

MERCHANT NAVY NEWS

Newsletter of the Merchant Navy Association and the
Merchant Navy Chapter of Forestville RSL sub-Branch NSW

Edition 37
Spring 2025



TO FOSTER THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE SEA

VALE, ANGUS DONALD BETHUNE CAPORN



We were saddened to learn that member Don Caporn crossed the bar on the 8th of April 2025. Don was a much-loved, longstanding supporter of the Merchant Navy fraternity who will be long remembered and dearly missed.

During June 1943, Don quit his job with NSW Railways and joined the Royal Australian Navy, aged 17-years. His first voyage along Australia's east-coast as crew member of *HMAS KYBRA* was encouraging. She was previously a merchant vessel, a cargo ship with two holds, now fitted as a training ship.

KYBRA had wooden decks, where upon hands and knees, Don was introduced to the ancient art of 'holystoning'. His next ship was also a requisitioned merchant vessel, the troopship *SS CANBERRA*.

A passenger vessel of 7,707 tons, built in 1913, *SS CANBERRA* had previously been requisitioned to serve as a troopship during 1917. She was owned by Howard Smith, Australian Steamships in Melbourne. Don's father was a merchant mariner who had served *SS CANBERRA* during the early 1930's, she had been requisitioned for WWII service in July 1941, and heavily strafed by Japanese forces near Cape York during March 1943.

Don sailed on *SS CANBERRA* from Townsville, escorted by a destroyer to New Guinea. After approximately ten days of acclimatising at *HMAS LADAVA*, Milne Bay, he joined another requisitioned merchant vessel, enjoying the first-class passenger accommodation on RAN supply ship *MV MERKUR*. After a few days at sea, Don was transferred to *HMAS SHROPSHIRE*, to complete the second leg of his journey to Manus Island, where he would join the crew of *HMAS ARUNTA* on the 6th of July 1944.

Relying upon multiple vessels for fuel oil, *MERKUR* for supplies, and *HMAS POYANG* for ammunition, *HMAS ARUNTA* participated in operations at Morotai, Leyte, Suriago Strait, Lingayen, Corregidor, Wewak, Brunei, and Lutong in Malaysia. During the invasions Don's action station was "A" gun supply crew in the forecastle mess deck.

After the invasion of Leyte Gulf, *HMAS ARUNTA* withdrew to Manus Island for revictualling. Her 20mm anti-aircraft guns were replaced with 40mm guns and she joined an invasion convoy bound for Lingayen Gulf. On the 5th of January 1945 the convoy was targeted by members of the Divine Wind Special Attack Unit, known as Kamikaze pilots.

HMAS ARUNTA experienced a near miss on the port side, which killed two crew members, Able Seaman H Sellick and Stoker Petty Officer R Hand. The ship was repaired in company of a USN Destroyer before both vessels resumed their positions in the convoy.

From the 9th of January *HMAS ARUNTA* participated in the Lingayen Gulf landings for a few days before withdrawing to escort *HMAS AUSTRALIA* to Leyte for repairs. Both ships were suffering damages inflicted during 'Divine Wind' strikes; *AUSTRALIA* had been hit by five kamikaze pilots over a period of four days.

HMAS ARUNTA returned to action, conducting bombardments of Corregidor before sailing to Sydney. After repairs and refitting *ARUNTA* returned to New Guinea, supporting Australian landings at Wewak, then same at Brunei and Balikpapan. Upon return to Sydney, Don celebrated Victory in the Pacific at Cockatoo Island Dockyard. Soon after, he was assigned various duties including guard aboard a cargo ship, naval policeman, and coxswain of a torpedo recovery boat at the Pittwater range. Don was next assigned to *HMAS GOULBURN* however, began suffering ill health and was discharged as Able Seaman.

Don later returned to the sea as Ordinary Seaman on *SS TIME*, a coal fired, cargo vessel built 1913. Over subsequent years he completed Foreign Going Certificates of Competency as 2nd Mate, Chief Mate, and Master, serving his final posting as Chief Officer on *TSMV KANIMBLA*. Don then worked as Assistant Wharf Manager for P&O before joining the Maritime Services Board as Master on tugs and pilot vessels. Eventually, being the sensible man he was, Don retired early as Senior Master to enjoy quality time with his family.

LEST WE FORGET

DON CAPORN

4 May 1926 – 8 April 2025

DONALD CAPORN

A PERSONAL RECORD OF SERVICE IN THE NAVY IN WW2

Amongst the many memories in my life was the night of 3rd September 1939 when our late Prime Minister Robert Gordon Menzies announced over the radio that "As a consequence Australia was now at war with Germany". As we sat around the [family] radio with my mother, her sister and myself at age 13 I probably had no idea or thoughts that I would end up in the navy and exposed to wartime action. At that age I was in my last year at the Crows Nest Junior Technical School with another two years to go. My father was at sea at the time in the merchant navy and my mother was the organiser of my school days.

In 1941 I completed my three years at Crows Nest and was ready to go out into the workforce but from memory and notwithstanding the fact that we were at war, jobs were scarce. I can remember my mother taking me into the Australian Gaslight company to see about employment, but nothing came of it. Mum must have heard somehow or other or read it in the paper that the New South Wales Government Railways wanted apprentice fitters and turners and after I completed the entrance test which must have been satisfactory I commence work at the Everleigh railway workshop which came as somewhat of a shock as I had never been in a workshop let alone the railways with the different sections including a machine shop, boiler shop and others. I served time in all of these shops, in particular the machine shop and boiler shop but also the carriage works. The railway workshops were heavily involved in war production and in 1943 I was in the section that 'smooth turned' the copper bands on the 25 pounder artillery shells which as was explained to me gave them the 'spin' for direction.

Sadly, early in 1943 my mother passed away and my father had to come ashore to care for us. The loss of my dear mother greatly upset me, and it must have developed an urge in me to fight for Australia as according to my railways employment Record Book I resigned on June 18th, 1943. I first tried to enlist in the Royal Australian Air Force but was still too young. Then I tried to enlist in the Army but not being up to the lark of putting my age up, I was sent packing. But in so doing the recruiting officer mentioned that the Royal Australian Navy were recruiting at age 17. So, it was off to the Navy recruiting office in what is now Gallipoli

House. According to my Service Record I volunteered at age 17 years and 1 month on June 24th 1943, at the height of the war, to proudly fight for King and Country. I can't recall what my father's reaction was to be having his only son leaving a secure occupation to go off to war however I had signed the official papers and that was it. But I still had to wait to be 'called up' so in the meantime I obtained a job in a chemical store dusting shelves and making deliveries using my personal push bike.

Call Up came in November 1943. With my father and my aunt to see me off I was transported by train from Sydney Central Station to Flinders Street Station in Melbourne and then to **Flinders Naval Depot** to begin a completely different life, so much different from being an only child with my own bedroom at home. Here I shared a large room [mess room] with 20/30 other boys and men where we lived, had our meals, and slept. In between meals and sleeping we trained in aspects of naval warfare that included among other things physical fitness exercises and marching [regimentation and discipline] and weapons handling with a .303 service rifle, firing live ammunition at targets on the firing range, followed up with bayonet drill.

We then progressed to handling and firing Vickers and Lewis guns and throwing hand grenades. Other training involved the operation of larger caliber guns, gas and fire and damage control, seamanship, and general good practices of the life of a sailor.

We also had turns at being the cook not in the sense of preparing the food but being detailed off to take the food containers to the galley to collect the food, dish it out, then wash the utensils and scrub down the benches and tables.

At night we slung our hammocks from bars fitted above the mess room tables and read or generally relaxed until lights out at 2100 or 2200 hours. Wakey wakey was at either 0530 or 0600.

We were given every 2nd weekend off with the choice of independent activities such as going to Melbourne or being billeted with a family in a private home. As I was only 17 years old if I went to Melbourne, I had to stay at a particular hostel in Collins Street although I did on one occasion stay at a private home one weekend. St Kilda and Luna Park were the favorite spots.

At one point during my training, I was approached and asked if I would be interested in transferring into the officer training stream, but I declined as I thought I would not be able to cope with the academic side considering I only had technical education.

When our training period at Flinders ended I was drafted to the depot at Rushcutters Bay to join my first seagoing ship the **HMAS KYBRA**, a merchant ship that had been requisitioned and commissioned as a navy vessel. Although it was fitted out as an Asdic training ship, my billet was as one of the navy sailors. The “Kybra’ was a two-hold cargo vessel with the forward cargo hold converted to living quarters and it was here that we slung our hammocks.

We sailed from Sydney, and I had my first experience of what it was like being on a darkened ship, not daring to show any light at all especially when having to come out on deck during the night, passing through two lots of screens. Our first course was down the coast to **Jervis Bay** for more training this time going ashore into sandhills where we practiced fired live ammunition on the American ‘tommy gun’, a fully automatic weapon. From there we sailed north to **Newcastle**. It was here that I had my first experience of the old-fashioned technique of ‘holystoning’ the deck. The “Kybra’ being built as a merchant ship had wooden decks that had to be kept white by removing deadwood. In the merchant marine this was done using a holystone, basically a slab of sandstone about the size and shape of a house brick.



This 'stone' was clamped into a metal frame attached to a long handle so that the push/pull movement can be done from a standing position. But not in the navy. This had to be done on our hands and knees with one 'stone' in each hand!

The furthest north we went was **Brisbane** and after leaving that port we anchored in Moreton Bay just off the western side of Moreton Island. Our commanding officer was ex merchant marine and wise to the ways of making life pleasant. His name was Kenee Corbett, had a beautiful, cultured English accent and after the war went on to serve as Master in BHP. It was actually a fishing expedition using hand grenades. Using the ships motorboat with a petty officer in charge the grenades were thrown into the water to stun any fish in the immediate vicinity of the explosion. The stunned fish were quickly gathered and provided a source of fresh fish for several days.

On return to Sydney, I was drafted first to the shore base **HMAS Rushcutter** [*all navy shore bases are classified as ships and given the HMAS title. This is to ensure that all navy personnel serving at the base are controlled by full navy regulations*]

and then to the shore base **HMAS Penguin**. While stationed at HMAS Penguin I had my first experience at night guard duty at the west gate to the base. I was on my own and I think it was a 2-hour duty. In hindsight I shudder to think what would have happened to me in the event of an enemy commando raid.

There was also daily work parties detailed and on one such detail we were transported to the Pyrmont docks to load and unload cargo as the wharf labourers had gone on strike. I think I was trucking cargo. Another work party was at Morts Dock to store a new navy frigate.

After some time at HMAS Penguin, I was despatched by troop train to Brisbane and **HMAS Moreton** for a few days then by troop train again to **Townsville**. By this time, I was accustomed to sleeping wherever I could with the long luggage racks being the first choice.

At Townsville we were marched down to the troopship **SS CANBERRA**, a coastal coal burning passenger ship now trooping.

By coincidence my father had served on this same ship as a marine steward in the early 30's and I had also been onboard one time in Sydney visiting my father with my mother.



SS CANBERRA

On sailing from Townsville on the 'Canberra' we were escorted by a corvette for the short voyage to **Milne Bay** in New Guinea. I and other navy ratings slept on the promenade deck with our hammocks rolled out on the hard deck. The navy base at Milne Bay was **HMAS Ladava** and I spent about 10 days here although I can't remember what my duties were. I do remember going to the movies at an American base and sitting on the trunk of a coconut tree laid along the ground. The toilet arrangement was rather novel simply consisting of a trench with a long smooth plank of wood with about a dozen holes in it, positioned above the trench.

The navy supply ship **MV MERKUR** arrived, and I joined her for the next stage of my journey to join the **HMAS ARUNTA** located somewhere in the south Pacific Ocean! During my few days on the MV Merkur I welcomed living in 1st class passenger accommodation at night and using the ships swimming pool situated abaft the funnels during the day. I was having a ball, but it didn't last long as when we made an ocean rendezvous with the **HMAS SHROPSHIRE** I was transferred to her. Life for a few days was definitely different. I had hardly been onboard for 5 minutes when I received a blast because I was leaning against the guardrail on the firing deck admiring the 8-inch guns when an officer informed me in no uncertain terms that it was a no-no [leaning against the guardrails]. Sometime on the 2nd or 3rd day I was given aircraft watch duty, stationed on the starboard wing of the bridge. This involved sitting in a specially built swivel

chair with a calibrated horizontal arc marked in degrees from 0 to 180. There was a vertical rod attached to this and a vertical plate graduated in degrees from 0 to 90 with another rod supporting a set of powerful binoculars for watching for approaching aircraft. It was the observer's duty to interrogate the sky in the allotted sectors. From memory there were two observers on each bridge wing.

One time while at this duty station I became aware out of the corner of my eye that 'B' gun turret had swung to starboard with both barrels of the 8-inch gun elevated. I also noticed that there was a destroyer some distance away on the starboard beam. Next thing the starboard barrel of the twin 8-inch fired a salvo in the direction of the destroyer. There was no warning of the pending firing, so it came as one hell of a surprise, and the noise petrified me. It turned out that the ship {Shropshire} was conducting an offshoot astern of the destroyer that I believe was the HMAS Warramunga.

We duly arrived at Manus Island in the Admiralty Archipelago and before long the HMAS ARUNTA arrived, and I was transferred to her for what was to be an eventful 12 months of naval operations. I had also turned 18 and was promoted to the rank of ordinary seaman. While serving on HMAS Arunta the ship took part in the invasions and naval operations of Moratui, Leyte, the battle of Surigao Strait, Lingayen, Corregidor, Balchafen (sic), Wewak, Brunie and Lutong. Our bases for the above operations were Manus in the Admiralty Islands then Subic Bay in the Philippines both run by the American Navy. (More about this later)



HMAS ARUNTA

Reflecting back on my time on the HMAS Arunta it always seemed that she was a floating, fighting steel shell in which we lived, slept, and fought so far from our home port of Sydney. This meant we were reliant on our supply ships, the “Merkur” for supplies and the “**Po Yang**” for our ammunition. For fuel oil we either went alongside HMAS Shropshire, the **USS Pennsylvania** (the American battleship) or an American oiler which was a converted Liberty ship. Living conditions were not 5 star but we survived by improvising. If it was too hot to sleep in hammocks we slept on the messroom deck or tables or on the side lockers. All of our food supplies came from the “Merkur” and on the odd occasion that we berthed alongside the “Pennsylvania” our commanding officer would scrounge some ice cream. Our diet was basic. No fresh milk so we used tinned condensed milk. Sometimes we got tinned fruit, mainly apricots. *In the official history of the vessel, it was noted that the commanding officer was worried about the possibility of scurvy due to the inadequate intake of fresh fruit and vegetables.*

While I was still young and inexperienced I suffered from the usual tropical ailments. Some of the longer serving members of the crew were able to purloin or otherwise get hold of the camp type stretchers that the American soldiers used in our base camp on Manus Island. It was so hot one night in Manus that I tried sleeping on deck. Unfortunately, it came on heavy rain during the night and in the rush to get below I tripped over one of these stretchers and lacerated my right ankle. In about a week the whole leg was swollen from a tropical ulcer that had formed on the laceration, putting me in the sick bay for 5 days suffering the indignity of daily inter-muscular penicillin injections in the buttocks!

While in this base port our daily routine was shipboard maintenance, chipping and red-leading rust and painting or if you were a member of a gun crew overhauling the guns [3 turrets of 4.7 inch and the high angle twin 4 inch]. On some nights we would have movies on the f'cle with the screen placed as far forward as possible to accommodate as many of the crew as possible.

When the store ship [Merkur] or the ammunition ship [Po Yang] arrived and came alongside it was ‘clear the lower deck’ meaning all hands were required to take onboard stores and ammunition. It was very heavy work and often my knees would buckle under the weight of an individual load.

Fresh water was highly important and limited, so we were rationed to about 1.5 gallons [about 5.5 liters] per day, sometimes every 2nd day. From memory we weren't allowed to do our laundry or running water in the bathroom, so we stood in front of the wash basin with our half kerosene tin of water and washed that way. No privacy in the toilets as all doors had been removed. Once at sea we kept cruising watches, so our heavy weapons were manned and always ready to go into action. A duty watch at sea was a period of 4 hours starting at say midnight to 4 am; then 4 am to 8 am and 8 am to 12 noon; noon to 4 pm. The next 4 hours would be split into 2 dog watches of 4 pm to 6 pm and 6 pm to 8 pm so that all hands rotated in the watches. All movements onboard were controlled by the bosuns pipe and the quartermasters who would go round the decks and through the mess-decks making the appropriate pipe and order as given to him by the officer of the watch.



Australian War Memorial 075090 Supply ship MURKUR in Milne Bay

For action stations we had alarm bells and when they sounded it was go at the run. It was an orderly run as if you were going aft you ran down the port side and if going fore'd you ran down the starboard side. If the action station alarm sounded and you happened to be on duty at your cruising station you waited to be relieved by the sailor whose allocated

was and then you went to your allocated station. When approaching an operation area for a landing or invasion all hands were piped to action stations 3 to 4 hours before, usually about 0300 or 0400 as most landings and invasions took place at daybreak. We would then be closed up at our station for a lengthy period of time. When possible one or two sailors from each station would be detailed off to go to the galley and make a large billy can of coffee.

The coffee was granulated but oddly we added a spoonful of mustard to it. Why I was never to find out.

This was taken to the action station along with sliced bread and a dixie of baked beans. When it was safe to do so we would go to cruising stations but be ready to go to action stations. At action stations we wore special clothing over our normal gear, consisting of anti-flash gear which was a two-piece outfit, with anti-flash gloves and hood without the helmet. We did lots of bombardments during the invasions and my **action station** for most operations was “A” gun supply crew in the forecastle mess deck. “A” gun was a 4.7 inch, so the ammunition was in two pieces; the projectile and the brass cordite case. These came up from the magazine by a vertical electrically driven hoist from which we handled the piece and placed it on another hoist which we manually pulled up to the gun deck crew. Sometimes to keep up with the demand for the gun we would build up a small supply in the mess deck but if we were to have been hit there would have been a large explosion if the cordite had caught the blast but that was the risk we took. There were two of us at this station.

My main **cruising station** was as a telegraph man in the wheelhouse standing by the indicator for the engine revolutions for orders to come down the voice pipe from the navigation bridge above. On an instruction from above say 200 revs I would ring it up which went straight to the engine room. When the engine room rang back to acknowledge the order I would inform the bridge.

The Philippines

The various battles that took place around the invasion fleet has been fully covered in various navy publications and books, but in brief the **Battle for Surigao Strait** was the classical naval action of “crossing the T” where the Japanese squadron of vessels steamed in “line ahead”

through the Strait and the US 7th fleet waited in such an advantageous position where it could fire broadsides while the Japanese could mainly only fire ahead. It is incidental and ironic that most of the US capital ships engaged in the battle were those that had been damaged in the surprise attack on Pearl Harbour that brought the USA into the war on the side of the allies. In the end it was a night of defeat for the Japanese navy and a substantial turning point in the war in the Pacific.

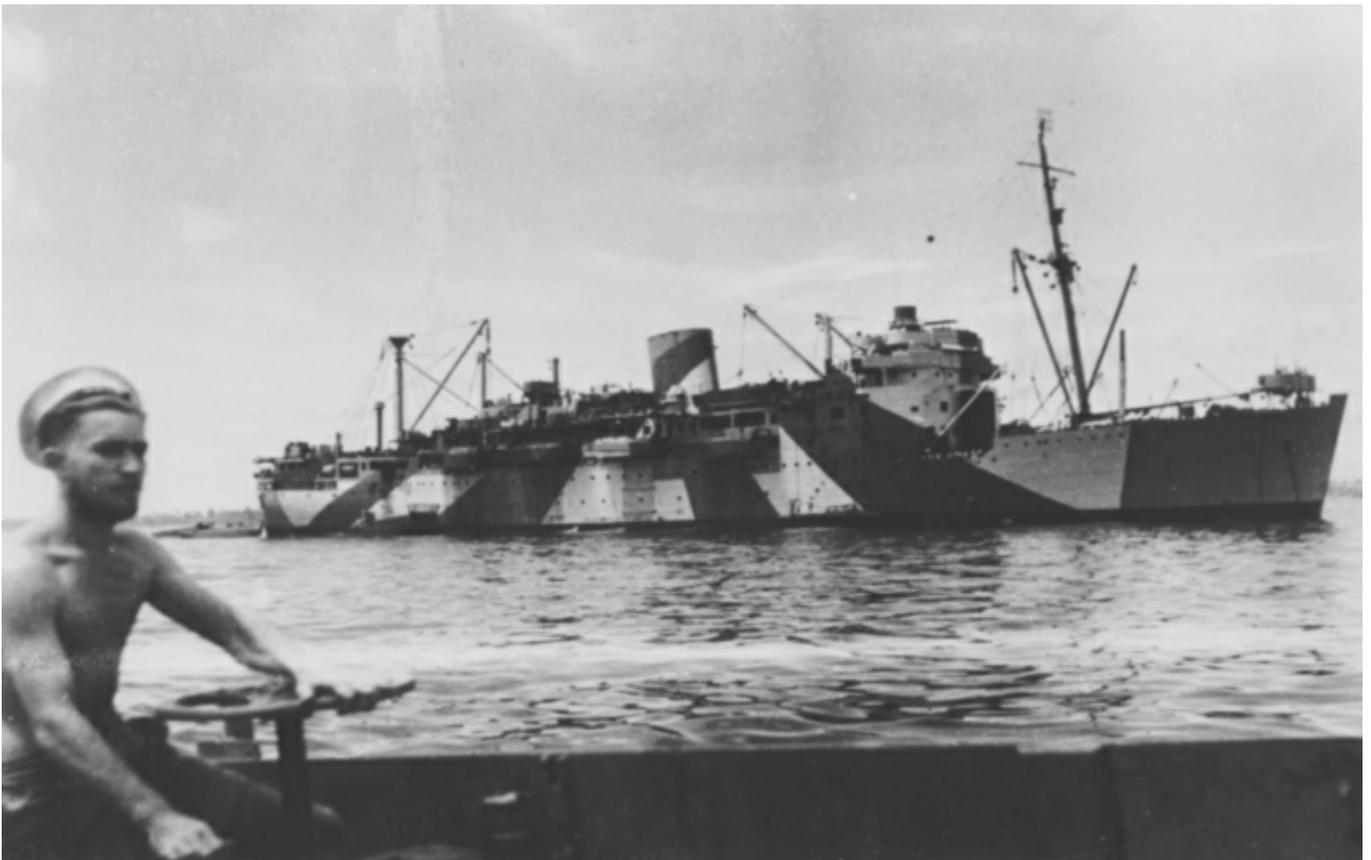
My ship, the HMAS Arunta in conjunction with USN destroyers made a torpedo attack against the Japanese battleship “**Yamashiro**” and then went back into the fray firing the fore’d 4.7-inch guns until told by the flagship to get clear as the heavy units of the allied fleet were ready to engage. Of the four Australian warships involved in the battle, **HMAS Australia**, and **HMAS Shropshire** [both heavy cruisers with 8-inch guns] and the **HMAS Arunta** and **HMAS Warramunga** only Shropshire and Arunta took part in the action. Unfortunately, HMAS Australia had been singled out and heavily targeted by the Japanese especially by Kamikaze suicide bombers and suffered heavy damage both above deck with the loss of the commanding officer. As a result, HMAS Warramunga had been detailed off to escort her and other damaged ships south for repairs and replacement of those of the ships personnel who had been killed or injured.

Although the action had resulted in a serious defeat to the Japanese forces in their attempt to get among the invasion fleet of transports, there were two other prongs to their planning. While the battle was raging, another fleet of Japanese warships had come through another Strait further to the north and had attacked a US force of **light escort carriers** out to sea which, through a misunderstanding by the overall Admiral for had been left unprotected. Orders were received for HMAS Shropshire and HMAS Arunta to join with some heavy units of the US fleet and proceed at full speed to the battle of the light escort carriers. As so happened just when the Japanese warships were on the point of annihilating the escort carriers the Japanese Admiral ordered a withdrawal thus saving the remaining carriers and our race to their assistance was cancelled.

The invasion of **Leyte** was successful and as is well known the venerable

and by now famous General Douglas MacArthur was able to fulfill his promise to the people of the Philippines to return. Other vessels in the fleet were the **HMAS "Kanimbla"**; **HMAS "Manoora"** and **HMAS "Westralia"**, all ex coastal passenger ships pre-war that were converted initially as **Armed Merchant Cruisers** and then to **Landing Ship Infantry**, and manned by a navy crew.

The "Kanimbla" was to figure prominently in my post war life as I served in her as a coastal passenger ship as 4th; 2nd; and chief officer starting in 1954.



Able Seaman Albert "Bluey" Ross, coxswain of landing craft K19 with HMAS Kanimbla in the background. Morotai, 2 June 1945.

After the invasion action settled down and appeared successful from a navy point of view we withdrew to return to Manus Island for re-storing and re-ammunitioning and a well needed rest and recreation. The general recreation was swimming over the side and water polo matches. For these activities it was necessary to have the ships whaler [boat] patrolling the near vicinity with weapons and live ammunition while similar lookouts were placed on the bridge wings because of the presence of sharks in these waters.

At a later forward base [Tawi Tawi] in the Philippines we were playing water polo and after the game as the last players was climbing the

scramble net to get back on board two great tiger sharks were noticed rising from the depths. The effect was instantaneous!

The fleet including the "Arunta" then prepared for the next invasion and we were warned to prepare for anything as the Japanese were still fighting hard. Prior to this proposed invasion [not sure if it was on Manus or Subic] our 20 mm antiaircraft guns [3 each side] were changed by the Americans for 40 mm that were more effective against the Japanese suicide aircraft. I was most impressed by the Americans. No messing about; off with the 20 mm and on with the 40 mm all in one day. But the changeover presented a problem as the manning of the 20 mm was 3 and the 40 mm was 6 so there was some juggling to be done to fully man these weapons.

The invasion fleet duly sailed and when roughly abeam of **Manella** (sic) an island on the west coast of **Luzon** the suicide attacks started. The "Arunta" experienced a near miss on the port side aft, killing 2 and wounding 2. Unfortunately, the ship was also disabled, and the Admiral left an American destroyer to stand by us and in the event that we were not operational within so many hours it was to take off the crew and sink the vessel. Repairs were effected in time and the two ships caught up with the fleet and resumed our respective defensive positions.

More ships were hit by these suicide aircraft, but the landings were successful with "Arunta" carrying out bombardments. After a few days of action, the fleet moved to an anchorage inside the invasion area in **Lingayen Gulf**. While here great care was taken because the Japanese had resorted to the tactic of having swimmers using the cover of floating debris to toss grenades through open portholes or onto the deck. To counter this the armed guards were doubled, and machine guns were mounted on the forecastle and at the stern with orders to fire at anything suspicious.

The next operation was the retaking of **Corregidor** by paratroops and our role was to carry out bombardments as before. By this time "Arunta" was in serious need of repairs and refit so we were sent to **Sydney**. On completion of this we sailed north again to support the landings in **Wewak** [New Guinea]. After that the next operations were in **Brunei** and **Balikpapan** in support of Australian troops. We then came south again and were at **Cockatoo Dry Dock** on **VJ Day** August 15th, 1945,

Don Caporn

having steamed 184,368 nautical miles on war service. Shortly after this I was drafted off, much to my disgust as it meant I missed out on peace time voyages. Then came various duties including ammunition guard aboard a cargo ship at east Circular Quay and naval policeman and coxswain of a torpedo recovery vessel at the Pittwater torpedo range. I was then drafted to **HMAS GOULBURN** but by this time I was beginning to suffer health problems and after a period of hospitalisation at the navy facility in Canonbury Darling Point I was discharged.

It was now back to civilian life but what to do? After life onboard the "Arunta" I couldn't face going back to complete my apprenticeship in a dreary workshop, so I opted to return to sea in the coastal merchant service. My first ship was the **SS "TIME"**, as **ordinary seaman** [my navy sea service was not sufficient to sail as AB] a coal burner of the Howard Smith fleet. With the best Maitland coal and a clean bottom, she could manage 9 -10 knots in calm seas. As we made ready to sail from the finger wharf at the bottom of King Street in Darling Harbour the bosun sent me to the bridge to take the wheel. After having steered the Arunta I thought this would be a piece of cake. But this was not to be as I found that the ships compass was of the magnetic type and graduated in quarter points while Arunta had a gyro compass graduated in degrees. As we passed Garden Island the ships Master gave me a course to steer in quarter points. This deflated me very smartly as I was lost but didn't want to admit it. However, I managed to figure it out and survived this baptism of fire. From here on it was all upwards as I worked my way up to **AB** then went on to complete my three officer Foreign Going Certificates of Competency [**2nd Mate; Chief Mate; Master**] with my final posting as Chief Officer on the **TSMV Kanimbla** before coming ashore where I gained further employment in **harbour tugs and pilot vessels** before final retirement.





**ANGUS DONALD CAPORN
PART 2
A PERSONAL RECORD OF SERVICE
IN THE MERCHANT NAVY**
The story of Don's interesting
career will continue in the next
edition Xmas 2025



**A WORKING LIFE IN THE
AUSTRALIAN MARITIME
INDUSTRY**
The intriguing story of
the career of Neil Bevis
will continue in the
Autumn 2026 edition.



Coming Events

Norah Head Merchant Navy
Memorial Service

6 December 2025

Please confirm details with Geoff
Walls mobile 0408680332 closer
to the time of this event

MERCHANT NAVY DAY – 2025



Merchant Navy Day Wednesday September 3rd was again commemorated in the Grand Hall of Mosman Art Gallery. It was another notable occasion in that beautiful venue with over 80 people in attendance. We are commemorating our first Merchant Navy Day without Don Kennedy OAM, our Past President and Patron of Forestville RSL sub-Branch. Don had done so much during his many years of service to promote and highlight the knowledge and history of the Australian Merchant Navy during wartime. He was a great ambassador on behalf of the many thousands of seafarers who served on Australian and Allied merchant ships, that were mostly old, slow and the majority unarmed. Many gave their lives or were wounded or injured during the delivery of valuable cargoes of supplies, heavy equipment, troops, ammunition and food to all parts of the world, under attack from enemy forces.

Don will be long remembered on this special day.

Today is also an important occasion to welcome out new Merchant Navy Day Patron. Mayor Cr. Ann Marie Kimber, who continues the role, replacing our previous Patron Cr. Carolyn Corrigan who was appointed Mayor of Mosman in 2017. Unfortunately, Carolyn was unable to attend today due to her nursing duties at St. Vincent's Hospital. We thank her for her undaunting support as she considered Merchant Navy Day a truly community event.

Also, Ian and Eileen Henderson, who since 2008 conducted the Merchant Navy Day Commemorations on behalf of Mosman RSL sub-Branch and the council, were unfortunately unable to be present due to health problems. It is most appropriate for them to be recognised for their valuable contribution on our behalf, for the conduct of this commemoration since 2008 until 2017, when they handed that responsibility to the Merchant Navy RSL sub-Branch.

Our Merchant Navy Chaplain, Sr. Mary Leahy, OAM, was present and introduced her part time assistant Anne Marie, a St. Joseph's sister who also teaches at St. Joseph's College. She is most interested in Sr. Mary's work with seafarers. Sr. Mary led our commemoration, ably assisted by HMAS Penguin C.O. CDR. Kent Browning and C. W/O. Derek Croker. Following the Merchant Navy prayer, it has been the tradition for Steve Vella to find a suitable poem. This year he chose "Lost Ones" appropriately written by Noel Smith, a merchant seaman. Another excellent contribution.

Our policy of past years, not having an official guest speaker giving an address, but rather, to follow our responsibility to ensure younger generations become aware of the service and sacrifice of Merchant Navy Veterans during wartime, we have had the continued involvement of Mosman High School Captains. This is a mark of their school Principal, Dr. Susan Wyatt, giving her support to current Captains Katie McPherson and Rafferty Laight. who once again, in addition to presenting a detailed record of these veterans exploits during WW11, addressed the current serious issues facing Australian merchant shipping in the global sea trade environment. They have set the bar even higher than previous years.

A copy of their presentation is attached with this report.

Following the commemoration of the Fallen came the Act of Remembrance, with the laying of wreaths and tributes by Federal, State and Local Government representatives and representatives from the numerous maritime organisations and associations present, together with our parent Forestville RSL sub-Branch and local community bodies. Then followed the Naval Ode, Last Post, the Minutes Silence and Rouse. The Commemoration concluded with the National Anthem.

In my Closing Remarks I was pleased to speak briefly about the plans of the M. N. Chapter to initiate two major projects to respectfully honour our Merchant Navy Veterans. Time is drawing very short to deliver these most important initiatives. Our M. N. Projects Steering Committee is working diligently to bring the excellent work of Capt. Iain Steverson and his wife

Arial, who prepared a 56,000+ word manuscript titled “The History of the Australian Merchant Navy during Wartime” to fruition. We are presently considering editing options and have been supported by an initial grant from the MNWMF. Our objective is to produce an authoritative volume for publication.

Our other project is to seek cooperation from the Australian National Maritime Museum, Darling Harbour and the Australian War Memorial, Canberra to mount exhibits displaying an appropriate record of the wartime exploits of the Australian Merchant Navy as the “Fourth Arm of Defence in support of the Nation”, supporting the Australian and Allied Armed Services.

I then gave a vote of thanks to our new Patron, Mosman Mayor Cr. Ann Marie Kimber and her Council and Art Gallery staff for allowing us the honour of holding our annual commemoration in the Grand Hall.

A most welcome late morning tea was then provided by Mosman Art Gallery staff, which gave those in attendance the opportunity to mingle and chat.

All the wreaths were moved to the Merchant Navy Memorial located at the Mosman War Memorial and the book tributes were donated to Mosman High School.

Merrill Barker, M. N. Chapter, Forestville RSL sub-Branch.

MHS Captains Presentation

Good morning, I am Kate McPherson, and this is Raffety Laight. We are the School Captains from Mosman High School. Our speech today celebrates the history of the Merchant Navy and also discusses its future. The term Merchant Navy refers to a nation’s commercial shipping and crews. During the Second World War Merchant Navy ships carrying cargoes were at just as much risk as Royal Australian Navy warships. Merchant ships were attacked not only in distant waters but also within sight of the Australian coastline while transversing much frequented trade routes.

It is recorded that merchant men suffered the greatest percentage of deaths of any service and that vessels were often unarmed in defence. Figures from the Seamen’s Union of Australia show that 386 members of the union lost their lives during WWII. With a membership of 4500 at the beginning of the war the overall fatality rate among members was 8.5



percent, a rate higher than that sustained by other branches of Australia's fighting services.

Following several gunnery and torpedo attacks on merchant ships along the New South Wales coast, the Naval Board instituted a system of coastal convoys as a temporary protective measure. Ships that sailed independently, rather than in convoys, ran a greater risk of being torpedoed. So where did Australia's merchant navy begin?

Because of its length of coastline and many ports, by the 1880's the colony of Queensland had recognised the need to establish its own coastal shipping service rather than rely on external shipping lines to transport its cargoes. By the early 1900's Queensland had developed a substantial fleet of local merchant ships operating from the Torres Strait to Brisbane. Queensland coastal merchant shipping continued operating throughout WWII, despite the risk of attacks by Japanese submarines and aircraft.

Therefore, Australia had an historical "Merchant Navy" and one that refers to its commercial fleet and merchant mariners who served in conflict. But today it currently lacks a significantly, flagged merchant fleet. While the term merchant navy, is not actively used to describe a specific military service today, the need for a resilient Australian fleet of commercial vessels, capable of being requisitioned in crises, is a recognised issue.

Australia's vulnerability to maritime trade disruption is well recognised. In 2025, International shipping moves 99 percent of our nation's traded goods by volume worth \$755 billion and provides not just prosperity but also vital resources such as 91 percent of the country's fuel and 90 percent of its medicines.

Yet of the approximately 6600 vessels conducting our international trade, only four of any size (over 2,000 tonnes of cargo) are Australian - insufficient to assure supply. Further, the armed risks to trade are growing. Fundamentally, securing supply means protecting merchant ships by using naval forces. Commercial vessels simply lack the sensors and weapons to intercept drones etc. Yet the Royal Australian Navy can't even crew its

ten frigates and destroyers against complex threats, let alone protect 6600 merchant ships. Which is why Canberra depends in particular on the United States Navy, still the world's premier fleet, to maintain a peaceful global maritime order.

Australia's Merchant Navy is identified as the commercial vessels under its flag and can be requisitioned during crisis. Australia once had a Merchant Navy, and the 2023 Strategic Fleet Report proposes (without using the term Merchant Navy) just such the body of vessels. It argues for 12 (and ideally 50) larger ships, with these being commercially owned and operated, and Canberra paying \$8 million per ship annually to cover Australia's higher operating costs. While the report doesn't mention arming such vessels, there is a history of doing so from Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships equipped for limited self-defence to Armed Merchant Cruisers with heavier weapons to guard convoys. A Merchant Navy of 50 ships (though Canberra has only agreed to 12) optionally armed with easily removable weapons is considered to have good merit.

Now, the history of the Australian Merchant Navy is a proud one.

During wartime, particularly the World War and the Vietnam War, Australian merchant ships and their civilian crews were essential for transporting troops, supplies and equipment. Hospital ships were crewed by merchant seamen. Merchant mariners in dangerous conditions and played a crucial role in supporting Australia's economy by keeping essential goods moving. The Australian merchant ships fly under a navy flag, which is known as the Australian Red Ensign. This is a red flag with the Union Jack in the upper left corner, the Commonwealth Star below it and the Southern Cross on the right side. It is the official flag for Australian registered merchant ships. The Red Ensign was developed as part of the 1901 Federal Flag design competition.

So, what is the future of the Merchant Navy? Environmental regulations are driving the adoption of alternative fuels and energy saving technologies to reduce the maritime sector's environmental impact. Automation is increasing, and there is a rising trend towards the development of smart and autonomous ships, requiring advanced digital skills from seafarers. However, a diminishing interest in maritime careers is expected to create a significant shortage of officers by 2026, impacting hiring and costs.

Australia is an island country with a proud history of merchant shipping and a reliance on that shipping for goods. Therefore, the challenge going forward is for the industry to invest in enhanced training and development programs to prepare seafarers for the evolving demands of maritime jobs that will see the continuance of a viable merchant navy.

[Merchant Navy Day photos - courtesy of Elizabeth Sandeman-Gay](#)



Sadly we recently lost two highly respected members of the Merchant Navy fraternity, John Hargreaves crossed the bar on 30 April 2025 aged 95. His wife Betty passed away on 22 August 2025 aged 94.

John began his seafaring days as a cadet with the Burn Philp Company in 1946/47. During this time he completed 23 return trips to Japan with supplies for the occupational forces. An unfortunate accident onboard prevented John from completing his Cadetship but after recovering he continued at sea as an Able Seaman. Despite some years spent in shore jobs he finally found his niche by gaining employment with the Maritime Service Board in Port Kembla, finishing a long career as crew on the ports pilot cutters.

They were both regulars at merchant navy events - especially the Canberra Memorial Commemoration. Rest in peace - John and Betty.

THOSE WHO HAVE CROSSED THE BAR

Capt. GRAHAM DAWSON BHP Master

Capt. COLIN DWYER BHP Master WWII 11/3/25

ANGUS DONALD BETHUNE CAPORN WWII 8/4/2025

JOHN HARGREAVES 30/4/2025

BARRY CAREY BHP Chief Eng. July 2025

FREDERICK WALKER WWII 20/7/2025

Capt. JONATHON MANN BHP Master 27/8/2025

THEY SAIL FOREVERMORE UNDER THE RED ENSIGN

<p>BOARD OF DIRECTORS Mr Sean Barrett, RNZN (Rtd.), Chairman Capt. Ted van Bronswijk Ms Catherine Linley Mr Michael McKinley Mr Paul Trangmar Mr Denis Speyer Mr Stan Moriarty, Company Secretary IMMEDIATE PAST CHAIRMAN Mr David Field FAICD Telephone: 0414 900 393</p>	 <p>The Merchant Navy War Memorial Fund Ltd (MNWMF)</p> <p>ABN 29 000 052 059 www.mnwmf.com.au</p>	<p>CORRESPONDENCE ADDRESS PO Box 61 PICTON NSW 2571</p> <p>COMPANY SECRETARY Telephone: 0418 488 163 Email: secretary@mnwmf.com.au</p> <p>CHAIRMAN Telephone: 0407 490 516 Email: Sean.Barrett@dpworld.com</p>
--	---	---

INVITATION

35th ANNUAL COMMEMORATION
NATIONAL MERCHANT NAVY WAR MEMORIAL
KINGS PARK, CANBERRA

SUNDAY 19th OCTOBER 2025, COMMENCING AT 1100 HOURS



RSVP: Monday 13th October by Phone or Email to:

Stan Moriarty, Secretary secretary@mnwmf.com.au 0418 488163

WREATHS Organisations/Individuals who wish to lay a Wreath are requested to provide:

- NAME OF ORGANISATION
- NAME & TITLE OF PERSON LAYING WREATH. On arrival all Wreaths / Flowers, clearly identified, to be delivered to the Wreath registration table.

PARKING All Parking is via the gate entrance (with signage) to a fenced off grassed area, diagonally opposite the Memorial. No parking in Bays opposite the Memorial, as reserved for Official Guests & Service Providers.

MINI-BUS Will be available from & return to the Garden City Motel, 55 Jerrabomberra Ave, Narrabundah ACT 2604

TRANSPORT ASSISTANCE - NO VETERAN should be prevented from attending the Commemoration due to lack of transport. If any Veteran would like to travel to and from Canberra, car-sharing volunteers will be arranged from Members of MNA / CMMA / RSL Sub-Branch & MNWMF. If interested, please make direct contact with your organisation. Alternatively, please contact Sean (Sean.Barrett@dpworld.com) or Stan (secretary@mnwmf.com.au).



CONTACT DETAILS

Merchant Navy Association

President/Treasurer:

Geoff Walls
PO Box 4181
SHELLHARBOUR
NSW 2529
Phone: 0408680332
Email:
geoff.walls@bigpond.com

Vice President:

Secretary:

Elizabeth Sandeman-Gay

All correspondence to:

PO BOX 4181
SHELLHARBOUR

Merchant Navy Chapter of Forestville RSL sub-Branch

Merrill Barker - Chapter
Coordinator

PO Box 6159
NARRAWEENA
NSW 2099
Phone: 02 9944 7328 Mobile: 0433
934 705
Email:
mnchapter@forestvillersl.org.au

NEWSLETTER EDITOR

Geoff Walls
PO Box 4181
SHELLHARBOUR
NSW 2529
Phone: 0408680332
Email: geoff.walls@bigpond.com