

SYNOPSIS

Canadian Merchant Navy, July 1943 – Sept. 1945

Introduction

During WWII the Canadian Merchant Navy, manned by unarmed civilians on slow moving freighters, was considered to be a fourth Canadian force fighting the Axis after the Army, Navy and Air Force. Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships (DEMS) carried a 4 inch gun manned by Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) gunners. DEMS mail was included in the RCN mail forwarding program for the Canadian Merchant Navy. File cards keeping a record of merchant mariners and the ships they served on were burned in September 1945.

Treatment and Importance

After WWII was over Winston Churchill said that the Battle of the Atlantic was the only campaign that gave him sleepless nights. From January to May 1943 22% of all merchant ships that tried to cross the Atlantic were lost. Of the four Canadian forces involved in the war outside of Canada, only 0.2% of the men were merchant mariners of which 13% were killed. Without the delivery of war material the three military services would have very little to fight with. Due to scarcity of material this exhibit cannot be expanded to two frames.

Personal Study and Treatment

The only philatelic article the author could locate regarding the Canadian merchant navy was written by Colin Pomfret in BNAPS Canadian Military Mail Study Group newsletter #164, March 2004, page 729 <http://bnatopics.org/hhlibrary/newsletters/mm/mm-2004-03-n164.pdf> A popular notion, based on lack of any covers reported, that the merchant navy was not allowed mail posted free was questioned by the author in 2009. Bill Pekonen then discovered 1945 Order In Council (OIC) P.C. 4157 allowing the Canadian merchant navy to send surface mail free of postage for four weeks starting August 7, 1945, see BNAPS War Times study group newsletter #45, May 2009, page 590 <http://bnaps.org/hhl/newsletters/wt/wt-2009-05-w045.pdf> An earlier OIC, P.C. 4129, December 20, 1939 does not specifically authorize postage free mail to Merchant mariners when overseas but neither is the Air Force specifically mentioned who did send surface mail free. The author published an article on the merchant navy in BNAPS CMMMSG newsletter #228, July 2017. Unpublished censor research: Note 1. Of 23 covers to P.O. Box 9000 – 100% were naval censored prior to forwarding. Of 16 covers to merchant mariners c/o their steamship company or from the Federal Government – 3 are censored. Note 2: Most Box 9000 WRCNS were on loan from the RCN censorship office in Ottawa. Both Box 9000 and naval censor staff reported to the Canadian Naval Control Service Note 3: All censor labels used by Box 9000 were cut in half prior to resealing envelopes. Note 4: NPO 407 (HMCS Hochelaga, Montreal) exclusively handled Box 9000 Montreal mail, the only non-accounting post office (no stamp sales).

Condition and Rarity

Material condition is good considering that 10 covers shown are to merchant mariners on board freighters where living conditions were basic at best and being at sea not conducive to preservation of paper. Without experience, identification of a merchant navy cover is not obvious. Identifying signs are one or more of: to or from a 'Park' ship; addressed to or from "c/o Box 9000 Montreal or Vancouver"; addressed to or from "c/o a Canadian steamship company"; initials DEMS or from correspondence of a known Canadian merchant mariner. Highlighted are: Page 7. Bottom cover is the only reported use of U.S. Travelling Censor 56041 on the west coast, three copies are reported on the east coast, all to ships. Page 10: Bottom cover has cachet "Merchant Ships Free Mail" - <http://www.bnaps.org/hhl/newsletters/mm/mm-2004-05-n165.pdf> page 744 (one of two reported) implying that it was mailed during the four week period that merchant mariners outside of Canada could send surface mail home posted free, similar to the Canadian military forces. Page 11: Top cover has an unreported combination of Durban, South Africa, "Maritime Mail" cachet with the London, England, naval GPO "Post Office Maritime Mail" machine transit marking. Thought not to exist 14 years ago, this exhibit shows five covers posted free by Canadian merchant mariners.

References

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- Halford, Robert G, "The Unknown Navy, Canada's World War II Merchant Navy", Vanwell Publishing, 1995.
- Library and Archives Canada, "NPO 407", RG24-C-10-1, Box number 6694, File CPC-7-2-23
- Library and Archives Canada, "NPO 1117", RG24-C-10-1, Box number 6685, File CPC-7-2-13
- Tucker, Gilbert Norman, "The Naval Service of Canada, Volume 2", King's Printer, 1952.