

## Book Reviews

**Ted Barris. *Battle of the Atlantic: Gauntlet to Victory*. Toronto, ON: HarperCollins Canada, [www.harpercollins.ca](http://www.harpercollins.ca), 2022. 434 pages, illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. CDN \$36.99, cloth; ISBN 978-1-4344-6079-8.**

We are so inured to events being reported in the news for only a few days; e.g., our diminishing interest in COVID, yet the Battle of the Atlantic lasted five years and eight months, from the sinking of *Athenia* on 3 September 1939 to the sinking of HMCS *Esquimalt* on 15 April 1945. There was no sudden climax or turning-point, just waves of successes and losses. Canada lost 24 warships, over 2438 RCN and 752 RCAF personnel in the Battle of the Atlantic (426). Moreover, Allied merchant navies lost 2233 merchant ships (58 being Canadian) and over 30,000 merchant seamen and officers. But there were 25,343 successful trans-Atlantic arrivals in Britain.

Over the years, many books have dealt with the Battle of the Atlantic, but most of them paint Canada as having little or no part in the fray. This book has strong Canadian content, not only in the ships involved, but also in the personnel. Barris, an author of many military history books, describes the war not in the impersonal way of ships doing this or that, but through the eyes of both Canadian and German participants. He has interviewed or found the writings of those participants to tell the reader that the battle was fought by people and not by ships and submarines.

The book loosely follows the chronological order of events of the battle – the U-boat attacks and the escorts' counter-attacks. It also touches on SS *Athenia* (torpedoed on the opening day of the war); HMS *Royal Oak* (torpedoed while at anchor at Scapa Flow); HMS *Jervis Bay* (took on *Admiral Sheer* to save its convoy); HMCS *Fraser* (sliced in half by HMS *Calcutta*); evacuation at Dunkirk; Britain's gold shipped to Canada; HMS *Repulse*, a 27,200 T battlecruiser, being "protected" by HMCS *Chambly*, a 915 T corvette,

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at Conception Bay, Newfoundland, after the former's chase of the *Bismarck*; Bletchley Park's decrypting Enigma signals; B-Dienst's decrypting Admiralty signals; SS *Caribou* (Sydney-Port-aux-Basques ferry torpedoed); the sinkings in the Gulf of St. Lawrence; the "happy time" along the American eastern seaboard; deployment of RCN ships in Operation Torch (Allied landings in NW Africa) and Operation Neptune (naval part of the D-Day landings); and finally, to VE Day and the celebrations in Halifax. The book closes as a sailor with tears in his eyes, views the disposal of "his" wartime corvette immediately after the war, the fate of so many other corvettes.

The Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) sprang from almost a non-entity to a large navy (albeit with small ships), and from about 3500 personnel to over 100,000. Naturally, it suffered from growing pains in both aspects. Without naval architects, shipyards, skilled labourers, and corps of trainers, it called upon foreign-designed and foreign-built ships, foreign supplied equipment, and foreign training. Thus, it received what was left, given that the supplier (usually the Royal Navy) saw to its own needs first. Added to that, Canada wanted to promote and continue the use of Canadian-made things – such as SWIC radar sets, which were definitely inferior to the British 271 radar. Canada was assigned escort duty for the slow convoys in the aircraft coverage gap in the mid-Atlantic, where the Wolf Packs loved to carry out their deadly business. The "powers that be" blamed the RCN for poor performance, but the Brits and the Yanks didn't do much better when they took over and shuffled the Canucks to the Mediterranean to escort convoys for Operation Torch.

I have read about a half-dozen books devoted to the Battle of the Atlantic and many more books with reference to it. But this is the first time that I have learned the tricks of the trade; for example, the two theories of how a single ship ought to attack a submerged submarine and how hunter-killer groups perfected a two-ship attack with greater success. Barris acknowledges the success of bombers, particularly at night with good radar and the Leigh Light in forcing submarines to submerge (if only to slow them down and deny charging of batteries) and attacking with specially designed depth charges. No doubt there are other books on the VE celebrations in Halifax, but this book gives a good description. Unfortunately, that riot (as some would call it) ruined the career of Rear Admiral Leonard Murray, the only Canadian to command an Allied theatre during the Second World War.

Thanks to Barris, we now have a good book that describes how the perennially under-equipped but over-achieving Canadian escorts fought the longest campaign of the Second World War.

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