

Running the Gauntlet: An Oral History of Canadian Merchant Seaman in World War II

Running the Gauntlet: An Oral History of Canadian Merchant Seaman in World War II by Mike Parker. Halifax, NS: Nimbus Press, 1994. 344 p.

Review by Francis I.W. Jones

The Canadian public's ignorance of Canada's naval forces and its merchant marine was brought home to me recently by a neighbour whose stepfather was visiting. She was most anxious to introduce him to me because: "He was in the navy too." It turned out that he was a merchant seaman. My neighbour "didn't know there was a difference." This is one misconception that Parker attempts to dispel in his timely oral history of Canada's merchant marine in World War II. He points out that "many still believe they [the merchant marine] and the navy are one."

Mike Parker's chronicle of fifty first-person accounts by merchant seamen, fifty years after the Battle of the Atlantic, is a valiant attempt to redress the wrongs done to men whose contribution to the allied war effort has never been acknowledged adequately: politically, economically, or socially. The lives sacrificed have been disregarded; the survivors of a prolonged test of endurance against a vicious enemy in a hostile natural environment have never received their just due. That is the gist of Parker's argument, demonstrated so eloquently for him by men whose vivid tales of fear, death and destruction, and ordeals against the elements, are leavened by humour and seasoned with bitterness at their shabby treatment by their own country. If they were fortunate enough to survive the initial torpedoing and death by explosion, fire, parboiling in escaping steam or choking in a sea of oil, they faced yet another ordeal in the water. If lucky, they were rescued. The alternatives were death by drowning, exposure, starvation, injuries or wounds or a lingering hell in a prisoner-of-war camp.

Senator Jack Marshall in the foreword asserts that public recognition for merchant seamen is long overdue. They have not received benefits accorded members of the Army, Navy or Air Force. This has been partially addressed recently. On May 18, 1994, the Secretary of State for Veterans announced that former merchant mariners may now be awarded the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal, which was previously awarded only to volunteers who served in the Army, Navy or Air Force during the war. On May 23, 1994, four veterans of Canada's merchant navy and one veteran's widow were presented with the medal in a ceremony held at the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic in Halifax. One of the recipients, who had spent four years and

four months in a German Prisoner-of-War camp, commented: "It's a shame it took 50 years. There aren't too many of us left." Subsequently, in a June editorial in the *Halifax Chronicle-Herald*, the secretary of the Merchant Navy Coalition for Equality questioned whether the award of the medal was "a low-cost symbolic sop" to merchant navy veterans, who despite legislation passed two years ago in 1992 entitling them to disability pensions, income support, and health care on the same basis as other veterans, are still having difficulty accessing these benefits because of undue bureaucracy in processing their claims.

Parker's introduction gives an overview of the Battle of the Atlantic and its significance in supplying Great Britain, the convoy system, submarine warfare, and a brief history of the Canadian Merchant Marine. Most particularly, it stresses the unfair treatment of merchant mariners or, rather, their lack of any treatment at all. Chapter 1 provides an overview of life in the merchant marine and stresses the differences between it and life in the armed forces. Chapters 2 and 3 are the heart of the book; first-person accounts of what it was like to be a merchant mariner in the Battle of the Atlantic. Chapter 4 recounts what it was like in a prisoner-of-war camp for those handful lucky enough to escape death at sea. The book concludes with an epilogue which is almost an eulogy to the quiet courage and endurance of the merchant seaman by a merchant mariner who also commanded one of the Royal Canadian Navy's most renowned destroyers during the Battle of the Atlantic. The foreword is a long overdue call for justice. The introduction and Chapter 1 are necessary background to understanding the milieu in which the stories in chapters 2 and 3 are told. Chapter 4 is interesting, but not unlike other accounts of other prisoners of war. The eulogy in the epilogue is perhaps a more eloquent reiteration of what the tales recounted in Chapters 2 and 3 reveal. These are the heart of the book.

Parker has done an admirable job of familiarizing himself with the sea, the navy, and seamen. He has taken the trouble to understand some of the principles of naval warfare in general and submarine warfare in particular - especially the importance of the convoy system in ensuring that Britain would have sufficient resources to carry on the war with Hitler. But it is in his ability to let his interviewees tell the story that he excels. One of Parker's interviewees, known to me personally, once told me he joined the navy after being torpedoed twice as a merchant sailor, because it was safer. This sentiment has been echoed by others.

Officers and men of the Royal Canadian Navy have had the opportunity to relate their World War II experiences in three volumes of *Salty Dips*, published by the Naval Officers Association of Canada (1983-1988), *Fading Memories*, published by the Atlantic Chief and Petty Officers Association (1993), and *Corvettes Canada*, by Mac Johnston (1994). Although there is a chapter in *Fading Memories* devoted to the Merchant Marine and an even

shorter chapter in *Ships and Memories-Merchant Seafarers in Canada's Age of Steam*, an oral history by Eric Sager, *Running the Gauntlet* is the only compilation of first-person accounts devoted solely to the viewpoint of the merchant mariner. The only real criticism is that Parker has taken the views of his interviewees as gospel without critical comment. Not all naval officers were unaware or disdainful of the enormous contribution of the merchant marine to the allied war effort. The Nova Scotia Naval Officers Association has long supported merchant mariners in their fight for recognition and benefits from a reluctant government, and since 1984 has actively cooperated with them. Nonetheless, Parker's work is a unique and timely contribution to the history of World War II, and dramatically emphasizes an injustice long overdue for redress.

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