

Honouring sailors' war effort

Merchant navy veteran recalls risk of each Atlantic crossing

By IAN FAIRCLOUGH Staff Reporter (Halifax Chronicle Herald)

Fri. Sep 4 - 4:46 AM



Veteran John Rolfe holds a flag in preparation for the annual Merchant Navy Veteran's Day ceremony at Sackville Landing on Thursday. (CHRISTIAN LAFORCE / Staff)

Peter Ady was a 16-year-old cadet when we joined the British merchant navy during the Second World War, one of tens of thousands of mariners on thousands of ships that made the harrowing trip across the Atlantic Ocean during the two world wars.

On Thursday, the retired captain was one of 20 or so former sailors and 40 other people who gathered on the Halifax waterfront for the annual Merchant Navy Veterans Day ceremony.

Looking every part the seafarer with his dress uniform, polished shoes, beard and sea-weathered face, Mr. Ady stood stoically during the ceremony to honour thousands of sailors from various countries who were lost at sea as they tried to avoid mines, German submarines and bombers to keep essential supplies moving to Europe and England during the two wars.

His first crossing in 1944, from the United States with a full load of aviation fuel, was uneventful. But on the second, in which his ship was carrying Cuban molasses to be turned into industrial alcohol, the vessel was torpedoed in the North Sea off Scotland.

"With a cargo of molasses the ship went down very quickly," Mr. Ady said. "We were lucky. We got two lifeboats away and only lost one person. It was quite an experience for a 16-year-old."

Unlike requirements in the Armed Forces, 16 was the minimum age at which someone could join the merchant navy.

The next ship he sailed on carried gasoline but the tankers were often faster and better protected, so there no problems during that crossing.

On one of the tanker runs, he said, his cabin mate, a fellow cadet, would climb into bed with a life-jacket on.

"I used to tease him, I said look, if we get hit, it's a parachute you'll need, not a life-jacket," Mr. Ady recalled with a laugh.

He made about half a dozen crossings before being sidelined by an appendix operation near the end of the war. He continued to sail after the conflict ended and moved to Canada in the 1960s.

Mr. Ady said Thursday's ceremony is important to those who served during the war, honours the memory of those who were lost and hopefully helps educate those who may

not know about the role the merchant navy played and the dangerous work mariners carried out.

"It was absolutely essential to keep the ships going, otherwise Britain would just have starved," he said. "It wouldn't have taken long."

One of the youngest people to take in the ceremony was Derrice Fraser, a 19-year-old university student who worked at the Department of Veterans Affairs this summer.

She said she doesn't think young people know the role of the merchant navy as much as they should.

"I couldn't tell you anyone my age who would have known about this," she said. "It's not a very high-profile thing, and it's kind of a shame."

The ceremony has been held since 2003, when the federal government designated every Sept. 3 as a Merchant Navy Veteran's Day.

Capt. Earl Wagner of the Canadian Merchant Navy Veterans Association, who chaired the committee that organized the ceremony, said he would like to see more people understand and realize the role the merchant navy played, and he hopes more people will become involved in his association.

"As our veterans are now in or over their late 80s, time is running out," he said.

"There are no replacements unless others come forward to carry on. Our present Canadian merchant navy is small, and mariners are not interested in (Second World War) events, and the Canadian Coast Guard are not interested either. Therefore, no recruits and the end of our organization is near.

"God willing we may be here next year."

He said there are only about 400 members of the association left across the country, although there are more veterans who are not part of the association.

But even that number has probably dwindled to no more than 2,000 people, he said.

"We're practically decimated," he said.

The loss of membership makes attending the event even more important to him, and when he spent a month in hospital in April recovering from a broken kneecap, he promised himself that he would be there.

(ifairclough@herald.ca)

'With a cargo of molasses the ship went down very quickly. . . . It was quite an experience for a 16-year-old.' PETER ADY Merchant navy veteran