

Speech, Merchant Navy Commemorative Theme Project

Annual General Meeting, Halifax, September 2005

Good afternoon, Merchant Navy Seamen, their spouses and family members, Departmental representatives, Distinguished guests, and Ladies and Gentlemen. My name is Stéphane Ouellette. I am the Project Director for the Merchant Navy Commemorative Theme Project.

I thank you for providing me with this opportunity to speak to you at your annual general meeting.

Today, I stand before you to talk about a special project that is very close to my heart. A project that started almost twenty years ago on the coast of Cape Breton Island. In fact, it is the spirit of God's Country, my beloved Island, a place where people have overcome incredible odds in the face of adversity through caring and compassion for one another, that has provided and continues to provide me with the strength, the courage and the sheer determination to pursue this endeavour.

Along with me here today is my colleague and friend, Mr. Nathan MacDonald, also a resident from the Island of Cape Breton. A very talented and imaginative young man, who's inspirations and shared values have lead to a fusion of our common passions and dreams that is playing a significant role in bringing this important project to fruition. Mr. MacDonald will be making a presentation following my own.

My personal passion began when I was inspired by the history-rich environment that permeated this great land. In particular, my attention was drawn to the crumbling WWII fortifications surrounding Sydney Harbour.

The Sydney Harbour Fortifications played an important role in guarding the Island of Cape Breton during some of Canada's darkest moments. After decades, however, leading to neglect and structural decay, the *Sydney Harbour Fortifications Restoration Project* was launched to preserve the remnants of a network of a once formidable defence system.

This eventually resulted in the establishment of a nationally recognized military museum, namely Fort Petrie (located in New Victoria) and in the production of the historical publication *Guardian of the Gulf: Sydney Cape Breton and the Atlantic Wars*, by Dr. Brian Tennyson and Dr. Roger Sarty.

As time passed, I became familiar with another part of our buried history, that of our forgotten heroes of the Merchant Navy. As a young Canadian, I wondered why I had never heard about these mariners, even from my own community where Sydney was one of the largest convoy gathering ports in North America during the Second World War – how quickly we forget, I thought.

I became fascinated by the myriad of untold stories ranging from the Battle of the Atlantic, Cape Breton's military history, to the sinking of the SS Athenia and the Battle of the St-Lawrence.

To my dismay, I was becoming increasingly familiar with the fact that, for over fifty years, Merchant Navy sailors had struggled and were continuing to struggle to acquire equal recognition and postwar benefits that their Canadian Navy, Air Force, and Army counterparts immediately achieved and received after the victory of the Second World War. All this despite the fact that the casualty rate for the Merchant Navy was far higher than that of all the armed services combined – if a ship was sunk, the survival rate for the crew was only 50% - fifty percent - your losses were 1 in 8.

I also discovered that the Merchant Navy were truly the fourth arm of the Canadian Forces. That you were the mainstay of the Allied Force's victory in 1945.

In fact, in my research, I came across An Order in Council (P.C. 14/3550), dated May 19th, 1941, read in part that:

"The Merchant Marine, on which our sea borne commerce depends, is under present conditions, virtually an arm of our fighting forces, and the provision of Merchant Seaman, their training, care, and protection is essential to the proper conduct of the war, and virtually necessary to the keeping open of our sea lanes on which the successful outcome of the present conflict so largely depends."

Moreover, I came across another document written by the Honourable Lionel Chevrier, then Minister of the Department of Transport, stating in a paper entitled Canada's Merchant Seaman (in 1945) that:

"No body of men has contributed more to the prosecution of the war effort than those gallant seaman who man the ships of the Allied Merchant Navies, and to which Canada's contribution in ships and men has grown from small beginnings to now play a substantial role.

Nevertheless, all of us know that those seaman whose voyages and duties bring them in contact with the enemy, undergo desperate risks and hazards. The dangers they encounter are comparable with those experienced by the average man in uniform."

I could not believe what I was finding out.

Eventually, through your relentless efforts you achieved official veterans status in 1992, and were able to obtain a form of compensation in 1999-2000.

This was better than before, but fare from being enough.

Then, on September 3rd, 2000, the British Commonwealth marked the first official national day of remembrance for the Merchant Navy.

Following suit, on June 12th, 2003, Mr. Paul Bonwick, former Member of Parliament, rose on a Point of Order and asked for unanimous consent from all parties to have the Private Members Bill, *C-411, An Act to Establish Merchant Navy Veterans Day*, declaring September 3rd as the official Day of Remembrance. *Bill C-411* was passed and adopted at all three stages in the House of Commons and was instantly referred to the Senate.

Senator Joseph A. Day offered immediate sponsorship of *Bill C-411* through the Senate, passing all three readings, and received Royal Assent on June 19th, 2003.

It is at this time that the need was identified to develop a much broader multi-theme project to support this new status. That is *The Merchant Navy Commemorative Theme Project*.

The Merchant Navy Commemorative Theme Project consists of several modules designed to commemorate, celebrate, and educate Canadians and the international community on the valiant contributions and sacrifices made by our Merchant Navy Veterans – to honour the very people, some of whom I have the privilege of sharing this room with here today.

Key components of the project include the Merchant Navy Veterans Day Ceremonies, and educational video and other information products, a dramatic feature/documentary series, a commemorative stamp and coin, a music video, and more.

The project team consists of a diverse group of established and emerging minds stretching the fields of education, public service, private sector, entertainment, national defense, and research. Together as individuals, the bodies and organizations that are behind the Merchant Navy Commemorative Theme Project are at the forefront of innovation and research in their respective fields.

It is through their tireless efforts contribution and partnership that the Merchant Navy Commemorative Theme Project is able to exist and forge ahead with its goals. We believe that by drawing on a vast network of resources and opinions, no stone will be left unturned, and no sacrifice will be forgotten.

In fact the success of the last two Merchant Navy Veterans Day of Remembrance events held in Ottawa, would not have been possible without the support, hard work, and dedication, most notably of Veterans Affairs Canada, the Office of Senator Joseph A. Day, the Department of National Defence, Public Works and Government Services Canada, and the Navy League of Canada, and other departments and agencies and veterans organizations.

We must not, and we will not forget that the Merchant Navy transported thousands of men and women across the great seaways of the world, bridging the physical space between the western front, the pacific rim and our home. They carried our soldiers, arsenal, military vehicles, food, clothing, medical supplies - the Merchant Navy were indeed our lifeline.

Today, The Merchant Navy Commemorative Theme Project aims to shed light on an area of our Canadian history, previously overlooked, neglected, and left to their own accord, like the once decaying structures of Fort Petrie. The project team, along with our sponsors and stakeholders, such as Veterans Affairs Canada, Senator Day, just to name a few, realize the importance of positioning the Merchant Navy into their rightful place in the annals of Canadian history. Our forgotten heroes will no longer be forgotten.

We aspire to infuse Canadian society with the trials and tribulations of the men and women who served in the Merchant navy. Through careful research, comprehensive resource retrieval and archiving we will compile

an accurate history of facts concerning the lives of those lost, those sacrificed, those heroes and heroines that are not with us today but are remembered for their valiant service to Canada, our nation sea to sea.

Ad mari usque ad mare.

Together, the men and women in this room and beyond will not only take their place in history, but take over the vacancies of heroes and heroines, and be known as legends in the minds of young and old alike.

Ladies and gentlemen, honoured guests, [Honorary guest name] thank for your time.

END SPEECH.