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Ocean Bridge: The History of RAF Ferry Command by Carl Christie [Review]

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Second World War was the transport of food, goods and weapons from North America. The struggle to accomplish this, known as the Battle of the Atlantic, has been told many times. Accounts of the chess match between the Allied escorts and the German U-boats as they fought their desperate struggle over the merchant ships has portrayed the merchantmen as mere pawns in a greater struggle. These pawns, however, have a story of their own to tell. The Canadian Merchant Navy, and the industry behind it, played a major role in the Allied war effort.

Early in the war, as the full implications of the U-boat threat began to materialize, the British began to look for options. One of the earliest expedients was the transfer of 25 shallow-draft Great Lake boats in the spring of 1940 to England to replace British coastal ships lost to the Germans. Six of these ships were immediately put to good use in evacuating the remnants of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk. Later in that same year, a mission was sent to North America to seek out ship-building yards to replace the steadily increasing losses. Though the Canadian industry had declined from its heyday in the 1920s, the war had stimulated tremendous growth. The British mission placed an order for twenty 10,000 ton dry cargo vessels followed shortly by a Canadian order for an additional 88 vessels. By the time the last wartime ship was launched, 354 10,000 ton and 43 4,700 ton vessels would be produced. This was in addition to the construction of nearly 500 destroyers, frigates, corvettes and minesweepers for the navy. In 1944, merchant ships were being launched at a rate of almost two per week. To put this in perspective, the 10,000 ton Park/Fort class of merchant ship produced in Canadian yards, which was nearly identical to its more famous American cousin, the Liberty ship, was being produced at a faster rate based on population and at a lower per unit cost. Nearly half of the

ocean-going vessels of the Commonwealth, including those of Great Britain, were built in Canada. Canadian government expenditures and the workforce devoted to the creation of the merchant fleet were larger than those of the aircraft industry. What an amazing accomplishment for a country considered an economic lightweight prior to the start of the war.

The Canadian Merchant Navy evolved into the world's 4th largest wartime fleet with a force of over 12,000 men. The majority of the ships in the fleet were Canadian-built. Over the course of the war, a total of 67 Canadian-flagged vessels were sunk by enemy action. The toll of merchant seamen lost was 1,578, a rate much higher than experienced by the navy. In addition, there were losses not related to enemy action.

The contributions of this fleet are immeasurable. After the war the British government had nothing but praise for the accomplishments of the Canadian Merchant Navy. Rear Admiral Leornard W. Murray, Commander-in-Chief of the Canadian Northwest Atlantic, stated that the Battle of the Atlantic was won by "the courage, fortitude and determination of the British and Allied Merchant Navy." Well deserved praise for the pawns of the "Unknown Navy."

Halford has done a masterful job telling the many diverse stories of the Canadian Merchant Navy. The book is divided into three sections: The first is a complete history of the Merchant Navy from its origins through the war years to its downfall after the war. The second section contains an autobiographical treatment of the author's own merchant navy experiences while the third section, titled, "In Their Own Words," records the personal accounts of individual sailors. This book, written in a clear and forthright manner, should be read by all interested in Canada's role in the Second World War.

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Ocean Bridge

The History of RAF Ferry Command

Carl Christie. *Ocean Bridge: The History of RAF Ferry Command* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995) 458 pages, \$39.95, ISBN 0-8020-0638-8.

The story of Ferry Command is a fascinating one indeed, especially in the capable hands of Carl Christie. This little known, and certainly little studied, branch of the World War II air services made a solid contribution to the war effort. The ferry service transported, by air, North American-built aircraft to Britain as well as freight and passengers for use on the fields of battle in Europe and the Far East. When it began, in 1940, trans-Atlantic flight was still in its infancy, and the proponents of the ferry service, led by Lord Beaverbrook, had a lot to prove. Christie details this important enterprise from its inception to its conclusion in 1945. Over this time Ferry Command delivered 10,000 much needed aircraft across the oceans for use by the RAF. Also duly noted is the far-reaching contribution made by the ferrying organization to the post-war usage of trans-Atlantic flight in the domestic sphere.

The story of Ferry Command unfolds as a truly international enterprise. Although mainly undertaken by the British, American and Canadian air services, Christie shows how the ferrying operations relied primarily on co-operation between these three countries, but also on countless other allied countries whose resources were utilized to make the huge leaps across the world possible. Britain, America and Canada took responsibility for administration, personnel and training as well as for the development of suitable airfields. The original route crossed the North Atlantic in one leap, delivering Hudsons to Scotland. As the success of the operations were

proven, new routes were instituted to meet the needs of different airplanes, the theatres to which they were being delivered, and the vagaries of the weather. Within a very short time Ferry Command was crossing the globe, through Bermuda, Greenland, Iceland, South America, Africa, the Middle East and across the Pacific. Christie includes maps which outline the major routes, emphasizing the scope of Ferry Command operations.

Christie provides detailed descriptions of the complexity of the ferrying operation in political terms. Beginning with the reluctance of the Air Ministry to sanction the delivery of planes by air to the jockeying for position by all governments involved, the tale unfolds. Not only official government agencies contributed to the execution of plans for Ferry Command, but also private interests from Canada, the U.S. and Britain. The South American airfields in particular are shown to have relied heavily on Juan Trippe and his Pan American Airlines, operating on behalf of the United States War Department. The evolution of the ferrying organization through its beginnings as the Canadian Pacific Air Services Department, to the Atlantic Ferry Organization (ATFERO), to Ferry Command and finishing its tenure as No. 45 Group of RAF Transport Command crosses political, civilian and military domains. Meticulous research shows in Christie's ability to sort through the various interests involved. He capably illustrates the complexity of the nature of Ferry Command, and the immense amount of work which went into carrying out the task of trans-global airplane delivery.

By far the most important part of the story of Ferry Command is that of the actual missions, and Christie dedicates a great deal of his book to this end. Christie not only furnishes descriptive records of individual ferrying assignments, but offers detailed character sketches of the individuals who did the job. Wherever possible, he

has included personal anecdotes derived from diaries and letters to add a human dimension to the narrative. This is also where Christie's research skills shine. He does not take anecdotal tales at face value. Instead, he has searched the archives for supporting evidence, which he provides when they exist, and notes when they do not. The story of the first aircraft lost by Ferry Command is greatly enhanced by details supplied by the weather forecaster, the flying control officer, the lone survivor, the flying superintendent and a pilot whose understanding of the technical aspects allowed him to present some theories about the possible causes of the crash. (pp.62-72) The fact that the Hudson also carried a celebrity, Sir Frederick Banting, who was also killed in the crash, adds to the poignancy of the narrative, and puts a real human face on the historical record. Christie illustrates every type of Ferry Command operation with personal observation, which, when backed up by archival sources, contributes a very full picture of the missions.

Between the political mechanisms which built the organization and the personal recollections of day to day missions, *Ocean Bridge* encompasses all aspects of the ferrying process. Christie includes problems with lack of personnel, and the recruitment methods employed to alleviate these difficulties. Along with manpower shortages Ferry Command encountered a need for a training program which enabled airmen to be able to undertake their assignments in the safest manner possible, as quickly as possible. These new training procedures, and the methods used to implement them is also well covered by the author. Accurate weather predictions proved necessary for the successful completion of trans-oceanic flight, which led to developments in the field of meteorology. Not only are the successes and advancements made by Ferry Command

examined - Christie also acknowledges failures. He devotes an entire chapter to what he calls, "the darker side of the Ferry Command story," (p.245) the sometimes heavy losses of manpower and machinery.

This book provides the definitive account of Ferry Command. Christie has mined a wealth of sources, with the result that few questions are left to be answered. He recognizes the difficulty in assessing the true value of the ferrying operation while making it clear that it had an impact. Well-chosen photographs accompany the narrative, as do detailed maps. Unfortunately, however, the Pacific route map is not included, although this does not detract from the other supporting materials. Christie also intrigues the reader with talk of sabotage, but, aside from dismissing the idea, never expands on the issue. However, very little can be said to detract from the fact that Christie has produced a book which adds a valued chapter to the study of the World War II air services.

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