

Coming of Age

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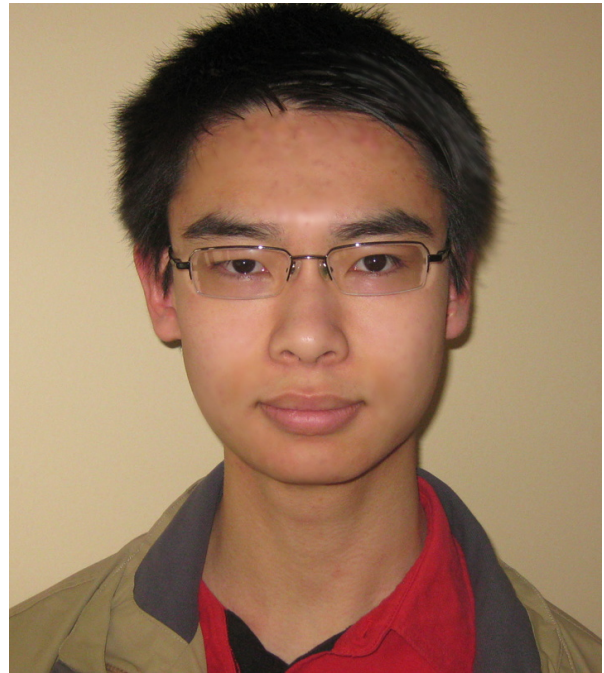
Early in the 20th century, Canada was faced a decision by the then British Empire. Canada had a choice, contribute to the Royal Navy, or create its own naval force. Canada made its choice, and in 1910, the Naval Service of Canada was born, which was to be later renamed the Royal Canadian Navy.

The Royal Canadian Navy started out as a small force, acquiring ships mostly from the British Empire. At the start of World War One, the Canadian Navy consisted of only six ships, of which two were repurposed coast guard vessels. Canadian sailors were offered the option to serve within Britain's Royal Navy or remaining to serve within the Royal Canadian Navy, and many sailors took the opportunity to join the British. Canada's Navy saw limited action throughout the first world war and its shipbuilding program saw limited success as well, turning out only three ships. Canada's navy was still a young, immature force, still seeking purpose.

Between the two World Wars, the Canadian Navy was still struggling to find funds, support, and a mission. Due to the lack of threats, the Navy was relegated to many civilian jobs for the Department of Transportation. Fears over Nazi Germany and its recent conquests brought a degree of rearmament to the Navy, but not enough to make a sizable difference. Only upon the outbreak of World War II, did the Navy start to get its legs and grow up.

Canada's Navy entered the war with only thirteen ships and 3000 men. Canada's allies had expressed doubts over the capabilities of her navy, as the Navy was formed from many people from all across Canada, many who were inexperienced. Some of the sailors had never even seen open water before. However, these doubts were to be proven unfounded. Canada was a major contributor to the war effort in The Battle of the Atlantic, which was longest campaign in the war, lasting six years from the beginning to the end of World War II.

The key to the Allies' war effort was in the successful resupply of their forces located in Europe and Britain. Without the constant stream of supplies, men, and resources, the war effort would have quickly collapsed. Unfortunately for the Allies, the Axis, primarily Nazi Germany, would not let the resupply go smoothly. Immediately upon declaration of war, German ships that were already deployed opened fire on French and British shipping. Single ship ventures



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were quickly destroyed, which led to the implementation of convoys. Many Allied attempts at protection against the German submarine threat proved unsuccessful, however.

By 1941, the French naval fleet was largely destroyed. One of Britain's greatest allies at sea had fallen. German submarines that had been kept for European operations returned to the war on Allied shipping in the Atlantic. Better trained submarines were going against fewer and fewer Allied escorts. German adoption of "wolf pack" tactics in their submarine operations struck fear into convoys and their increasingly difficult voyages. German submarines were enjoying incredible successes, so much to the point where it was named "Happy Time" in honor of their easiness in battle.

Ignorance of the submarine threat and inability to protect the convoys cost many lives and seriously threatened the European war effort. However, tides started to turn in May of 1941. The Royal Canadian Navy started seeing an explosive expansion. Particularly famous was the widespread deployment of Canadian corvettes. Initially relegated to a minor role, the Royal Canadian Navy was seeing a greater and greater duty in the escort and protection of the merchant convoys.

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Canadian, British and American forces came together in late 1941. Their increasing cooperation and improvements in technology greatly improved the antisubmarine capabilities of the merchant escorts. In particular, the breaking of the German Enigma code, which was the cipher for German radio communication, allowed degrees of certainty against a threat that was largely impossible to see. However, superiority was seesawing back and forth between the Allies and Axis in the fight to control the seas.

Following the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor, the United States diverted much of its naval forces to the Pacific theatre. Canada's role in The Battle of the Atlantic was to become even more important. As the Allies were preparing for the Invasion of Normandy, shipping was becoming even more vital. Canada had become a major player in insuring the success of the merchant navy in supplying for the Western Front. Throughout the war, the Canadian Navy had lost twenty-four ships and destroyed thirty-one German submarines. In the supply effort, the Royal Canadian Navy had escorted roughly 25000 merchant ships. Canada's Navy was critical in ensuring the ability of the Allies to fight and to open the second front to the war.

Canada's contribution to The Battle of the Atlantic was not limited to its protection of the convoys however. Canada played a vital role in building, supplying, and operating the merchant navy. At the beginning of The Battle of the Atlantic, Canada had very few open sea capable merchant ships. By the end of the war, Canada had built more than 400 ships for the merchant navy. Canada's contributions were not without loss, more than seventy Canadian merchant ships were lost.

Growing from a small complement of six destroyers and several other ships at the outbreak of the war to the third largest navy in the world at the end of the war, Canada's Navy had grown to prominence. Going from from an ill equipped and inexperienced force to a world class player and highly experienced navy brought great pride to its members, Canada, and the world. By the end of the war, the Royal Canadian Navy consisted of around 270 ships and 100,000 sailors. Canada's Navy was no longer some offshoot of a British policy, Canada's Navy had grown up. The Royal Canadian Navy had its place in the world. The Royal Canadian Navy had come of age.