

Mariners' sacrifice recognized

Merchant navy gets memorial for Second World War service

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Nova Scotia

Staff Reporter

THEY SHARED the dangers of the Battle of the Atlantic with members of the Royal Canadian Navy but not the rewards.

On Wednesday, the merchant mariners of the Second World War got their own memorial on the shores of the Bedford Basin, where the massive convoys carrying vital supplies to Europe assembled seven decades ago.

Ninety-one Canadian merchant ships were lost and 2,200 Canadian merchant seamen died in the conflict — a heavier loss proportionately than any of the country's armed services, the commander of Maritime Forces Atlantic told a crowd gathered for the unveiling.

"They sailed alongside and with the navy, charged with transport of goods and material essential to the war effort and to the survival of democracy in the free world," Rear Admiral Paul Maddison said.

"And they did it well, with steely determination, grit and courage, hunted by an aggressive enemy, in ships that did not have the luxury of speed to evade the U-boats."

Canadians owe the merchant seamen eternal gratitude, Rear Admiral Maddison said.

"They are truly great people and great Canadians," he said. The anchor memorial is located in DeWolf Park, named after Vice-Admiral Harry DeWolf, who was from Bedford.

During the war, he was a seasoned destroyer commander and he rose to head the postwar navy.

"He must have known and appreciated the sacrifice, the camaraderie, the courage and the determination of the merchant crews for ming up the convoys here in Bedford Basin ... for those interminably slow, highly stressful, often tragic, but absolutely vital Atlantic crossings," Rear Admiral Maddison said.

Maxwell Zwicker, who is originally from Liverpool but lives in Bedford, sailed on half a dozen different ships during the war. He was 15 when he joined the merchant navy and remembers nearby ships being torpedoed.

"You couldn't even stop to pick up survivors," said Mr. Zwicker, now 83.

He was pleased to see the memorial unveiled.

"It's the first time we've had something for the merchant navy that we haven't had to fight for," Mr. Zwicker said. "The rest of the time, we had to fight for everything."

Edgar Leblanc of Sambro also joined the merchant navy at 15 because he couldn't get into the military at that age. He spent 4 1/2 years as a prisoner of war after a German surface raider sank his oil tanker in

the Pacific in April 1941. Twenty- six of the Madrono's sailors were lost in the attack; only a half dozen survived.

Mr. Leblanc, now 85, was rescued from a raft and held for 15 months on various ships before arriving in Bordeaux, France.

"They worked the arse off you," he said of the camps, where he was known as prisoner of

war 959. "And you know what we had for clothes? I had a sweat rag, a T-shirt, a pair of dungarees and some socks and shoes. That was it, and we landed in Bordeaux in wintertime." He made it back to Halifax in late 1945, weighing just 80 pounds.

"There was nothing there for us," he said, saying staffers at Camp Hill Hospital turned him away because he wasn't a military veteran.

Mr. Leblanc said he was denied jobs, education grants and even entry to the local legion because he hadn't been in uniform.

He also waited 45 years for medical benefits and only qualified for hearing aids recently to combat deafness caused by the noisy ships.

"I came home and I had no country," he said.

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Douglas Himmelman, far left, Edgar Leblanc, Maxwell Zwicker, George Scott, Louis Armenia, John Rolfe and Norman Crewe form a colour guard during the unveiling Wednesday in Bedford of a memorial to Canada's Second World War merchant navy. (PETER PARSONS / Staff)



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