



The Mathews Men, Seven Brothers and the War Against Hitler's U-boats

By William Geroux

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This story of the World War II service of U.S. Merchant seamen begins with the cutting open of a shark caught by a Cuban fisherman, who finds human remains including a forearm and ring with the initials G.D.H. This ring traces back to George Dewey Hodges, a U.S. Merchant seaman from Mathews County, VA, who was killed along with 17 other men, when a U-boat torpedoed and sunk their American steam merchant vessel, the Onondaga, on 23 July 1942. The Hodges family contributed seven sons, including Dewey, to wartime merchant sea service, and many other men from Mathews County went to serve onboard merchant ships. William Geroux, the author, captures many of these seamen's stories for a greater understanding of the tremendous risks taken on a daily basis to keep the supply routes open.

Looking at Mathews County on the map in the prologue, readers will immediately see a scattering of small towns with no large urban centers dominating the landscape. The story of the courageous contributions of the merchant seamen is told through the experiences of not only the seven sons of the Hodges family but also other members of the Mathews County community; it is a fascinating read, which includes details of sinking ships, desperate attempts to survive, and efforts to sink the enemy before he can attack. The 300 million tons of cargo the U.S. Merchant Marines transported through U-boat hunting grounds brought "ammunition, aircraft, fuel, tanker trucks, landing craft, ambulances, locomotives, food, clothing, and medicine" to Allied troops throughout World War II. This heroic effort was instrumental to overwhelming the Germans and Japanese.

The author, who served as a newspaper journalist for the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* for 25 years, also worked for Maersk, the largest container shipping company in the world so he knows the fine points of shipping. He tells of how the U.S. Merchant Marines kept the supplies coming despite the violently active U-boat hunting grounds they had to cross. The details of U-boat warfare are included, such as how magnetic torpedoes explode when entering a ship's magnetic field and how acoustic torpedoes home in on the sound of a ship's propellers. He goes on to explain British countermeasures for each torpedo type and the limitations and effectiveness of depth charges and sonar at the time. In just two years from 1941 to 1943, U-boats sank more than 1,000 British merchant ships and killed more than 20,000 British seamen, so the efforts of the U.S. Merchant seamen helped keep Britain in the war.

This volume looks at various aspects of World War II shipping and the fight against the U-boats. The sections of the book provide stand-alone stories telling various parts of the efforts to resupply by sea. If you are looking for one continuous story, this is not the book for you, but the combined stories make a compelling read. I loved the last sections of the book which include a map showing where many of the merchant ships sank and a listing of many of the merchant seamen in the book with what happened to each of them during and after the war — if they survived.