

Published in the Halifax Chronicle Heralds, Saturday the 3rd of October 2012

Respect for Corvette: Nation's naval memorial needs permanent home

By TIM DUNNE



Retired Cmdr. Wendall Brown stands in front of HMCS Sackville as it sits in its winter berth in 2010. (ERIC WYNNE / Staff / File)

The Halifax Herald's Sept. 4, 1939, edition emblazoned "Empire at War" in a bold red headline across its front page.

The German submarine U-30 torpedoed the British ship SS Athenia the previous day as she carried more than 1,000 passengers and several hundred crew from Glasgow to Montreal. Sinking stern first into the waters of the North Atlantic, her demise began the Battle of the Atlantic, the longest battle of the Second World War.

The German navy deployed U-boats from the Gulf of St. Lawrence across the breadth of the Atlantic to the shores of Great Britain in an attempt to stem the flow of convoys between North America and Great Britain.

At the outset of hostilities, the Royal Canadian Navy consisted of only 13 vessels and 13,000 sailors. By the war's end in 1945, the RCN had grown to the third largest Allied navy with 375 ships and 110,000 members.

This huge nation with its small population dedicated itself to the defeat of Germany.

But unlike the First World War when the Canadian Army maintained its distinct organization, Canada's victories during the Second World War aren't so well-known, as our military forces were largely subsumed into the British war effort.

Largely unknown by many Canadians, the RCN was the Allies' principal bulwark against German naval forces during the Battle of the Atlantic.

On any given day, more than 100 merchant vessels joined the convoys crossing the Atlantic to British ports. As they passed from Halifax Harbour, they entered the zone of the Battle of the Atlantic, the war's western front.

By the end of the war, Canadian warships successfully escorted 25,000 merchant ships carrying almost 42 million tons of food and war supplies in 1,498 convoys.

This sustained the people of Britain and allowed Allied forces to prepare for the D-Day invasion of Normandy in 1944.

This carried a heavy price, paid by our ships and their crews. Two thousand members of the RCN in 24 ships perished in the North Atlantic waters.

Along with them were 1,600 Canadian and Newfoundland Merchant Navy seamen, 752 members of the Royal Canadian Air Force and 125 civilian passengers of the ferry Caribou as it steamed from Nova Scotia to Newfoundland.

For every seven mariners who served, one was killed or wounded.

The achievements and the tragedies of our naval and merchant mariners, RCAF aviators and the civilian passengers are embodied in HMCS Sackville, the last remaining Second World War Corvette.

She was acquired a quarter-century ago by a small group of retired RCN members who established the Canadian Naval Memorial Trust. The Trust's goal is to preserve HMCS Sackville in a permanent structure that will serve as an internationally recognized naval memorial all year round.

She was declared Canada's naval memorial by the government of Canada on May 4, 1985. However, the proclamation was devoid of any federal funding, leaving the trustees of the ship to raise the funds necessary to provide the ship a permanent home.

As the 70-year-old Sackville continues to age, she needs to be stabilized and enclosed in a seawater berth within a permanent structure appropriate to the ship's stature as a national memorial.

Other nations use former warships as memorials and accord them the reverence and funding that they so richly deserve.

The USS Arizona is a victim of the Dec. 7, 1941, Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and is recognized as the memorial for the 1,177 American service persons killed in the attack. The memorial was completed in 1961 with private donations and funds allocated by Congress.

HMS Victory was Admiral Nelson's flagship for the Oct. 21, 1805, Battle of Trafalgar when the United Kingdom defeated the combined navies of France and Spain. Today, HMS Victory serves both as the flagship of the Second Sea Lord and as a museum.

The annual commemoration of Remembrance Day is intended to serve as a reminder of the hardships, dangers and sacrifices of our veterans of air, land and sea battles.

Is it not time for the nation to provide the necessary funds to give a permanent home to the last link which we have to the Battle of the Atlantic?

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