

Hardly Heroes: Canadian Merchant Seamen and the International Convoy System, 1939-1945

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Mike Parker's fine oral history of Canadian merchant seamen during the Second World War contains at least two references to storefront windows — one in Quebec, the other in Trinidad - which displayed the sign "Dogs & Sailors Not Allowed." Another recently published book claims that the same notice was seen in wartime Halifax, Nova Scotia.¹ These stories are likely apocryphal, but they illustrate how sensitive merchant seamen are to the stigma attached to their occupation. Today there is growing sentiment among civilian veterans of the Battle of the Atlantic that their contribution has never been properly recognized. Part of the explanation for this lies in the nature of the convoy system and the comparatively limited role that Canadians played in it.

This essay argues that it was the international nature of the sea-going labour force during the war that shaped both the experiences of Canadian merchant seamen and public attitudes towards them as a social group. I base this argument primarily on an analysis of contemporary sources describing the wartime facilities provided for seamen in Halifax, as well as on Commander F.B. Watt's account of the activities of the Naval Control Service (NCS), organized early in the war to monitor subversive activity aboard merchant vessels at that port. In addition, the federal Department of Transport's casualty list of Canadian merchant seamen lost due to enemy action was analyzed, and the findings show that seafarers were both younger and more likely to be married than the rootless and rambunctious image commonly associated with merchant seamen would suggest. Police court records for the city of Halifax, however, tend to support the anti-social stereotype exemplified by those presumably fictitious storefront signs.

The evidence shows overwhelmingly that Canadians were just one minority among many ethnic and national groups involved in the convoy system, a hierarchical industrial structure directed by British interests (and, later in the war, also American) but composed in large part of French, Belgian, Norwegian, Swedish, Greek, Polish and Dutch vessels and crews. Consequently, the benefits of military service in terms of government and public recognition were denied Canadian merchant seamen. Had they served exclusively on Canadian vessels — or had the North Atlantic convoys been made up of mostly Canadian or even British ships — no doubt the situation would have been different.

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But this was not how the deep-sea merchant fleet was organized before the war, nor was it how the convoy system operated after September 1939.

Our concern here is not the inner workings of the convoy system but the men and women who made it work. Where did they come from? What drew them to an occupation that for a time was as dangerous as working in a coal mine? The numerous studies of wartime British and American merchant fleets have tended to focus on ship construction, labour relations, and the logistics of the convoy system. Relatively little attention has been paid to the social characteristics of seafarers.²

Until recently, the Canadian literature on merchant seamen has also been scanty, so the publication of Mike Parker's oral history is welcome, especially since it complements Eric Sager's thoughtful but brief collection of seafarers' reminiscences and Commander F.B. Watt's first-hand account of the NCS in Halifax.³ While it is good to see the wartime experiences of merchant seamen told in their own words, we should be cautious about accepting such recollections fifty years after the fact as the *final* word on the subject.

Analytical (and more partisan) accounts of Canadian merchant seamen during this period have focused on union triumphs and defeats leading inexorably to the violent confrontations of 1949.⁴ Since the size of Canada's deep-sea fleet more than quintupled during the war, union growth was to be expected. John Stanton estimates that "a large majority" of Canadian merchant seamen — about 8000 — were Canadian Seamen's Union (CSU) members in 1945.⁵ Yet if Bryan Palmer's figure of 6000 CSU members in 1939 is accurate, wartime gains appear modest at best.⁶ Like most blue collar workers during the war, union membership among merchant seamen seems to have been more a matter of convenience than commitment. Notably absent from the Parker interviews is any mention of labour radicalism, which also raises questions about the notion that the Canadian merchant marine teemed with left-wing militants. To most seamen, it seems, shipboard hierarchy exerted a stronger influence on their day-to-day lives than identification with principles of industrial unionism. Moreover, the emphasis on national labour movement goals, as embodied in the CSU, ignores the international character of the seafaring labour force during the war and gives a distorted impression of what shipboard life was really like for the majority of those employed in the convoy system.

The point is that the total number of *Canadian* seafarers in Halifax during the war was always small compared with British, American and foreign seamen. To give credit where due, it was East Indians ("Lascars"), Chinese, Norwegians, and other foreign-born seamen who truly bore the brunt of the U-boat offensive during the first half of the war. By 1944, on the other hand, most of the merchant seamen in Halifax were American.⁷ The Americans were better paid than their Canadian or foreign counterparts, more unionized, and their chances of survival at sea were better because the U-boats by then were on the defensive. These racial, ethnic, and national distinctions, as well as the occupational diversity, were aspects of the convoy system that were regarded as relatively unimportant at the time, and they have remained more or less unexplored ever since.

The commonalty of seamen was based not on the company employing them or a particular skill or trade so much as the unique nature of the workplace, an environment where hierarchy and discipline were the order of the day. Despite the shipboard regimen, cultural differences and disparities in working conditions from ship to ship caused many problems for shipowners, although the public was encouraged to think that the only threats to the convoys were the weather and the U-boats. Society tended to view merchant seamen as a single, homogeneous group. To most outsiders — and not a few young men went to sea believing this — seafaring was as much a way of life as a vocation. It was an occupation associated in the popular imagination with romance and adventure.

The war shattered these idyllic notions. The reality of low wages and sometimes appalling working conditions began to surface through reports of "crew trouble" on board merchant vessels assembling for convoy.⁸ Sometimes the root cause was insubordination, as in the case of the *George Washington*, a pre-World War I coal-burner whose boilers and crew both quit while she was berthed at Halifax in the fall of 1941. According to one naval officer, the *George Washington's* crew was "the most savage collection of rascals ever assembled for a ship on this side of the Atlantic." But as we shall see, misunderstandings due to language and culture were also common causes of disputes on vessels operated by foreign shipowners and manned by non-European crews. Friction even existed between British (or "Kipper") officers and their "colonial" crews. Because experienced senior personnel in the Canadian merchant marine were in short supply when the war began, most masters and officers were British.¹⁰

To Canadians — especially those from a long seafaring tradition — British masters could be "egotistical snobs," even though their seamanship was usually beyond reproach. Among ordinary seamen, there was "no love lost" between Canadian and Kipper sailors. "The only time we got along is if there was some other foreigner interfering with us, then we'd side with the British or the British would side with us," one seaman told Mike Parker." On the other hand, some Canadians preferred British-style discipline to the unpredictable routine on Canadian vessels. The British "had a system that was carried from ship to ship," one seaman remembers. "It didn't matter what company you were in, you pretty well knew what you were supposed to be doing, where[as] the Canadian ships reflected the master's character quite a lot...a change of master could be just as big a change as if you'd gone on another ship."¹²

Because the workplace was mobile and diverse, the life of a typical merchant seaman was filled with many contradictions. He traveled the world, but rarely ventured beyond the waterfront districts of the ports he visited, and usually associated with others like himself.¹³ Compared with most land-based occupations, he possessed a remarkable freedom to choose when and where he wanted to work. Many seamen liked it that way. But job security was practically non-existent and subject to the whims and prejudices of masters who rated each man's performance at the end of a voyage. In the case of merchant seamen serving on Canadian vessels, the Nautical Division of the Department of Transport issued "Statements of Sea Service" containing information supplied by masters. The forms included a "Report of Character" divided into sections for "ability"

and "general conduct." Ratings were the same in both categories: "Very Good," "Good," "Decline to Report," or "Not Stated." A sailor with too many "Decline to Report" citations faced wage penalties and an uphill battle when attempting to sign on to new vessels.¹⁴

Union organization among seamen during the war continued to be vigorously opposed by companies citing increased operating costs as a likely outcome of higher wages and improved working conditions.¹⁵ In the late 1930s, the CSU attempted without success to secure the eight-hour day. With the extra vigilance and duties required while sailing in war zones, the prewar schedule of four hours on, four hours off was eventually replaced by four hours on, eight hours off, twice a day. Nevertheless, the twelve-hour day was still the norm on many vessels long after the war ended.¹⁶

The single most important wartime reform for merchant seamen was the introduction of universal hiring halls, known as manning pools. The CSU wanted to operate the halls, but the government "decided to go it alone" and the first Merchant Seamen's Manning Pool in Canada opened in Halifax in the fall of 1941.¹⁷ When completed, the pool accommodated 450 seamen. Three months later, Montreal received a similar facility and eventually so did Vancouver and Saint John. The manning pools gave seafarers some measure of wage and employment security by eliminating favouritism and blacklisting, but it did not usher in a new era of improved labour relations in the shipping industry, as postwar events would show.¹⁸

When it is considered that 100 or more vessels was not an unusual sight in Halifax harbour (including Bedford Basin), and that each vessel carried an average of forty or fifty crew, merchant seamen comprised one of the largest occupational groups in the city. Naturally, since most were not Canadian, the Department of Munitions and Supply felt no obligation to provide accommodation for them, even though merchant seamen were as integral to the war effort as shipyard workers. In the end it was the Navy League which financed the construction of a 350-bed hostel, the Allied Merchant Seamen's Club, on Hollis Street. Completion of the building was delayed by several months, but it finally opened in December 1941. Four months later, H.B. Jefferson, the wartime press censor in Halifax, was given a grand tour by the manager, Clifford Taylor:

Quite a number of drunks were rambling around and T[aylor] says they have a dormitory set aside where they put these fellows at night so they won't interfere with anybody but themselves. I was all through the kitchen, cafeteria, dormitories, writing rooms, reading rooms, etc. and also the bar room, in the basement floor where at least 400 men were gathered in a room as big as an average High School assembly hall...The bar itself is only about ten feet long and completely enclosed, with a steel grating which can be let down quickly over the serving counter. There are no waiters or waitresses, but there are 4 bar tenders...They sell all kinds [of beer]...but Labatte's [*sic*] appears to be the most popular...Most of the sailors sitting around the beer room today seem to be quiet, honest fellows, but T says the looks of some of them are highly deceptive

and...they are all better than average fighters. The Norwegians are the worst. Although they do not seem to be much good as fighters at sea, as soon as they strike land they get tough.¹⁹

Attendance at the regular Sunday evening concerts staged at the Allied Merchant Seamen's Club averaged about 700 seamen "of almost every nationality," despite a seating capacity of only 500.²⁰ Renamed the Seagull Club after the war, it survived well into the 1950s, in violation of an order that the building be removed within six months of the cessation of hostilities.²¹ John Fisher, who began his broadcasting career in Halifax, discovered a veritable global melting pot when he spent an evening at the club a few weeks after Jefferson's visit:

I sat down in the lounge next to a group of men. In their group was a French Canadian, a Cockney, a Belgian, a Swiss and an Irishman married to a Belgian woman. They were all from the same ship and good pals. Fine fellows too. We had a long chat and I said I wanted to meet different personalities. Well said the French Canadian — that policeman at the door is an Egyptian who had his face slashed by a Greek seaman. In the kitchen we have a Dane, a Chinaman and a French speaking Canadian. Sitting a short distance from us was a stocky little man. I said I'll bet that man is a Phillipino [*sic*]. The Irishman said I'll bet you a package of cigarettes he's from India while the Belgian wagered he was part Chinese. So we delegated the French Canadian to go ask him. He brought him back and proved us all wrong. He was a Panamanian Indian - one of the aborigines of Central America. We had a long talk with him. He was sailing on a Greek ship, yet he didnt [*sic*] understand a word of Greek. I asked him why he chose that ship: "Me like cose Greek ships have chicken twice week, whiskey every day and beer three times week." And besides the pay on Greek ships was very good, he said.²²

The international composition of merchant crews increased the probability of violence and disputes, especially when ashore and away from the heavy hand of shipboard discipline. Clifford Taylor told H.B. Jefferson that "tempers run pretty high sometimes" but that "only about five per cent of...seamen need watching." Although Taylor claimed that there was "practically no friction between the different nationalities," the evidence suggested otherwise. He described the fights which broke out when foreign sailors failed to stand during the playing of "God Save the King." Taylor admitted that "the amount of battling in the home and around the streets is increasing" but he insisted that the violence "shows no signs of developing to riot proportions."²³ Nevertheless, the Navy League hired eleven policemen, working around the clock in three shifts, to keep order on the premises.

At one point Russian and Chinese sailors protested because their flags were not hanging in the club along with those of other Allies. Good Sino-Canadian relations were

soon restored thanks to a contribution from the local Chinese community, but "we couldn't buy the hammer and sickle," Taylor explained later. Eventually, "some Americans off an American ship presented us with one."²⁴ On another occasion, some Greeks brandishing knives went looking for a German family recently rescued from a ship torpedoed off the coast. The Germans were quickly removed from the club, but the Greeks "kept a rigorous vigil...for hours afterward."²⁵

Naval authorities seemed less concerned about what seamen did to each other than what they might do to disrupt the convoy system. Hence the existence of the NCS, a supposedly neutral agency established to deal with the problems and grievances of seamen. At least this is the interpretation presented in Commander F. B. Watt's first-person narrative of NCS activities in Halifax. As a naval officer charged with enforcing discipline and ensuring that the convoys sailed on time, Watt's observations were coloured by a sense of duty and the correctness of his cause. For example, the departure from Halifax of four Great Lakes' tankers chartered by the Ministry of War Transport was delayed because British crews "declared that the ships had been misrepresented to them by the English authorities, and that they had no intention of risking their lives on such unseaworthy tubs." As a result, "in a burst of sentimental concern for abused merchant seamen the Halifax press took up the cause of the [strikers, and]...the Mayor of Halifax complicated matters by deciding he should be publicly recognized as a champion of the foc's'le underdog." The possibility that crew grievances were based on legitimate fears for their own safety was not raised. When a handful of hold-outs were prosecuted under provisions of the Merchant Seamen Order (PC 2385, 2 April 1941), Watt observed that "no sympathy was wasted on them."²⁶

PC 2385 reflected the prevailing view that merchant seamen were unpredictable and unreliable. The federal government was highly suspicious of the CSU, which had instigated strikes on the Great Lakes in 1939 and 1940, believing it to be controlled by Communists.²⁷ Earlier legislation allowed miscreants to escape incarceration by simply volunteering to serve on another ship, but PC 2385 imposed far harsher penalties on seamen convicted of causing "delaying action." Jail terms were compulsory and open-ended, meaning that sentences could be extended indefinitely. Commander Watt concluded that the effectiveness of this tactic was shown by the "limited number of times we were forced to [use it]." But the opposite may also be true: that fears about fifth-column activity among merchant seamen were exaggerated and that PC 2385 was not often applied because it was seldom needed. It was considered by some to be so draconian that it was challenged repeatedly in the courts and Parliament.²⁸

The NCS performed a useful role as an instrument of social control, mediating disputes between masters and crews, dispelling idle gossip and defusing potentially mutinous situations. But one of the reasons the NCS took the form it did was the absence of shore-based accommodation for seamen. Prior to the Allied Merchant Seamen's Club opening in late 1941, the only facilities for merchant seamen were the Sailor's Home, operated by the Navy League, and Missions to Seamen, located next to the YWCA on Barrington Street. The sixty-bed capacity of the Sailor's Home was inadequate for

wartime demand, but even before this became apparent it was forced to move from Barrington to Hollis Street when the Navy League, having turned over its own building to the RCN early in the war, occupied the old Sailor's Home.²⁹ To add insult to injury, there were no public drinking establishments in Halifax where sailors could congregate. Sending boarding parties to ships anchored or berthed in the harbour was thus the most convenient way for naval authorities effectively to monitor crew morale on large numbers of merchantmen.

The boarding parties of the NCS uncovered ample evidence that working and living conditions were the cause of many incidents reported as "crew trouble." One example in the summer of 1941 involved a British vessel, *SS Empire Defiance*:

Class distinction, bad boilers, poor discipline and bad quarters seem to be the trouble...Chief engineer curses the black gang and [he is] generally under the influence of spirits according to the Mohammedans who are, to all reports, honest firemen...Fo'c's'le alive with roaches and other vermin. Leaks in deckhead and, in bad weather, floor covered with a foot of water. Very poor crew accommodation forward and firemen's food not so good. It is reported that former crews were Lascars and officers could handle them as they pleased,...but this crew resents that attitude towards them.³⁰

The Free French crew on another vessel boarded by Commander Watt in the fall of 1940 told "of dirt, decay and demoralization." Naval authorities in Ottawa were notified that the ship was unseaworthy and required urgent repairs, but the "vessel's operators declined...to hold her in Halifax and were able to make it stand up in those places where delicate political decisions were juggled." Soon after, the vessel was lost with all hands in a hurricane while bound for Martinique.³¹

Incidents first thought to be subversive sometimes turned out to be the result of occupational hazards in the workplace. In one case, suspicions of foul play were raised when British gunners on a vessel manned primarily by Lascars and Goanese began to succumb to food poisoning. Later it was discovered that the gunners' messdeck was located in an area of the ship where a cargo of sheep dip had been stowed on a previous voyage. The gunners had been eating food contaminated with traces of the insecticide, which contained "a high arsenic content." One man died as a result.³²

The NCS began as means to muffle dissent, detect subversive activities, and impose quasi-military discipline on a labour force perceived to be "cocky and restless."³³ But even the boarding parties soon realized that "while physical sabotage remained a danger to be guarded against, sabotage of the seamen's spirit" was "the greater peril."³⁴ Its accomplishments notwithstanding, the NCS was equally significant for what it was unable to do to improve conditions on merchant vessels. As the case of the hapless Free French merchantman demonstrated, the NCS possessed less authority with superiors than with the sailors whose behaviour it monitored.

Early in the war, the notion that Communists were conspiring to undermine the war effort through seamen's unions was a common if exaggerated fear.³⁵ But the complaints of seamen were seldom politically motivated. Crew members protested inadequate defensive or life-saving equipment, abusive treatment by masters and mates, and appalling living conditions, particularly on foreign vessels.³⁶ Moreover, according to Commander Watt, half the incidents dealt with by the NCS were related to drinking.³⁷ The social and economic motivations underlying so-called subversive behaviour were downplayed if not completely ignored. The most telling clause in PC 2385 was that it applied to seamen of any nationality. The order made it clear that the logistical demands of the convoys far outweighed the civil rights of the men and women who made it work.

Deep-sea sailors in Halifax who happened to be Canadian faced as tough a battle as seamen of other nationalities when it came to improving wages and working conditions. In the 1930s, the CSU secured collective bargaining rights on the Great Lakes, but it did not turn its attention to Halifax until much later.³⁸ Just before the war, the union managed to sign up crews of CN Steamships "Lady boats," six passenger and general cargo vessels operating a scheduled service between Halifax and the West Indies, and opened a small second-story hiring office on Birmingham Street.³⁹ The CSU then moved to enlist fishermen on Nova Scotia's south shore. This strategy was aimed at tapping the coastal trade, which employed large numbers of fishermen, and held greater potential for membership than the much smaller Canadian deep-sea fleet. The CSU also encountered resistance among the Lady boats' black crew members, who belonged to unions based at their home ports in the West Indies. Despite CSU assurances that it was non-discriminatory, racial segregation continued. Deck jobs were reserved "exclusively for Canadian nationals," while positions for black seamen "were restricted to the 'black gang' or the stewards' department."⁴⁰

The colour barrier was only one of many obstacles to improving conditions for merchant seamen during the war. In contrast to gains made by workers in other sectors of the war economy, merchant seamen remained on the whole divided and underpaid. Later in the war, the CSU would be recognized as the sole bargaining agent for the government-owned Park Steamship line, but this was exceptional.⁴¹ The convoy system brought thousands of foreign seamen to Halifax, and the vast majority were not privy to negotiated wage agreements or democratic rights. Merchant seamen were a diverse, "many-flagged mob," fragmented by national, racial, and ethnic differences, not to mention the plethora of wages, terms and conditions in effect on various lines and in countless countries.⁴² This is one reason why the service of Canadians in the merchant navy received nothing more than symbolic recognition: there was nothing distinctively "Canadian" about being a merchant seaman. When the public was urged to knit mittens and scarves or to donate old clothing for merchant seamen, it was not because they were "our boys," but because the ships needed to get to Britain.

The official response to dissent among merchant seamen seems ironic considering that the merchant navy was frequently lauded in the wartime press for its courage in the face of the enemy. It underscored how little attitudes toward seamen had changed since

the days when "middle-class social agencies viewed sailing ships as alternatives to reformatories."⁴³ In this light, Communist inroads into the ranks of Canadian seafarers occurred not because the latter were predisposed to radicalism, but because Communists were the only labour organizers committed enough to do it. Creating solidarity in an industry fragmented into hundreds of self-contained "shops," each with its own distinctive hierarchy and working conditions, and each operating independently within a far-flung international trading system, seemed impossible, particularly in an industry tightly controlled by monopolistic interests.⁴⁴

Investigations conducted by the Canadian government in 1913 and 1924 concluded that British-based cartels were "endeavouring to control all the shipping interests of the world," including the US, Canada, and members of the British Empire.⁴⁵ Small wonder then, that seamen by the 1930s were ready to listen to anyone who promised them "the opportunity to participate in the government of their industrial lives."⁴⁶ But Jim Green's portrayal of a pro-union merchant marine comprised of a militant and "well-informed rank-and-file democracy" may be overdrawn.⁴⁷ One Montreal sailor's recollection probably typified the attitudes prevalent on most ships: "There were two or three...heads of the union [who] were Communist...and that was it. The rest of us had nothing to do with the Communist party."⁴⁸ This does not mean that all seamen rejected the goals of labour activists; some no doubt were even radicalized by their experiences. But most went to sea to earn a living and learned to work within the system. After all, unlike the armed forces, if they did not like it, they could leave.

As Commander Watt remembers, "competent seamen with a mature attitude towards their profession were not as readily produced as ships were," hence the need to keep them "in all respects ready" through coercion and discipline.⁴⁹ But the public also perceived them as heroes risking "death without glory" on the high seas.⁵⁰ "Merchant seamen were warriors, who died that Britain might live," wrote one popular British chronicler, and there were many such examples of what Tony Lane characterizes as the "rhetoric of stoicism."⁵¹ Wartime propaganda belied the fact that social interaction between seamen and "respectable" civilians — in Halifax at least — was limited, and usually occurred during staged events, such as Sunday evening concerts at the Allied Merchant Seamen's Club. More common was contact with other marginalized groups in the city: brothel keepers, bootleggers, and prostitutes. Aside from the inescapable fact that seamen ashore often engaged in activities frowned upon by most civilians, overburdened war service organizations in Halifax were simply too hard pressed to deal with the hordes of service personnel, let alone the hundreds of native and foreign seamen in the port.

From the desperate shortage of vessels that permitted shipowners to ignore safety precautions, to the reliance on voluntary donations to provide enough clothing to keep from freezing in winter, to exploitation in the unsavoury dives of Lower Water Street, there is no doubt that merchant seamen paid a heavy price for their marginalized status. Even so, the economic incentives could be tantalizing — fifty percent of basic pay as a bonus (on American ships it was 100%) for sailing in war zones, for example.⁵² In 1941, H.B. Jefferson noted that a shipping company was "offering \$600 to England and \$600

back as a bonus for explosive [*sic*] ships, but you have to make the round trip to collect the money."⁵³ Certainly there were those who decided that the risk was not worth it. But for every seaman who did, there was someone else willing to take his place.

The classic image of the merchant seaman from the mid-nineteenth century onward has been that of a "marginal man" who was "not a fully integrated member in any social world in which he participates."⁵⁴ Community attitudes and the degree of deviant behaviour of merchant seamen in Halifax reflect this social marginalization to some degree, but sociological models and anecdotal evidence do not in and of themselves explain the social and occupational characteristics of seamen. One useful primary source for analyzing Canadian merchant seamen is the casualty list of more than 1100 men who lost their lives to enemy action.⁵⁵ The list reveals that the majority of Canadian merchant seamen came from small towns and villages in rural Canada, especially from Quebec and Nova Scotia (see figure 1). Such origins hardly suggest fertile territory for labour radicalism or criminal proclivity. What they do suggest is economic need coupled with an employment outlet to the outside world for individuals with limited formal education. Halifax police court records for December 1945 confirm the large proportion of Nova Scotians in the merchant fleet: of sixteen seamen charged, five were from Nova Scotia and only two were from Quebec. Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland, Saskatchewan and British Columbia each claimed one, as did England and Scotland; the remaining three gave no permanent address.⁵⁶ These figures are only suggestive, since the records are incomplete, but they do echo the distribution pattern found in the casualty list.

It is also clear from Mike Parker's interviews that many young men either left school prematurely to go to sea or joined up soon after they graduated.⁵⁷ According to Jim Green, the average age of Canadian merchant seamen was "not over" twenty-five, significantly lower than the average for British seamen, which was reported to be "about 32 years in 1945."⁵⁸ A comparison of casualty list ages with Tony Lane's calculations for British seamen in 1941 also shows that Canadian merchant seamen tended to be younger than their British counterparts (figure 2).⁵⁹ In fact, the casualty list indicates an even lower average than Green suggested. Parker's oral history seems to corroborate the striking youthfulness of Canadian merchant mariners. "If you were too young to go into the military," one former seaman recalls, "you went to the merchant service."⁶⁰ Charles Macauley had just turned seventeen when his father arranged for him to sign on as an apprentice seaman. Earle Wagner was also seventeen, but he remembers that "people lied about their age and got in [at] fourteen and fifteen." Against his parents' wishes, fifteen-year-old Eugene Wilkie left West LaHave, Nova Scotia in 1940 because "all my friends around my age" had already gone to sea. George Evans of St. John's was also fifteen "when I left on my first ship," as was Jim Boutilier when he joined a tanker. "They'd take anyone in those days, glad to get them, on the tankers especially," Boutilier recalls. On the west coast, Robert Bradstock was a cabin boy on the Canadian government ship *Estevan* at fourteen. Bernard McCluskey was thirteen years old when the war started. Turned away by the navy, he worked his way up from a supply ship in Charlottetown harbour to a Newfoundland icebreaker to ocean-going tugs operating out of Halifax. By

1941 he was serving on a Norwegian freighter in British coastal waters. Given the youth of merchant seamen as suggested by these examples, and the average age of those on the casualty list, it was not surprising that the crew of a French merchantman nicknamed one of their shipmates "Papa Henri" because "he was in his forties."⁶¹

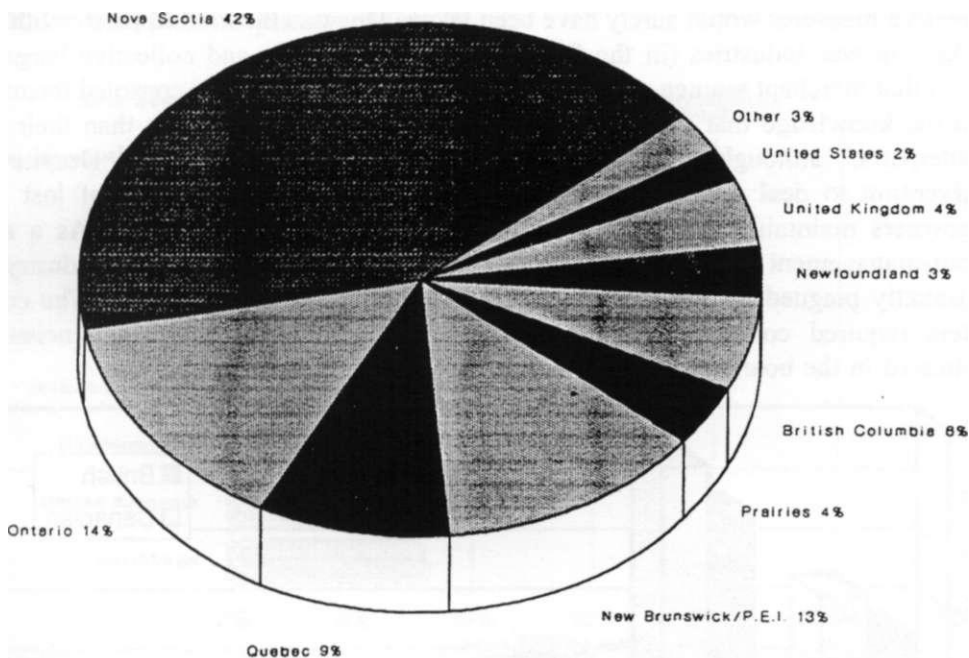


Figure 1: Origins of Wartime Transient Population of Halifax (Households in-migrating after September 1939).

Source: 1944 Cousins survey.

Some of these young men were no doubt drawn to seafaring through a sense of adventure, but for most the incentive to face the dangers was chiefly monetary. Now that the adventure and dangers have long passed, the survivors are demanding their due in glory. While it may currently be fashionable to portray merchant seamen as unheralded heroes of the Battle of the Atlantic, we need to recognize that they were fundamentally workers who, as Tony Lane points out, "went on doing their job because in war, as in peace, they had to earn a living and it was simply unfortunate and couldn't be helped that going to sea had become so much more dangerous."⁶² What we owe merchant seamen today is a realistic awareness of the life they led and a healthy respect for the hard workers they were, rather than the heroes we wanted them to be.

Craig Forsyth writes that "understanding...the problematic nature of the social identity of merchant seamen is possible only through the analysis of the collective history of the occupational group."⁶³ As an occupational group, merchant seamen had no land-

based equivalent; the nature of the workplace was unlike anything an employee in a manufacturing or industrial setting might experience. Many of the ships Canadians sailed on were obsolete (especially if they were British) and incompetent masters and abusive officers were all too common. Had similar conditions prevailed in a war factory, corrective measures would surely have been taken. This was the kind of parity with other workers in war industries (in the form of union recognition and collective bargaining rights) that merchant seamen waited in vain to receive. Instead, they consoled themselves with the knowledge that they were paid "better wages and conditions than their naval counterparts," although they fell far short of American pay scales.⁶⁴ Despite state intervention to deal with labour supply problems and the replacement of lost ships, shipowners maintained their monopolistic practices throughout the war. As a result, labour-management relations were never formalized, and the shipping industry was continually plagued by misunderstandings, desertions, and confrontations. The convoy system required cooperative action on the high seas, but this was not necessarily duplicated in the boardroom.

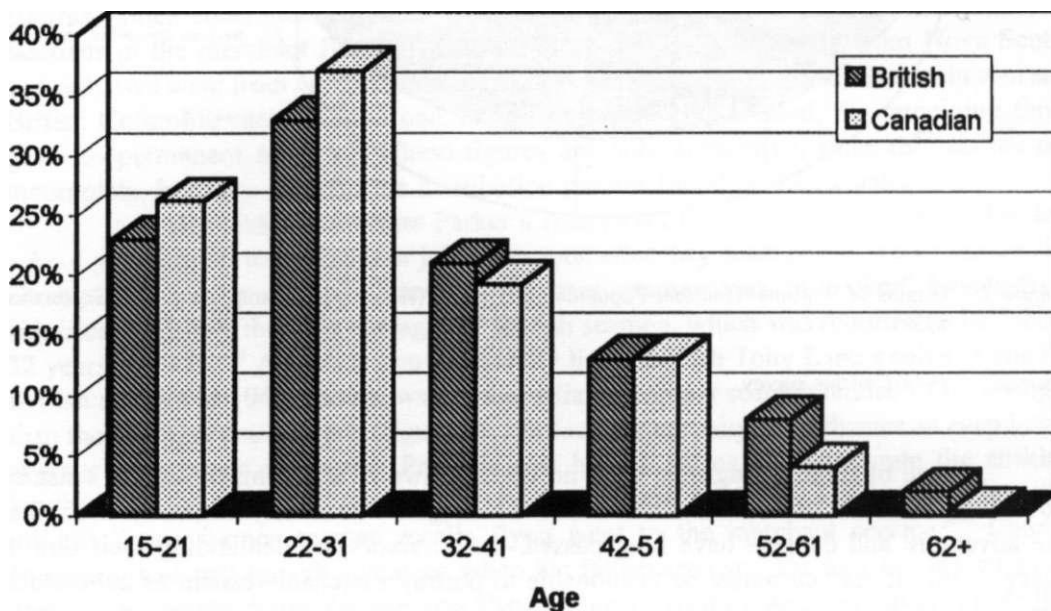


Figure 2: Age Distribution of British and Canadian Merchant Seamen

Source: See text.

It seems to be a given that merchant seamen were socially marginalized due to their undeniable appetite for disreputable pleasures ashore. The Halifax police records clearly show that foreign-born seamen, as well as Canadians from every region of the country, were hauled into court in large numbers, mostly on assault, property damage, and drunkenness charges.⁶⁵ But tarring all seamen with the same attributes obscures the small

town origins of many Canadian seafarers and the fact that about one in five appear to have been married [see figure 3). The notion that sailors were mostly young and therefore unruly overshadowed the significant numbers of older workers (figure 4). The average age of the sixteen merchant seamen who appeared before the police magistrate in December 1945, for example, was just over thirty.⁶⁶

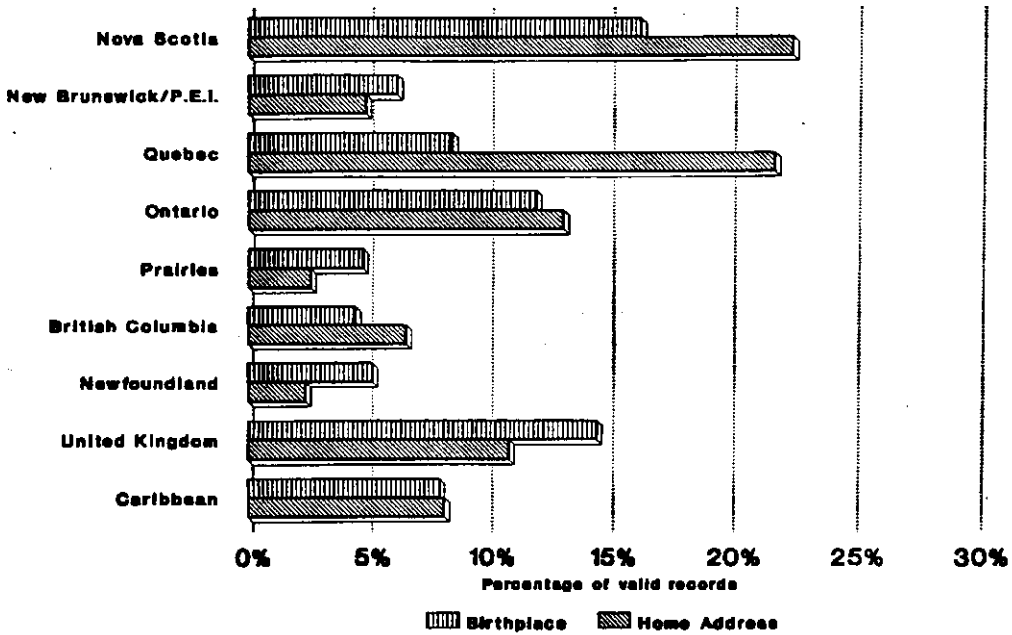


Figure 3: Origins of Canadian Merchant Seamen Lost at Sea due to Enemy Action, 1939-1945.

Source: Department of Transport, Nautical Division.

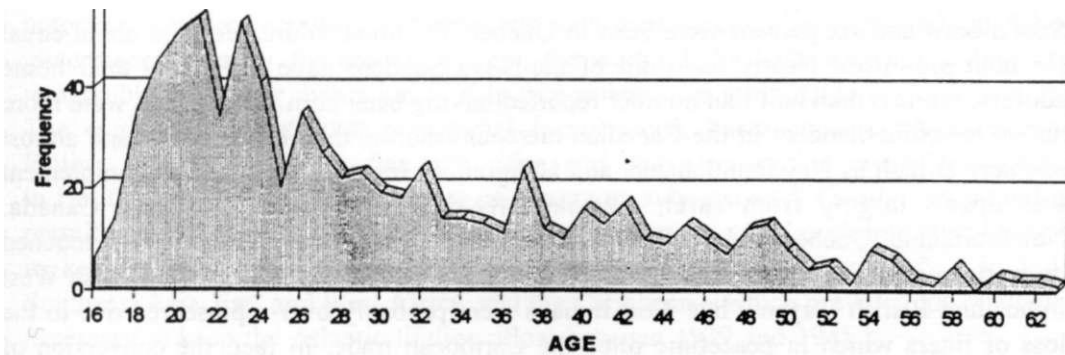


Figure 4: Age Distribution of Canadian Merchant Seamen Lost due to Enemy Action, 1939-1945

Source: See figure 3.

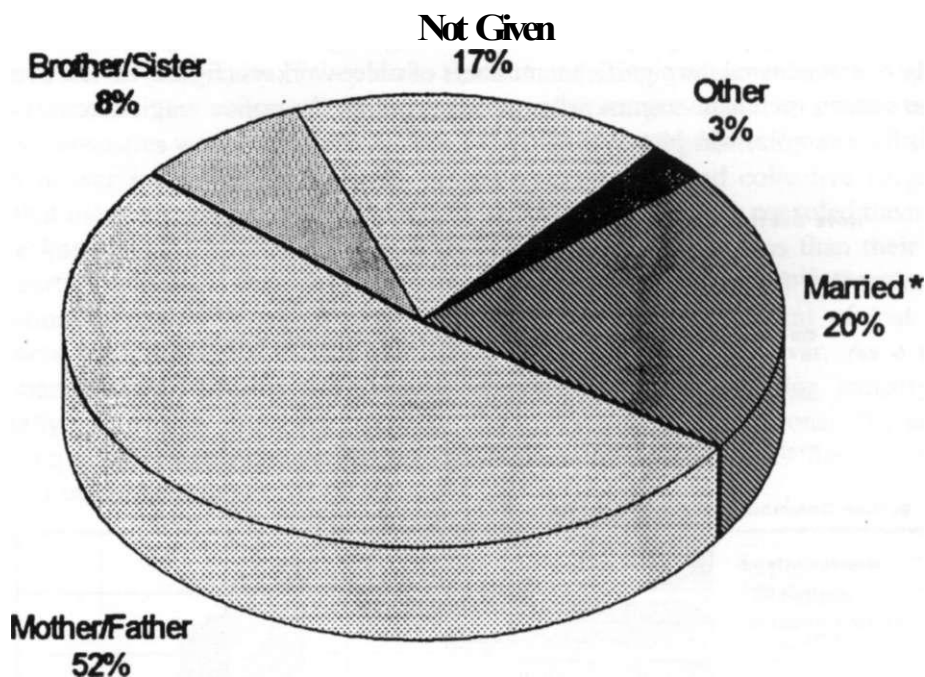


Figure 5: Next of Kin, Canadian Merchant Seamen Lost due to Enemy Action, 1939-1945 (Includes wives, common-law wives, sons, daughters, and in-laws).

Source: See figure 3.

A regional breakdown of next-of-kin addresses also provides useful insights [see figure 5). The casualty list gave both birthplace and address of next of kin. These addresses were usually different. Thus, while 12.4% of all sailors were listed as Nova Scotia-born and six percent were born in Quebec, the home addresses were about equal for both provinces. Nearly one-third of the Nova Scotians gave Halifax as their home address, but less than half that number reported having been born there. There were more native Newfoundlanders in the Canadian merchant marine than Haligonians, and almost as many British as Newfoundlanders and Haligonians together. The overall complement was drawn largely from rural, economically-depressed areas in eastern Canada, Newfoundland, Quebec, and the British Empire, with a clear emphasis on regions touched by well-traveled sea routes. Many seamen in the casualty list were from the British West Indies and British Guyana, but West Indians were probably over-represented due to the loss of liners which in peacetime plied the Caribbean trade. In fact, the conversion of passenger liners for war duty resulted in a drastic reduction of catering staffs, and many former stewards found themselves looking for work during the war as deckhands or whatever else they could obtain.⁶⁷

Gender distribution was so overwhelmingly male that the small number of women who worked on merchant vessels was usually overlooked. One night in early 1942, the manager of the Allied Merchant Seamen's Club in Halifax walked into the cafeteria and noticed a woman sitting at a table "talking to the men:"

She was wearing a big raccoon coat and looked pretty sophisticated. I figured that she had no business in the building as we do not allow any women here unless they are volunteer workers. So I went over and said: "I beg your pardon, but...are you waiting for someone...you know we dont [*sic*] allow ladies in here." She... looked me up and down and then said "I'll have you know I am a seaman, have been going to sea for 15 years and consider it my right to be here." She turned out to be a Canadian too.⁶⁸

In December 1943, another Canadian woman became the "first Nova Scotian girl to pass the government examinations and receive her ticket as a land or marine radio operator." It was reported that she had departed the previous week "on a merchant ship as wireless operator and secretary to the Captain."⁶⁹ At sea no less than on land, women found it hard to escape female stereotypes. In April 1939 Myrtle (Molly) Kool of Alma, New Brunswick, became only the second woman in the world to hold a Master's ticket.⁷⁰ Most women at sea, however, were stewardesses, not captains — including the first Canadian casualty of the war, who went down with *Athenia* on 3 September 1939.

As this article has attempted to show, more research is needed into the social characteristics of merchant seamen in order to gain a better understanding of seafaring as an occupation rather than as simply one facet of the Battle of the Atlantic. Clearly, the obstreperous behaviour of sailors "on the beach" reinforced the negative image of seamen as faceless, anti-social outsiders. Ironically, much of their anger seems to have been directed against other seamen, in clashes over simmering grievances, personal grudges, and national rivalries. These, it appears, were primary causes of labour unrest and worker discontent among mariners during the war, not rising radicalism that culminated in the notoriously violent postwar confrontations with hard-nosed shipowners and anti-labour governments. As for the convoy system, the work of the NCS notwithstanding, it is remarkable how *little* disruption to ship movements was attributable to "crew trouble." The evidence suggests that managerial inexperience, bureaucratic conflicts between British, American and Canadian authorities, and simple congestion, created more havoc in Halifax harbour than the activities of messroom subversives.⁷¹ Finally, we should not permit national pride to downplay the crucial contributions of other countries and peoples in keeping the convoys moving. It was the other "outposts of empire" — in India, Southeast Asia, East and West Africa, and the Caribbean - which provided the manpower necessary to keep the Atlantic lifeline afloat between 1939 and 1945.⁷²

In sum, Canadian merchant seamen played an important role in maintaining the convoys, but in the overall scheme of things, the Canadian presence was felt far less in merchant vessels than in naval operations on the North Atlantic. What I have tried to

present here is a case for examining all the evidence currently available - documentary as well as anecdotal - before reaching any conclusions about the full extent or significance of Canadian participation in the international convoys. The evidence suggests that merchant seamen in the Second World War were, first and foremost, war workers in a difficult and sometimes dangerous workplace, not ersatz heroes flinging themselves in the path of every oncoming torpedo. I have little doubt that wartime seafarers still alive today identify more with the former characterization than the latter.

NOTES

- * Jay White holds a PhD in Canadian History from McMaster University and is presently teaching at Western Washington University.
1. Mike Parker, *Running the Gauntlet: An Oral History of Canadian Merchant Seamen in World War II* (Halifax, 1994), 169 and 204; Ted and Alex Barris, *Days of Victory* (Toronto, 1995).
 2. An exception is Tony Lane, *The Merchant Seamen's War* (Manchester, 1990). The standard official histories for the British side of the equation are S.W. Roskill, *A Merchant Fleet in War 1939-1945* (London, 1962); and C.B.A. Behrens, *Merchant Shipping and the Demands of War* (London, 1955). American historiography on merchant shipping during the Second World War includes Felix Riesenber, Jr., *Sea War: The Story of the U.S. Merchant Marine in World War II* (New York, 1956); Robert G. Albion and Jennie Barnes Pope, *Sea Lanes in Wartime; The American Experience, 1775-1945* (New York, 1968); War Shipping Administration, *The United States Merchant Marine at War* (Washington, 1946); Emory S. Land, *Winning the War with Ships: Land, Sea and Air - Mostly Land* (New York, 1958); and Daniel Levine and Sara Ann Piatt, "The Contribution of U.S. Shipbuilding and the Merchant Marine to the Second World War," in Robert A. Kilmarx (ed.), *America's Maritime Legacy: A History of the U.S. Merchant Marine and Shipbuilding Industry Since Colonial Times* (Boulder, CO, 1979), 175-214. On labour relations, see Joseph P. Goldberg, *The Maritime Story: A Study in Labor-Management Relations* (Cambridge, MA, 1958); and Bruce Nelson, *Workers On The Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen, and Unionism in the 1930s* (Urbana, IL, 1988). For the British perspective, see Arthur Marsh and Victoria Ryan, *The Seamen* (Oxford, 1989).
 3. F.B. Watt, *In All Respects Ready: The Merchant Navy and the Battle of the Atlantic, 1940-1945* (Scarborough, ON, 1985); and Eric W. Sager, *Ships And Memories: Merchant Seafarers in Canada's Age Of Steam* (Vancouver, 1993).
 4. See, for example, Jim Green, *Against the Tide: The Story of the Canadian Seamen's Union* (Toronto, 1986); John Stanton, *Life and Death of a Union: the Canadian Seamen's Union, 1936-1949* (Toronto, 1978); and William Kaplan, *Everything That Floats: Pat Sullivan, Hal Banks, and the Seamen's Unions of Canada* (Toronto, 1987). Kaplan and Green reflect strong biases from opposite ends of the political spectrum. S.C. Heal, *Conceived in War, Born in Peace: Canada's Deep Sea Merchant Marine* (Vancouver, 1992), is less political than Watt but no less conservative.
 5. Stanton, *Life and Death*, 26.
 6. Bryan D. Palmer, *Working Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991* (Toronto, 1992), 296.
 7. *Halifax Mail*, 7 January 1944.
 8. Gilbert N. Tucker, *Naval Service of Canada*, (2 vols., Ottawa, 1952), II, employs the term but gives few details on the precise number of incidents, causes or outcomes.
 9. Lane, *Merchant Seamen's War*, 107-108.
 10. Parker, *Running the Gauntlet*, 168.

11. *Ibid.*, 204.
12. *Ibid.*, 186.
13. Lane, *Merchant Seamen's War*, 84-85.
14. Stanton, *Life and Death, 16-11*; Statement of Sea Service in possession of former merchant seaman Mel LeBlanc, Mount Hope, ON.
15. Kaplan, *Everything That Floats*, 18.
16. Interview with retired merchant seaman Mel LeBlanc, Mount Hope, ON, 23 March 1990.
17. Green, *Against the Tide*, 96, states that the manning pool opened in September. But a Halifax newspaper reported in late November 1941 that the building was still under construction, suggesting that it may have opened before it was finished. Public Archives of Nova Scotia (PANS), Manuscript Group (MG) 1/498, H.B. Jefferson Papers (HBJP), unidentified newspaper clipping.
18. Green, *Against the Tide*, 152. See also Charles Lipton, *The Trade Union Movement of Canada, 1827-1959* (3rd ed., Toronto, 1973), 280; and Palmer, *Working Class Experience*, 438.
19. PANS, MG 1/489a, HBJP, 28 April 1942. Taylor had operated a day shelter for the unemployed in Montreal before the war.
20. Public Archives of Ontario (PAO), MU 4156, John Fisher Papers (JFP), file: East Coast Reporter, 1942.
21. The building was exempted from fire regulations so that it could be built mainly of wood. See James F.E. White, "The Ajax Affair: Citizens and Sailors in Wartime Halifax, 1939-1945" (Unpublished MA thesis, Dalhousie University, 1984), 21-22.
22. PAO, JFP, file: East Coast Reporter, 1942, Broadcast script, 21 May 1942.
23. PANS, MG 1/489a, HBJP, 28 April 1942.
24. PAO, JFP, file: East Coast Reporter, 1942, Broadcast script, 11 June 1942.
25. Fisher papers, Broadcast script, 21 May 1942.
26. Watt, *In All Respects Ready*, 216.
27. Kaplan, *Everything That Floats*, 33.
28. *Ibid.*, 123-124, 130, 207.
29. *Halifax Mail*, 1 September 1940.
30. Watt, *In All Respects Ready*, 148-149.
31. *Ibid.*, 95-96.
32. *Ibid.*, 90-92.
33. Craig Heron, "Communists, Gangsters, and Canadian Sailors," *Labour/Le Travail*, XXIV (Autumn 1989), 232.
34. Watt, *In All Respects Ready*, 86.
35. *Ibid.*, 63, 213-214. Kaplan adopts a similar tone.
36. Green, *Against the Tide*, 102-104.
37. Watt, *In All Respects Ready*, 91, 121.
38. Green, *Against the Tide*, 31-43.
39. *Ibid.*, 57, 59.
40. Green, *Against the Tide*, 59. The "black gang" was a term commonly applied to engine-room personnel.
41. *Ibid.*, 97.
42. Watt, *In All Respects Ready*, xii.
43. Margaret S. Creighton, "American Mariners and the Rites of Manhood," in Colin Howell and Richard Twomey (eds.), *Jack Tar in History: Essays in the History of Maritime Life and Labour* (Fredericton, 1991), 147. See also Judith Fingard,

Jack in Port: Sailortowns of Eastern Canada (Toronto, 1982), 19.

44. Heron, "Communists," 232. See also Daniel Marx, *International Shipping Cartels: A Study of Industrial Self-Regulation by Shipping Conferences* (Princeton, 1953).

45. *Searchlight*, 8 September 1945, cited in Stanton, *Life and Death*, appendix C, 160-162.

46. Kaplan, *Everything That Floats*, 19.

47. Heron, "Communists," 232.

48. Parker, *Running the Gauntlet*, 206.

49. *Ibid.*, 213.

50. Green, *Against the Tide*, 105. Latter quotation from Gerald A. Morgan, "Introduction," in Watt, *In All Respects Ready*, xv.

51. Lane, *Merchant Seamen's War*, 4-5.

52. Parker, *Running the Gauntlet*, 198. US merchant seamen received \$100 per week, plus a \$100 bonus for Atlantic duty, and another bonus each time a war zone was entered or an air raid occurred. Levine and Piatt, "Contribution," 197.

53. PANS, MG 1/489a, HBJP, 4 May 1941.

54. Craig J. Forsyth, *The American Merchant Seaman and His Industry: Struggle and Stigma* (New York, 1989), 31.

55. A copy of this list was obtained by Mel LeBlanc of Mount Hope, ON from the Department of Transport and loaned to the author. A computerized database was compiled from the list, giving name, next of kin, home address, position, age, name and identification number of the vessel, and date lost. The data was analyzed using SPSS-PC+.

56. PANS, Record Group (RG) 42/E9, Halifax Police Court Docket, December 1945. Unfortunately, the court clerk only began sporadically to

record occupations of those charged in 1944, but the docket for December 1945 is fairly complete.

57. Parker, *Running the Gauntlet*, 206.

58. Green, *Against the Tide*, 98; Lane, *Merchant Seamen's War*, 24.

59. Lane, *Merchant Seamen's War*, 25 and 27. His calculations were based on a sample of 1011 seamen in the Registry of Shipping and Seamen, while mine comprised the 786 entries in the casualty list for which the age was given.

60. Parker, *Running the Gauntlet*, 197.

61. *Ibid.*, 45, 62, 81, 124, 179, 234, 265.

62. Lane, *Merchant Seamen's War*, 9.

63. Forsyth, *American Merchant Seamen*, 70.

64. Green, *Against the Tide*, 97.

65. PANS, RG 42/E9, Halifax Police Court Docket, June 1942-December 1945. This is based on a selective sampling of 1550 cases spread over forty-two months.

66. *Ibid.*, December 1945.

67. Lane, *Merchant Seamen's War*, 26.

68. PAO, JFP, file: East Coast Reporter, 1942.

69. PANS, MG 1/498, HBJP, unidentified newspaper clipping, 8 December 1943.

70. Today a granite reproduction of her Master's certificate stands on Alma's waterfront.

71. Jay White, "Conscripted City: Halifax and the Second World War" (Unpublished PhD thesis, McMaster University, 1994), 194-243.

72. Lane, *Merchant Seamen's War*, 156, estimates that together these countries and regions comprised nearly one-third of the British shipping industry's labour force when the war began.