



Fern Blodgett was born in Regina on July 6, 1918. Her family moved east when she was a child. For years, Fern watched the ships from the shore of Lake Ontario at Cobourg, dreaming of becoming a sailor, even though she knew that only boys could crew ships at sea.

When WW II broke out, wireless radio operators, called "Sparks", were needed urgently, and not enough men were available to fill the demand. Fern saw her chance, but was turned down by two training schools in Toronto, because she was a woman. She persisted, and was finally accepted, graduating on June 13, 1941 - the first Canadian woman to earn a professional wireless radio operator's certificate. That day, she received an offer to serve as a wireless radio officer aboard a ship. When she arrived in Montreal, she caused the

ship's young Norwegian captain, Gerner Sunde, some consternation - he had not realized that "F. Blodgett" was a woman. Britain and Canada did not allow women to serve on ships as radio operators. However, since Norway had no regulation either for or against, and the M/S Mosdale desperately needed an operator, Captain Sunde hired Fern as the new Sparks.

Fern Blodgett was the first Canadian woman to qualify as a professional wireless radio operator. During the Second World War's fiercely-fought Battle of the Atlantic, she became the first Canadian woman to serve as a "Sparks" at sea.

The **Battle of the Atlantic** (1939-1945) was the long struggle between the Allied and Axis powers for control of sea lanes and vital supply lines to Britain. In many ways, it was also a battle of technology, with Allied scientists working to design new ways of locating and destroying the U-boats which employed "wolf-pack" tactics to such devastating effect. Winning the battle at sea was deeply crucial to winning the war, and developments in communications, radar, and code-breaking were factors in that victory.

Serving at sea was incredibly dangerous work - the vessels were targeted by U-boats and warships, strafed by enemy aircraft, exposed to the peril of winter storms, and at risk of hitting floating mines in uncharted fields. During the Battle of the Atlantic, some 3500 Allied vessels were lost, and 40,000 seamen died. The vast majority of these losses were merchant ships, with their civilian crew and passengers. The Norwegian M/S Mosdale, a fruit carrier, started as one of six sister ships - only the Mosdale survived the war.

Despite seasickness and the grim events of the perilous Battle of the Atlantic, Fern stayed at her post, carrying out her duties bravely and well during 78 Atlantic crossings, from Eastern Canadian ports to Britain. A bold pioneer, she opened the door for 22 women, new Sparks, who followed her to sea.

A year after joining the Mosdale's crew, Fern married Captain Sunde. Their wartime efforts were recognized in July 1943, when King Haakon of Norway presented them both with the **Norwegian War Medal**. Fern Blodgett Sunde, the Canadian "Sparks", was the first woman ever to receive that honour.