

The MN Day Commemorative Services And Re-union

Sunday September 3rd 2006 Tower Hill, London



A band of HM Royal Marines, lead the parade of Merchant Navy Standards and Standards of other Associations, followed by serving and retired Merchant Seafarers with other Organisations, leaving Mark Lane (Great Tower Street) for Trinity Square Gardens at 12.30 hours. The First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Jonathan Band KCB ADC took the salute upon arrival of the Parade in Trinity Square Gardens. The multi-faith Commemorative Service and wreath-laying is held at the Merchant Navy Memorial. This Annual service is held on the Sunday nearest to Merchant Navy Day, 3rd September, in memory of Merchant Seafarers who died in World Wars I and II and in conflicts up to the present day.

Over 33,000 seamen lost their lives in WW2. Men whose wages were stopped the moment a torpedo struck their ship. Men who still vividly remember the horrors of watching their shipmates drown or horrible burn to death when ships carrying high octane blew up in a fiery ball. Men who survived and returned home only to sign on and ship out yet again to face the enemy with guts and determination to make their contribution to the war effort.

One survivor recently told how they even had to pay for the tiny MN badge that was the only recognition they had that they were part of the serving manpower. Yet another survivor told me how giggling girls would approach them on leave and present them with a white feather. They would be asked if MN stood for Maternity Nurse.

Not much respect there for brave men putting their lives on the line to feed a beleaguered country desperate for food, and a war machine hungry for supplies.

The Prime Minister, Winston Churchill said of the Battle of the Atlantic:

"The Battle of the Atlantic was the determining factor all through the war, never for one moment could we forget that everything happening elsewhere, on land at sea or in the air depended on its outcome. Many gallant actions and incredible feats of endurance are recorded, but the deeds of those who perished will never be known. Our Merchant Seamen displayed their highest qualities, and the brotherhood of the sea was never more strikingly shown than in their determination to defeat the U-boat."

The low-point for British ship losses in WW2 was between February and May 1941, when 325 ships, totalling 1.4 million tons, were sunk, at an average of 81 ships per month. Most were sunk by U-boats in the Atlantic.

Over 30,000 merchant seafarers lost their lives on British merchant ships during WW2. At least 22,000 (73%) as a result of submarine attacks.

During WW2 3,194 British vessels totalling 12.5 million tons (about 60% of the fleet), were sunk worldwide, from all causes. But by 1945 much of this loss was made up by wartime building, purchases from the USA and enemy prize tonnage.

'Discharged at Sea' meant the voyage contract was closed because the ship had been sunk by enemy action or lost. Until a new law was passed in May 1941 this meant that a seaman's pay was stopped from the time of the sinking until he signed a new voyage contract ashore.

In 1938 192,000 seafarers were employed on British merchant ships. Of these, 131,000 (68%) were British residents, 50,700 (26%) Indian and Chinese, and 9,790 (5%) other nationalities, mainly European. These numbers fluctuated as the war progressed.

In 1939 British Able Seamen were paid £9.6 per month. This was raised to £12.6 by May 1942. Non-British (ie non European including Chinese & Indian) crew members on British ships received between a quarter and a half of these rates.

British seafarers were also paid £3 per month war risk bonus in Sept 1939. This was raised to £5 in early 1940. By February 1943, including war risk money, an Able Seaman's monthly pay had risen to £24.

During WW2 merchant ships brought into the UK all of her oil, about half of her food, and most of her raw materials. They also carried millions of troops, their equipment and supplies to and from war zones worldwide.

The average age of British merchant seamen was 36 years in 1939, 32 in 1945.

In 1939 Britain had 1900 ocean-going ships and several thousand smaller vessels such as coasters, short-sea and fishing vessels.

The UK had hundreds of shipping companies in 1939, from large passenger and cargo lines to small trampship and coasting companies.

For most of the war, ships sailing independently were required to sail at a minimum speed of 15 knots. From November 1940-May 1941, however, the required minimum speed was reduced to 13 knots, causing disastrous losses.

Convoys ranged in size from a few merchant ships with one naval escort (in 1939) to over 160 merchant ships with a large number of escorts, supported by aircraft and capable of reinforcement by specialist escort support (in 1944).

The war at sea changed dramatically in Britain's favour due to much stronger surface escort forces and air cover, along with better technology (especially radar), and better intelligence based on the breaking of the German 'Enigma' Code.

The Merchant Navy don't get the recognition that they deserved, because people don't realise that everybody in this country depended on them, and the armed forces depended on them. Where did they get all their food from during the war? Where did they get their ammunition and their planes and the tanks? Who brought them? People tend to forget, in the first place Merchant Seamen were volunteers.

Information from various sources, permission not sought. If you contributed to the above, please allow us to use your words as a tribute. Sections can be removed if necessary.

Thank you

LEST WE FORGET.



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