

# Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Robb, Linsey (2015) Blood, Thunder and Showgirls: The Merchant Navy on the BBC, 1939–1945. *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 35 (3). pp. 473-488. ISSN 0143-9685

Published by: Taylor & Francis

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2015.1027558>  
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2015.1027558>>

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:  
<http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/32079/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)

[www.northumbria.ac.uk/nrl](http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/nrl)



Blood, Thunder and Showgirls: The Merchant Navy on the BBC, 1939-1945.

Abstract

This article examines the representation of the Merchant Navy on BBC radio in Britain during the Second World War. It discusses how this essential, but dangerous, wartime role was presented to the British public by arguably the most prevalent wartime cultural medium. It uses extensive research in the BBC's Written Archive Centre, using both radio broadcasts and listener research, to understand how the role of the Merchant Navy was portrayed and understood during the war. This article argues that, unlike other civilian occupations, men of the Merchant Navy were presented as brave and courageous under enemy fire and were consequently given access to much of the prestige generally reserved for the armed forces.

The Battle of the Atlantic was the longest continuous military campaign of the Second World War, stretching from September 1939 until the defeat of Germany in May 1945. One of the primary British goals of this prolonged campaign was to ensure a steady supply of essential goods between Britain and her allies despite the efforts of the German U-boat campaign. However, unlike other military campaigns this was not a battle fought solely by the military. The civilian Merchant Navy were also at the heart of the conflict facing the perils of torpedo fire and aerial bombardment in locations as far reaching as the Arctic Circle and the Mediterranean Sea. Although levels of trade decreased during the war, due to increased danger and decreased foreign markets, an average of 2,500 merchant ships a day continued to traverse the oceanic theatres of war with their cargoes.<sup>1</sup> The work of the Merchant Navy was absolutely central not only to Allied victory but British survival. For example, as an island nation Britain had long relied on shipped food imports and, despite a 91% calorific increase in the outputs of Britain's farms, the supplies brought by the mercantile marine were vital.<sup>2</sup> But transporting Britain's cargoes was a perilous job. From 1939 to 1945, 45,329 merchant seamen were killed, wounded or made prisoners of war. In comparison 73,642 members of the much larger Royal Navy suffered the same fates while engaging directly in combat with the enemy.<sup>3</sup> Clearly the dangers faced by the mercantile marine were grave. Yet, regardless of growing interest in these men, this key and dangerous role in Britain's war effort remains under-researched.<sup>4</sup> Building on a recent burgeoning historiography this article will focus on the BBC's changing portrayal of the merchant service during the war years.

The Merchant Navy had an exalted place in wartime culture and were the focus of several wartime films, notably *San Demetrio, London* (Charles Frend, 1943) and *Western Approaches* (Pat Jackson, 1944) among others, as well as being a perennial focus of praise and admiration from both the state and the press.<sup>5</sup> Similar persistent coverage of the exploits of the mercantile marine was present on the BBC. From the opening days of the war until its

end, with little fluctuation, the BBC widely discussed the vital but dangerous part the civilian navy were playing in striving for ultimate victory.<sup>6</sup> Examining the ways the BBC chose to represent this vital group of wartime workers offers a unique opportunity to explore wartime culture. By examining the broadcasts in conjunction with production documents and listener research files, not only the way these men were portrayed to a vast audience can be analysed but also the reasoning behind these depictions and public reactions to them. This article will, therefore, show that war changed the representation of the mercantile marine: distancing them from their pre-war image as sexually licentious, dim-witted louts and elevating them to the position of wartime heroes. Moreover, this was a conscious decision on the part of the BBC and a representation which found resonance with the BBC's listeners.

### **Using radio to explore Britain's war.**

In wartime Britain radio was the monopoly of the BBC and was, as Siân Nicholas states, 'a ubiquitous presence in ordinary life'.<sup>7</sup> The prevalence of radio sets in Britain meant that the BBC estimated that they were capable of reaching up to 34 million people, out of a population of 48 million, and so arguably had a wider reach than any other cultural medium.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, as well as being ubiquitous radio was also much trusted and so was central to how the war was conveyed to, and understood by, the British civilian population. As a Mass Observation publication, *Home Propaganda*, noted in 1941 'the Radio is at present the most trusted of British sources of information...The most potent and immediate method of influencing fifteen million or so Britishers at once is over the radio at nine o'clock in the evening.'<sup>9</sup> Radio broadcasts, however, remain an underutilised medium in the study of the Second World War with more focus on filmic sources despite radio's equal, or arguably greater, popularity and geographical range.<sup>10</sup> This may, in part, reflect the difficulty in accessing the material when compared to films especially given the BBC archives' lack of

cataloguing. Furthermore, these scripts exist now only on microfiche. The result of which is that much of the aural detail is lost and cannot be found. Despite these scripts being, for the most part, 'broadcast scripts', they obviously omit much of the detail of the voice, accent, tone and background details. It is an act of faith to trust these scripts especially as many are marked that they are unchecked against the broadcasts. However, as these scripts are the only way to access a cultural medium which was so central to the lives of the British public during the war they nevertheless remain invaluable and constitute a rich source of information about a neglected feature of the British war experience.

### **The BBC and the Mercantile Marine**

Early in the war films, drawing on pre-war stereotypes, depicted the Merchant Navy as the bumbling fools of the sea. This was most notably seen in the 1940 Ealing drama *Convoy* (Penn Tennyson, 1940) where the Merchant Navy skipper actively disobeys orders from the Royal Navy, ultimately drawing both services in to battle and causing his own death. In contrast, the BBC depicted the mercantile marine in a positive way from the onset of hostilities. In January 1940 the BBC broadcast a typical talk entitled *Ships Sail On* detailing the hardships and problems endured by the Merchant Navy in wartime. It told the following tale:

A few days before Christmas I was talking to the Second Engineer of a tramp steamer which was mined in the North Sea a few weeks ago. He had just come off watch and had started that first delicious hour of sound sleep which is the reward of most watchkeepers. Suddenly he was awakened by a loud noise. He found himself on his knees in his bunk, with his bedclothes around his neck, and felt the ship heeling far over with the force of the explosion. His light wouldn't work and he told me of those first few moments of almost panic when, in total darkness, he felt for the familiar floor and found a jagged hole. How he skirted it and found his door jammed, but managed to force it open and helped the others who had been asleep in the same alleyway. He told me of fourteen hours in the coldness of an open boat before being picked up by a neutral ship- the whole crew luckily- all suffering from cold and, strangely enough, sea-sickness from the unfamiliar motion. <sup>11</sup>

At this time neither the military nor the civilian population of Britain had really been touched by war. As Churchill stated in December 1939 ‘only at sea has the war been proceeding at full scale since September 3<sup>rd</sup>.’<sup>12</sup> In light of this the seaman was being displayed as brave and courageous despite the dangers and difficulties of war which beset him. As stated in the conclusion of *Ships Sail On*, ‘they can’t be frightened.’<sup>13</sup>

However, the BBC’s depiction of the mercantile marine in wartime was not unequivocally positive. In addition to their regular discussions of the navies across their broadcast schedules in 1941 the BBC began to formulate a programme to celebrate the work of the Royal and Merchant navies. However, by the time of the first show it had been reduced to a programme solely about the Merchant Navy as it was felt that ‘that the traditions and language, and even the equipment of the Royal Navy and the Merchant’s Navy were entirely different and it was impossible to have a single programme which would suit both at once. The result of the effort would probably appear ridiculous.’<sup>14</sup>In July 1941 the BBC began broadcasting the weekly programme, *The Blue Peter*, aimed at the Merchant Navy. Promotion and celebration were the ostensible aim. Policy notes stated that:

The gallant and splendid work being done by the Merchant Navy in this war cannot be over emphasised. Whether he be a hardened skipper of some old cargo tub cursing under the difficulties of station keeping in convoy, or a new recruit to the fo’c’sle of the newest fast freighter, the merchant seaman is very much of a front-line fighter, even if he has no official uniform. <sup>15</sup>

However, in spite of auspicious and laudable aims, *The Blue Peter* received much criticism from the start and was replaced after only six months of broadcast. Even the name was a failure as The Blue Peter flag, used to signal a ship due to leave port, was not used in wartime for security reasons. The main criticisms were that the show, despite being envisaged and touted as a mix of entertainment and information, leant too much towards entertainment.<sup>16</sup> The show presented a series of skits interspersed with musical numbers which bore little relation to the life aboard a merchant vessel. Moreover, what little information was presented

appears to have been only marginally linked to the work of the merchant service. For example, one programme included a lengthy discussion of the work of small-boat owners at Dunkirk.<sup>17</sup> This style may be responsible for the accusation that the show was designed more for the audience at home than the merchant seaman.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, praise was almost completely absent in *The Blue Peter*, another bizarre fault of the show given its initial remit. Instead the show veered dangerously close to outright mocking of the service. One of the recurring sketches featured in the show was that of the ‘Ship’s Narker’. These skits were considered so central to the show that the programme was promoted using them.<sup>19</sup> They were often the first of the show and depicted a moaning seaman, the narker in Merchant Navy parlance, accompanied by his more upbeat friend. The narker, George, was shown to not only complain about everything, including the price of beer, rationing and the lack of sails on ships, but also to be unintelligent. He was repeatedly shown mixing up words or simply not understanding. He called a bonfire a ‘bomb fire, referred to Tutankhamen as ‘Tooting Common’ and failed to grasp the concept of an Egyptian mummy being male. While his companion, Syd, was obviously more worldly and educated, George’s stupidity and stubbornness were the focus of the skits. This representation played on the traditional depiction of the Merchant Navy. They were long associated with drunkenness, undesirable sexual behaviours and disorderly conduct which compared poorly to the staid respectability of the Royal Navy.<sup>20</sup> It is this image which is reflected in the BBC’s *The Blue Peter*. Far from being the heroes of the sea as other contemporary representations were beginning to suggest, such as the film *Seaman Frank Goes Back To Sea* (Eugene Cekalski, 1942), this man was the butt of the joke and so presented as unheroic.

However, it became clear that such a negative portrayal had lost its cultural resonance in wartime. The unfavourable representation presented in *The Blue Peter* did not go unchallenged. The National Maritime Board wrote to the BBC to complain that:

I have taken some little trouble to find out what the men really think and I am afraid it is not flattering. Last Saturday's effort was a particularly unfortunate one. The portrayal of a British Seaman as illiterate is hardly in keeping with the facts as known to those of us who are intimately connected with the British Ship Adoption Society and the War Library Service.<sup>21</sup>

The BBC responded to the complaints robustly:

This item is broadcast as a comedy turn, and in every case so far the item has been announced as such and therefore must be accepted with that premise. The material for this item has been carefully prepared and care has been taken to offset the seeming illiteracy of one character by the knowledgeableness and good sense of the other.<sup>22</sup>

Despite this defence the 'Ship's Narker' was dropped from later shows. Such a reaction suggests that the pre-war image of the Merchant Navy had become increasingly unacceptable in wartime. Moreover, the 'Ship's Narker' section of the show perhaps best highlights that *The Blue Peter* largely failed to show the Merchant Navy in the heroic and brave light which it had intended.

However, it is possible to see *The Blue Peter* as an unfortunate failure in the BBC's otherwise positive depiction of the Merchant Navy. In late 1941 *The Blue Peter* changed producer as well as department, moving from Talks to the much more obvious department of Variety, and was re-launched in January 1942 as *Shipmates Ashore*. This new programme was recorded in a Seamen's Club, eventually relocating to its own club donated by American donors, and fitted more exactly the brief of a mixture of information and entertainment. Mixed among the band numbers and celebrity guests, including Leslie Howard and Vera Lynn, were debates and discussions of the issues surrounding merchant seamen. The show also featured a weekly 'Ship's Newspaper', which dealt in news exclusively pertinent to the Merchant Navy, as well as in the later editions featuring actual seamen George Ralston as the 'Ship's Reporter' who presented a slightly lighter, but still factual, look at the life of the Merchant Navy. This show appears to have been more successful, or at least considered to have been so by those at the BBC, as it ran from 1942 until well into 1946.



This new show presented the Merchant Navy in a heroic light in line with contemporary filmic depictions. *Shipmates Ashore* placed more emphasis on the praise and reward of the men in the Merchant Navy than its predecessor. However, as a matter of policy this praise was understated. In the meetings to shape the new *Shipmates Ashore* in December 1941 it was suggested that ‘it be not directed at showing the landsman what a fine fellow the merchant seamen is. That must be done elsewhere in programme.’<sup>23</sup> Broadcasted comments, therefore, included, ‘You can take it from me, people would be only too pleased to acknowledge a merchant seamen’ and ‘I don’t suppose either the ships or the men look so spick and span now as they did in the old days – but they’re doing a far bigger job. We’re just beginning to realise what they’ve been up against’.<sup>24</sup> However, while this praise was understated on *Shipmates Ashore* other parts of the BBC’s programme were more emphatic. The following was included in a *Sunday Postscript*, J.B. Priestley’s Sunday evening discussion programme which was one of the most successful series in the BBC’s history, by noted ex-seamen Frank Laskier:

If you people will only realise that no matter what you are doing the food you eat, the petrol you use, the clothes you wear, the cigarettes you smoke, that so very many things are brought over by the sailor. We will never let you down; we will go through trials unimaginable. We’ll fight and we’ll fight and we’ll sail, and we’ll bring back your food.<sup>25</sup>

Such statements which emphatically linked the seamen not only to the war effort but also connected their sacrifice to the listener at home were dominant on the BBC throughout the war, out with programmes aimed directly at the mercantile marine, and created a heroic image of the men who sailed the seas based on the hardships they faced.

Yet despite this increased wartime status there was a tendency to focus on the dangers the Merchant Navy endured rather than the role they played in a successful total war. There were constant references to men stranded in lifeboats for long periods and the persistent dangers which beset convoys as well as tales of injured sailors. Such depictions implied not

only that the men presented had failed in their objectives but also that they were frequently in need of rescue, often by the Royal Navy. In *Shipmates Ashore* the ‘Ship’s Reporter’, who had earned the job after being stranded in a lifeboat at sea for 30 days, and the ‘Ship’s Newspaper’ both made these references repeatedly.<sup>26</sup> However, on *Shipmates Ashore*, as with praise, this danger was more muted than in the rest of the BBC’s output. This muted danger was a policy consideration from the beginning. In a meeting held in April 1941 it was recorded that:

Elwes [from the Ministry of Shipping] asked that the greatest possible publicity should be given throughout the broadcasting service to the great and heroic part in the nation’s war effort that was now being played by the Merchant Service; he also requested that too much stress should not be laid on the ‘blood and thunder’ aspects of their lives, since this was liable to depress the morale of their families and indirectly of the men themselves.<sup>27</sup>

Yet given the enormous emphasis placed on ‘blood and thunder’ in the rest of the BBC’s output it is questionable whether the emphasis of this one programme could have stemmed that tide. One typical broadcast, on the different roles in merchant ships, explained:

He goes into battle nearly unarmed. Once in his ship afloat, he has nothing behind him – no rest camps, no place to retire to if things get hot. If his narrow box of a ship is shot from under him there’s nothing for it but a cold and merciless sea – in an open boat if he is lucky, perhaps on a carley float [a rubber lifeboat], quite likely in nothing but a lifebelt.<sup>28</sup>

Such references to death and danger were repeated endlessly. However, this constant emphasis did not go unnoticed and was met with some criticism. The Ministry of War Transport, endorsed by the Admiralty, sent a memo in February 1942 to the BBC complaining about the portrayal of the Merchant Navy. The memo argued that:

It is suggested that, owing to an accumulation of circumstances publicity about the Merchant Navy is creating undue public concern about shipping, is causing unnecessary anxiety to relatives of seamen and is not contributing to the maintenance of seamen’s morals...While stories of gallantry, of boys running away to sea and so forth occasionally appear, most of the Merchant Navy publicity has been focussed on the harassing experiences of survivors in lifeboats. This constant harping on the unhappy adventures of survivors would seem, over a period of time, to have determined the attitude of the public towards seamen so that today they are regarded, not as much as men

who have accomplished great things, but rather as men who have suffered a great deal and endured much. The public are sorry for seamen and this feeling may largely account for the ready way in which purse strings have been loosened for Merchant Navy charities and for the underlying criticism that appears in the Press regarding the type, equipment and provisions of lifeboats.<sup>29</sup>

While the effect on public opinion appears to be conjecture on the part of the Ministry of War Transport, they rightly point out that most of the representations of the merchant service do focus on the dangers they faced. Yet there may have been more practical reasons for the omission of the successes of the Merchant Navy. The BBC responded to the Ministry of War Transport's concerns as follows:

We do everything in our power to get news talks which illustrate the achievements of the Merchant Navy, and we are constantly thwarted by censorship. We received only about a fortnight ago a first-class story of the salvage of a tanker which was drifting into a minefield. This tanker contained 10,000 tons of oil, and it was rescued by a few men from a cable ship. That has been stopped in spite of our renewed request for an examination of the script. I had the final letter only this morning, in fact since this memo began. We had a story which was not unlike this but not so spectacular, that was also stopped. Then there was the story of Caroline and the time bombs- this ship was attacked from the air and several time bombs fell into the hold. The sailor from Caroline gave a magnificent description of going down into the hold and salvaging these time bombs (which went tick tock), and saved the ship from total loss with all its cargo...But we have done quantities of material about the Merchant Navy, although we have lately rather slowed down on the open-boat stories which seem to me to get monotonous. Features Department tell me there is a very good market for them all the same.<sup>30</sup>

However, the Ministry of War Transport gave their own reasons for why they thought this focus had occurred. They argued 'the Press, partly through limitations of space, are more and more inclined to stress the sensational highlights of war and the achievements of the Merchant Navy are too often humdrum and unspectacular. Indeed, most of their highlights only occur in moments of disaster.'<sup>31</sup> While this may be, to an extent, true what is notable is that the BBC actually presented a much more nuanced view of the merchant service than was shown on other media. Despite their preoccupation with the dangers faced by seamen, the BBC placed more emphasis on the mercantile marine's vital role in waging a total war than

was ever managed in other media, especially on film where the focus was most obviously on those ‘moments of disaster’. During one broadcast listeners were told ‘Those men were on top of 15,000 tons of Benzine – 15,000 tons of Benzine that could be taken straight out of the ship and put straight into bombers.’<sup>32</sup> Another broadcast similarly exhorted:

And there is one other thing which we can all do, and that is to resolve here and now never to waste any of these essential things which they bring to us – Food, Paper and, above all, Petrol. They risk everything they have for us every time they go afloat. We mustn’t let them down by wasting what they bring.<sup>33</sup>

In contrast what was represented filmically tended to focus solely on stories of men in lifeboats, as in *Western Approaches*, or in grave danger, as in *San Demetrio, London*. Radio, however, was able to blend such stories with less dramatic issues such as discussions of wages and uniform as seen on *Shipmates Ashore*. While such depictions were never given the prominence of the exciting and heart-rending tales of survivors in lifeboats adrift in dangerous seas it did go some way to tempering that image.

Furthermore, despite increasing links between the two sea services in wartime references to the Royal Navy were rare in both *Shipmates Ashore* and *The Blue Peter* except for their implied role in convoys. This was an attempt on the part of the BBC to create an image of the Merchant Navy which drew on its own merits rather than relying on comparisons to the Royal Navy. In the notes for the reshaping of *The Blue Peter* into *Shipmates Ashore* it was requested by Seymour de Lotbotiniere, director of BBC outside broadcasts, ‘That it be given no Royal Navy flavour.’<sup>34</sup> However, this again is contradicted by other BBC programmes. Indeed, programmes about the armed services and the Merchant Navy frequently stressed their similarities, especially between the Merchant and Royal Navies, and thus presented an image of equality between the sea-going services. There were frequent references to the merchant service actively fighting the war. One broadcast declared ‘And so we came to port, ready to go out again to fight the u-boats and anything else the Axis

can devise', while another described 'the seafaring men who were fighting the Battle of the Atlantic when most of us in Khaki were still in civilian clothes.'<sup>35</sup> Moreover, it was BBC policy during the war to refer to merchant shipping solely as the Merchant Navy, rather than the mercantile marine or merchant service as was more commonly used among merchant seamen themselves, suggesting they wished to frame the mercantile marine as a service in line with actual military participation. Quite obviously the armed services were the pinnacle of masculinity during the war, with especial reverence reserved for the RAF fighter pilot. Given the overtly militaristic portrayal granted to the mercantile marine by the BBC it is arguable they wished to associate the Merchant Navy with that wartime ideal. Indeed, radio regularly depicted the Merchant Navy facing militaristic dangers which were not depicted in other media, further strengthening the links between the Merchant Navy and the armed forces. Most notably, there were frequent references to men's experiences as prisoners of war and subsequent escape. *The Story of Gerard Riley* typically explained:

The nearest we came to recapture was in a famous French city when we tried to cross its main bridge. A German soldier was demanding passports on the other side - we did not see him until it was too late to turn back and we had to do something mighty quick. So, when we were within a few yards of him, I dropped a bottle of French wine which had been given to us by a dear old Frenchwoman, on the white concrete of the bridge. It made a nice big red stain. The German soldier grinned, thinking it was a huge joke that we had lost the wine. He nudged us, heaved us a kick, and said: 'Nichts Wein', but he forgot in his amusement, to ask for our passports. We got across safely.<sup>36</sup>

Such tales of evading German soldiers were more usually told of those in the armed services, such as shot down airmen and those men left stranded after the infamous events at Dunkirk, and so again links the mercantile marine to that ideal masculine occupation. Cumulatively, this suggests that the BBC, despite the efforts of the producers of *Shipmates Ashore*, were attempting to shape an image of the Merchant Navy which drew on the prestige of their counterparts in the armed services.

This link between the Merchant Navy and the armed forces was also reinforced, somewhat paradoxically, on radio by constant references to the Merchant Navy's lack of uniform, an issue which was also frequently debated in parliament.<sup>37</sup> One broadcast of *Shipmates Ashore* featured a lengthy debate on the merits and drawbacks of granting the merchant service a uniform rather than their lapel badge. Although no conclusion was reached it raised the issue of the recognition that uniforms would bring the mercantile marine.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, there were frequent references in other shows to the 'un-uniformed heroes' and that the 'men rarely wear more uniform than their silver Merchant Navy badge. But in my opinion it is one of the proudest uniforms ever worn.'<sup>39</sup> Such statements suggest that, despite their lack of uniform, these men were considered to be the brave equals of their uniformed military counterparts.

Moreover, this bravery was explicitly discussed not only implied. It was often stated that the act of going to sea knowing the dangers which beset merchant ships was a brave act in and of itself. One broadcast, when describing a seriously injured seaman who had received some brandy, stated 'he smiled as well as his battered face would let him, took another drink and said "I hope I get luck like this next time I catch a packet." I was struck by his phrase next time. There was no suggestion that he should give up.'<sup>40</sup> This was more emphatically stated in other broadcasts. In one notable broadcast *The Shipbuilders* novelist George Blake stated:

That's my notion of courage - the getting along with the job, in the face of the most ghastly dangers and the most ghastly consequences of mishap; and still getting along with it after more than four years of heavy sinkings and heavy casualties and acute discomfort. With the most profound respect to the armed forces of all the United Nations, I still insist that this is the highest courage of all - this sustained, cold courage: not through some minutes of desperate gallantry, but over years now of protracted risk and frequent horror.<sup>41</sup>

While it is unclear if the 'years now of protracted risk and frequent horror' to which Blake refers are a reference to merely the war years or the known hardships of the mercantile

marine in peacetime Blake is clearly highly praising such endeavours and indeed perhaps even placing them above the ‘minutes of desperate gallantry’ of the armed services.

In light of such broadcasts it is unsurprising that BBC Listener Research shows that the mercantile marine were well received on the radio. One typical comment, in response to ex-seaman Frank Laskier’s appearance on *Postscripts* was ‘Thrilling, interesting, well-told. It makes us Landlubbers feel mean, even in blitzed Brum.’<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the most common criticism of depictions of the Merchant Navy was that the BBC had failed to show the seamen’s bravery and courage in an adequate manner. One listener asked to comment on *A Tribute to British Seamen* broadcast in 1943 stated ‘it was a catalogue of what we owe the Merchant Navy, but not a thrilling programme such as the subject deserved.’<sup>43</sup> This positive reaction to the Merchant Navy by the public was regularly recorded. Home Intelligence reports recorded in February 1944 of the war at sea that ‘Confidence and pride continue, with particular satisfaction at the January joint statement on U-boat warfare. The Merchant Navy is singled out for special praise.’<sup>44</sup> Notably, public indignation was recorded when the Merchant Navy was not given treatment equal to their military counterparts. Towards the end of the war there were frequent angry remarks made about the fact merchant seamen were not demobbed as the armed services were. In November 1944 Home Intelligence reports recorded that ‘Dissatisfaction continues at the Government’s refusal to let merchant seamen rank as servicemen for reinstatement in civil employment.’<sup>45</sup> This evidence suggests that the British public saw the service in the Merchant Navy as deserving of great praise and as analogous to the military and so sought for them to be treated in similar ways, an opinion largely replicated by BBC radio broadcasts.

## **Ordinary Heroes.**

The BBC also showed the mercantile marine to be similar to the armed forces in ways which were not obviously militaristic. As Sonya Rose notes the idealised depiction of the armed forces centred not only on bravery and courage but on kindness, as a direct contradiction to the image of the Germans as cold-hearted Nazi war machines.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, the representation of the armed services often emphasised the strong bonds between the men portrayed. This research has shown that the same emphasis was prominent in the depiction of the Merchant Navy. The Merchant Navy often displayed, culturally at least, a sense of deep camaraderie. Christine Geraghty argues, of filmic depictions of the armed forces, that these male relationships were culturally necessary to preserve their human side. She contends that ‘there is a danger... of male characters in war films appearing inhuman and uncaring, part of the machinery of warfare. The relationships within the group ensure that there is some way, however restrained, of expressing comradeship, grief and humour.’<sup>47</sup> Such a portrayal was also found in the BBC’s depiction of the merchant service. There were regular stories of men endangering themselves to save their shipmates and caring for those who were injured. In one typical Talks broadcast one man told of his time injured in a lifeboat and described ‘the warmth and the security, and the infinite love and tenderness, which one man, I’ll never know who it was, kept his arms about me the whole time, to prevent me from slipping off.’<sup>48</sup> Despite the service’s whispered reputation for same-sex relationships the emphasis was firmly on homosociality rather than homosexuality.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, most of these stories were ultra-masculine in tone. There was the story of ‘Paddy Goucher’s Souvenir’ on *Shipmates Ashore* which declared:

Bosun Paddy Goucher, Wicklow born, carries a lump of cannon shell in his head. It’s the last of 14 pieces which hit him when he went to the aid of a man during an attack on their coaster by a couple of Nazi planes in The Channel. They took the other pieces out at a London dockside hospital- when Paddy could spare the time. They couldn’t get him to lie down long enough to do it in one job.<sup>50</sup>



This story is very telling. Paddy received his injuries not only in combat but saving a comrade. In addition, he also refused to be treated and carried on working and therefore reinforced his manly image by refusing to succumb to injury. Clearly, as with the armed services comradeship was central to the depiction of the Merchant Navy.

Moreover, the BBC made a concerted effort to portray the mercantile marine as ordinary British men. Indeed, a key component of the uniquely British ‘people’s war’ rhetoric was the ordinariness of civilians who could make an extraordinary difference to the war effort. Both *The Blue Peter* and *Shipmates Ashore* featured men drinking. Indeed, *Shipmates Ashore* was presented from a Seamen’s Club bringing with it implicit and explicit connotations of drinking, often presented as a stereotypical British trait during the period. This idea was further underlined on *Shipmates Ashore* by the ‘Ship’s Reporter’ and his emphasis on funny stories of life at sea. For example, he reported the tales of men trying to sneak dutiable items into Britain:

One little story I heard this week was that of a chap who wanted to get 10 pairs of real Nylon full-fashioned stockings ashore. He put them all on, one on top of the other. Then he put his seaboots on and walked home. When he took off his seaboots at home to give his wife the stockings, there weren’t any feet left in them. The BBC won’t allow me to tell you what his wife said.<sup>51</sup>

Ralston then ended this section with the point that ‘I heard a lot of similar stories, but as there might be a tobacco wallah listening, I better leave them alone.’<sup>52</sup> The effect of this was to portray the Merchant Service as ordinary working-class men who were keen to get one over on authority. As Penny Summerfield notes such a depiction was a carefully constructed image which balanced the more unpleasant aspects of the Merchant Navy’s traditional cultural persona with the need to project a unified image in wartime.<sup>53</sup> However, this emphasis on typical British traits gives the impression that these men, in the Merchant Navy, were not only heroes but were fundamentally ordinary British men therefore mirroring the idealised masculine image generally reserved for the military man.

## **Women and the Merchant Navy.**

Mary Conley argues that, from the late Victorian era onwards, men of the Royal Navy were increasingly associated with domesticity exemplifying ‘respectable British manhood celebrating their duty to nation and empire and their devotion to the family’.<sup>54</sup> Research in to these previously unexamined radio programmes show that domestic relationships were also key to the BBC’s portrayal of the merchant service. Both *The Blue Peter* and *Shipmates Ashore* featured, *The Blue Peter* rather more heavily, messages from wives, girlfriends and mothers. These lent an air of domesticity to depictions of the Merchant Navy which was central to the idealised masculine image. One ‘sweetheart’, on *The Blue Peter*, told her boyfriend:

Doreen calling. I hope you are listening. I received your last letter dated June 25<sup>th</sup> and I am hoping to hear from you soon again. Do you get my letters more regularly now? Keep sending cables darling, they are always welcome. I had a letter from your sister, your people are all well, your brother is in Liverpool. Just had a short holiday. Wish you had been with me. Take care of yourself sweetheart. I miss you terribly and love you more than ever. Bye bye, darling, all my love and may God bring you safely back.<sup>55</sup>

Similarly, while *Shipmates Ashore* devoted less time to personal messages, and read out messages rather than broadcasting the wife or sweetheart of seamen, the show still featured a regular ‘Personal Column’ in the ‘Ship’s Newspaper’ section of the show. While this new format was more factual and less obviously emotional it still broadcast news of mothers’ operations and sisters’ weddings which were equally as domestic as those broadcast during *The Blue Peter*.<sup>56</sup> These references not only to romantic love but siblings again align the Merchant Navy with the domestic world they were separated from.

What is also apparent from these personal messages is the ‘traditional’ way in which gender relations were presented with regards to the Merchant Navy. Despite the increased use of women in support roles, the armed forces remained overwhelmingly masculine with women largely remaining far distant from the persistent dangers of warfare. Such a

relationship was reinforced in both popular culture, in films such as *The Gentle Sex* (Leslie Howard, 1943), and in government propaganda for the various female auxiliary services. Indeed, while men in more sedate civilian occupations, for example agriculture and industrial jobs, were culturally shown to have been replaced by women, the Merchant Navy, like the armed forces, was understandably resistant to the wartime blurring of gender boundaries. Moreover, the women sending messages to seamen on the BBC, and it was invariably a woman, (although in *Shipmates Ashore* there was a separate section to allow seamen to send messages to other seamen) rarely positioned themselves out with the domestic sphere. Even if she did declare her role in the war effort it was often as a domestic help, working in a communal feeding centre for example.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, these women tended to emphasise their concern and care. One wife stated on *The Blue Peter*:

Hullo George darling, this is a wonderful moment for us both, after over a year's absence, and very kind of all concerned. Mother, Father, Bobby and family are well, and I am too, as usual. All our houses are still safe, through God's goodness...Our prayers are with you all on board, every day. We are so proud of your ship's life-saving achievements in such dangers. I am longing to see you safely home again, when it is possible sweetheart.<sup>58</sup>

Similarly, on *Shipmates Ashore*, while the messages were read out by the announcer rather than a wife or mother, there were regular messages of support to injured men from mothers, wives and sweethearts as well as reports of new born babies and mothers' operations. The cumulative effect of this was to reinforce an image of the brave hero of the sea and his waiting wife or mother, a classic female role.

This 'traditional' gender relationship was furthered in *Shipmates Ashore* by the presence of women in the seamen's club. The first show of the series opened with the declaration that the club was host to '30 really lovely girls from a West End show.' Moreover, in the course of the show the listener was told 'you should see these seamen deciding which girls they're going to fight for. But they can't go wrong today – not with 30 of the loveliest show girls in London' and 'She's a very luscious 17, boys. Sweet and wide-

eyed. As pretty a picture as any seamen ever posted up over his bunk.’<sup>59</sup> This overtly sexual imagery was toned down after the first show as ‘it [was] apt to prejudice the programme’ perhaps reflecting a desire to distance the merchant service from their sexually licentious pre-war image.<sup>60</sup> However, there remained an emphasis in each on introducing the girls in the club. One characteristic broadcast declared ‘It’s off-duty time at the Club and when the lads arrived they found a bunch of pretty W.A.A.F. here waiting for them.’<sup>61</sup> In a much more pronounced way than seen in other media, and for other civilian occupations, these men were being touted as not only ‘ordinary’ husbands and sweethearts but sexually desirable men. This is especially obvious in one show where the host, Pat Taylor, introduces the song ‘I threw a kiss on the ocean’ by stating ‘There are a good many girls who’d like to send greetings, too. We can’t do that, worse luck, but here’s what the girls do say and sing to all you lads at sea – “I threw a kiss in the ocean.”’<sup>62</sup> This representation of the Merchant Navy as sexually desirable was a policy decision. In a meeting in 1941, in preparation for the launch of *The Blue Peter*, the value of emphasising the ‘importance of red blood, virility, masculinity’ was stressed, perhaps in an attempt to distance the Merchant Navy from any connotations of homosexuality.<sup>63</sup> As sexual desirability is a key tenet of masculinity such a portrayal cemented the seaman’s status as ‘manly’ hero.

## **Conclusion**

The BBC’s depiction of the merchant service in wartime illustrates that war disrupted traditional masculine imagery. Indeed, when they attempted to draw on pre-war conceptions of the Merchant Navy they were quickly met with disdain and protest. Instead they shifted to a portrayal of the merchantman as hero. While the mercantile marine perhaps did not reach quite the same level of praise and admiration aimed at those in the military, given suggestions of protection of the Royal Navy and the pity of the general populace, they were depicted by the BBC in a way which consciously paralleled the portrayal of the armed services hero.

They bravely and courageously faced largely military dangers and actively fought in the war. Moreover, despite the convoy system essentially placing the merchant service under the protection of the Royal Navy the relationship was presented as largely equivocal and the Merchant Navy were principally presented as the equals of their uniformed counterparts. Moreover, they became ideal symbols for this ‘people’s war’ as they were consciously portrayed with traits associated with the idealised British citizen. They were bonded not only to their mates on board the ship but also were shown to have a strong domestic side, as well as a healthy love for a pint of beer. Qualities showing them to be truly British heroes. Finally, their masculine status was firmly cemented by their relationships with women. Far from being supplanted by an incoming female labour force, the women presented alongside the Merchant Navy were largely presented in a domestic or romantic context and generally without any links to the war of their own. What was presented was a largely traditional gender relationship where men fought and women stayed at home and waited. Ultimately, it is clear that culturally merchant seamen were depicted as wartime heroes analogous, if not exactly equal, to the armed forces ideal.

---

1. Central Statistical Office, *Fighting With Figures: A Statistical Digest of the Second World War* (London, 1979), 43.

2. *Ibid.*, 67.

3. *Ibid.*, 43.

4. T. Lane, *The Merchant Seamen’s War* (Manchester, 1990); P. Summerfield, Divisions at Sea: Class, Gender, Race, and Nation in Maritime Films of the Second World War, 1939–60 in *Twentieth Century British History*, 22 (2011), 330-353.

5. For example, the state released a series of posters simply stating ‘To The Merchant Navy – Thank You!’ while newspapers constantly harangued their readers to remember the sacrifices made by the Merchant Navy.

<sup>6</sup> The BBC does not archive by date but rather by speaker making judgements about patterns of broadcast difficult to assess. The Merchant Navy, however, were of perennial focus by the BBC.

---

7. S. Nicholas, *The Echo of War: Home Front Propaganda and the Wartime BBC, 1939-45* (Manchester, 1996), 1.

8. Ibid, p.12. If the high levels of licence evasion in some areas are taken in to account, this figure might be as high as 40 million.

9. Mass Observation, *Home Propaganda: A Report Prepared by Mass Observation for the Advertising Service Guild* (London, 1941).

10. Nicholas, *The Echo of War*, 2.

11. *Ships Sail On*, 17 January 1940, BBC Written Archive Centre (Hereafter BBC WAC)

12. 'The Navy In Action', Glasgow Herald, 15 Decembe 1939, 6.

13. *Ships Sail On*, 17 January 1940. BBC WAC.

14. R34/460 Policy- Merchant Navy Programmes 1940-44, BBC WAC.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. *The Blue Peter*, 9 August 1941, BBC WAC.

18. R34/460 Policy- Merchant Navy Programmes 1940-44, BBC WAC.

19. Ibid.

20. Summerfield, 'Divisions at Sea', 334.

21. R34/460 Policy- Merchant Navy Programmes 1940-44, BBC WAC.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. *Shipmates Ashore*, 7 January 1942, BBC WAC.

25. *Sunday Postscript* by Frank Laskier, 26 October 1941, BBC WAC.

26. *Shipmates Ashore*, 21 March 1942, BBC WAC.

27. R34/460 Policy- Merchant Navy Programmes 1940-44, BBC WAC.

28. *Courage of Merchant Seamen* by George Blake, 14 November 1943, BBC WAC.

29. R34/460 Policy- Merchant Navy Programmes 1940-44, BBC WAC.

- 
30. Ibid.
  31. R34/460 Policy- Merchant Navy Programmes 1940-44, BBC WAC.
  32. *Postscript by a Merchant Seamen*, 5 October 1941, BBC WAC.
  33. *Courage of Merchant Seamen by George Blake*, 14 November 1943, BBC WAC.
  34. R34/460 Policy- Merchant Navy Programmes 1940-44, BBC WAC.
  35. *News Talk by An Officer of the Merchant Navy*, 11 February 1942, BBC WAC.
  36. *The Story of Gerald Riley (Survivor from the MOPAN)*, 26 August 1941, BBC WAC.
  37. Hansard HL Deb 10 September 1941, vol 120, col 27-28.
  38. *Shipmates Ashore*, 7 January 1942, BBC WAC.
  39. *Courage of Merchant Seamen by George Blake*, 14 November 1943, BBC WAC.
  40. *Down in the Engine Room*, 12 January 1942, BBC WAC.
  41. *Courage of Merchant Seamen by George Blake*, 14 November 1943, BBC WAC.
  42. R9/5/116- Audience Research- Reports, Sound 166- Talks, Postscripts 1941-1942, BBC WAC.
  43. R9/5/9- Audience Research- Reports, Sound 9- Features- June 1943- April 1944, BBC WAC.
  44. CAB 121/106, Ministry of Information Home Intelligence Weekly Report, No.176, 17 February 1944, National Archives, London.
  45. CAB 121/106, Ministry of Information Home Intelligence Weekly Report, No.215, 16 November 1944, National Archives, London.
  46. Sonya Rose, *Which People's War?: National Identity and Citizenship in Britain 1939-1945* (Oxford, 2003), 153.
  47. C. Geraghty, 'Masculinity' in G. Hurd, *National Fictions: World War Two in British Films and Television* (London, 1984), 24.
  48. *Postscript by Merchant Seamen*, 5 October 1941, BBC WAC.
  49. Paul Baker and Jo Stanley, *Hello Sailor!: The Hidden History of Gay Life at Sea* (London, 2003), 1.
  50. *Shipmates Ashore*, 7 January 1942, BBC WAC.

- 
51. *Shipmates Ashore*, 3 April 1943, BBC WAC.
  52. Ibid.
  53. Summerfield, 'Divisions at Sea', 12.
  54. Mary A. Conley, *From Jack Tar to Union Jack: Representing Naval Manhood in the British Empire, 1870 – 1918* (Manchester, 2009), 3.
  55. *The Blue Peter*, 11 October 1941, BBC WAC.
  56. *Shipmates Ashore*, 21 March 1942, BBC WAC.
  57. *The Blue Peter*, 5 July 1941, BBC WAC.
  58. *Shipmates Ashore*, 7 January 1942, BBC WAC.
  59. *Shipmates Ashore*, 7 January 1942, BBC WAC.
  60. *The Blue Peter*, 9 August 1941, BBC WAC.
  61. BBC Written Archive Centre, *Shipmates Ashore*, 6 November 1943.
  62. *Shipmates Ashore*, 25 July 1942, BBC WAC.
  63. R34/460 Policy- Merchant Navy Programmes 1940-44, BBC WAC.
- 

Dr Linsey Robb is currently a research associate at the University of Strathclyde working on the AHRC-funded project 'Masculinities Challenged? Reserved Occupations in Britain, 1939 – 1945' with Dr Juliette Pattinson and Professor Arthur McIvor.