

Heroes in Dungarees

(WWII's merchant marines [MM]) by John Bunker (1995)

Oct 1939 the City of Flint was captured by the Germans, but a Norwegian crew took the Germans by surprise & they were freed. The 1st MM casualty of WWII was City of Rayville. Liberty ships [EC-2] became the work horse of WWII. They were 441' long, carry 9146 tons of cargo, had 2500 hp & cost \$1.5M. Ship yards in WWII produced 5300 ships. Liberty ships had a crew of 42 men.

German submarines could make out the black shadow of a ship against the lights of the Atlantic coast & these waters became known as U-Boat Lane. May 1942 US finally started regulating lights. While Germans subs were busy on the east coast, Japanese subs were working on the west.

In 1940 one convoy lost 22 out of 34 ships. Convoys traveled at speeds of the slowest ship [about 7 knots], but when one had problems & could not keep, it became prey to enemy subs. More than 1000 merchant ships were sunk in the Atlantic in 1942 alone. 1943 more escort ships & long-range radar turned the tide of battle.

US shipped \$10B of goods to Russia to fight of Germany. The waters north of Iceland were so cold that sailors had a 50-50 chance if their ship was sunk & they had to use lifeboats. Convoy PQ-17 lost 23 of 33 ships in the cold waters of the Arctic. 3feb43 600 men were lost on a cruise liner pressed into service for the war. The Germans were still sinking merchant marines 2 days before they surrendered on 7may45.

Reconnaissance planes reported convoys to submarines. It was imperative to have blackout screens on ship so they wouldn't be spotted by the enemy. A typical convoy had 50 merchant ships & 5 escorts [a destroyer & 4 frigates] spaced about 800 yards apart [but could easily be separated or collide in bad weather]. Germans would let sailors abandon ship, Japanese would take them prisoner or kill them.

The US provided 65 million tons [80%] of the fuel for Allies in WWII & tankers were a big target. US tanker Anderson went into flames on 22feb42 & only one man survived. 18nov42 a tanker was hit & they abandoned ship. A few men got out late & found the lifeboats gone. They put out the fire & took the ship to Newfoundland. A U-boat attacked them in route, but they again escaped. Unfortunately, the crew was killed after repairs were made & they headed back to sea.

Unfortunately, merchant ships were easy targets for axis planes in the Mediterranean [they used smoke screens a lot]. April 1942 German bombers made 4338 attacks on Malta & became the most bombed spot on earth. Liberty ship John Barry was torpedoed 28aug44 & \$300M of silver was sent 8000' below the surface. Dec 1941 a Japanese sub attacked a tanker north of San Francisco & another north of Santa Barbara.

Japanese occupied Attu & Kiska Islands [end of Alaska's Aleutian Islands] from June 1942 to May 1943. As Japanese navy & air force became decimated, kamikazes became more common & sank 34 warships & 30 merchant ships at Okinawa.

6Jun44 more than 4000 ships & countless planes crossed the English Channel to invade France [Normandy, Omaha & Utah beaches]. Ports & rivers had to be swept clean of mines. V-2 missiles came down silently on England with much destruction. The V-1 could be heard, but were more destructive. Some ships disappeared & thought all lives lost, only some of the crew turned up at the end of the war in POW camps.

A mast of the Delisle fell on Capt William Clendaniel's artificial leg as the ship was sinking. His crew pilled him to safety. Several days later a fishing vessel retrieved his wooden leg & returned it.

Note:

WWI used rivets to build ship, but WWII welded the ships.

Quotes:

Talking about German subs, Churchill said: "never in modern war was so much done by so few"