

54th Annual Commemoration
Merchant Navy Memorial & Columbarium, Rookwood, NSW
Lieutenant Commander Desmond Woods, RAN
Sunday 8th April 2018

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today I speak to you of brave men who lost their lives in battle and who are hardly remembered in modern Australia, even on Anzac Day. I am speaking of the sailors of the Australian Merchant Navy, particularly those who made such a vital contribution to allied victory in the Second World War. They deserve an honoured place in the recollection of those they fought and died for.

The Australian War Memorial commemorative roll, which lists those Australian civilians who died as a result of service in war or conflicts, includes the names of 845 Australian Merchant Sailors who lost their lives at sea during the Second World War. But the true number will never be known, for these 845 names do not include the hundreds of unrecorded Australian seamen killed while serving in British merchant ships. We need to acknowledge that thirty thousand British merchant seamen died at sea in the Second World War. Some of them were in fact Australians. The Empire's merchant seamen sailed under both the British and the Australian Red Ensign. Merchant mariners were civilians and yet they went in harm's way from the first to the last day of the six years of the War at Sea 1939-45 and paid a heavy price for doing so.

Since the Second World War the national memory of these brave men has faded, with little done to teach Australians about their part in the victory of 1945.

This omission from the national recollection is particularly true of the period of the New Guinea campaign in 1942, when Japanese troops were trying to seize Port Moresby by coming overland through the jungle. The brutal battles

on the Kokoda Track and on the northern coast of New Guinea were finally won with the aid of the Navy and Air Force, cutting off the seaborne re-supply of the Japanese army, forcing the enemy into retreat and then surrender.

The heroism of the Australian and American troops in the jungle is undoubted; but we should also remember New Guinea was won back through a combination of the matchless courage and endurance of young soldiers and airmen ashore, and the merchant seamen afloat who provided supplies to them, and the RAN ships that escorted these vulnerable merchant freighters through enemy attacks.

The Merchant Navy also suffered losses in Australian waters. There were 76 merchant ships lost to mines, torpedoes, shelling and bombing around our coast. 29 of these sunken ships were Australian registered vessels and 349 Australian seamen were killed on these ships or perished later at sea in open boats before they could be rescued.

268 men and women were killed when the protected Australian Hospital Ship *Centaur* was torpedoed off Cape Moreton by a Japanese submarine. Army Nurses, doctors and soldiers died. Australia was rightly shocked that this Red Cross marked ship was illegally targeted. We rightly remember that only one of the 12 nurses on board survived. We should also remember that of the total of 268 dead 78 were *Centaur's* Merchant Navy crewmen who died when their ship entombed them off the Queensland coast.

Australian merchant seamen sailed into battle in freighters, troopships, hospital ships, landing ships, and most dangerously in fuel tankers and ammunition ships. They stayed in their civilian ships when they were converted into Navy auxiliary warships, and armed merchant cruisers and went looking for the enemy.

These intrepid master mariners, and the often very young sailors of the allied merchant fleets, accepted that the odds were stacked against their survival. Nevertheless, every few weeks they shouldered their kit bags, reported for

duty, slung their hammocks, loaded cargo and once again steamed their ships back into danger. They displayed a quiet heroism and an uncomplaining dedication to their duty equal to that demonstrated by the three-armed services.

Australian merchant seamen were at the evacuations of troops from Norway, Dunkirk, Greece, Crete and Singapore. Escorted by the Navy, they ran supplies under bomb and torpedo attack to the besieged Australian soldiers in North Africa known as the “Rats of Tobruk”, so they could keep on fighting.

When the tide of battle turned and the Allies took the fight to the enemy, their merchant ships were being shelled off the beaches when allied troops invaded Sicily, Italy and Normandy and in the long series of bloody invasions of enemy held islands across the Pacific.

Australian seamen were on the British merchant ships that repeatedly ran the deadly gauntlet in the Mediterranean from Gibraltar into Valetta Harbour in Malta. The ammunition they brought kept the British and Australian fighter pilots flying into battle able to shoot down the bombers attacking that vital island fortress. The food and medical supplies sustained the starving and injured civilian population.

Their cold courage and endurance brought the oil which refueled the British submarines sailing to sink the enemy ships crossing the Mediterranean to supply the German army in North Africa. In 1941, these battered and bombed merchant ships, armed and guarded by the Navy, were all that stood between Malta and starvation and surrender. One oil tanker, the *Ohio*, came into Malta's harbour on fire after repeated attacks, a floating bomb. The huge vessel, close to sinking, was lashed between two Royal Navy destroyers to keep her afloat. An epic feat of seamanship which kept Malta able to stay in the fight until relief came.

Australian merchant seamen were present in the lethal six-year Battle of the Atlantic which kept Britain fed and fueled and able to keep fighting Hitler and the Nazis. They were at sea during the bitter Arctic convoys to Northern Russia which kept Soviet soldiers armed and fed. When their ships were sunk the survival of seamen in those cruel, icy seas was measured in minutes, not hours.

It was the Merchant Navy that fueled and supplied the British Pacific Fleet – the Royal Navy’s powerful fleet of battleships, aircraft carriers and cruisers and destroyers which was based in Sydney and Manus Island from 1944. As they fought their way north with the United States Navy these warships depended on Merchant Navy tankers and freighters and hospital ships in the vast Pacific. As the allies closed in on the home islands of Japan merchant ships and warships were attacked from the air by Japanese suicide bombers. Finally in late 1945, after Japan had surrendered, it was the Merchant Navy and the RAN that between them brought home to Australia most of the thousands of sick, emaciated prisoners of war who had survived four years of brutal captivity in Southeast Asia and Japan. We remember the 37 Australian merchant seamen who died while Prisoners of War in Europe and the Far East.

The ocean floors of the world are strewn with the wrecks of the broken, burnt-out merchant ships and the remains of the men who went down with them. Some were just teenaged boys, with all their lives ahead of them when they died.

The posthumous George Cross medal citation for one eighteen-year-old Merchant Navy apprentice called Clarke, exemplifies the heroism of many very young sailors. He had gone to sea at 16 as young engineer. Two years later his ship was torpedoed by a German submarine and set on fire. This is what the medal citation says he did:

When the rope was cast off the boat drifted back towards the burning ship, and it was clear to all on board that it would require a tremendous effort to row the boat

out of danger. Most of the occupants, however, were so badly burned that they were unable to help, but Apprentice Clarke took an oar and rowed for two hours without a word of complaint.

It was not until after the boat was clear of danger that it was realized how badly he had been injured. His hands had to be cut away from the oar as the burnt flesh had stuck to it. He had pulled on the oar as well as anyone, although he was rowing with the bones of his hands.

Next day he died of his wounds, having shown the greatest fortitude. By his supreme effort, undertaken without thought of self and in spite of terrible agony, Apprentice Clarke ensured the safety of his comrades in the boat. His great heroism and selfless devotion were in keeping with the highest traditions of the Merchant Navy.

So, what do we owe to these men who served in the war at sea last century? We owe them more than we can ever repay. These tough sailors who served under the Red Ensign held Australia's and the world's future freedom in their hands for nearly six years and they never let go their grip.

Here are the words of one of their shipmates, a former merchant seaman paying tribute to those who died at sea with their ships:

They need no dirge, for time and tide fills all things, with tribute unto them. The warmth of a summer sun, the calm of a quiet sea, the comforting arm of night, the generous soul of nature and the power of a seabird's flight.

Blow golden trumpets, blow mournfully for all the golden youth and shattered dreams that lie where God has lain his quiet dead for all the world to see, upon an alien ocean bed.

Wherever they lie, may they all rest in peace. **Lest We Forget**