

52nd Annual Commemoration
Merchant Navy Memorial & Columbarium, Rookwood, NSW
Rear Admiral (Rtd) The Hon. Peter Sinclair AC AO KSTJ
Sunday 10th April 2016

I feel honored to have been invited to speak at this important commemoration. It is always a pleasure to be in the company of fellow mariners.

Having spent almost 42 years in the RAN, I cannot claim to be a Merchant Mariner, but I could have been.

My father spent his working life with the Newcastle and Hunter River Steamship Company, which evolved from the very first steamship company in our nation's history. Those beautiful paddlewheel steamers, Sophia Jane (built in England) and William the 4th (built on the Hunter), were the first two steamships that sailed between Sydney and Morpeth, via Newcastle in the 1830s.

My father was the General Manager of the company during the years of WWII, and he was also involved in planning the convoy system. As an enthusiastic Navy League cadet, not yet in his teens, I recall occasionally visiting the ships with my father when they were working cargo alongside wharves at Pyrmont.

So as a boy I was very much aware of the risks faced by our merchant shipping and the losses that were incurred. Most Australians today are aware of the Japanese midget submarine attack on Sydney Harbour on 31 May 1942, but very few then and even less now knew that Merchant ships were being sunk not far from Sydney Heads and along our coast with much greater loss of life, throughout the war

years.

The first ship lost was the Nimbin in 1940, long before Japan entered the war. She struck a German mine. The last two ships lost, off Western Australia, were sunk by German U-boats! Ironically, the Captain of the U-boat was previously a Merchant Navy Captain.

Not too many of us know that there were Australian Merchant ships at Gallipoli. Simpson's donkeys were unloaded from one of them. We hear nothing of this and yet it is the navy that claims to be the silent service.

It was during those war years that I decided a life at sea was for me. After the war I made a few voyages in my father's ships, Karuah and Mulumbinba, from Sydney to Newcastle and down to Launceston and I was hooked. I remember there was an old, retired Rear Admiral from the RN serving as Second Mate in one of the ships! They were great adventures for this young boy.

The navy got to me first, because I was able to join as a Cadet Midshipman at the tender age of 13 in January 1948. But I always remembered my first days at sea in those old merchant ships. Years later, in the Mediterranean in 1960, I spent some days in the British motor vessel Tabor, towing it from Pantelleria Island to Malta after she suffered a major engine failure. That brought back memories also.

But we are gathered here at Rookwood today, not to hear my reminiscences but to remember and honour fellow seafarers who served at sea in Merchantmen and other ships and who paid the supreme sacrifice. They were not necessarily lost in Australian ships

or even in Australian waters. For in last year's memorial programme, our merchant sailor losses are shown under more than 70 ship names in WWI and 180 for WWII, because Australian sailors served far and wide throughout the Allied Merchant Navies.

Indeed, I noted that 32 names of those lost are listed under US army small ships. I had a Merchant Navy honorary uncle who served with the US Army Small Ships in the Pacific who was highly decorated by the Americans for his service – and he would be one of many. He was a real hero to this young lad.

Our nation is an island, heavily dependent on the use of the sea for its livelihood and defence. The vast majority (over 98%) of our imports and exports are moved in ships and it disturbs me that in recent decades we have allowed our Merchant Marine to decline to the point where, God forbid, there is another major conflict, we would be almost totally dependent on foreign merchantmen for our survival. We have allowed our seagoing skills and experience to decline, probably purely for economic reasons without any concern for the strategic implications. Sad, but this is not the place to debate such matters.

We are here to remember and honour our shipmates who crossed the bar as a consequence of their war service with the Merchant Navy during WWI and WWII. War service in merchant ships was perilous. They had nothing of the damage control features of navy ships, let alone the means of defending themselves, nor the medical care facilities. They most often carried dangerous cargoes and they did not have the speed and evasive characteristics of the grey funnel line ships. They were also important targets to the enemy.

It should be acknowledged also that merchant seamen were exposed to danger continuously. That could not be said for navy sailors, soldiers, and airman, many of whom served in support postings during the war. Not so the merchant seaman. They served only in ships and every time they went to sea, they were facing real danger for the duration of the voyage.

It is not surprising therefore that the Merchant Navy suffered a higher rate of casualties per capita than the armed forces during WWII. The consequences of those casualties were also more serious. Whereas there were far more wounded than killed in action in the army, for example, it was the reverse for the merchant navy. Some 5000 allied merchant ships were sunk during WWII. Around 50,000 allied seamen were lost and only around 4000 were wounded. You won't find too many MASH units around the world's oceans.

We owe a huge debt to the Merchant Navy for its contribution to the allied victories in WWI and WWII. Churchill once famously remarked that the outcome of the battle of the Atlantic was his biggest worry during WWII, because if that maritime lifeline was cut, Britain was lost.

We remember those who have not known a grave but the eternal sea at this fitting memorial and in doing so I hope that we can not only give comfort to those who still grieve but also better inform our citizens of the debt they owe to so many. There are now impressive memorials to merchant seamen to be found here and in Canberra and at appropriate locations along our coast – including in my hometown at Tea Gardens on the splendid memorial built there a few years back.

But we need to do more to make our leaders and our citizens aware of

the courage and sacrifices of our merchant mariners and the critical importance of an Australian Merchant Navy to our nation's future. This memorial service is an important step down that path. We honour brave men today.

Lest we forget.