**35th Annual Commemoration of the National Merchant Navy War Memorial**

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[Acknowledgements]

The Australian Merchant Navy Memorial was dedicated 35 years ago on 7 October 1990. Although far from the sea, it serves as an enduring monument to the memory of all the merchant seamen who played a vital role in Australia's war efforts in the First and Second World Wars.

As a nation, we are proud of our military history and the service and sacrifice of our veterans. The wartime service of merchant seamen forms part of the fabric of the Anzac tradition.

In peacetime, merchant seamen plied their trade in commercial ships, carrying passengers and goods to all corners of the globe. When the First World War broke out in 1914 and again when the Second World War erupted in 1939, they played a critical role supporting Australia's war effort. Poorly armed or not armed at all, their ships faced the perils of war.

They carried troops and military supplies to and from war zones, and delivered all manner of goods to sustain the home front and wartime industry.

Tens of thousands of allied merchant seamen lost their lives in the world wars. Of the thousands of Australians who served in the Merchant Navy, at least 184 died in the First World War and at least 678 in the Second World War.

We may never know the full numbers because many others sailed in foreign flagged ships and other countries' merchant navies.

30-year-old Second Baker John Hedley from Melbourne was one. He was a cook on the British passenger and cargo ship SS *Manitou* when it was attacked by an Ottoman gunboat off Lemnos on 16 April 1915. The *Manitou* was transporting troops and ammunition for the Gallipoli landing that took place less than a week after John's death.

Wartime service aboard merchant ships required a quiet heroism, and an uncomplaining dedication to duty. As the inscription on the memorial here reminds us, many *'gave their lives for their country and have no known grave but the sea'*.

Merchant seamen were boys and men, and a few women, drawn to the sea from diverse backgrounds. They ranged in age from teenagers as young as 14 to adults right up to their seventies. They served alongside merchant seamen from many other seafaring nations.

They sailed in all maritime environments from Australia's eastern seaboard to the hot and humid tropics, to the deadly cold of the Arctic Circle. They experienced every possible weather condition from calm seas in warm sunshine to the frightening swells of severe Atlantic storms. The ever variable and dangerous sea could itself, take the lives of merchant seamen.

Steering ships into harm's way in wartime sea lanes and war zones required merchant seamen to stare down the enemy and accept the possibility of death. One threat encountered in both world wars was raiders - enemy warships and armed merchant cruisers. They attacked ships at sea and laid mines outside harbours and in sea lanes.

Stewardess Clara McMillan was sailing from Auckland to Sydney on 26 June 1918 when the Melbourne-registered SS *Wimmera* struck a mine laid by a German raider off Cape Maria van Diemen. Clara was one of 3 female and 13 male merchant seamen lost with the ship.

20-year-old Sailor Max Rochfort of Fremantle one of the first Australians killed in the Second World War when the British-registered SS *Aviemore* was torpedoed in the Atlantic on 16 September 1939. His grieving mother told a reporter, *'It is hard! Very hard! … [B]ut he died doing his duty.'*

In both wars, the paramount threat was submarines. They hunted individually and in the Battle of the Atlantic formed the feared U-boat 'wolf packs'.

In 1942 and 1943, Japanese submarines brought the war at sea close to home attacking merchant ships and a hospital ship off Australia's eastern seaboard. Half the Australian merchant seamen killed in the Second World War died in our own waters.

16-year-old Deck Hand Billy Rushford was one of 38 merchant seamen (from a crew of 43) killed when the Sydney-registered SS *Iron Crown* was torpedoed off Gabo Island, Victoria, on 4 June 1942. Memorial notices published after the war show he was *'sadly missed by his loving mother'* and *'ever remembered'* by his 3 sisters and their husbands.

In recognition of the sacrifice of merchant seamen, General Douglas MacArthur described how merchant seamen *'brought us our lifeblood and they paid for it with their own. … When their ships were not blown out from under them by bombs or torpedoes, they delivered their cargoes to us who needed them so badly.'*

Behind stories of service and sacrifices like the ones I have shared today, and countless others, are stories of family, friendship, love, heartache, and pride.

Today, it is right that we remember and honour the thousands of merchant seamen from Australia and other seafaring nations and their crucial contributions to, and sacrifices for, Australia's war efforts. Together, we sustain their memory as the ranks of those who served continue to thin out, and we play our part in ensuring their memory endures for generations to come.

This memorial, on the shores of Lake Burley-Griffin in our nation's capital, with its evocative form, inscriptions, and names of the war dead will forever remind us of the wartime service and sacrifice of merchant seamen.

Every day and night, in all seasons, this dignified memorial is exposed to the elements - wind, rain, searing sunlight, wintry sleet and darkness - all conditions of nature experienced by our merchant seamen on wartime voyages.

But of greatest significance to us is the pledge inscribed on the memorial itself: *'They will be remembered forever more.'*

Lest We Forget.