

Merchant Navy Miscellaneous

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 incl 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.

It has been said that “We should remember them”.

“The restless oceans are their shrouds, and their final resting places known only to the god they worshipped”:

“Survivors from sunken ships could never forget such events. The screams of drowning or burning shipmates: the scramble to escape from cabins: to man lifesaving craft in a chaos of flames and escaping steam: and all in the dark. It was sheer hell: yet, throughout all this, there were few instances of panic due to cowardice. Nevertheless, the strain was almost unbearable: and men kept a brave face because they did not want to betray their fear to their shipmates”.

Vernon G.A. Upton.

"There are no graves: no crosses: no where a loved one can shed a tear: We should remember them."

David Simpson

*One road leads to London.
One road runs to Wales.
My road leads me seawards
To the white dipping sails.*

- John Masefield