

# The Battle of the Atlantic

*The Battle of the Atlantic (September 1939 – May 1945) was the longest campaign of the Second World War and arguably the most important. Canada was a major participant and its efforts were crucial to Allied victory.*

## Overview

As Marc Milner explained in *The Battle of the Atlantic*, “the Allies won the war in the Atlantic and did it in convincing style. They proved superior on all fronts, from sheer industrial production to intelligence, equipment, operational research, and command and control.” But it wasn’t easy and it took almost four years to reach the turning point at which Britain ceased to be a fortress under siege and became the assembly area for the liberation of Europe. It took until May 1943 for American, British and Canadian naval and maritime air forces to counter Admiral Dönitz’s submarine wolf packs, and it would take another two years to defeat them. The Allied strategy always envisaged a two-phased attack on Germany, but it all hinged on countering the U-boats and then keeping them under control. As the statistics show, winning the Battle of the Atlantic was a team effort. In the end, the dogged determination of Allied sailors and airmen, North American industrial capacity, and the efforts of the many scientists and mathematicians who broke the German codes and invented new weapons made it all possible.

## The Canadian Role

When the Second World War began, the RCN consisted of six destroyers and seven smaller ships. This small fleet was operated and supported by 1,990 officers and men, and an equal number in the Naval Reserve. At first, the small fleet could do little more than patrol the coast. A modest naval expansion in 1940 saw new ships ordered, but the rush to put those ships to sea made heavy demands on training. The fall of Europe in 1940 saw the RCN more deeply committed to the convoys to Britain.

When the Germans began using U-boat wolf packs to attack convoys in the mid-Atlantic Canada undertook the difficult task of providing convoy escort between Newfoundland and Britain. Small ships designed for coastal waters, with some crews unqualified even for that duty, had to face determined enemy attacks under terrible weather conditions. The men and ships were being pushed beyond their limits. The success rate against the U-boats was not encouraging.

Early in 1943, Britain withdrew the battered Canadian mid-ocean escort groups to allow the better-equipped Royal Navy anti-submarine warfare (ASW) groups to deal with the wolf packs. This succeeded and the submarines themselves were withdrawn from the mid-Atlantic. Although this was a turning point in the war, Germany still had over 200 U-boats available, and with new equipment and tactics they continued to attack Allied shipping.

With the major Allied push to build up supplies in Britain for the invasion of Normandy, the RCN played a major role in escorting convoys to Britain. It also made a major contribution to the actual invasion. Although the U-boats had little success against the invasion fleet they continued to attack shipping in British and Canadian coastal waters. Thus, the Canadian fleet was continuously and heavily engaged in Canadian and Newfoundland home waters, as well as in protecting the strategically-important transatlantic convoys. This was an essential military contribution to the Allied cause.

*(Source: Roger Sarty, “The Royal Canadian Navy and the Battle of the Atlantic, 1939-1945”, War Museum of Canada Dispatches)  
Photos, clockwise from upper left: a depth charge attack; convoy leaving Halifax in February 1941; U-889 on surrendering to the RCN; a Canadian sailor; anti-aircraft gun; HMCS Fredericton*





### ***The Statistics***

The numbers from both side of the Battle of the Atlantic remain controversial and, in some ways incomplete. Despite the controversial nature of the numbers, some general statistics are useful because they illustrate the intensity of the Battle. Over the course of the war, about 630 U-boats were lost at sea to Allied action, of these 42% were sunk by ships, 40% by aircraft and 6% by combined action. The Allies managed to capture three. Another 120 were lost through bombing or from mines. 215 U-boats were scuttled at the end of the war and 153 were surrendered. Germany built over 1,000 U-boats during the war and lost 764 through Allied action. In contrast, the Allies lost some 2,750 merchant ships and around 40,000 seamen. In winning the battle, the Allies lost about 175 warships of all types. The RCN lost 24 warships during the war – 14 were sunk by U-boats – and about 2,000 members of the RCN died, almost all of them in the Battle

of the Atlantic. Against this, the RCN sank or shared in the destruction of 31 U-boats and escorted some 25,000 merchant ships. By the end of the war, the RCN had expanded to include some 270 ships and nearly 100,000 men and women, and had made a significant contribution to the Allied war effort.



### ***The U-Boats***

Germany started the war with only 45 operational U-boats. Another 9 were being built. Of the operational U-boats, 29 were the longer-range types VII and IX, the others were smaller coastal submarines used in the North and Baltic Seas. Until the final hunt and destruction of the *Bismarck* in May 1941, surface raiders actually posed the greater threat, but they rarely engaged Canadian forces. Admiral Dönitz's strategy was to disrupt Allied shipping and prevent the Americans from crossing the Atlantic. This was easier said than done, for although the Allied navies had neglected ASW during the inter-war period, they quickly gained proficiency. At first the U-boats operated independently against the convoys, switching in 1941 to the wolf packs with greater success. Concerted Allied efforts, helped by new equipment and tactics as well as gaining the tactical advantage from breaking German signal codes, eventually turned the tide. Increasing numbers of long-range U-boats allowed the war against shipping to be waged in North American waters with considerable freedom until the Americans eventually started effective hunter-killer ASW operations. But the U-boats still roamed Canadian and Newfoundland waters through much of 1942, destroying over 70 vessels, including 21 in the Gulf of St Lawrence. The focal point of U-boat operations remained the Atlantic, especially when the Allies started to build up forces in Britain. By mid-1943, Allied technology, perseverance and industrial might began to prevail and shipping losses declined. The Allies were building merchant ships faster than the Germans could sink them and at the same time Allied sea-air cooperation began taking a heavy toll on the U-boats. German industry could not keep pace with the losses. In the end, the U-boats lost the industrial battle and thus the Battle of the Atlantic.



(Sources: Cajus Bekker, *Hitler's Naval War* and <http://www.u-boat.net>)