



MERCHANT NAVY COMMEMORATIVE THEME PROJECT (MNCTP)



FACT SHEET

THE SINKING OF THE S.S. ATHENIA AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SEPTEMBER 3RD, 1939

Sinking of the S.S. Athenia, September 3, 1939

The S.S. Athenia was a steam turbine transatlantic passenger liner built in Glasgow in 1923 for the Anchor–Donaldson Line (which later became the Donaldson Atlantic Line). She worked between the United Kingdom and the east coast of Canada.

On September 3, 1939, on the day that the United Kingdom and France declared war on Germany, the passenger ship S.S. Athenia was torpedoed by Captain Fritz–Julius Lemp (U–30—a Type VIIA U–boat), while on patrol in the northwestern sector of Ireland. She was the first UK ship to be sunk by Germany during the Second World War.



The S.S. Athenia was carrying 1,103 passengers, including 500 Jewish refugees, 469 Canadians, 311 Americans, 72 British citizens, along with 315 of her crew. However, 98 passengers and 19 of her crew were killed. Fifty–four were Canadian, 28 were American, including Canadian Stewardess Hannah Baird. Incidentally, the first casualties of the Second World War were Canadian and American civilians.

The sinking of the S.S. Athenia was condemned as a war crime, leading Germany to fear that the United States of America might enter the war to defend the United Kingdom and France.

Significance of September 3

During the Second World War, a total of 25,343 merchant ships, with 164,783,921 tons of cargo on board, sailed from North America to Britain. The Royal Canadian Navy gave to the struggle over 2,000 dead and 24 warships. More than 900 RCAF and Canadian Army personnel were also lost. Over 2,199 Canadian Merchant Navy Seaman were killed in both WWI and WWII. Moreover, more than 250,000 American Merchant Marine sailed the treacherous oceans of the globe. Over 6,835 American Merchant Marine were killed and over 11,000 wounded. In addition, 604 Merchant Mariners were taken prisoners of war, resulting in 61 casualties within POW camps.

Quick Facts

- The first casualties of the Second World War were Canadian and American civilians.
- German authorities denied that one of their vessels had sunk the ship, and the Kriegsmarine did not admit responsibility until January 1946.
- This incident accounted for the Donaldson Line's greatest single loss of life at sea.

Associated Links

- [S.S. Athenia: The first ship torpedoed in World War II](#)
- [First Anchor: Donaldson Line's Passenger Ship Sunk August 16, 1917](#)
- [BBC: WW2 People's War—The Athenia](#)
- [Remembering the Sinking of the S.S. Caribou and Her Gallant Crew, October 14, 1942](#)
- [Unsung Women of WWII](#)

Merchant Navy Day in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand

- On **September 3, 2000**, the United Kingdom commemorated Merchant Navy Day, where the Red Duster's 35,000 dead were remembered for the first time in history. For additional information, please select: [Merchant Navy Day in the United Kingdom](#) and [Flying the Red Ensign](#)
- On **September 3, 2004**, Merchant Navy Veterans Day was commemorated for the first time in Canadian history at the National War Memorial, in Ottawa, ON, Canada. To view these ceremonies, please visit our YouTube Channel at: [Merchant Navy Veterans Day in Canada](#)
- On **September 3, 2008**, the Commonwealth of Australia held a day of national observance to commemorate the service and sacrifice of Australia's merchant mariners. For additional information, please select: [Merchant Navy Day in Australia](#)
- On **September 3, 2010**, the New Zealand Government announced that they would join Britain and other Commonwealth countries to commemorate those who served in the Allied Merchant Navy. For additional information, please select: [Merchant Navy Day in New Zealand](#)

Associated Links

Parliament of Canada Act—June 23, 2003

- [Bill C-411, An Act to establish Merchant Navy Veterans Day](#)

Legislative Assembly of Ontario

- [Messages from Political Leaders of the World—Ontario Landing Page](#)
- [Official Opposition Tribute for VE Day and the Battle of the Atlantic](#) (May 5, 2017)
- [Wilson introduces Merchant Navy Day Act, 2017](#) (May 5, 2017)
- [Barrett pays tribute to Battle of Atlantic](#) (May 8, 2017)
- [The Pan-Canadian and International Recognition of September 3rd as 'MN Day' Initiative](#) (May 26, 2017)
- [Bill 130, Merchant Navy Day Act, 2017 June 1, 2017, Deadline to Pass at Queen's Park](#) (May 31, 2017)
- [Premier Kathleen Wynne Provides Support Messages to Canadian, Allied Merchant Navy, and American Merchant Marine Veterans](#) (June 13, 2017)

Nova Scotia Legislature

- [Merchant Navy Day Proclamation by the Province of Nova Scotia](#) (September 3, 2016)

Legislative Assembly of Manitoba

- [Merchant Navy Day Proclamation by the Province of Manitoba](#) (September 3, 2015)

Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan

- [Merchant Navy Day Proclamation by the Province of Saskatchewan](#) (September 3, 2015)

Legislative Assembly of British Columbia

- [Merchant Navy Veterans Day Proclamation by the Province of British Columbia](#) (October 11, 2002)

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