

# The history of Canada's Merchant Navy is unlocked in new book by local author

By MIKE TOTH  
Special

Funny man Rodney Dangerfield and the Canadian Merchant Navy have at least one thing in common.

They got no respect.  
The Canadian Merchant Navy, you say. What's that? Never heard of it. Precisely.

Compared to the well-publicized and much-celebrated wartime achievements of the Navy, Army and Air Force, an ocean of silence surrounds the long-gone Canadian Merchant Navy.

## Rise and fall

Mississaugaan Robert Halford has done something to change this — he has written a book that chronicles the rise and fall of the Canadian Merchant Navy, documenting the achievements, struggles and successes of the men who built and sailed on merchant ships during the Second World War.

The book, entitled *The Unknown Navy*, was published and just recently released by Vanwell Publishing (Canada's largest publisher of naval heritage books) and is available at most book stores.

For Bob Halford, this book is a labor of love. He spent six years researching, digging into archives for long-forgotten material, pouring through government documents and hunting far and wide to track down the men (there weren't many women in the merchant marine during the war days) who sailed the seven seas in those turbulent years keeping open essential commercial shipping lines.

"During the Second World War, Canada operated the fourth largest merchant navy in the world, almost all of it built in Canadian shipyards," says Halford. "Some claim it was even the third largest."

By the end of hostilities in 1945, it certainly was.

He points out the Canadian merchant marine's contribution to the Allies winning the war was significant. In the early stages of the war, during the pre-

Pearl Harbor days when the United States was still a neutral power, it was primarily the Canadian convoys that teamed up with the British and others to defy a considerable threat posed by the German submarine fleet's wolf packs (a collection of U boats hunting and hounding the North Atlantic finishing lanes in a pattern that wreaked havoc) to get much needed war material and food supplies through to Britain.

A total of 1,146 Canadian merchant seamen lost their lives as a result of enemy action, 677 serving on ships of Canadian registry and the others listed as missing or lost at sea while employed on ships sailing under foreign flags.

Wartime expenditures, as well as the labor force that was involved in the shipping industry that supplied the Canadian Merchant Navy, exceeded that of the highly successful aircraft industry. At wartime peak, the Canadian aircraft industry employed 116,000 and the shipping industry 126,000.

By war's end, Canada's merchant fleet was the third largest of the western powers behind the much larger American and British.

Having served its purpose, the Canadian government decided to unceremoniously scuttle the fleet a couple of years after the end of the war.

All this is documented in Halford's book that stands as a definitive work about the Canadian Merchant Navy.

## Sea roots

There is a pile of little-known tidbits hidden inside the covers. For instance, did you know that the luxury Cunard Line had its sea roots in the first Canadian Merchant Marine (oh yes, there were parts I and II to its history), born in Halifax after the First World War? Or how about Greek shipping magnate-to-be Aristotle Onassis purchasing six ships when the merchant fleet was first scuttled after Armistice. Onassis paid \$20,000 for each (haggled down from the asking price of \$30,000) to form the foundation of his sea empire back in 1933.

And Halford should know what he is

writing about — he joined the Merchant Navy at the age of 20 in 1943. After training in Hubbard's, Nova Scotia he was assigned to the SS Green Park as ordinary seaman. By 1946, he was sailing the Pacific, Indian Ocean and South Atlantic routes aboard SS Nemiscam Park and SS Kootenay Park.

Becoming a merchant sailor wasn't his first choice. First he wanted to join the Air Force, then tried his luck — unsuccessfully as it turned out — with the Army and Navy. He got turned down by all three as a result of scars suffered during a childhood accident.

## Patriotic duty

"I was determined that I was going to get into this (the fray of the war) because it was a patriotic thing to do," he says, adding the merchant marines were the only ones who would have him.

He says, for the most part, he enjoyed his sailing days. "I'm glad I hadn't missed it," he says.

*The Unknown Navy* is the end result of thousands of hours of devotion to the project over a six-year span following his retirement.

"The real story of the Canadian Merchant Navy had never been told," he says in way of explaining why he had plunged into the project in the first place. Halford is 72 and has lived "in very the same" Streetsville-area home since 1957.

By his own admission, he's more of a fyer now than sailor.

"I'm an aviation buff," he says. That explains why he has spent 19 years as editor and publisher of the Canadian Aircraft Operator, a monthly tabloid publication serving the up-in-the-air industry.

*The Unknown Navy* has been well received and praised by those who know the score best — the men who risked their lives day in and day out in a mostly unglamorous service to the war effort.

"When we received his manuscript, we knew after reading it that it would be a winner," states Vanwell Publishing's publicity and promotions director Vanessa Kooter.