

MERCHANT NAVY NEWS

Newsletter of the Merchant Navy Association and the
Merchant Navy RSL Sub-Branch NSW

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Xmas 2018



TO FOSTER THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE SEA

VALE, ROBERT JOHN KIRKPATRICK 1920 - 2018



We were deeply saddened to learn that longstanding member of the US Army Small Ships, and life member of the Merchant Navy Association Bob Kirkpatrick, crossed the bar on 12th September, 2018. Bob was born at Dulwich Hill, NSW on 3rd June, 1920. He left home at the age of 14 to work at Kincaid Bros. Dairy in Moore Street, Leichhardt, and at the age of 16 worked at McEvoy and Dudley Fosters Shoes in Redfern. Bob joined the Navy League Cadets at 'Victory Training Depot' Kirribilli, and at the age of 18 years enlisted with the Royal Australian Navy, however he was soon after declared medically unfit for service as a seaman due to colour blindness.



During February 1940 Bob joined the Australian Army and commenced training at Marrickville. The previous year he had bought himself a 350 cc Velocette motorbike and the Army expressed a desire to hire it. Bob refused to give up his bike and was subsequently employed as Dispatch Rider. He delivered on his Velocette between Sydney and Richmond



until 1941 when he attempted to join the R.A.N. a second time. Bob was offered a position as Officer' Steward, but he wanted to be a Seaman and joined the Merchant Navy instead.

Left: Bob with his 350cc Vecolette

On 5th February, 1942 Bob was assigned to the Troopship *AQUITANIA*. She was launched during April 1913 with gross tonnage of 45,647. *RMS AQUITANIA* had served as a Troopship, Armed Cruiser, Transport and Hospital Ship during WWI before returning to commercial service for Cunard Line.

During 1939 she was again acquired for war service and carried Canadian, New Zealand and Australian Troops to England. During 1941 *AQUITANIA* was repainted battleship grey, and returned to Australia via Singapore.

Spies in Singapore advised the Germans that *AQUITANIA* was sailing and the merchant raider (*HSK-8*) *KORMORAN* planned to ambush her in the Indian Ocean, but encountered *HMAS SYDNEY* instead. While en route to Sydney the Captain of *AQUITANIA* ignored orders not to stop for survivors of sinking's and rescued twenty-six crew members of *KORMORAN*. When Bob joined *AQUITANIA* she had been scheduled for transport duties between the United States and Australia.

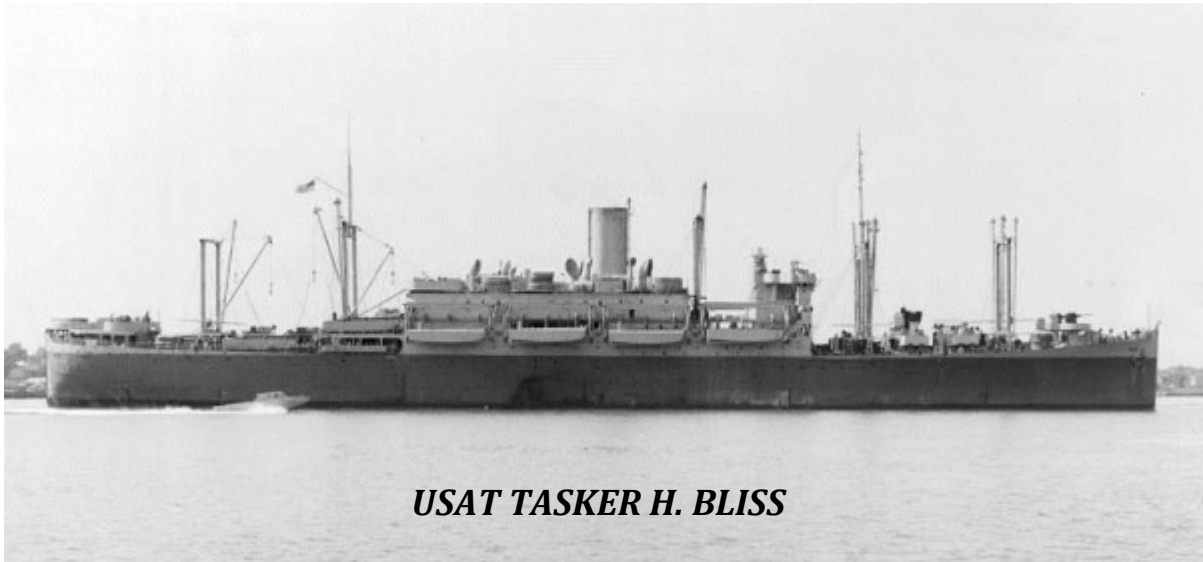


Left: Bob Kirkpatrick in San Francisco, February, 1942.

During February, 1942 U.S. vessels escorted *AQUITANIA* from Sydney to Honolulu where she evacuated women and children to San Francisco. She returned to Honolulu carrying U.S. troops and war materiel, returning to San Francisco with another load of civilians before Bob was discharged.

After a brief spell in San Francisco, Bob was assigned to U.S. Army Transport *USAT TASKER H BLISS*, completed during January, 1921 as steam passenger ship *GOLDEN STATE* with gross tonnage of 12,568.

The U.S. Army had chartered her during July, 1941 and renamed her after Tasker Howard Bliss, who served as Chief of Staff of the United States Army between September, 1917 and May, 1918. On 25th May, 1942 Bob sailed from San Francisco in a convoy bound for New Zealand and Australia. During the voyage from San Francisco Bob was re-assigned to another vessel in the convoy named *URUGUAY*. She was a South American vessel requisitioned by U.S. Army during January, 1942. After disembarking troops in New Zealand and Brisbane, Bob was discharged in Sydney during June, 1942. *USAT URUGUAY* served as a troopship until February, 1943 when she was rammed by the U.S.N Tanker *U.S.S. SALOMONIE* resulting in the death of thirteen sailors and injuring fifty others.



USAT TASKER H. BLISS

Bob's next ship was the Dutch vessel *SS VAN HEEMSKERK*. She was a passenger / cargo vessel launched during 1909 with gross tonnage of 2,996. She served KPM in the Dutch East Indies trade until World War I when she was acquired for war service and operated by the British India Steam Navigation Co. Ltd. She was returned to KPM during 1919 and once again operated in the Dutch East Indies. After the fall of Java during March, 1942 *VAN HEEMSKERK* was one of twenty-one KPM vessels that took refuge in Australian Ports and were subsequently chartered by the U.S. Army.

On 2nd July, 1942 Bob was assigned to *VAN HEEMSKERK* as Trimmer, joining her in Sydney and departing for Melbourne on 6th July in convoy. *VAN HEEMSKERK* returned to Sydney on 19th July, then steamed to Brisbane, Townsville and Bowen, before returning to Brisbane where she joined another convoy bound for Milne Bay. In one day the crew landed Allied troops along with a cargo of ammunition, bombs and foodstuffs before returning to Cairns via Townsville. They embarked on another supply run from Cairns on 6th September in company with *SS JAPARA* and escorted by *HMAS ARUNTA*, due to arrive at Milne Bay on 11th September. Five days earlier *MV ANSHUN* had been sunk during a Japanese surface raid and another raid was expected, so the convoy held off and did not enter Milne Bay until the following day.



USAT URUGUAY

On 15th September the transports departed for Townsville escorted by *HMAS ARUNTA* and *HMAS STUART*. During a subsequent supply run to Port Moresby late in October, Bob saw the wreck of *MV MACDHUI* which had been sunk during a Japanese air-raid on 18th June.



Above: *MV ANSHUN* on her side in Milne Bay, September 1942.

VAN HEEMSKERK returned to Australia and Bob was discharged in Brisbane on 11th November. On 28th November, 1942 she was involved in the sinking of the German blockade-runner *RAMESES* while operating off the coast of Western Australia in company with the Australian cruiser *ADELAIDE*.

Six weeks after Bob was discharged, on Boxing Day *VAN HEEMSKERK* was bombed by 'Washing Machine Charlie' and suffered seven casualties.



Left: Bob on the mast of the wrecked *MACDHUI*

Bob was reassigned to *VAN HEEMSKERK* in Brisbane on 28th January, 1943 and embarked on 5th February bound for Port Moresby via Gladstone and Townsville carrying U.S. and Australian Troops, fuel supplies, ammunition, explosives and foodstuffs. After three days in Port Moresby she departed on 20th February, carrying troops and supplies between Oro Bay and Milne Bay, returning to Townsville on 9th March. *VAN HEEMSKERK* then steamed to Bowen, before arriving at the Port of Brisbane where Bob was discharged on 18th March.



VAN HEEMSKERK

ROBERT JOHN KIRKPATRICK

During May, 1943 Bob was assigned to *CARDROSS (III)* as Fireman. She was a cargo steamship, of 2,515 gross tons, built during 1919 by Hill & Sons, Bristol. The Australasian United Steam Navigation Co. Ltd. purchased the vessel and named her *MACKARRA*. During 1941 she was purchased by J Patrick & co. Pty. Ltd. and renamed *CARDROSS*.



CARDROSS (III)

Bob joined *CARDROSS* in Brisbane, sailing between Cairns, Thursday Island and Darwin carrying ammunition and other war materiel, before returning to Sydney on 20th June.

Bob was discharged the following day and travelled to Brisbane to join the Liberty Ship *USAT BENJAMIN BONNEVILLE* as Ordinary Seaman on 1st July, 1943. She was named after Benjamin Louis Eulalie de Bonneville, a French born Officer in the Union Army between 1815 and 1861. Two thousand, seven hundred and ten Liberty Ships were completed during WWII, and each could carry over 9,000 tons of cargo in the holds, plus aeroplanes, tanks or locomotives lashed to the deck.

A Liberty could carry 2,840 jeeps, 440 tanks, or 230 million rounds of rifle ammunition. *USAT BENJAMIN BONNEVILLE* steamed from Brisbane to Milne Bay via Townsville, arriving 12th July. She carried war materiel between Milne Bay, Oro Bay and Australian ports until late October when she carried supplies to Buna, then returned to Milne Bay via Lae.

After returning to Australia, *USAT BENJAMIN BONNEVILLE* departed Sydney for Wellington carrying invasion troops and their equipment, along with explosives, high octane fuel, bombs, ammunition, barges and foodstuffs. Troops from New Zealand joined Australian troops and a contingent of the U.S. 4th Marines on the journey to Noumea and Espiritu Santo, visiting Tulagi, Russell Islands, Purvis Bay and Vella Lavella in the Solomon Islands. During this period Allied forces were conducting landings on New Britain and Bougainville, which if successful would isolate the Japanese stronghold at Rabaul.

USAT BENJAMIN BONNEVILLE landed troops and supplies at Empress Augusta Bay on the west coast of Bougainville before steaming to San Pedro, California where Bob was discharged on 31st March, 1944.

After a few weeks in California, Bob was assigned to the U.S. Liberty Tanker *SS JAMES COOK* as Able Seaman. She was built during 1943, controlled by the War Shipping Administration, administered by Pacific Tankers Corp, San Francisco, and Chartered to Great Britain.

With a cargo of oil and diesel fuel *SS JAMES COOK* steamed from San Pedro to Pearl Harbour,

ROBERT JOHN KIRKPATRICK

Port Colon in Panama, followed by the Caribbean islands Curacao and Aruba before returning to the United States. Tankers were dangerous work, and Bob was aware.

He was discharged from *SS JAMES COOK* in the Port of New York early in June, 1944 and celebrated his 24th birthday in the Big Apple.

Bob was next assigned to the Swedish vessel *MS GOONAWARRA* and travelled overland on a Greyhound bus to join her in San Francisco. The British Consul arranged a Neutral Ship Visa for *MS GOONAWARRA*. She was bound for Australia carrying war materiel including aeroplanes lashed to her deck. After the voyage of approximately three weeks Bob was discharged in Sydney on 21st July.

After a six week spell in Sydney, Bob was assigned to U.S. Liberty Ship *SS JAMES B MCPHERSON* as Ordinary Seaman on 11th September, 1944. She departed Sydney on 1st October headed for Newcastle, before proceeding directly to Milne Bay and Finschhafen. After four days at anchor *SS JAMES B MCPHERSON* departed for Humboldt Bay via Saidor, and returned to Finschhafen on 30th October with Japanese Prisoners. At this time Finschhafen was heavily populated and served as a supply base for operations conducted in Aitape, Hollandia and Rabaul. Bob was suffering from dysentery and the symptoms of malaria. He suffered weight loss and the fevers were very difficult to manage in constrictive sleeping quarters below the waterline. *SS JAMES B MCPHERSON* landed U.S. troops at Hollandia, along with high explosives, barges and tug-boats, before steaming to San Francisco where she docked on 19th December, 1944.

Bob was discharged from *SS JAMES B MCPHERSON* on 21st December, just in time to recover and celebrate Christmas in a friendly port!



After celebrating New Year 1945, Bob joined the U.S. T2 Type tanker *CEDAR BREAKS* as Able Seaman on 8th January, 1945. *CEDAR BREAKS* delivered fuel to vessels in operational areas and it was a very dangerous task. Smoking and metal tools were forbidden on-board the tanker, however when she was in port crew members of other vessels increased the risk of fire-explosion by smoking on deck. *CEDAR BREAKS* steamed from San Francisco to the U.S. ports of Portland and Seattle carrying high octane diesel fuel with aeroplanes and barges lashed to her decks. She returned to San Francisco before embarking on a supply run, carrying 6 million gallons of high octane petrol from Port Arthur in Texas to the Marshall Islands and Saipan in the Mariana Islands. Bob worked alternate two hour shifts on watch from the crow's nest, scouring the horizon for danger until she reached San Francisco where he was pleased to be discharged on 23rd March, 1945.

ROBERT JOHN KIRKPATRICK

T2 Type Tanker CEDAR BREAK

After seven days ashore Bob was assigned to *SS KANSAN* as Supernumerary, and served as Mess Man on a return voyage to Australia. *KANSAN* carried war materiel, including fuel and aircraft to Brisbane where Bob was discharged due to ill health on 1st May, 1945. Bob's wartime service had ended, after approximately three years of active service at sea.

During September, 1945 Bob started working for the Water Board at Headwork's, Guildford. The following year he was stationed at Potts Hill Reservoir where he remained until 1956, and then began working at the Water Board Head Office until retirement during 1980.

Bob enjoyed regular holidays with his family at The Entrance, NSW and was an inspired fisherman. He was a very sincere and loving man who was devoted to his family and also to commemorating his Service.

For many years Bob volunteered for the Merchant Navy Association (NSW) and regularly participated in commemorative activity. He served as Treasurer for the Merchant Navy Association (NSW) and later as Vice-President. In recognition of Bob's dedicated service to the Merchant Navy Association he was granted Life Membership, and he was very proud of this acknowledgement. For many years Bob participated in the Merchant Navy Memorial Services held at Rookwood and Canberra, ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day commemorations, along with the Remembering Pearl Harbour commemorative service held annually at Bankstown. Bob's dedication to assisting others and commemorating his Service was both inspiring and formidable.

Bob is survived by his loving daughters Pamela and Lynne, five grandchildren and five great-grandchildren. We extend our deepest sympathies to Bob's family and friends.

Bob will be dearly missed by all that knew him and his memory will continue to inspire us.

[Article kindly provided by U.S. Army Small Ships Association](#)

LIFE WELL LIVED

*A life well lived is a precious gift, of hope and strength and grace,
from someone who has made our world a brighter, better place.*

*It's filled with moments, sweet and sad with smiles and sometimes tears,
with friendships formed and good times shared, and laughter through the years.*

A life well lived is a legacy, of joy and pride and pleasure,

THE MENIN GATE BELGIUM NOVEMBER 2018



At this time of the year much attention is focused on the 100 -year commemorations relating to the end of World War One, in November 1918. The war that was dubbed or 'The Great War' or 'The War to End all Wars.' How wrong they were. It was only 21 years later that WW2 commenced.

Like a great many Australians, I have travelled all over the cities and towns in Northern France and Belgium where Australian soldiers fought and died, in their thousands, between 1916 and 1918.

There are hundreds, maybe thousands, of towns, memorials and cemetery's which have names that resonate so well in books and history articles, all telling a tale of heroism and death.

Perhaps the one place that has left me with such an enduring impression is located in the Belgium town of Eiper. Strangely, during that war the town was known as 'Ypres'. There, is to be found the 'Menin Gate.' About 20 years ago I spent a couple of days in that historic town.

For those who have never been there please let me describe the 'Gate'. It is a massive concrete and granite structure which is located at the edge of the town, covering the road which leads out on the way to the town of Menin. That road is known as the Menin Road. Traffic passes through the archway in an area where, many hundreds of years ago, large gates had been erected designed to protect the villagers from overnight incursions of invaders. Soldiers travelled that road in the war.

The town of Eiper also had a large wall, known as a 'rampart' built all around it together with a moat. Things are much different these days but there is still evidence of it to be seen.

In the aftermath of the enormous deaths of British and Commonwealth soldiers in that general area during the war, with permission of the Belgium Government, the British Government decided to erect this magnificent memorial. It took years to build but was completed in 1927. Since 2nd July 1928 at 8 pm each night a memorial service has been conducted in the memorial by the local Belgium government authorities. Buglers from the Eiper Fire Brigade sound the 'Last Post' following a short address, usually delivered by the Town Mayor. When the town was captured by the Germans during WWII they decreed the services should cease but, upon the town being liberated towards the end of WW2, on the very first night, the services recommenced, and have done so every night up to this time. On the Saturday night that I attended there were up to 500 people, mostly tourists from Britain and Commonwealth countries, arriving in dozens of tourist coaches.

MERCHANT NAVY RSL SUB-BRANCH

On the walls, both inside and outside, are engraved the names of almost 55,000 British, Australian and Commonwealth soldiers who died in that 'Ypres Salient' and who have no known grave.

On the memorial the following words appear, indicating the purpose of the Menin Gate.
TO OFFICERS AND MEN WHO FELL IN THE YPRES SALIENT, BUT TO WHOM
THE FORTUNES OF WAR
DENIED THE KNOWN AND HONOURED BURIAL GIVEN TO THEIR COMRADES
IN DEATH

When I returned home from Belgium I purchased from The Australian War Memorial in Canberra a copy of Will Longstaff's famous painting. I had it professionally framed and presented it to Forestville RSL sub Branch, where I am a service member. It hangs in pride of place in the foyer of the RSL Club.

I am not sure where I discovered this short poem. Perhaps it was in some book or newspaper article.

I understand the author is 'unknown'. The manner it is written may not appeal to everyone but I find it, in some way, symbolises the dreadful sadness of the wartime circumstances in that fateful region,

On a cold dark winter's night listening to the Last Post played under the Gate, the visitor feels in the spine the apprehensive of those men who passed this way to war

THE POEM

'What are guarding Man-At-Arms ?

Why do you watch and wait.?

'I guard the graves', said the Man-At-Arms,

'I guard the graves by Flanders Farms,

Where the dead will rise at my call to arms.

And march to the Menin Gate.'

When do they march then, Man-At-Arms'?

Cold is the hour and late'

'They march tonight, said the Man-At-Arms,

With the moon on the Menin Gate,

They march when the midnight bids them to.

With their rifles slung and their pipes aglow,

Along the roads- the roads they know,

The roads to the Menin Gate.

What are they singing, Man-At-Arms.

As they march to the Menin Gate?

The marching songs,' said the Man-At-Arms.

That lets them laugh at Fate.'

No more will the night be cold for them.

For the last tattoo has rolled for them

And their souls will sing as of old, for them

As they march to the Menin Gate.'

.....
At the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month in 1918, World War One ended.

Don Kennedy
President Merchant Navy RSL sub Branch.

Message to sub Branch members from the President.

Since the last issue of Merchant Navy News you will have received a copy of the RSL State Branch magazine, Reveille. I am not sure what your reaction is to the article on page 11, concerning me.

All I want to say about it is, I did not volunteer nor approach State Branch in an effort to have such an article printed. Some of you may be aware that, as the request of a very nice member of the staff at State Branch, I appeared on a TV program a few days before Anzac Day last April. I agreed to this offer on the basis that I would have the opportunity of putting forward the case for a better understanding of the role and the sacrifices of the merchant navy in wartime.

The State Branch employee was pleased at what I did that day and, for some reason, urged me to do more to publicise the role of the merchant navy.

On the strict condition that any article to appear in Reveille would emphasise that role, I agreed to her request.

The photo which appeared on page 27 was one of many taken in Canberra when eight 'Atlantic' veterans took part in services in May this year. I had asked that a photo of the veterans together with accompanying DVA staff be included in an article that I wrote be inserted.

For some reason, it did not turn out that way. Due to problems of space, my article about Canberra, two pages long, was much reduced.

A longer article, titled, 'The battle of the Atlantic', could not be printed due again to space problems. It can be read on the Internet as indicated at the top of page 13. All this publicity is intended to enhance the role of the merchant navy. I am grateful that the staff at State Branch have been so helpful.

I assure you it is not intended in any way to enhance my personal role.

On Wednesday 28th November we had our quarterly meeting at our new location, the Chatswood RSL Club. On a day described in the media as 'the worst storm in 100 years' we managed to get eight brave members to attend.

After lengthy discussion, a vote was taken on what our voting position should be at the extraordinary RSL meeting on 4th December, re the new proposed RSL constitution. It was finally decided that our representative at that meeting, Vice President Mr Alan Read, should vote 'Yes'.

On behalf of our committee, Merrill Barker, Bob Harding, Alan Read and Stan Shardlow may I extend to all of you our very best wishes for a happy Christmas and a wonderful and healthy New Year.

Our Annual General Meeting will be held at Chatswood RSL Club on Wednesday 27th February 2019, commencing at 10.30 am. I hope to see as many of you as possible that day. It would be good if those attending could join us at the club for lunch afterwards.

Don Kennedy

President Merchant Navy RSL sub Branch

RECOGNISING OUR WWII VETERANS

CLARENCE DAWES



Clarrie first joined the Merchant Navy at 14 years of age. Whilst sailing on MV Coorabie during 1942 the ship was acquired by U.S. Army and Clarrie was employed to crew her to Sydney. Upon arrival First Mate Bill Webster was recruited by Small Ships to assume command of a ketch and he asked Clarrie to join him as A.B.

The ketch was built in 1912 and in 1937 modified to become Leprena; soon after she was nicknamed 'Leapin' Lena' due to frequent rolling. S-64 Leprena was in dry-dock for several weeks before sailing from Sydney to Townsville loaded with medical supplies. Sailing on to Milne Bay Leprena arrived just after a failed Japanese invasion attempt and was welcomed by Japanese Bombers.

At 106' long the Leprena was suited to carrying logs from a river on East Cape to Gili Gili for the construction of wharves. During the early actions at Buna, Leprena would visit the front lines every few days with ammunition and supplies, returning with wounded to a hospital near Oro Bay. Clarrie continued to serve on Leprena after Buna was taken, carrying supplies to various islands and ports.

Clarrie's next ship was S-131 Huanui, an 84' wooden schooner from New Zealand; soon after he was reunited with Captain Webster on steel cargo steamer S-146 Maiwara.

Next assignment was to sail S-136 Noora back to Sydney to have a new engine fitted; then Clarrie was sent to Newcastle to crew a new ship called ST-68 and commenced towing barges to New Guinea. Later Clarrie was appointed to S-58 (CS-3) Harold as A.B. (Repair Crew) for a few weeks before flying to Sydney for a two week break.

Clarrie was next assigned to OL-1 as Bosun and has fond recollections of Arthur Morgan who was her Captain from August 1943 until July 1944. Arthur had previously served as Chief Instructor at the Apprentice Seamanship School at Walsh Bay. OL-1 was performing salvage work, when on a trip to New Guinea Clarrie went down with malaria and was left behind on Thursday Island. After several weeks Clarrie sailed as working passenger on a Liberty Ship to Brisbane then again back to New Guinea.

Clarrie was then assigned to LT-645. The large tug towed many damaged ships through the wreck strewn waters of Philippines and beyond. Clarrie recalls being at sea when the A-bomb dropped on Japan and was discharged February 1946.

Clarrie is a member of the Merchant Navy Association, the U.S. Army Small Ships Association, and a resident of Thevenard, South Australia.

THOSE WHO HAVE CROSSED THE BAR

**ROBERT JOHN KIRKPATRICK 12/09/18 WWII MN & US
Army Small Ships**

Capt. JAMES WILLIAM GLADSTONE WILBY 10/10/18

**DUNCAN FRASER PATERSON 20/10/18 WWII US Army
Small Ships**

Capt. CHARLES ROBERT (BOB) WALTON 31/10/18

THEY SAIL FOREVERMORE UNDER THE RED ENSIGN

COMING EVENTS

MERCHANT NAVY RSL SUB-BRANCH MEETING: Chatswood RSL Club, on Wednesday 27th February 2019 at 1030hrs.

MERCHANT NAVY ASSOCIATION MEETING: Cabra-Vale Diggers Club, Saturday 16th March 2019 at 1030 hours

ROOKWOOD ANNUAL SERVICE: Sunday 14th April, 2019 at 1030 hours for 1100 hours.

CANBERRA MN MEMORIAL DINNER: Saturday 19th October 2019 at Garden City Hotel, Canberra

CANBERRA ANNUAL MN SERVICE: MN Memorial Kings Park Canberra, Sunday 20th October 2019 at 1100 hrs

M.V. NOONGAH

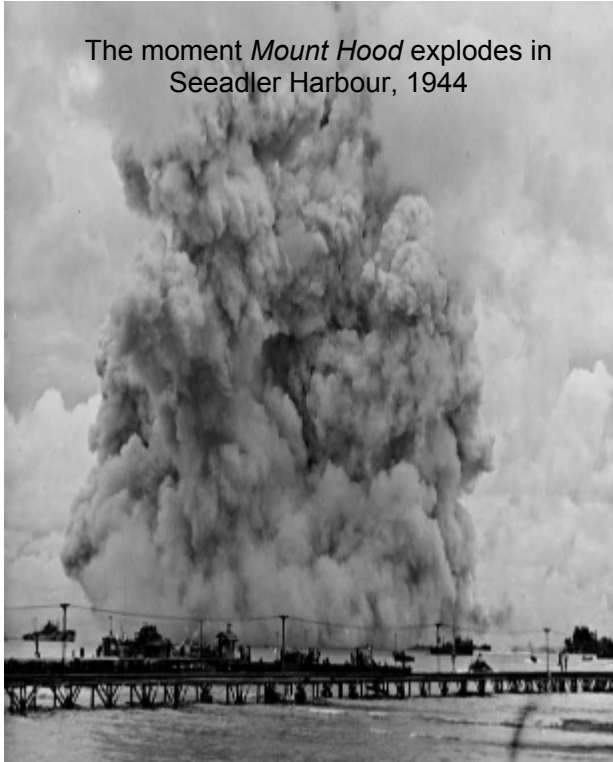
On August 25th 1969 MV Noongah left Newcastle with a cargo of steel for Townsville. She struck bad weather off Smokey Cape near Kempsey on the northern New South Wales coast. The vessel developed a list and sank with the loss of 21 members of the crew.

The Merchant Navy Association will combine with other organisations to commemorate the 50th anniversary of this tragic loss of merchant seafarers. At this stage the commemoration will coincide with the World Maritime Day event to be held at Pyrmont Bridge - Sydney Maritime Museum, late September 2019.

PLAYING BATTLESHIPS – DIRECT HITS AND NEAR MISSES FOR AUSSIE MARINERS

Capt. Iain Steverson

The moment *Mount Hood* explodes in Seeadler Harbour, 1944



These days Manus Island, Papua New Guinea is better known to the Australian public as an off-shore placement area for illegal immigrants that had sought entry into Australia. Manus Island is the largest island situated in the Admiralty Group and at the time was part of Australia's Mandated Territory. Its main port Lorengau is situated on the western side of Seeadler Harbour.

In 1944 Manus Island was transformed into a massive American logistic base, (Seeadler Harbour) complete with airfields, docks, together with ship repair shops and all modern maintenance and overhaul facilities the latter named Los Negros Ship Repair Base. Manus also became in 1945 the forward base for the British Pacific Fleet, preparing to support the allied Forces in final attack on Japan

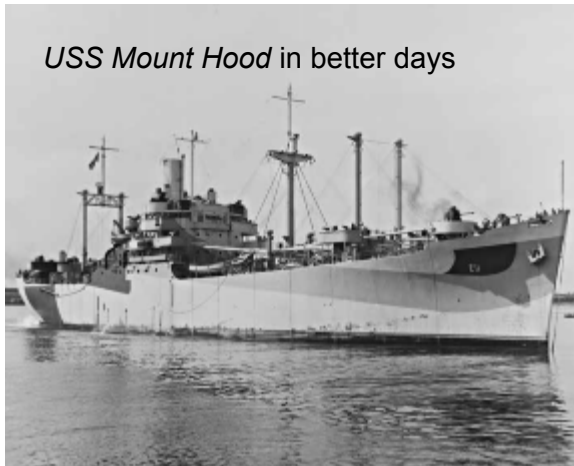
The USA pulled out in 1948 following the Australian Government rejection of the American offer to maintain and control the extensive base. . Australia subsequently retained a small Navy base in the harbour at Lombrum which was eventually passed onto the fledgling Papua New Guinea Navy.

The United States Navy Ammunition Ship Mount Hood 1944 explosion at Manus Island

At 0855 on November 10, 1944 the United States Navy cargo ship **USS Mount Hood** (AE11), loaded with 3,800 tons of ammunition was laying at anchor at Manus Fleet Base, Seeadler Harbour when she suffered two large explosions. Flame and smoke shot up midships to more than mast head height, then within a few seconds the bulk of the ammunition destined for warships involved in the Philippine invasion, was set off, resulting in a devastating explosion. Smoke mushroomed to 7,000 feet (over 2,100m) into the air obscuring the scene and the surrounding area for a radius of 500 yards (500m) on all sides. When the smoke lifted from the surface of the water a few minutes later only small pieces of floating debris were to be seen. **USS Mount Hood** had a complement of 281, and all personnel then on board had disappeared

Officially the casualties between **USS Mount Hood** and the **USS Mindanao** (ARG 3) 45 sailors were listed as dead, 327 were declared missing and 371 were seriously wounded. **USS Mindanao** was the worst ship to be affected, built as a 'Liberty' ship and converted by the United States Navy (USN) to a Fleet repair ship, was anchored close by just 320m away. She suffered extensive damage, which took over a month to repair. Fortunately, 17 crew from **Mount Hood** had gone ashore early that morning in order to stretch their legs on the nearby beach and became the only survivors of their ship. Additionally, 38 other ships and 66 small craft were sunk or damaged as a result of concussion and flying debris. The largest remaining piece of the **Mount Hood's** hull measuring 5m x3m was found in a nearby land trench. A

A trough was blasted below her in the harbour bottom measuring 100m in length, 15m wide and 12m deep. The main source of this article was from a monograph by the Navy Historical Review, the articles headline reading “The day it rained Metal at Manus”. It certainly was one of the most devastating ‘self inflicted’ shipping disasters in the Pacific war possibly as a result of on-board welding.



Mount Hood (AE-11) had been laid down in January 1944, as a standard C2 merchant ship **Marco Polo** at the North Carolina Ship Building Company, Wilmington, North Carolina and was taken over by the USN as one of 15 C2-Tspecially fitted *ammunition ships*, featuring AE pennants. She had been in USN service of just four months and was on her maiden voyage to the Pacific area. Her particulars were, length 459 feet (loa), breadth 62 feet, 8,335 gross, 10,755 deadweight tons,

driven by two Nordberg diesels giving a service speed of 16 knots. Her seven sister ships built at the same yard prior to **Marco Polo** were fitted out by the USN as Amphibious Force Flagships (AGC's) rated as Combined Operations-Communications-Headquarters ships were equipped with elaborate communication equipment and each lasted through to the 1960's. The ex-**Marco Polo**/**USS Mount Hood** as they say just missed the boat. The 1944 built **USS Mindanao** lasted considerably longer being eventually sunk as an artificial fish reef off Florida in 1980. The Australian built ‘River Class’ frigate **HMAS Hawkesbury** was at anchor at the time in the harbour and was witness to the tragedy sailing as a convoy escort next day.

The first Monte Bello Atomic Test

The 1943 built **HMAS Hawkesbury** was to be again witness of another massive explosion, as one of the RAN Guard ships at the first British atomic test designated, ‘Operation Hurricane’ carried out at the Monte Bello islands off the Western Australian, Pilbara coast in October 1952. **HMAS Hawkesbury**'s mission was to patrol on the lookout for inquisitive Russian submarines. The atomic explosion took place aboard **HMS Plym**, a 1943 British built ‘River’ Class, which had transported the nuclear device from the UK in a specially built cradle stowed in the hold. She arrived at the Monte Bello's on 8 August, where it was decommissioned, with the scientists left to prepare the ship as the ‘sacrificial lamb’ for the atomic test. At precisely at 0800 on 3 October 1952 the explosion was activated from the command ship **HMS Campania**, which had been being built by Harland and Wolff in 1944, intended as a Shaw Savill and Albion as a fast-refrigerated cargo ship, but taken over by the Royal Navy and completed as an Escort Aircraft Carrier. Having been decommissioned to just plain **Plym** with the 25 kilo-ton bomb (Hiroshima's bomb was 15 kilotons) just sitting three metres below the waterline in the hold compartment the explosion totally disintegrated and vaporised the frigate, leaving a crater 30 m wide and 7m deep in the seabed under where the ship had been. The Australian ships were anchored a distance of three kilometres from the blast with the crews hiding under black tarpaulins many dressed in shorts and shoes. I remember thinking at the time from NZ how Australians would be proud of their efforts to help the British Empires cause. **HMS**

Campania's Harland & Wolff commercial near sisters were Shaw Savills **Wairangi** (1942), **Waiwera** (1944), **Port Hobart** (1946) and **Empire Star** (1946)

Was Australia's Minelayer HMAS BUNGAREE a near miss in 1942?

When the Japanese midget submarines attacked Sydney Harbour 31 May 1942, their main target was the cruiser **USS Chicago**, however close by was the RAN's minelayer **HMAS Bungaree** in the lee of Clark Island. Owned by the Adelaide Steam Ship Company, the almost new coal burning **Bungaree** had been taken up from trade and converted to an effective minelayer which successfully mined amongst areas the entry channels into the Great Barrier Reef. **HMAS Bungaree** loaded her mines from the Ford factory in Geelong however I have been unable to ascertain if she was in Sydney Harbour with her full complement of 200 mines. Needless to say, if that had been the case and the midget submarine had homed in on an this non- consequential looking 'ordinary merchant ship', the resultant blast would have devastated a large section of the Elizabeth Bay area of Sydney Harbour!



Port of Wellington, New Zealand 1943 near miss

A serious near miss occurred on one of a number of fires that occurred to ships in Wellington, New Zealand which went unreported during WW2 due to wartime censorship. The Wellington wharves on 6 July 1943 were packed with American ships preparing for the US Marine advance into the South West Pacific to drive back the Japanese forces north commencing from the Solomons (Guadacanal). The Liberty ship **John Davenport** was berthed at Queens Wharf, Wellington near what is the former Maritime Museum and 300 m from the main street Lambton Quay, undergoing urgent deck welding repairs. The ship had a load of over 3,000 tons of bombs which included 6,000lb block busters making up a big percentage of her cargo! It was the heaviest single cargo of bombs and munitions to pass through Wellington in WW2. A fire was discovered at 0530 that morning from deep in No.3 lower hold. The following story was related by Wellington's Chief Fire Officer Charles Woolley on his retirement who stated "the fire engine from Wellington Central met a number of the ships' crew moving extremely quickly out through wharf gates! The Captain of the ship said he didn't want the fire brigade, as he was planning to leave the berth as quickly as possible and scuttle the ship." The Fire Brigade Chief asked for 10 minutes to investigate the fires source and the locals and from the report said they could extinguish the fire with the right equipment. **John Davenport** was loaded to the hatches with military equipment and on top of the hatches were cased aircraft which were too heavy to be shifted with ships gear. The decision was made to move the ship

to Aotea Quay where the ports heavy lift floating crane **Hikitea** (still retained as a museum piece under restoration could operate in deeper water. The ship was shifted just over a mile to the new berth with the Pilot and remaining Officers and Crew. Meanwhile four brigades were on board to do what they could with ships equipment. The harbour trip was described as 'the longest sea journey in history'! At Aotea Quay (the ports container berth before the recent earthquake) **Hikitea** removed the aircraft followed by the cargo in the way to get at the base of the fire which was eventually put out with all brigades able to return to stations safely. No ship fire in NZ ever had more appalling possibilities. So, the **John Davenport's** shipload of bombs, munitions and aircraft urgently needed at a critical stage of the Pacific War was safely delivered into the war zone. Even more satisfying that morning was the **John Davenport** was not scuttled, even more so did not disappear together with half of New Zealand's capital city. Wellington Port experienced serious ship board fires in 1942 (2), 1943 (1) 1944 (2) and a final one in 1945. **John Davenport** was built by the New England Shipbuilding Corporation, in June 1942 and was finally scrapped in Philadelphia in July 1960. Wartime censorship was such that the episode was not made known till post war.

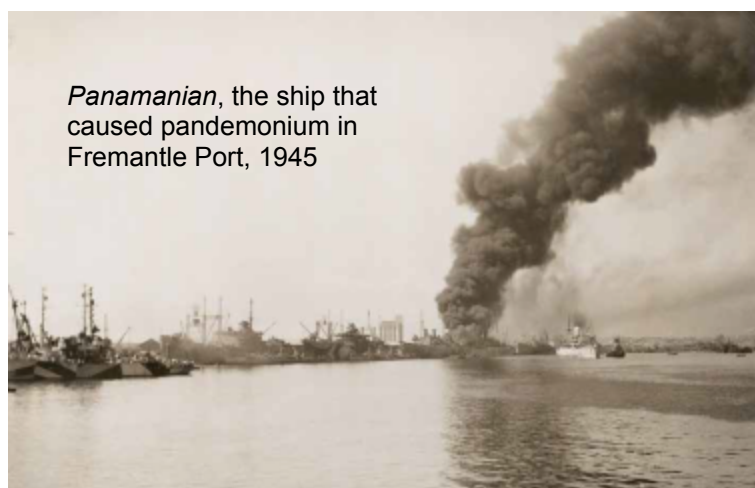
Fremantle Port's lucky 1945 War Time Escape

On a very hot West Australian summer's day, 17 January 1945, Fremantle port was a very busy military and commercial port. The port was crammed with allied warships, submarines, depot ships and merchant ships, it being the major submarine base for British and American operations in the Indian Ocean. Over 6,000 vessels a year were using the port during the war and in this incident once again censorship was invoked but the black smoke billowing from the ship together with numerous harbour movements would have been hard to cover up.

Due to the shortage of tonnage an ancient large general cargo ship owned by Shanghai interests named **Panamanian** was berthed at No.8 berth North Wharf loading 12,000 tons of bagged flour. During the loading that day a winchman working a steam winch had placed a hessian flour sack for protection from the 117degree heat. Going to smoko the bag was left on the winch and started to smoulder. The bag was picked up, the smouldering fire stamped out and the bag was thrown over the wharf side. At the same time the Bullard and King cargo ship **Umgeni** was berthing (doubling off) on the off side, outside of **Panamanian**. The sack fell on the wharf, it again ignited and burst into flames, catching on one of the horizontal timbers on the wharf structure. Dropping fire into the water it ignited a film of furnace oil sludge floating on the water surface around the ship. A sudden burst of flame shot up igniting the mooring ropes and the ships overside hull paint. This spread to the numerous hessian bags, then spread to the ships bridge and the dry wooden wharf timbers. **Panamanian** was well ablaze, with the forward three holds, the saloon and promenade decks burning fiercely. The ammunition for the ship's defensive armament, a 4 inch stern gun, the eight 20mm Oerlikons and a 12 pounder together with rockets exploded to add to the chaos. The double banked **Umgeni** was quickly removed by the attending tugs. The fire spread rapidly along the wharf and the Royal Naval submarine depot ship **HMS Maidstone** berthed 350m away caught fire. With flames licking its sides and up as far as the bridge, she was quickly towed into midstream and the fires extinguished. As she was loaded with torpedoes, ammunition and diesel for her submarines, **HMS Maidstone** was a floating bomb. Alongside North Wharf on that afternoon, were six Royal Navy, 13 United States and one Dutch submarines alongside their mother ships. Two United States Navy submarine depot ships were at North Wharf, and these were also moved mid-stream.

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Fire-fighting equipment and personnel from the local fire brigades, supported by American navy fire-fighting equipment fought the fire on **Panamanian** and the surrounding wharf area. **USS Chanticleer** a submarine rescue ship fitted with a large pumping plant, steamed up and down pouring water onto the ship and wharf area. The Chief Officer of the Western Australian Fire Brigades Board personally supervised the fire fighting operations. The first Metropolitan Fire Brigade vehicle to arrive on the scene took up position on the wharf and, was enveloped in the fierce wharf fire and was burnt out. Allied service personnel from various ships, assisted in the fire-fighting efforts with only one fatality a RN Able Seaman who fell down the hold on **Panamanian**. Some ships were removed to Cockburn Sound and Gage Roads. By 1800 **Panamanian** was listing badly due to the amount of water pumped aboard and having started to drift off the wharf with fire hoses still attached she was pushed back alongside the wharf by the very busy tugs. There was a fear that her fuel tanks would explode but by daylight the following day the fire on the ship had been brought under control. The last of the fire-fighting equipment was finally withdrawn seven days later.



The cause of the oil slick in the harbour was due to furnace oil from **Panamanian**, which due to her age had many oil leaks in the engine room, and regularly pumped the bilges into the harbour during the 18 days she had been alongside! The cargo was a write off. In 1946 the owners of **Panamanian**, Asia Navigation Company Ltd. (Wallem & Co.) lodged a writ

claiming US\$1,034,000 for damages to **Panamanian** and its cargo upon the Fremantle Harbour Trust. The Court found however in favour of the Fremantle Harbour trust.

Panamanian was an interesting ship with had an extraordinary career. She was a very big ship for the time, a twin screw, quadruple expansion oil burning steamer with measurements of 600 feet (loa) x 565.3' x 31.1, gross tonnage 15,903 tons, net 9,990 classed 100A1 by Lloyds, (surveyed Bombay in October 1944) at the time of the Fremantle fire. Built in 1904 by New York Ship Building Co., Camden New Jersey for Atlantic Transport Co. Ltd., as **Minnelora** but was launched for Pacific Mail S.S. Co. New York, as **Mongolia**. In 1929 sold to Dollar Line, San Francisco renamed **President Fillmore**. Laid up in New York between 1931-38 until taken over by American President Lines. In 1940 having been sold to Arnold Bernstein Shipping Co., she caught fire and sank at Baltimore eventually raised and towed to Newport News for repair. Sold and delivered at Yokohama in March 1941 to Asia Navigation Company (Wallem & Co. registered owners) who renamed her **Panamanian**, Panama flag, she was chartered by the Ministry of War Transport (UK). MOWT in August 1941. Following the Fremantle incident she resumed service in March 1946 following repairs, followed by a minor fire in Sydney 14 May 1946 she managed to make Hong Kong where she was eventually scrapped in January 1947.

The Fort Stikine 1944 Bombay disaster

Australia's association with the **Fort Stikine** Bombay disaster which took place 14 April 1944 was that the Canadian standard coal burning "Fort" ship, was under Port Line

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management for the MOWT and the Australian Hospital ship **Wanganella** was instrumental in saving lives and treating the injured. Under the command of Captain A.J. Naismith the ship was discharging 9,000 bales of cotton loaded at Karachi at Victoria Dock close to the CBD. A nasty cocktail was also loaded at Karachi including bagged fishmeal, thousands of drums of lubricating oil (many leaking), scrap iron, sulphur, timber, rice and resin. In the lower holds were 1,417 tons of explosives including shells, torpedoes, mines, signal rockets, crated Spitfires, gliders and incendiary bombs. In No. 2 tween deck was stowed 124 bars of gold worth over (£) one million pounds. The ship reached Bombay on 12 April and despite carrying three categories of explosive and having been given a priority discharge certificate she lay alongside for 24 hours before discharge commenced. Smoke had been observed coming out of the ventilators, about 1400 from the cotton bales and gained control despite smoke having been reported to authorities during the day. In the previous five years over sixty ship fires had occurred in the port with only one major casualty, although 15 of the ships had carried explosives. No urgency initially, then the realisation of the problem was noted and 900 tons of water was pumped into No. 2 hold, the seat of the fire being buried under raw cotton bales. Officials having finally looked at the stowage plan decided the ship should be removed out of the shallow dock and scuttled. Meanwhile everyone had evacuated the ship and were standing on the wharf. Suddenly the first explosion at 1545 saw flames shoot into the air 12-15 metres, and five minutes later the ship was engulfed.



Captain Naismith and Chief Officer W.D. Henderson had gone back aboard to ensure no one else was on board. They together with the second cook were not seen again. People were meanwhile moved quickly away from the area, heading out the gate for the Victoria Terminus railway station which was packed to capacity by the fleeing populace. At 1604 a huge explosion rocked the port and the immediate port precincts, with the forepart of the ship exploding with a deafening roar. Flaming drums, blazing cotton and white-hot metal cascaded across ships, sheds and the nearby city carving a path of fire, death and destruction leaving the after holds afloat and on fire. Thirty-five minutes later the after end, containing 784 tons of explosives blew up. A giant tidal wave lifted the 4,000 ton **Jalapadma** up and dropped her astride No. 2 godown. Twelve ships were sunk or became constructive total loss (CTL) and several more were damaged. The official death toll in the port area was 740 including 476 military personnel with 1,800 injured. Civilian deaths outside of the dock area were 500

dead and 2,480 badly injured. The cause of the first explosions were later ascertained as leaking oil drums placed next to large quantities of sensitive high explosives with 770 tons of highly flammable raw cotton in each hold! This together with volatile fish meal added to the mixture. Parts of the ship's debris was spread over 10 miles. Her boiler was found intact over half a mile away. Some two square miles of the western part of the city area was set ablaze. The clean-up took seven months by eight thousand workers who removed half a million tons of debris from the two devastated dock system. In peace time the job would have taken years to carry out in normal circumstances but was prioritised due to Bombay's strategic position in the war effort. Better prioritising may have prevented the disaster. The magnitude of the disaster was never published to the world at the time, though it was there for the spies to note.

By a stroke of good luck the Australian Hospital ship **Wanganella** was anchored in the harbour two miles distant, waiting to transport injured British Army and Air Force casualties from the Burma campaign, for transshipment at Suez and observed the whole incident. On passage from Fremantle to the Middle East her end mission was to transport injured New Zealand soldiers many from the Battle of Monte Cassino. Due to the number of injured from the explosion the shore civilian hospitals could not cope and **Wanganella** was called on to assist, with the operating theatres working continuously for 36 hours. One of the ships badly damaged and declared a CTL was the 1919 built steamer **Iran**, the former Union Steamship Company Trans Pacific trader **Waikawa**, owned by a Wallem & Co subsidiary Iran S.S. Co., Panama.

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Wishing all of our members and friends a
safe and happy festive season
and a healthy prosperous 2019





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