The Signal

On the night of 8 April 1940 — the eve of Germany's invasion of Denmark — A.P. Møller, founder of what would become the Maersk shipping empire, and his son Mærsk Mc-Kinney Møller faced a decision. They knew the invasion was imminent. Of the 46 ships in the Maersk fleet, 36 were outside Danish waters. Those captains needed instructions (writes Robin Ashby)

.
According to Christian Tortzen, the official historian of the Danish war sailors and author of the authoritative four-volume Søfolk og skibe 1939-1945, Maersk captains at sea held sealed orders, to be opened in the event of German occupation. The arrangement was operationally astute: a brief, innocuous radio signal could authorise the opening of orders already written and secured aboard each vessel, without transmitting instructions in clear that might attract German attention or compromise those remaining in Denmark. What the sealed orders contained was unambiguous — sail to a neutral or Allied port, and place the ship at Allied disposal. Ignore all subsequent signals from occupied Denmark.

Of the 36 Maersk ships outside Danish waters when the occupation began, all complied. Control of the fleet was temporarily transferred to A.P. Møller's cousin in New York, beyond German reach. Mærsk Mc-Kinney Møller himself travelled to the United States to maintain those relationships throughout the war.
Maersk was not alone. Across the Danish merchant fleet, captains faced the same choice. The Danish government, collaborating with the occupiers, ordered them home. Almost all refused. Around six thousand Danish merchant sailors would go on to serve the Allied cause. They did not respond to signals from occupied Denmark. They did not go home.

Newcastle upon Tyne: The Unlikely Home Port

The British government needed to administer this unexpected asset of ships and men. Someone had to take responsibility for the pool of Danish sailors — allocating them to vessels, holding their wages, storing their belongings while they were at sea. The Danish consul in Newcastle volunteered. He had no facilities whatsoever apart from his office. But he took them.

Newcastle became the official home town of the Danish war sailors. In March 1941, a Danish Seafarers Club was opened in St Nicholas Buildings, directly opposite the Cathedral where a memorial service would be held eighty-five years later. It was opened by Sir Arthur Salter, Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Shipping. There was a reading room, a restaurant, and for the officers, a billiards room. Officers and men did not mix. The British security services maintained an office in the building. The Danes were monitored — trusted allies, but watched.

The ordinary seamen found lodgings in the streets around Westmoreland Road. The officers sought more comfortable quarters in Jesmond. Two Danish churches served the community: the historic St John's Danish Church in Elswick, founded in 1892, and a second congregation in the Sailors' Bethel high above the River Tyne. Between voyages, the sailors were formally registered with the Danish Merchant Navy Reserve Pool, which provided fixed employment and pool pay during time ashore.
Then they went back to sea.

The Cost

Tortzen's research, the most comprehensive undertaken on the subject, records more than 2,000 Danish sailors killed during the Second World War in total — including those lost while Denmark was still neutral before April 1940, those sailing in German-controlled home waters, and those who died in Allied service. Of the six thousand who served in the Allied fleet, around 850 to 1,000 lost their lives. The Danish merchant fleet, which entered the war at some 868,000 gross tons, was reduced by 44 per cent by 1945. Around 250 ships were lost in all.

They sailed on every ocean and every convoy route: the North Atlantic, where U-boats hunted in wolf-packs through the worst years of 1941 to 1943; the Arctic convoys to Murmansk and Arkhangelsk, where cold could kill as surely as a torpedo; the Mediterranean; and, in June 1944, to the beaches of Normandy. Some 800 Danish sailors participated in Operation Overlord — a fact that would eventually prove decisive for Denmark's post-war standing among the Allied nations.
For Maersk alone, 25 ships were lost and 150 seafarers killed. By 1945, the fleet had been reduced to just 21 ships, only seven of which remained under Danish control. Within three years, through swift rebuilding, Maersk had returned to pre-war tonnage — but the human cost could not be rebuilt so easily.

The Long Wait for Recognition

When the war ended, the sailors came home to a Denmark that was not particularly interested in what they had been through. The country's post-war narrative was shaped around the domestic resistance movement, the celebrated rescue of the Danish Jews in 1943, and the uncomfortable reckoning with years of governmental collaboration with the occupiers. Merchant sailors who had spent five years at sea, based in British ports, were peripheral to that story. As Tortzen documented through the sailors' own letters and diaries, they returned largely unacknowledged.

It took fifty years. In 1995, the Danish war sailors were finally accorded recognition as freedom fighters — formally equal in status to the domestic resistance. A national monument, Sortladne Hav (The Black Sea), was unveiled in Copenhagen in 2017, when the Danish Prime Minister acknowledged on behalf of the nation that the sailors had been the country's most important contribution to Allied victory. That recognition was long overdue.

The recognition campaign drew a parallel that will resonate with British readers. The veterans of the Arctic convoys — those who had sailed the same lethal routes to Murmansk and Arkhangelsk — fought for decades for their own campaign medal, finally receiving it in 2012, sixty-seven years after the war ended. In both cases, men who had kept the Allied cause alive through its most dangerous years were left to make their own case to governments that preferred more comfortable narratives.
The Normandy connection provided the clearest corrective. Because 800 Danish sailors had been at the D-Day landings, Denmark could finally be counted formally among the Allied

nations. The Danish flag flew at Normandy on 6 June 1994, for the first time at the fiftieth anniversary commemorations. Some surviving sailors were present. The statue erected to the Danish sailors in Normandy in 1984 had stood for a decade before Denmark officially acknowledged the men it commemorated.

The Maersk Legacy

The decision taken by A.P. Møller and his son in April 1940 — the sealed orders, the transfer of control to New York, the instruction to place the fleet at Allied disposal — established something that has lasted long beyond the war itself. Maersk's cooperative relationship with US and UK naval and maritime authorities, which began in that moment of institutional decision, has remained a consistent feature of the company's engagement with Western governments ever since.

This is not sentiment. A company that chose its allegiance in the most unambiguous of circumstances — in the hours before an occupation, through sealed orders that brooked no later revision — carries that institutional memory into its dealings with the navies and governments of its partners. It is one reason why, in the decades since the war, Maersk has remained a company with which Western naval authorities expect, and receive, cooperation on matters concerning merchant shipping.

Why Newcastle Still Remembers

The memorial to the Danish war sailors is in Newcastle, at St Nicholas's Cathedral, because Newcastle was their home port. The Danish Church — whose current Chairman, Dr Hans-Christian Andersen, delivered the annual memorial sermon ion 3rd May 2026 — maintains that connection across the decades. His church has kept the memory of these men alive in a city that, for five years, was as close to a home as most of them had.

Among those at the service was the granddaughter of a Mr Hansen — a war sailor who

survived but who, like so many of his generation, rarely spoke of what he had endured. She laid a wreath. That silence, and that wreath, are themselves a kind of testimony: to the cost of what these men carried home, and to the inadequacy of the recognition they received for so long.

Christian Tortzen titled one of his works with a line from a Danish song: I skal ikke blive glemt — You shall not be forgotten. It was a promise made to the sailors in 1940.

It took the best part of a century to keep it.

The author , on the left of the picture, is a former adviser to Maersk.Seen here on 3rd May 2026 in St Nicholas's Cathedral with Cdre Dan Termansen, Defence Attache, Embassy of the Kindom of Denmark in London; Cllr Henry Gallagher, Lord Mayor of Newcastle upon Tyne; and Dr Hans-Christian Anderson, Chairman of the Danish Church in Newcastle, who delivered the sermon.


OM DE DANSKE SØFOLK
AF ALLE GRADER SOM
SATTE LIVET TIL
DERES LANDS TJENESTE
ARENE 1939-1945
DANISH
MEMORIAL
WINDOW