

**Merchant Navy ‘Sparks’
in the
Battle of the Atlantic**

Experiences of a young
Radio Operator
on the North Atlantic in 1941

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Typical Atlantic Convoy requiring extra Radio Operators in 1941

- ✦ **March, 1941 - Graduation from radio school with Radio Operator Certificate – 2nd Class (1st requires sea duty)**
- ✦ **Reported to Holland America Line, Hoboken, N.J. on first assignment.**

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My assignment - the Maasdam. Not this one!

Photo shows Cruise Ship Maasdam (5)

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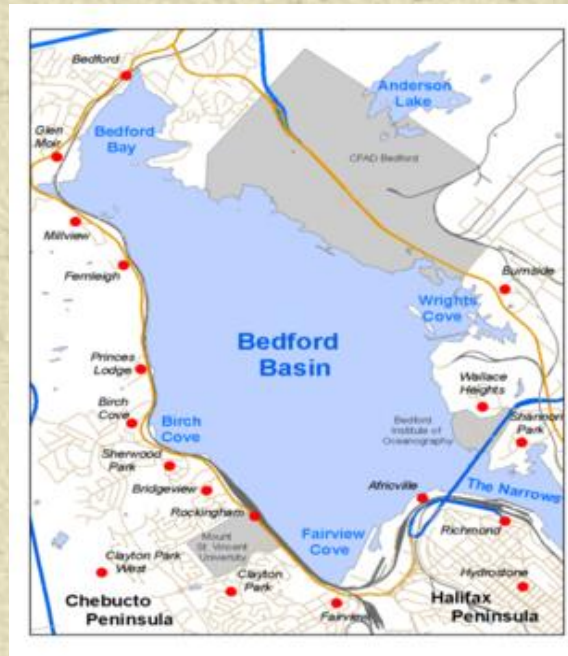


- ✦ **Signed onto Maasdam (3) – built in Holland 1921**
- ✦ **Length: 470 ft**
- ✦ **Beam: 58 ft**
- ✦ **Draft: 27 ft loaded**
- ✦ **Gross Weight: 8,812 tons**

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- ✦ All holds and deck loaded – Jeeps in hold, 6X6 trucks lashed to hatch covers.
- ✦ Passengers: 32 businessmen.
- ✦ April 1 - Dep. Hoboken, N.J. to join a convoy out of Halifax
- ✦ Landlubber at Sea
- ✦ Radio Equipment:
 - ◆ TRF Receiver
 - ◆ Transmitter Sealed
 - ◆ Emergency TX – Spark Gap with 10 inch coil
 - ◆ Strict radio silence except for emergency call.
- ✦ Sea Legs
- ✦ Apr 4 - Arr. Halifax. Dozens of ships anchored in Bedford Basin.

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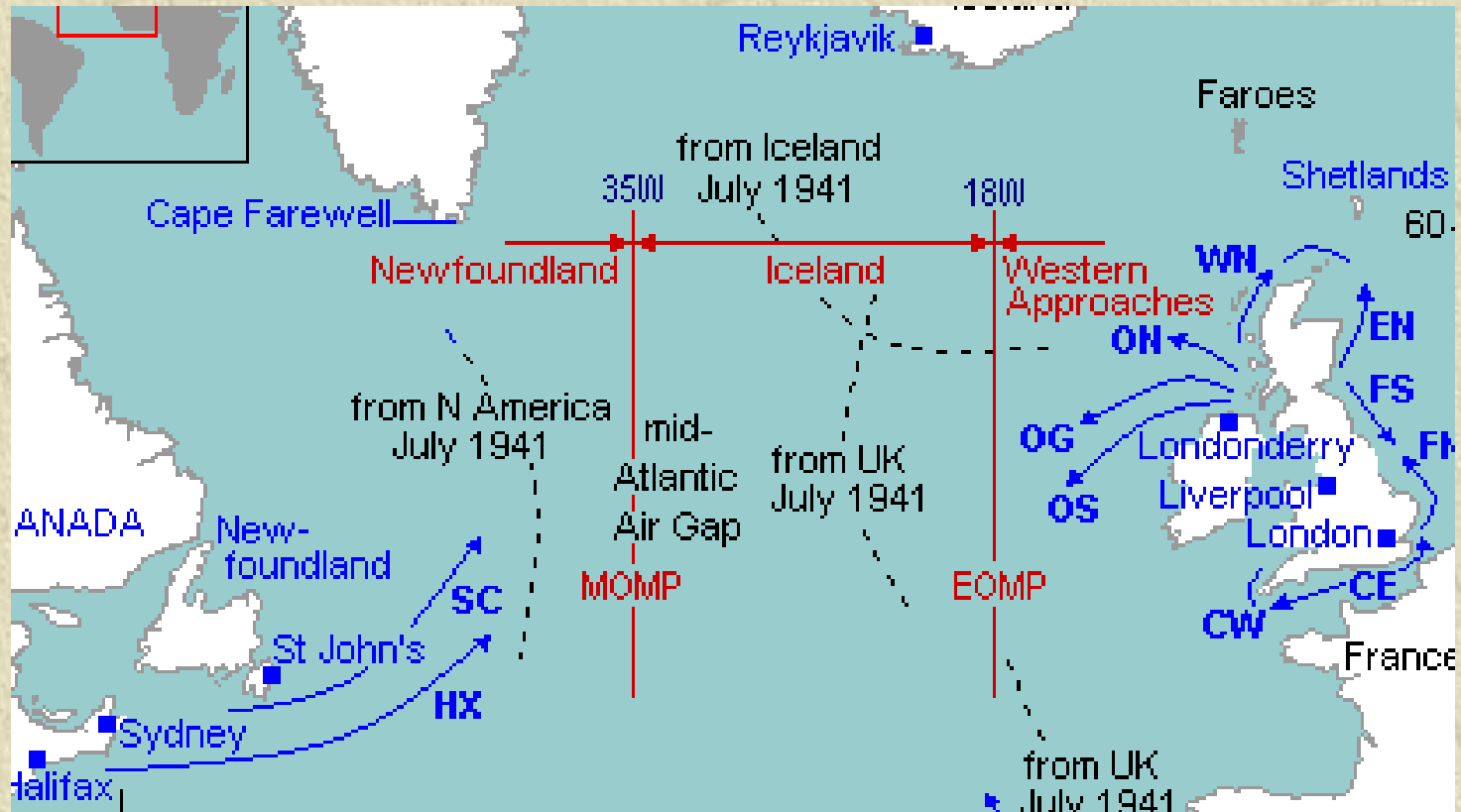
- ✦ **Apr 6 – Dep. Halifax for Liverpool - 39 ships leave single file from Bedford Basin through The Narrows to form Fast Convoy HX.119. “Smokers” to cut smoke or leave convoy.**
- ✦ **Running at 7 Kt - Zig-Zag course - Rough weather**
- ✦ **Apr 13 - Joined by HX.119B from Bermuda with 19 more.**

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An RCN Corvette escorts convoys to mid-Atlantic gap. Photo courtesy of “The Sea is at our Gates” by Commander Tony German.

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- ✦ Map shows the limits of convoy protection by sea or air.
- ✦ Between those limits, ships were on their own.

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*'A Convoy Arrives in Liverpool' by Charles David Cobb (1990).
The first ships are entering Brunswick Dock. The others are
heading for Birkenhead and the North Docks.*

- ✦ **Apr 22 – Arr. Liverpool**
- ✦ **We docked at Huskisson Dock (one of those North Docks)**
- ✦ **Extended offloading.**

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- ✦ **May 2-8 - Massive Luftwaffe air raids of Liverpool docks – the “Hellfire of Liverpool” – heaviest bombing of a British city outside London (and it was our luck to be in the midst of all of it).**
 - ◆ **681 medium bombers over 6 days and nights**
 - ◆ **870 tons of high explosive bombs**
 - ◆ **112,000 incendiary bombs**
 - ◆ **Fires and explosions of ship cargoes and warehouses**
 - ◆ **Ship on next dock on fire. Exploded, damaging Maasdam**
 - ◆ **1741 people killed and 1154 injured in those few days.**
 - ◆ **Firemen amazing in the face of grave danger. Many died.**
- ✦ **No cargo or passengers loaded for return trip to New York.**

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Liverpool Huskisson Docks following the May 2-8, 1941 air raids

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- ✦ **May 12 - Dep. Liverpool for New York in Convoy OB.322**
- ✦ **May 20 - Convoy dispersal. As escorts turn back, we're on our own in the mid-Atlantic gap and running at brisk 16 kt.**
- ✦ **Distress signals heard (SS Marconi and SS San Felix lost). Other distress signals from ships in eastbound convoy.**
- ✦ **May 24/25 - Gulf Stream. Warm and humid. Welcome change from the North Atlantic.**
- ✦ **May 24 Historical Note – German Battleship Bismarck sinks British Cruiser HMS Hood not that far north of us.**
- ✦ **May 29 – Arr. New York**
- ✦ **Shore Leave.**
- ✦ **Took train home to Bradford, ON. Bought a uniform**

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✦ **Jun 8 - Return to Ship**

✦ **Loading:**

- ✦ war materiel, Hudson bombers on hatch covers, wings in hold.
- ✦ 32 passengers include 11 US Marines for US Embassy duty in London, 18 American Red Cross nurses, Hollywood actor going home to join RAF, two businessmen.

✦ **Jun 11 – Dep. NY for Halifax to join east-bound convoy.**

✦ **Jun 13 – Arr. Halifax. No shore leave. 100 or more ships in Bedford Basin.**

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- ✦ **June 16 – Dep. Halifax for Liverpool.**
- ✦ **51 ships leave Bedford Basin single file to form Convoy HX.133 outside**
- ✦ **June 17-21 – Fog**
- ✦ **Some collisions**
- ✦ **Near miss for Maasdam.**
- ✦ **June 23 - MS Vigrid has engine trouble, falls back from convoy, torpedoed and sunk**

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- ✦ **June 24-26 - Under attack by ten U Boat “wolf-pack”**
- ✦ **June 24 - Two ships lost**
- ✦ **June 25 - One more ship lost**
- ✦ **June 26 – 300 miles southwest of Iceland**
 - ◆ **Tanker MT Tibia hit about 9 AM – not sunk. Back on station about noon.**
 - ◆ **Our ship Maasdam hit about 9:30 PM and sinking!**
 - ◆ **A minute later SS Malaya II hit and blew up.**
 - ◆ **Our captain issued “Abandon Ship” order**
 - ◆ **Muster at life-boats. Two useless, damage to our life-boat, foot wound to a Marine, head wound to 3rd Mate**
 - ◆ **Three boats load and depart. Last boat loaded, leaking, soon swamped. Occupants swim to Havprins**

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- ✦ **Tanker MT Havprins stopped to clear bridge damage. Picks up one of our life-boats. Marines, some nurses and some others swim to Havprins. Two of the nurses drown.**
- ✦ **Maasdam officers and four nurses stay in swamped lifeboat.**
- ✦ **Havprins sends motor boat to tow us over so we can climb aboard Havprins via the rope ladders.**
- ✦ **Designated rescue ship SS Randa picks up our other two life-boats. Heads for Iceland with wounded for urgent medical attention.**
- ✦ **Tanker MT Kongsgaard hit and on fire. Abandoned, but later re-boarded and salvaged. Unbelievable bravery.**

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Tanker MT Havprins. Photo courtesy of the son of one of the 1941 Havprins crewmembers who found my website.

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- ✦ **June 29 – SS Grayburn, carrying steel and trucks, left convoy. Torpedoed and sank.**
- ✦ **July 4 - Arr Bristol on MT Havprins with part of our crew.**
- ✦ **Wartime posters like above have new significance for me.**
- ✦ **One month survivor leave for all the Maasdam crew.**
- ✦ **Decided to take the train to Scotland to get away for a while**

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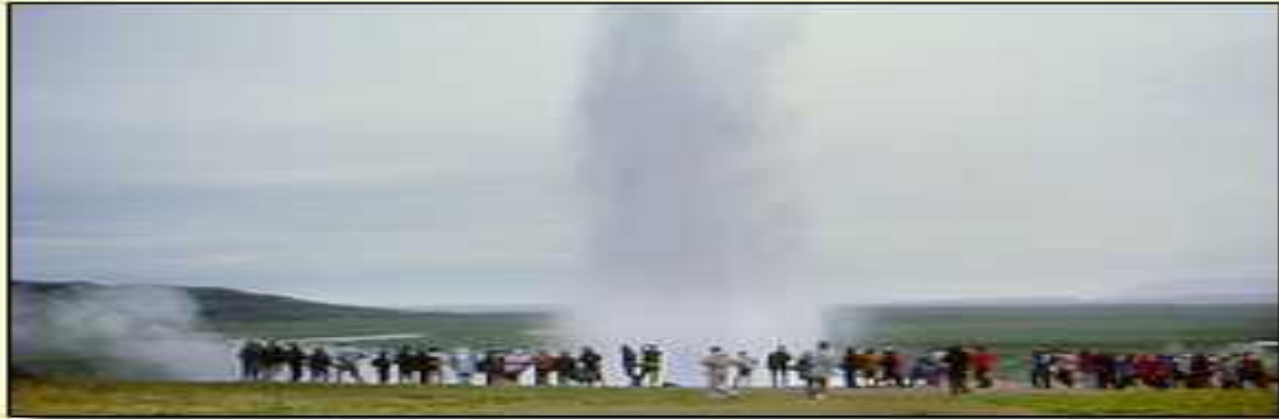
- ✦ **Aug 8 – Signed onto another Dutch ship in London.**
- ✦ **MV Tuva 4652 tons - half size of Maasdam. Diesel/battery.**
- ✦ **I got the only passenger cabin as no other passengers.**
- ✦ **Aug 16 - Dep. London with “coasters” and barrage balloon**
- ✦ **Load general supplies and 5 ton chain at Sunderland.**
- ✦ **Aug 25 – Arr. Loch Ewe to join westbound convoy**

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- ✦ **Sep 1 – Dep Loch Ewe with Convoy ON.11**
- ✦ **Sep 4 – Leave convoy ON.11 and anchor at Reykjavik, Iceland to await dock space to offload.**
- ✦ **Sep 10 – Docked. Offloading until Sep 27. Time for tour**
- ✦ **Visited the Gullfoss waterfall (below)**



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- ✦ Also visited the hot-water Geysir (above).
- ✦ Geothermal heated swimming pool, and city heating.
- ✦ Sep 28 – Dep. Reykjavik for Tampa “in ballast” with Convoy ON.19A
- ✦ Oct 2 – MV Tuva torpedoed at 4 AM! Crew quarters damage. Sinking fast. Abandon ship!!
- ✦ One man pinned under debris. Had to be left behind.

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- ✦ **After an hour on life-boats and rafts, rest of crew rescued by Canadian destroyer HMCS St Croix – (US Lend-Lease four stacker, 1100 tons)**

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- ✦ **St Croix low on fuel. Had to return to St. John's.**
- ✦ **Oct 6 – Landed at St. John's, NF. Overnight in hotel. Red Cross survivor kits much appreciated.**
- ✦ **Oct 9 – Arr Halifax**
- ✦ **Oct 26 – Paid off (less Scottish trip expenses). Homebound by Trans Canada Airlines Lockheed 10 (my first air trip)**
- ✦ **While on leave I heard that DOT were recruiting experienced Radio Operators. Tough decision. Applied.**
- ✦ **Later learned HMCS St Croix torpedoed Sep 20, 1943. 65 men lost. All but one of the 35 rescued by HMS Itchen were lost when Itchen was torpedoed two days after that rescue. Result: only one survivor of HMCS St Croix. Tragic.**
- ✦ **After war learned that both U Boats U-564 and U-575, who had sunk my two ships, were sunk in 1943. All lost.**

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Statistics – North Atlantic Convoys

Convoys	To	Cargoes Delivered	Lost
629	UK	26805	417
126	Med	6247	3
78	Murmansk	1400	85

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North Atlantic Losses (All Causes)

Year	Ships	U Boats	RCN
1939	47	6	0
1940	375	18	3
1941	496	19	3
1942	1006	35	4
1943 (toMar)	<u>155</u>	<u>2</u>	<u> </u>
Total to date	2079	80	10
1943 (rest)	130	148	4
1944	31	111	7
1945	<u>19</u>	<u>72</u>	<u>3</u>
Total (period)	180	330	24 (2210 RCN sailors)

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- ✦ **Battle of the Atlantic was eventually won because:**
- ✦ **In 1943 Long-range aircraft started to patrol the Mid-Atlantic Gap.**
- ✦ **“Hunter-Killer” groups of destroyers and frigates were dedicated to hunting and destroying U Boats.**
- ✦ **RADAR performance improved and size/weight shrank to allow use in aircraft. Until the Schnorchel, U Boats could not surface to run engines and charge their batteries without risk of attack by aircraft.**
- ✦ **Code Breaking the German Navy ciphers meant the allies could know where the U Boats would attack.**

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Losses WWII

Allied merchant ships (all causes) 5,800

Merchant seamen lost (British) 30,500

Merchant seamen lost (Canadian on Canadian ships) 1,487

Merchant seamen lost (Allied) 24,000

German U Boats on operations 863

German U Boats lost at sea 754

German U Boats destroyed 30

German sailors lost at sea 27,490

German U Boat losses reached 75%

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The enemy: a Type VII U Boat, the most common type in service during the early part of the Battle of the Atlantic.

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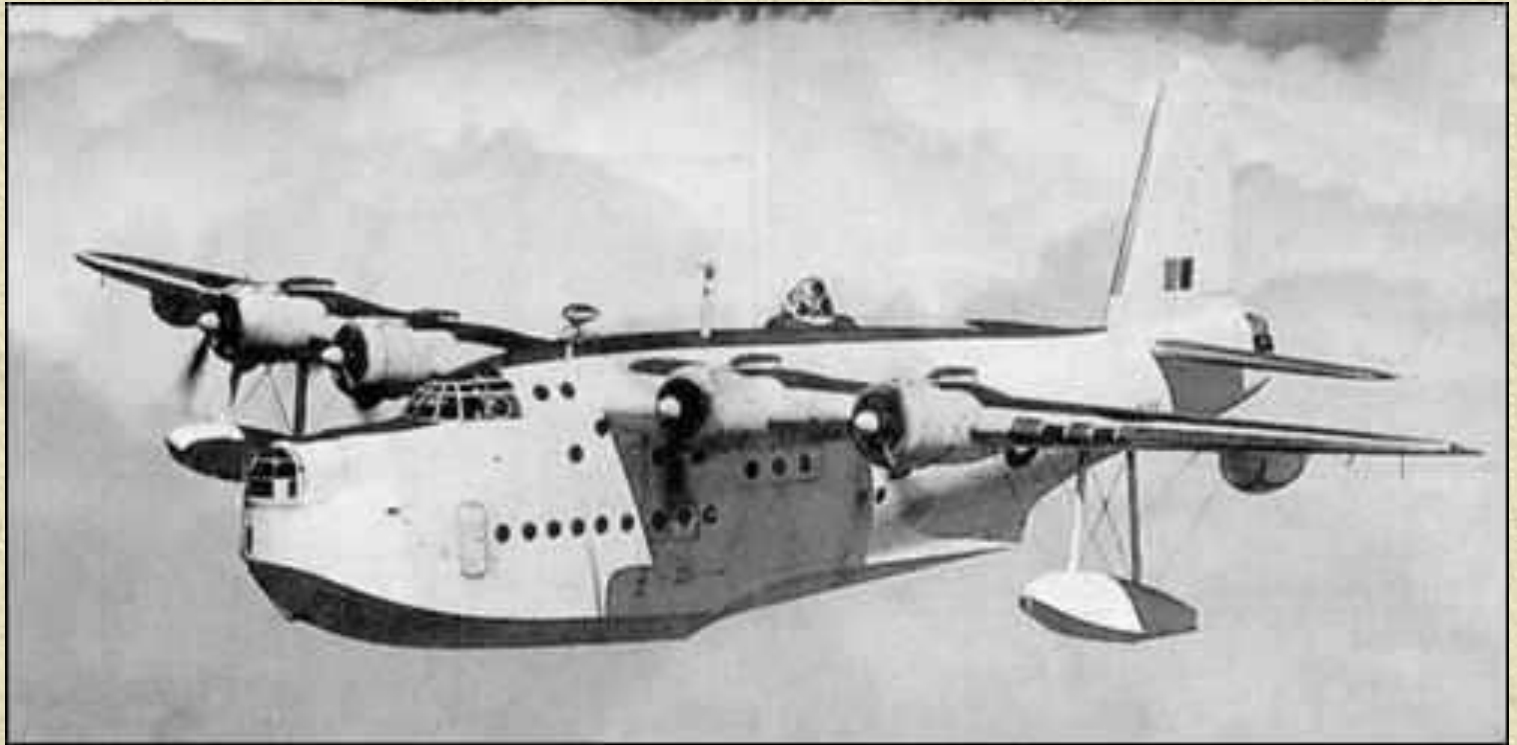
*German Focke Wulf FW-200 Condor - 3000 km range
Flew from bases in Norway. They carried bombs but were most
effective at spotting convoys for the U Boats*

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Catalina flying out of Iceland and Bermuda was the major allied anti-submarine aircraft in the early years of the Battle of the Atlantic. Range 4200 km.

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Short Sunderland Flying Boat flew out of Ireland doing low level patrols into the North Atlantic. Range 4220 km with crew of 10.

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RAF 'Liberator' over "the mid-Atlantic gap" mid-1943. Standard 4200 km range greatly extended by using huge bomb-bay fuel tanks. Note the unwelcome smoker (foreground). Photo from "The Sea is at our Gates" by Commander Tony German.

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- ✦ **Our allies, whose homelands were occupied, sailed their merchant ships wherever required, for the duration of the war.**
- ✦ **Let us remember the veterans of all services, whose lives were changed forever by their experiences.**
- ✦ **We remember especially those who did not survive.**

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✦ **Thank you for your attention**

✦ **Any questions?**

✦ **Sources:**

<http://www.warsailors.com/convoys/index.html>

<http://members.shaw.ca/va3oeb>

✦ **Book List available**