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The Battle of the Atlantic: Impact on World War Two

Early in the war, German U-boats took a heavy toll on merchant shipping as the Allies struggled to find effective ways to combat it. Allied victory in the Second World War would not have been possible without victory at sea. Canada’s Merchant Navy, along with the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) and the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), played a key role in their efforts. Without successful transportation of troops, materials and larger convoy escorts with specially equipped sea patrols, Britain would not have fared well in WWII.

“The only thing that ever really frightened me was the U-Boat peril…” Sir Winston Churchill, FRS, OM, TD

Technology played a vital role during the Battle of the Atlantic. Aircrafts were effective in protecting merchant ships, but the Allied planes used earlier in the war did not cover enough distance in order to offer sufficient protection. However, the introduction of long-range planes by the Allies helped reduce the hazards of risky portions of the travels. Soon after, Germany developed torpedoes that followed the noise made by a ship’s propellers. Allied scientists responded by inventing a noise-making device that was towed behind a ship to divert the torpedoes. Between 1939 and 1942, the Germans upped the number of U-boats from 30 to 300. In addition, they also developed “hunting” techniques using large groups of submarines, referred to as wolfpacks, to attack enemy convoys. For the Allies, the situation became dire. Merchant ships were being sunk faster than they could be replaced, thus putting the supply link between North America and Europe at a great risk. New radar and sonar technologies helped the Allies find the U-boats and new weapons and helped sink the submarines more effectively. Eventually, the improved equipment and tactics of the Allies finally helped turn the tide of the battle in their favour.

Convoys heading in both directions across the Atlantic were attacked. Sinking empty ships was considered to be almost as valuable as sinking filled ones. From America and Canada, the Atlantic convoys were the lifeline to Britain for everything from food and medical supplies, to fuel and military equipment. If the German Navy was able to destroy enough ships, Britain could have been starved into surrender. Black May refers to a time period (May 1943) when some German U Boats began to suffer high casualties with fewer Allied ships sunk; it is considered a turning point in the Battle of the Atlantic. In addition, it allowed the allies to stage troops in England to prepare for later operations such as Torch and Overlord.

The Royal Canadian Navy helped win the Battle of the Atlantic in 1943, which led to German U Boats withdrawing from most of the Atlantic then. This allowed the Allies to use Britain as an ‘unsinkable Aircraft Carrier.’ An estimated 2,000 sailors of the Royal Canadian Navy were killed during the war, the vast majority of them during the Battle of the Atlantic. Canada’s Air force and Navy began to make a name for themselves because of their extensive involvement in WW2. The Battle itself lasted the duration of the Second World War in Europe, starting on September 3, 1939 and ending on May 8, 1945, which is now known as V/E Day.

The Battle of the Atlantic was the closest Britain came to losing WWII. It was the one battle that the Allies could not afford to lose, under any circumstances. What makes it especially remarkable is the fact that it had no geographical restrictions. Had it not been for the new technology and tactics, the British may well have not been able to pursue the war past 1942. Without the supplies to keep going, most of the aforementioned battles that turned the tide of war may never have taken place, and Germany may well have been able to keep its hold on Europe indefinitely.

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