

Address at the 60th Anniversary of the Merchant Navy Memorial Sunday 13th April.

Introduction

This is an occasion on which we can, for a brief time, compose ourselves to some quiet and purposeful reflection.

We are here to honour and preserve the memory of those who have lost their lives in service in the Merchant Navy.

Those here know that few people in our country today have any knowledge or awareness at all of the maritime domain, of ships and those who serve in them, of shore-based roles enabling that business on the seas and the trade, itself a complex national and international web on which our very existence depends and those who minister to seafarers' needs of body, mind and spirit. Few have an awareness of the scale and effort of the war at sea that also came to near coastal waters. And the victory that enabled in our present long era of peace and prosperity

The Merchant Navy in war.

The name "Merchant Navy", for which this memorial stands, was bestowed by King George V on the British merchant shipping fleets following their service in the First World War incurring huge losses of ships and men.

In the Second World War the Merchant Navy of the whole British Empire, which included the Australian merchant fleet, suffered proportionately the highest casualties of any of the allied services.

They were part of the British Empire, later the Commonwealth of Nations, nations which responded to the call to fight against tyranny.

Thirty thousand two hundred and forty-eight British Empire merchant seamen who served at sea under the red ensigns of the Empire lost their lives doing so.

3,500 Australian merchant seamen serving in World War II in Australian registered ships.

The Australian War Memorial has placed the names of 845 of them, who are known to have died on war service during World War II.

The true number of Australian born merchant seamen lost on all the world's oceans will never be known as these 845 do not include the hundreds of unrecorded Australian seamen killed while serving in British merchant ships and in the ships of other allied countries.

And there were many merchant seamen of other allied nations in seas around Australia whose dead are recorded elsewhere..

There were Norwegian, Dutch, American vessels were also moving vital supplies to and from Australia in vessels of all types.

This Memorial here is not particular about nationalities.

For merchant ships the outbreak of both world wars meant initially sailing without any protection. John Webster; a now departed shipmate of the Port Club (many members here present) was a 16 y.o. cadet and his vessel sailed halfway round the world with no protection to make it to their home port and he continued serving throughout the war on long voyages.

Not for merchant sailors the terrible excitement of fighting with the armaments of a warship built for purpose. Merchant ships were mostly poorly armed or unarmed, mostly slow vessels easy to target and were the prime targets of an enemy who to quote the a crew member of a German raider "Every ounce of petroleum, every grain of wheat, every piece of war equipment that we could stop reaching the enemy would be so much nearer to starving them into submission"

They were part of that worldwide war in all the seas and oceans. They served in every theatre of war including that longest and most deadly battle of the war at sea that is known as 'The Battle of the Atlantic' as my NZ born father did both

aboard a merchant vessel and later in a warships escorting convoys of merchant ships he having made his first ocean voyage from NZ to England at the outbreak of war as a RNZN volunteer reservist assigned as a DEMS gunner on the British refrigerated cargo and passenger liner *Akaroa* which had been hastily fitted, in Auckland, with a gun on the poop described as being one model on from a muzzle loader. They were provided with 20 rounds of ammunition. And so he became one of the first ANZAC's to arrive in England after the outbreak of war.

The war in the waters of Australia and New Zealand.

The scale of the war off the east coast of Australia and in the Tasman Sea is little known. In WW2 15 merchant ships were torpedoed, mined or sunk by gunfire in the waters between Bass Strait and Fraser Island. Eight more merchant ships sunk at or near Sydney.

While this island continent was not invaded in 1942 the seas around it most certainly were. Between December 1941 and August 1943 58 Japanese submarines sank 180 ships and damaged 15 more. During this period up to 40 long range attack submarines sank 38 merchant ships in Australian waters.

Today it is difficult today to grasp the reality that a very real war was fought off our coastline.

A few examples.

One of the most shocking and infamous incidents was the loss of the *Centaur*, a Blue Funnel passenger cargo vessel then in Australian service as a hospital ship, which despite her prominent markings as such was torpedoed off Moreton Island in January 1942. Of the 332 on board only 36 survived.

Off the south coast near Gabo Island the BHP ore carrier *Iron Crown* sank in just 60 seconds after being torpedoed in June 1942 taking with her 38 or her 43 crew. Ore carriers became known to seamen as 'death ships' for the speed at which they sank.

Not all sank so do not feature in the tally but still suffered loss of life.

The Adelaide Steamship Company's *Allara* is just one example. Sailing south with a cargo of sugar from Cairns *Allara* was 40 miles off Newcastle when a torpedo blew most of the stern and the propeller away in the pre-dawn hours of July 1942. Five men were killed and eight injured. The crew abandoned ship but returned on board when the *Allara* stayed afloat. It was towed into Newcastle.

Merchant seafarers who survived a sinking or casualty got a month's leave after which they would no longer be paid.

There are many tales of personal heroism in all these events.

Across the Tasman distance did not isolate NZ either. In the first war a German auxiliary cruiser laid mines and or used her seaplane to sink or capture four vessels including the Sydney bound *Wimmera* out of Auckland. She hit one of these mines the North Cape and the terrific explosion sank her in 10 minutes killing 26 including her Captain.

Following the same playbook in the Second World War the German commerce raider *Orion* laid mines in the approaches to Auckland and in June 1940 the realities of war were brought home when the Union Company's biggest and most luxurious passenger liner *Niagara* outbound from Auckland for Vancouver and carrying half the NZ army's small arms ammunition and Bank of England gold bullion was sunk within hours of departure when still in coastal waters.

There was the NZS Co *Turakina*. The refrigerated cargo vessel with nothing more than a vintage 4.7" gun on her poop was near the end of her passage from Sydney to Wellington in August 1940. When she encountered the same German raider *Orion*. Ignoring signals from the raider to stop and not to use her radio *Turakina's* captain decided to fight it out in the hope that the delay would allow warships from Australia or NZ time to catch her. *Turakina* never stood a chance but her captain refused to give up and when his ship was sinking raced aft through the flames to urge his surviving gunners to 'have another shot at the ...' To the credit of the German raider it lingered long enough to pick up those that survived.

Orion went on to sink other vessels.

The United States, once that country committed troops to Papua New Guinea, formed a local shipping service to supply US and Australian troops from Australia and manned their vessels with merchant seamen from all over the world as well as Australia including men who were otherwise unfit, too young or too old for military service. Many vessels were requisitioned harbour vessels, fishing vessels or small coastal cargo vessels. They became known as the US Army Small Ships and provided the logistics essential to support the front line. An Association of the same name still keeps their history alive.

The Merchant Navy's role not well remembered

At the time many of these events were not reported for reasons of wartime secrecy. After the war there was a generation who knew and mourned them but history as written and taught made little reference to these merchant seaman and the ships they sailed in and because it had no institutional structure such as the armed services had. And perhaps also because merchant seamen were not held in high regard by the community so wartime role and losses were not so much forgotten, as never really recognised.

The impact of the war on merchant seamen themselves was little known except to people in the towns along the coast where casualties landed and to their families and friends.

Merchant Navy veterans were granted a place in the ANZAC Day marches in the 1970's though even today it has been a struggle to have some RSL service clubs acknowledge the role of the "fourth service". That service which supplied the other three with the means to fight.

Merchant navy veterans and their widows weren't covered by the same Pensions Act as naval personnel. The situation of merchant mariners didn't really improve until there was an inquiry by the Repatriation Commission in 1989 revealed many inequities and pensions took until 1994 to implement.

The repatriation commissioner, Jocelyn McGirr, pointed out that all merchant seamen by virtue of their jobs were at risk all the time, while members of the

fighting Navy quite often went for all or part of the war at home bases without ever being in harm's way. But these acknowledgments came 50 years late.

Our present situation and history.

We depend on sea bourn trade more than ever. Our peacetime commerce and very standard of living depend on it. In time of conflict or even threat of conflict this trade may be imperiled, and our way of life impacted very quickly. It is in the public domain that Australia maintains only about 30 days supply of liquid fuels with almost all supply delivered by regular shipments in tankers. A supply easily interrupted.

Just a month ago flotilla of warships of a strategic competitor to our north made an unannounced circumnavigation of Australia. Even monitoring their actions proved challenging, caused some concern and demonstrated how isolated and vulnerable our seas and coasts are. In current wars in Europe and the Middle East supply chains have been imperiled by attacks on merchant vessels in the Red Sea, Black Sea and potentially the Straits of Hormuz.

We are again in dangerous times.

Conclusion. Returning again to those for whom this memorial is dedicated.

At this memorial we should not forget what it took to win and what was won.
We owe a debt to those enabled our post war peace and prosperity.
We owe them recognition, honour and continuing remembrance.
And in remembering heed the lessons of those conflicts and the price of peace.
Keeping in mind the lessons of history to inform and hopefully guide our future.

I have in my address today drawn from the address given at this memorial in 2018 by Commander Desmond Woods RANR he concluded this memorial with words better crafted than I have skill match. And so I conclude with them...

May all our fellow seafarers commemorated here today, those who were killed in action and those who survived the wars of last century but who have since died, wheresoever they may lie, rest in peace. We remember their steadfastness, their bravery and their sacrifice with humility and gratitude. They are not forgotten. The Last Post sounds for them all.

We are here today giving practical effect to those fine words:

“We will remember them”

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