

Pier 21's Role in the Second World War By Carrie-Ann Smith

The vast majority of Canadian servicemen and women who fought in Europe during the Second World War departed from Pier 21 in Halifax, Nova Scotia. For most, these final hours on the waterfront, waiting to board ship, were fraught with a sense of anxiety, excitement, and uncertainty as to whether or not they would live to see Canada and their loved ones again. We owe a great deal to these brave men and women, many of whom sacrificed their lives. Pier 21 National Historic Site embraces the wartime history of the Halifax shed and pays tribute to Canadian veterans.



When Canada entered the Second World War on September 10, 1939 Pier 21 was immediately taken over by the Department of National Defense. Graham Metson's *An East Coast Port: Halifax at War 1939-1945*, and the recent publication *Sailors, Slackers and Blind Pigs: Halifax At War* by Stephen Kimber offer interested readers a fascinating picture of wartime Halifax.

We must rely on first-hand accounts for information about Pier 21 during this era since wartime security concerns have left us with few images and little text. The diary of Halifax's wartime censor, H. Bruce Jefferson, whose office was located in the Nova Scotian hotel behind Pier 21, is an incomparable source of detailed information on the important role Halifax played in maintaining the lifeline of supplies and personnel to Britain.



Canada's official war historian, C.P. Stacey, wrote that with the exception of two small groups, all 494,874 Europe-bound service personnel embarked from Pier 21. Of these, 50,000 would not live to return. Throughout the war years thousands would arrive back on hospital ships like the *Letitia*, *Lady Nelson*, and *El Nil*.

Pier 21 had the capacity to process thousands of soldiers at a time. The seawall could easily accommodate large troopships like the *Queen Elizabeth* and the *Queen Mary* and it was close to a number of existing military facilities, allowing military personnel to easily march to the Pier from their accommodations elsewhere in the city. The movement of personnel was also aided by the Pier's proximity to the train station.

Halifax's deep, well-protected harbour provided an excellent location for the Allies to assemble convoys. The city had existing naval facilities to provide for the convoy escorts

and it had Pier 21, which provided the departure and arrival point for many of the convoys leaving from and returning to North America in support of the war in Europe.

One of these returning convoys arrived at Pier 21 in July of 1940, and had amid its members the Pasteur, a French ship. She was carrying the French gold reserves to Canada for safekeeping. The unloading of the gold took place under tight security and lasted most of a day.

During the war Pier 21 also saw the arrival of 3,000 British evacuee children. Canadian officials agreed to let British children come from heavily-bombed areas of Britain as part of the CORB scheme (Children's Overseas Reception Board). Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the United States also accepted children. The evacuation scheme was initially a great success, but the tragic sinking of the City of Benares by a German U-boat in September 1940 and the resulting loss of seventy-seven children brought it to a halt.



In 1944, the detention area of Pier 21 was seriously damaged after a fire started in a chamber used for disinfecting mattresses. The damage was limited to that area, and the Pier continued to function normally. The military set up temporary buildings near the Pier 21 Annex to replace the damaged space. Repairs were not completed until 1947.



With hundreds of thousands of Canadian servicemen and women in Britain (and eventually continental Europe) wartime romances and marriages were inevitable. 48,000 war brides and their 22,000 children began arriving during the war years, with the largest influx disembarking at Pier 21 in 1946. Some brides came on small banana boats and others on luxury liners, but, however they arrived, each faced a moment of truth as she disembarked and caught her first glimpse of Canada.

After the war the process of demobilizing Canadian personnel began and their long awaited homecomings started. Many of those that returned to Canada through Pier 21 were greeted with bands playing and cheering crowds. This image depicts one of the first arrivals of a troopship carrying soldiers back to Canada after World War II.

The Ile de France, laden with ecstatic soldiers, docked at Pier 21 on July 14, 1945. Mrs. Campbell brought her young son David down to the Pier to greet the soldiers. The boxes in her arms are cookies, which the soldiers had thrown down to the well-wishers who had come to watch their long awaited return to Canada.

This photograph captures the energy and rejuvenation of spirit which accompanied the end of the Second World War. Many emotional arrivals and reunions took place at Pier 21, but the homecoming of the Canadian service personnel left an indelible impression on the immigration staff and all Haligonians.



A few Favourite Quotes from Veteran's Who have Contributed Their Memories of leaving and Returning to Pier 21

Dale Richie speaking about his father Oral Carswell

Yesterday I toured Pier 21 and stood on the deck where my father left for Europe and returned to Canada during World War II. My tears dropped to the floor where he stood in line with a jubilant group of teenaged boys, off to see the world, almost 60 years earlier. I felt how he must have felt, and was moved with overwhelming emotion at the memory of his circumstance.

We often heard how my mother's feet "flew" to greet him, and have the letters to diary their thoughts during those incredible years. I can imagine his joy and relief to disembark at Pier 21 and to be home.

Alf Cassidy

I remember my first arrival at Pier 21 in October, 1942. It was by troop train and in the darkness of the blackout. We made our way from the train along the dimly lit dock and into the bowels of the troopship called The Sterling Castle. We left the harbour the following morning.

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When my ship was coming up to the pier, all several thousand troops aboard moved to the pier side of the ship with the result that it listed to that side. As I recall it was the port side. The list was so bad that the ship couldn't dock and an announcement came over the tannoy for some of us to move to other side. But no one wanted to move and miss the action and excitement of seeing Canada for the first time in many years. Eventually, the list was corrected, we docked and were soon on our way.

Bill Pineo

HALIFAX HARBOUR, JUNE 1940

Minesweepers, accompanied by destroyers bristling with guns, were getting organized in order to protect a convoy of troop ships soon to be heading across the Atlantic.

For most of those on board the ships, it was the beginning of a great adventure: this being their first time away from Canada.

As they gathered on the decks assigned to them, a sense of anticipation was evident, as young minds vividly projected exciting pictures of what lay ahead of them.



Now and then, their thoughts traveled back over the miles to those they would be leaving behind; some perhaps, forever.



Art Etter

My return to Canada was on the Isle de France's very last troop transport voyage, arriving June 21, 1946. With a new daughter born during my absence waiting for me in Virden, Manitoba, Pier 21 was a welcome sight!

Earl South

As I remember we were only at Pier 21 for a few days. It was quite a shock after normal barracks, to be housed in a cage-like building, with no privacy of any kind. However, after being in the military over a year at this time, one learned to accept whatever happens to you.

I did receive a pass for a few hours on Sunday June 27, 1943 and did see downtown Halifax. I'll always remember leaving Pier 21 in the pre-dawn damp morning, with no one watching or waving goodbye.

Dorothy Chartrand

The morning had been a busy one on board the troop train as we neared our destination – Halifax Harbour. Two days before, our small group had left the army camp in the fog which enveloped Kitchener, Ontario. We had changed trains at Toronto and did not stop along the way except to meet trains heading west. This was a different kind of experience for us. All cars of this train were filled with young people in uniforms, mostly khaki, some blue and navy blue. The long train pulled slowly into the dark dingy sheds at Pier 21 before the sun rose. It was a cold damp November morning. Outside of the troops who disembarked, the only other personnel were the train crew and dockworkers.

All of us had some time in the past month or so, said our fond 'so-longs' to our loved ones at home. There would not be any tears visibly shed on this occasion.

To our right, stood the giant ship that would carry us far away on this adventure into the unknown. It was camouflaged and no name appeared on its bow. Capacity was unknown, but it was said that the number on board after laying in that dock that whole day was between four and five thousand.

Herbert R. Foss

I was a 16 year old youth who told the recruiting officer that I was 19 years old. This was in Galt, Ontario and I was with five others who misrepresented their ages. We were all accepted in May 1941 and were placed in the Highland Light Infantry of Canada, which was stationed at Stratford, Ontario.

We moved from Stratford to Quebec City and then to Debert, Nova Scotia. It was in Debert, Nova Scotia that we were notified that we were going overseas great news. That night they (the army) placed us on a train and back to Ontario for a few days of embarkation leave with our families and friends.

After a few days (7 days only) we were on a train in Galt, Ontario which sped east on the way to Halifax, Nova Scotia, non-stop.

On the way, the older and wiser men led us young soldiers to believe in their stories which included that when we reached the Pier at Halifax that the army would load us aboard a boat and then take the boat to the deep water and transfer us to an ocean going vessel.



Alas, such was not the case. We marched with our gear from the train through Pier 21 onto a ship that had an East Indian crew. No we did not get off the ship onto another boat but sailed out into the harbour, formed a convoy that headed for England. Our view of Pier 21 was short and brief. Alas Pier 21.