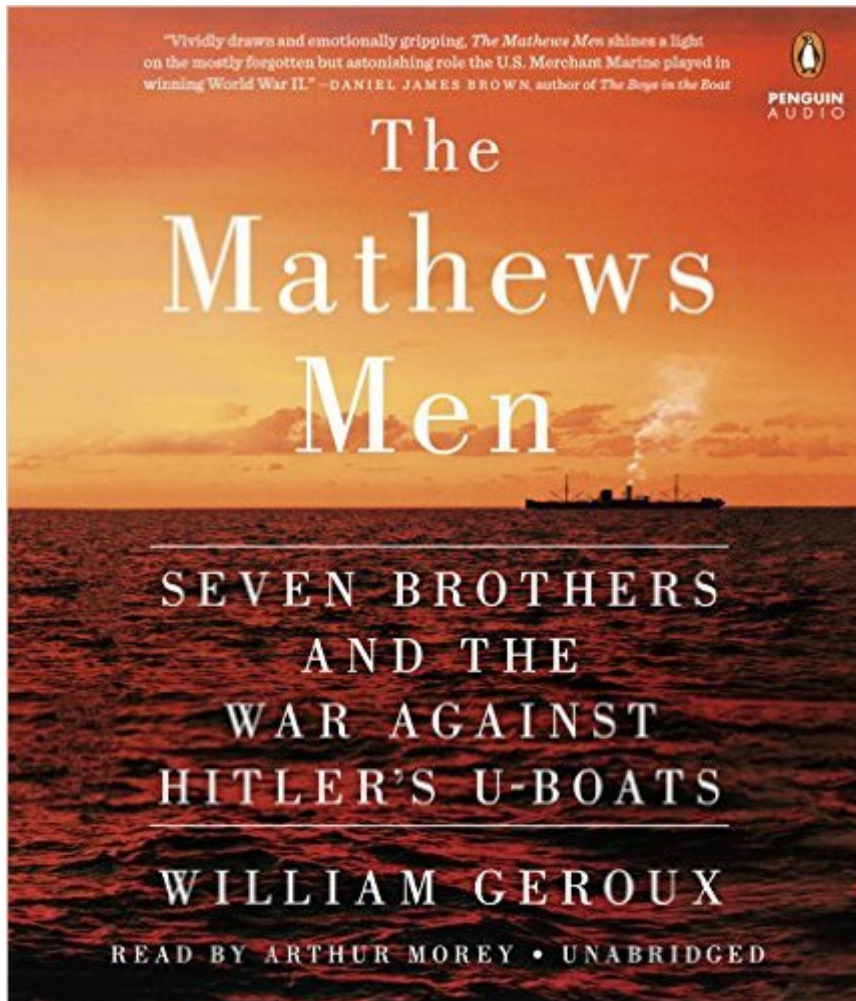


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The Mathews Men: Seven Brothers And The War Against Hitler's U-boats



Synopsis

“Vividly drawn and emotionally gripping.” —Daniel James Brown, #1 New York Times bestselling author of *The Boys in the Boat* One of the last unheralded heroic stories of World War II: the U-boat assault off the American coast against the men of the U.S. Merchant Marine who were supplying the European war, and one community’s monumental contribution to that effort Mathews County, Virginia, is a remote outpost on the Chesapeake Bay with little to offer except unspoiled scenery—but it sent an unusually large concentration of sea captains to fight in World War II. *The Mathews Men* tells that heroic story through the experiences of one extraordinary family whose seven sons (and their neighbors), U.S. merchant mariners all, suddenly found themselves squarely in the cross-hairs of the U-boats bearing down on the coastal United States in 1942.

From the late 1930s to 1945, virtually all the fuel, food and munitions that sustained the Allies in Europe traveled not via the Navy but in merchant ships. After Pearl Harbor, those unprotected ships instantly became the U-boats’ prime targets. And they were easy targets—the Navy lacked the inclination or resources to defend them until the beginning of 1943. Hitler was determined that his U-boats should sink every American ship they could find, sometimes within sight of tourist beaches, and to kill as many mariners as possible, in order to frighten their shipmates into staying ashore. As the war progressed, men from Mathews sailed the North and South Atlantic, the Caribbean, the Gulf of Mexico, the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, and even the icy Barents Sea in the Arctic Circle, where they braved the dreaded Murmansk Run. Through their experiences we have eyewitnesses to every danger zone, in every kind of ship. Some died horrific deaths. Others fought to survive torpedo explosions, flaming oil slicks, storms, shark attacks, mine blasts, and harrowing lifeboat odysseys—only to ship out again on the next boat as soon as they’d returned to safety. *The Mathews Men* shows us the war far beyond traditional battlefields—often the U.S. merchant mariners’ life-and-death struggles took place just off the U.S. coast—but also takes us to the landing beaches at D-Day and to the Pacific. “When final victory is ours,” General Dwight D. Eisenhower had predicted, “there is no organization that will share its credit more deservedly than the Merchant Marine.” Here, finally, is the heroic story of those merchant seamen, recast as the human story of the men from Mathews. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

When pondering the possible content for World War II histories, the options are endless. The strategic machinations of political leaders and the decisions (for better or worse) of generals and admirals, the life of the ordinary on the front lines, the battles at home to keep the war effort strong, individual stories of triumph and tragedy that stem from the happenstance of ships, planes or combat units in fateful places at exactly the right (or wrong times). As the Greatest Generation dwindles in numbers, it's fair to wonder how many more unexplored stories of the WWII era are left to be told. "The Mathews Men" is focused generally on the merchant mariners from Matthews County, Virginia (with emphasis on the men from a single family, as representatives of a community of seafarers). Mathews County sits on spit of Chesapeake Bay land wedged between the Rappahannock and York Rivers north of Hampton Roads. Before the start of the war, its proximity to the sea and a lack of other opportunities created a natural draw towards merchant seamanship. William Geroux tells an often under-appreciated story in any sustained conflict: that logistics are the lubricant of victory., and that strategy and tactics are meaningless without fuel, food and the materials of war. This book is well researched, well written. You will feel the heat (and the menace of sharks) of the Caribbean, the chill of the Barents and feel the ominous threats of angry seas and menacing U-Boat captains across the Atlantic and the waters that join it. Expect to come away with a bigger appreciation for the role of beans and bullets, and true insight into the character of the men who brought those things to the fight. Excellent reading!

One of the least known and understood aspects of World War II is the contribution of America's maritime industry. From 1939 through 1945, Free Europe - which at one point was limited to the United Kingdom alone - was largely dependent on American merchant shipping. Until December,

1941, American merchant ships faced little danger from German submarines, but British merchant ships were being sunk at an alarming rate. After Pearl Harbor and Germany's declaration of war on the United States, American ships became very dangerous places to be at least through late 1943 when anti-submarine warfare became effective. The men who manned American merchant ships have never received the credit they were due. This is the story of some of those men, all from Matthews County, Virginia, including seven brothers. It is a harrowing story of terror and sudden death. Imagine sailing on the Atlantic on a moonless night and your unarmed or inadequately armed ship is struck without warning by a torpedo and your only hope is diving into the cold ocean and hoping to be picked up by rescue ships that often bypassed helpless survivors. The casualty rate was very high, the life lonely and dangerous just from the job, even before you factored in German submarines and sometimes aerial bombing. Yet, voyage after voyage, these men persisted. It was their job — and without them Britain in particular might have starved and surrendered to the Germans. This book is tribute to the men of Mathews County in particular and the Merchant Marine in general. It is a masterful telling of the struggle to keep freedom fighting, an often exceedingly dangerous task, by delivering the food and tools needed to first resist and ultimately invade and conquer. A great read. Jerry

Some of the great unsung heroes of World War II are the members of the U.S. Merchant Marine. During the period from 1942 to 1943 (known as the 2nd Happy Time by the Kriegsmarine), US merchant ships were easy pickings for the numerous U-boats which were lurking off the coast of the Eastern US. William Geroux has given this brutal story a personal detail, in the form of the many mariners who emerged from Mathews County Virginia, where a seagoing career was as much a way of life as we associate with the Nantucket whaling industry. In particular, Geroux focuses on the seven brothers from the Hodges family, most of whom served in the US Merchant Marine during the war, trying to avoid death at the hands of the U-boats. They don't all survive --- literally from page one, we know that one of the Hodges brothers ends up in the belly of a shark. The interesting aspect of the merchant mariners is that they were essentially contract workers. They signed up one voyage at a time, and if they stayed on land too long, they became eligible for the draft. After the war, they were not considered eligible for many of the benefits that veterans of the war received. One imagines that it was tempting for them to take their chances with the draft, rather than go face the Kriegsmarine in slow-moving, unprotected merchant vessels, but a considerable number of them simply continued doing it because this was the life they had chosen and loved. It's a pretty amazing story, and one worth reading.

Geroux has written a highly researched and thoroughly enjoyable story focusing on a small area of Virginia during WW2. Focusing on the merchant marines and how they fought valiantly against the U-boats of Hitler, THE MATTHEWS MEN features six sons who became sea captains, some surviving the war and others who didn't. Matthews county, Virginia sent merchant ships to the Atlantic, Caribbean, Indian, and Mediterranean oceans to name just a few during the war and fought more efficiently than anyone could've imagined. The history included in the book provides sobering numbers and is a truly engaging read. Of the 830 U-boats commissioned in the war, over 700 were sunk. At the start of the war, some 250,000 merchant marines were active. Today, just over 11,000 remain. A fascinating story and uplifting read for any history buff.

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