards one of U-30's torpedoes struck 'Athenia's port side. Most of the force of the explosion shattered the bulkhead between the boiler rooms and the engine room

The ship stopped and immediately took on a six-degree list to port, making it difficult for frantic passengers to reach the lifeboats on the upper deck.

Captain Lemp ordered his submarine to surface and, failing to be satisfied with what he had done to an unarmed passenger liner he decided to direct his crew to open fire with their deck gun in an effort to destroy the ships' radio antenna. It is patently clear that by that time he would have been well aware that his target was not an armed merchant cruiser.

The 'Athenias' urgent SSS signal (attacked by submarine) sent Royal Navy destroyers and merchant ships racing to her aid but it was not until the early hours of the following day that they were able to reach the scene. They found 'Athenia' just barely afloat with full lifeboats bobbing in the swell nearby. 1300 survivors were rescued but a later count revealed 118 lives were lost, including 22 American citizens. 'Athenia' sank stern first that morning, 4 September 1939. One of those who died was an Australian crew member. It has since been claimed that this Merchant Navy seaman was the first Australian casualty of WWII.

There was international outrage at the sinking of 'Athenia' but, due to Hitler's claim that there would be no attacks on passenger ships, the German Government initially denied responsibility. They stated the sinking was not an attack by a German submarine. They even said they had information that the British had placed a large bomb on board the ship. This was intended so the German Navy (Kriegsmarine), would be blamed for the attack. This lie was revealed when rescued passengers of the liner reached safety. Some of them reported that they had actually seen the German submarine on the surface as its deck gun fired on them before it submerged.

The survival of the United Kingdom during the second world war depended entirely on its very large fleet of some 3000 ocean-going merchant ships which, at that time was the largest merchant fleet in the world. Also, there were about another 3000 smaller ships, over 500 tons. Their Merchant Navy consisted of about 140,000 men. Its peacetime task had been to bring into the country all its oil, half its food and most of industry's raw materials. The nation's economy also depended on its' ships to export manufactured goods to world markets.

British merchant seamen were sometimes described as being a fairly rough lot, given to heavy drinking and, as a result, to be avoided in port if any arguments arose in or around pubs. Those who worked 'below' in the engine room, firemen and trimmers, were usually from the area around Liverpool. Most ships in those days were coal burners. Their working and living conditions on board were, compared to most jobs on land, extremely harsh. The shipping companies

which owned most of the ships, enforced extremely frugal arrangements with low wages and strict food rationing.

Merchant seamen, unlike members of the Navy, Army and Air Force, were not supplied with any clothing or personal requirements. They were required to purchase their own. When 'signed on' to a ship they were subject to a form of discipline from the ship's captain. He had the power to dock their pay and even have them sacked from the ship. This could mean, should it have been a serious offence, that the seaman could be denied employment on any other British ship. His discharge document would reveal details of his conduct and his employment status.

Contrary to popular belief it was not the money that persuaded these men to return to the sea even after they had been rescued following loss of their ships. In 1942 the wage for a British able seaman was set at twenty-two pounds, twelve shillings and sixpence a month. The spirit and courage displayed by the Merchant Service was truly remarkable and was admired by most men of the Royal Navy who sailed alongside them. The British Ministry of War Transport was fearful that the high casualty rates of the Merchant Service might break morale. Nothing significant was revealed – except a general grouse from them about the poor food while at sea. Sometime later British seamen became envious that American merchant seamen were paid about double what they received.

Up to May 1941 a British seaman's pay ceased when his ship was sunk. This happened because it was considered that as he was not working and therefore not available to perform his duties, he should not be paid. This dreadful anomaly was corrected by the British Parliament that month.

However, all British merchant ships abided by strict safety rules laid down by the Board of Trade. All Masters, deck Officers and ship's engineers were well trained and extremely professional.

A few weeks after war was declared on 26 September 1939, two German 'pocket battleships' were sent into the Atlantic, one to the area off Bermuda and the other, the 'Graf Spee,' to the coast of Brazil in the south. Their mission was to

intercept British and allied merchant ships and destroy them. History reveals that the 'Graf Spee' soon met its' match in the southern Atlantic during a naval battle. It was badly damaged and eventually scuttled. It never got home to Germany.

As a result of mounting merchant ship losses, the Admiralty decided to introduce the convoy system. A typical convoy consisted of a maximum of 60 or 70 merchant ships sailing in a compact formation covering about 20 square miles of sea, initially with some small naval support craft.

A system was gradually introduced where all merchant ships were armed. If available, a few naval ratings joined the ships to man the guns, usually the 4 - inch naval gun on the stern. They became known as 'DEMS' crew (defensively equipped merchant ships). If naval personnel were not available merchant navy crew, usually the deck crew, manned the guns.

Station keeping in a convoy was, in the early stages, chaotic as engineers and masters struggled to keep in their appointed columns with fine adjustments of propeller revolutions in order to maintain a constant speed. Convoys, as a matter of necessity, travelled at the speed of the slowest ship. Usually this was less than 10 knots. There were often uneasy moments of tension, especially in bad weather and at night, between the captains of the few Royal Navy escorts and the independent-minded merchant skippers who believed they knew at least as much about seamanship as those young fellows in the 'grey funnel line'.

While the land war in Europe had been labelled the phoney war, between September and December 1939 there had been no let-up at sea. By Christmas that year Britain had already suffered the loss of 150 merchant ships almost entirely due to submarine attacks. This represented about 2% of the total British Merchant Navy's pre-war strength.

Before the end of May 1940 losses of merchant ships had approached 300,000 tons. On 16 June 1940 the British Government received an alarming report from a member of Churchill's War Cabinet which said, 'however indomitable the spirit of the country, the task of maintaining our resistance until such time as

our materials have so increased as to enable us to attempt a military decision against the enemy will be well-nigh impossible unless we are able to draw assistance on a large scale from the New World.' This was a reference to the consistent plea for assistance from the neutral United States and the fact that the battle in the Atlantic was in real danger of being lost.

During the three months from July to October 1940 the U-boats destroyed another 217 merchant ships. The U-boat attacks on the poorly guarded convoys gave a new sense of urgency to the need for more destroyers, for which Churchill had already pleaded in a cable to US President Roosevelt.

When German forces invaded Norway almost all of its' merchant fleet, the fourth largest in the world, escaped to British or allied ports. Norwegian tankers conveyed about one third of all oil to Britain during the war. 694 Norwegian ships were sunk by enemy action, mostly in the Atlantic, involving the death of at least 3700 Norwegian seamen.

On 21 September 1940 convoy HX 72, consisting of 42 merchant ships, was attacked by a 'Wolf Pack' of four U-boats. A naval report to Admiralty reads: 'at about midnight there was a very heavy explosion and a tanker burst into flames. Terrific explosions continued during the night as ship after ship was hit by torpedoes. Over a period of seven hours eleven merchantmen were attacked and sunk and over a hundred thousand tons of American supplies sent to the bottom.'

During the next month convoy SC 7 was attacked by a pack of five U-boats. One U-boat accounted for six of the eighteen merchantman that were sunk. This came about in a running battle. The slaughter was made worse because the convoy had scattered under the fierce attack leaving the stragglers to be picked off one by one. Over 80,000 tons of shipping and nearly 100,000 tons of supplies were destroyed in one of the worst convoy disasters that the war was to experience.

The escorting naval officer's report on making port, was 'Friday, 20 October 1216hrs, made my ETA Liverpool and informed C-in-C Western Approaches that NO ships were in company'.

On the morning after, a convoy of 49 ships, HX 79, loaded with American military supplies was spotted by a crew member of the wolf pack. In five hours one fifth of the convoy was wiped out.

The Atlantic is a very big ocean. As the speed of convoys was as slow as the maximum speed of the slowest, it usually took between 20 and 25 days to travel from North America to Britain's western ports. Intensive bombing of the docks on the Thames in London by the German air force forced just about all shipping to load or discharge their cargoes at crowded ports on the western coast.

Ship crews found it exhausting and stressful having to endure the 24-hour threat of attack by enemy submarines and bombing by long-range German aircraft as their ships approached the west coast of Britain. Surviving crew members became exhausted by lack of sleep.

And so, it went on, day and night for another four years. Initially Hitler was said to be happy with progress. It is recorded that he told his staff that England would soon be willing to sue for peace when it no longer had enough food for its' people and sufficient fuel for its military forces.

Many books have been written about this longest battle of the war but most of them pay little attention to the men who, time and time again, went back to sea to face a very uncertain fate in the usually violent waters, Intense cold and an extremely relentless enemy. The losses of ships and their valuable cargo were, naturally, the main subject of despair but on each merchant ship there would have been approximately 45 men. When a ship was torpedoed, especially at night or in bad weather, there was little hope for the crew. If it was a tanker laden with oil or petrol there was just about no hope of survival. Should a tanker crew member manage to get into the water uninjured he would almost certainly be devoured by fire as the burning oil spread across the ocean's surface.

Author Nicholas Monsarrat, a former Royal Navy wartime officer, in one of his books 'The Cruel Sea' depicts the life of a Royal Navy crew engaged in wartime convoy duties in the Atlantic. His story has graphic images of what it was like for sailors in the navy. However, when the following morning he described the carnage of merchant ships being attacked and sunk during the night he almost

always refers to 'ships lost during the night'. He seldom made mention of those brave souls who perished as their ship was blown up or as it took them down when it slipped beneath the waves.

During the years 1941 – 1944 the battle raged non-stop with Germany at one stage dangerously close to victory. The supply of 50 old WWI naval destroyers from America, the entry of America into the war in December 1941 and the acquisition of the ultra-secret 'enigma' code machine from a captured U-boat gradually began to turn the tide. The magnificent work of staff at Bletchley House in England in breaking the German Naval code was extremely significant.

Another significant factor which had a bearing on the outcome of the battle was the sinking by the Royal Navy of the huge German battleship 'Bismarck'. This, the largest warship ever built by Germany had been sent initially to attack convoys and Royal Navy ships. It succeeded in sinking the Royal Navy battleship 'Hood' before being located some 300 miles west of Brest on 26 May 1941.

Royal Navy ships, 'King George V' and 'Rodney,' with assistance from cruisers and aircraft from Royal Navy aircraft carriers attacked Bismarck and sank her the next day, on 27 May. In excess of 2000 German sailors lost their lives. The Royal Navy ships managed to rescue only about 150.

The first days of 1943 had seen the Battle taking an ominous turn for Britain, faced by a fuel crisis and a shortage of ships and escorts. Things were getting desperate. The Soviet Ambassador in London could not have chosen a worse time to press a demand for more and bigger Arctic convoys to Russia. Churchill wrote a curt note to his Foreign Secretary saying, 'I am getting to the end of my tether with these repeated Russian naggings. Our escorts all over the world are so attenuated that losses out of all proportion are falling on the British Merchant Navy'.

Despite German navy and air force efforts, increasing numbers of convoys managed to arrive in Britain unscathed. Those that had been attacked usually had some survivors get to port.

When the Battle of the Atlantic ended in May 1945 well over 3000 merchant ships (15 million tons of allied shipping) had been sunk, as had 175 allied naval vessels. Numbers of British and allied Merchant Navy crew lost in the Atlantic were between 33,000 and 35,000. While the majority of deaths were male seamen it is recorded that up to 50 women, almost exclusively employed on passenger and hospital ships, also died as a result of enemy action.

On the German side the losses were also terrible. In total, during the war 1162 U-boats had been built. 781 were lost. Of the 40,900 men recruited, about 28,000 lost their lives, mostly entombed in their steel coffins on the ocean bed. A few were fortunate to be able to escape as their crafts were attacked while on the surface and then having the good fortune of becoming prisoners of war.

All those British and Commonwealth veterans, Navy, Air Force and Merchant Navy who took part in the 'Battle' were awarded the campaign medal, the Atlantic Star. There were many naval personnel, mostly Royal Navy, and a large number of British and Commonwealth Air Force air crew who died, but the major participants and by far the most deaths were Merchant Navy men. The US Navy and Air Force made a significant contribution when America entered the war also with their shipyards building enormous numbers of merchant ships, mostly aptly named 'Liberty' ships.

Contrary to general opinion, during the war a considerable number of British merchant navy members received awards for service and for gallantry.

The British Government has remembered its' Merchant Navy veterans. In May 2013 they arranged a number of commemoration services throughout England entitled 'Battle of the Atlantic – 70 years on'. Eight Australian veterans (four RAAF, three Merchant Navy and one RAN) were taken to England for nine days by Australian Department of Veterans' Affairs officers. They participated in services and revisited certain historic wartime locations. Each of those eight men had a host of memories, recalling names of men they had sailed with, or flew with, and who had paid the ultimate price.

Our Department of Veterans' Affairs has conducted yet another round of services for a few Australian survivors of Battle of the Atlantic '75 years on'. In

Canberra early in May this year (2018) eight of the surviving veterans, four of them being veterans from the 2013 mission to England, attended.

It is now 73 years since that long cruel battle came to an end. The majority of those who survived and played a part in it are no longer with us. Britain also survived, and to a large extent, she did so as a result of the courage endurance and the sacrifice of the seamen of the Merchant Navy.

Seamen on British, American, Norwegian and other allied ships which were sunk in the Arctic-Murmansk convoys to Russia near the Arctic Circle suffered terribly. When their ship was sunk, torpedoed, or bombed by aircraft, three minutes in the water was about as long as they could live.

A few authors have, over the years, in publications, paid tribute to the seamen who, faced with horrendous conditions, time and time again re-joined ships in Liverpool and many other British ports. Leaving their homes and the shelter of the ports, they faced the often-raging sea, the bitter cold, and the real prospect of having their ship sunk from under them, with precious little hope of rescue. There were no funeral services, the cruel sea claimed their bodies.

Exact figures are not available but what is certain is that many of the British and allied ships sunk during those six years in the Atlantic had on board at least one Australian crew member.

At the end of the war Winston Churchill declared, referring to those wearing the Merchant Navy (MN) lapel badge, "if you ever meet one of those men, take your hat off to him because we would have lost the war if it was not for them".

The casualty rate in the Merchant Navy, on a proportional basis, was at least four times greater than that of the Navy, Army and Airforce. Those three services needed a significant number of their personnel performing essential duties which did not always require them to go into harm's way. There were no shore jobs in the Merchant Navy. Everyone went to sea – into 'harm's way'.

Casualties of Merchant Navy personnel occurred in all oceans during the war, including around the Australian coast, especially on the east coast, where some

50 ships were attacked mostly by Japanese submarines, but by far the most casualties were during the Battle of the Atlantic.

These are the words we say at our ex-service and wreath laying rituals:

‘THEY HAVE NO GRAVE BUT THE CRUEL SEA NO FLOWERS LIE AT THEIR HEAD
A RUSTING HULK IS THEIR TOMBSTONE AVAST ON THE OCEAN’S BED.’ ‘WE
WILL REMEMBER THEM LEST WE FORGET’

Don Kennedy JP

President, Merchant Navy RSL sub-Branch

Service member, Forestville RSL sub-Branch

Atlantic veteran