

The May sun rises early in the northwest Atlantic. On this [May 10 morning](#) 70 years ago, the crew of the Royal Canadian Air Force Liberator, patrolling 250 miles southwest of the Flemish Cap, were glad to see it.

Missions had become routine in the past months and certainly since six days ago, when Grand Admiral Karl Doenitz had ordered the German submarines to cease fire, action was unexpected.

So the growing light would help as they approached the small surface radar contact a few miles ahead. The captain of U-boat 889 had, at last, decided to obey his orders and surface his boat in surrender to Allied forces.

The Liberator crew, unable to accept a surrendered U-boat, called for assistance and quickly HMC Ships Oshawa and Rockcliffe were on the scene. U-889 was escorted into Shelburne.

More than all the parades, all the cheering crowds and all the official proclamations, the surrender of this small black-hulled vessel exclaimed that the most vital struggle of the war was over and that, in triumph, Canada had achieved something remarkable.

The Battle of the Atlantic was the longest of the war. Ships were sunk on the first day of the war and, over six harrowing years later, ships were sunk on the last day.

It was the most critical struggle. Winston Churchill claimed that it was the only battle that kept him awake at night. German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel avowed in his diary that North Africa had not been lost on the barren sands of Cyrenacia, but rather on the punishing waves of the Atlantic. Soviet Marshal Georgy Zukhov stated that without Allied control of the Atlantic, there would have been no victory at Stalingrad, nor an invasion of Normandy. Canada's contribution had been the decisive factor in the outcome.

How extraordinary was the Canadian achievement? The facts certainly give compelling testament. Britain turned to Canada in 1939 as the only source of help in maintaining Atlantic supply routes to Europe, but engaging an enemy at sea was a daunting prospect.

How could a country with few seafarers and only a handful of ships, naval or merchant, hope to form the means of keeping Britain supplied with the food and materials necessary to survive?

How could an agrarian nation with little industry of any kind, that had not launched a single steel-hulled ocean-going vessel in 20 years, hope to build the merchant and naval ships that would be needed? It must have seemed an impossible task.

Yet Canadians rose to the challenge in a magnificent manner. In a few short years, there were 15 shipyards across the country employing 85,000 men and women, who by war's end had turned out nearly 1,200 large merchant and naval ships and 8,000 auxiliary and small craft.

By late 1942, Royal Canadian Air Force Maritime aircraft were ranging far and wide from bases in the

Maritimes and Newfoundland and the Canadian merchant navy had grown from nothing to over 100 ships.

From a standing start, our contribution to victory in the Atlantic rose to the point where the majority of Allied forces in the campaign were Canadian. Rear Admiral Leonard Murray of the Royal Canadian Navy became responsible for the entire western North Atlantic, from Long Island to Iceland. Never before or since has the United States navy entrusted defence of its ocean approaches to another nation.

The only part of the Second World War that was fought on Canadian territory was in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, in the Cabot Strait and off our coasts.

The war at sea had been an enormous challenge. More than any other, it transformed the country economically and socially. Just as Vimy Ridge gave birth to our nation, the Battle of the Atlantic marked the coming of age of Canada, giving us a strong, independent voice in the post-war world.

A century and a half ago, Joseph Howe remarked that "it is a wise nation that celebrates its glorious deeds." One only has to look at how the Australian and New Zealand actions at Gallipoli in the First World War became the "Anzac Legend" to see the wisdom in that assertion. Today, it remains an important part of the identity of both nations, shaping the way they view their past and their future.

The magnificent achievement by Canadians in the Atlantic deserves to be remembered and celebrated across our nation. The deeds of our forefathers are important for our future. **By Ted Kelly and Hugh MacPherson who are members of the Battle of the Atlantic Place project team in Halifax.**