

SYNOPSIS

Canadian Merchant Navy, July 1943 – Sept. 1945

Introduction

Presented is Canadian Merchant Navy postal history during the two-year period that the Royal Canadian Navy maintained a merchant mariner mail forwarding program called “c/o P.O. Box Montreal”. During WWII the Canadian Merchant Navy was considered to be a fourth Canadian force fighting the Axis after the Canadian Army, Navy and Air Force. However the Canadian Merchant Navy was manned by unarmed civilians mostly on slow moving freighters. Some ships carried a 4 inch gun manned by Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) gunners and were called Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships (DEMS). DEMS mail was also forwarded within the program. The file cards 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. However, without the delivery of war material the three other 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/hhl/library/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 after 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 Canadian Air Force specifically mentioned, who did sent mail free. The author published an article in BNAPS CMMMSG newsletter #228, July 2017. Unpublished censorship research includes: of 23 covers to P.O. 9000 – 100% were naval censored prior to forwarding. Of 13 covers to merchant mariners c/o their steamship company or from the Federal Government – none are censored. Note 1: most Box 9000 WRCNS were on loan from the RCN censorship office in Ottawa. Both Box 9000 and naval censorship offices reported to the Canadian Naval Control Service. Note 2: NPO 407 (HMCS Hochelaga, Montreal) the only non-accounting post office (no stamp sales) exclusively handled Box 9000 Montreal mail. Note 3: all censor labels used by Box 9000 were cut in half prior to being used to reseal envelopes.

Condition & Rarity

Material condition is good considering that 16 covers shown were sent 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: WWII era; 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. 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 army, air force and navy. 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. Previously thought not to exist, this exhibit shows five covers posted free by Canadian merchant mariners.

References

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- Tucker, Gilbert Norman, “The Naval Service of Canada, Volume 2”, King’s Printer, 1952.