

THE MERCHANT NAVY IN WARTIME

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**Prepared as Briefing Notes for The Hon. Brendan Nelson, BMBS, FRACP (HONS), FAMA,
Director The Australian War Memorial – Guest of Honour, 25th Annual Commemoration,
National Merchant Navy War Memorial, Canberra, Sunday 18th October, 2015**

It is now some 97 years since the end of the First World War and 70 years since the end of the Second World War. The Merchant Navy played a critical role in both these events and the loss of Australian merchant seamen is commemorated at this national memorial on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin.

Thousands of Australian merchant mariners served during the two World Wars on Australian, Commonwealth and Allied ships. Also, many merchant seamen, yachtsmen and others with seagoing experience joined the naval reserve and served in various areas of the RAN including submarines and armed merchant cruisers.

By the end of World War 2 the Reserve force represented about 80% of the total personnel serving in the RAN.

Also, during World War 2 around 3,000 Australians with seafaring backgrounds volunteered to serve in the 'Small Ships Section of the United States Army Services of Supply'.

The 'Small Ships' went where larger ships could not go and were involved in supplying allied troops fighting in the Papua New Guinea, Philippines, and other Southwest Pacific Campaigns.

Wherever the war was being waged, merchant ships were there taking troops and essential supplies to the heart of the action. The traversing of these supply lines was an extremely hazardous operation.

During World War 1, the Australian Government requisitioned dozens of merchant ships from commercial shipping companies for use as troopships. In addition to carrying troops, horses and military stores, these vessels also carried wool, metals, meat, flour and other foodstuffs, mainly for Britain and France.

The fleet consisted mainly of British steamers and a few captured enemy ships. The ships were given the title 'His Majesty's Australian Transport' or HMAT.

One of the largest of these ships was HMAT *Ceramic* and was also one of a relatively small number of merchant ships to see military action in both World Wars. Sadly, *Ceramic* was sunk by a U Boat in December 1942 while on passage from England to Australia with 657 persons on board, comprising 279 crew, including 33 Australians; 244 military and naval personnel – mostly nurses; and 133 fare paying passengers.

All but one of the 657 persons on board *Ceramic* lost their lives.

In Australia and New Zealand, we commemorate ANZAC Day, a day which is set aside to remember and to pay homage to our fallen comrades. This day was born out of the Gallipoli campaign, but the involvement of the Merchant Navy in that operation is not well known.

The merchant ships took all of our troops to Gallipoli, and in many cases landed our troops on the beach at ANZAC Cove in the ships' lifeboats, which also came under the deadly fire from Turkish guns.

The great majority of wounded in that campaign were taken in the ships' lifeboats to the hospital ships which were waiting offshore. The merchant ships evacuated most of our troops from Gallipoli to Alexandria, Lemnos and Cyprus and then transported the wounded home to Australia.

During war time it was quite common for Australian merchant seamen to serve in both Australian and allied ships transiting war zones in various parts of the world. Australians were present in the Mediterranean and the North Atlantic convoys, while many of the merchant seamen killed in Australian waters were of other nationalities.

The vast majority of Australian seamen killed in World War 1 lost their lives in ships operating in European waters. Examples are:

- The *Southborough* sunk in the North Sea carrying iron ore from Tunisia to Britain with the loss of 30 lives.
- The *Australdale* sunk in the Bay of Biscay carrying coal from Wales to Gibraltar, also with the loss of 30 lives.

One exception was the *Wimmera* sunk by a mine off the New Zealand coast with the loss of 16 lives.

Probably the most criminal act performed at sea in the First World War was the sinking of the Canadian Hospital ship *Llandoverly Castle* by a German submarine. After the sinking in the approaches to Ireland, the attacking submarine surfaced and proceeded to run down lifeboats and machine gun survivors.

- A total of 234 persons were murdered, including doctors, nurses, patients and crew. However, one lifeboat with 24 survivors escaped this massacre and lived to report the atrocity.

In compiling the list of Australian merchant seamen killed in World Wars 1 & 2 the Australian War Memorial noted that 'Due to the lack of adequate records, we cannot know the full number of merchant seamen who died serving the allied cause.'

During World War 2 Allied shipping sustained major losses. It has been estimated that some 5000 ships were destroyed, more than 50,000 seamen killed, 4000 wounded and 5000 taken prisoners of war.

Merchant ships supporting the allied war effort belonged to several countries including Australia, Britain, New Zealand, Canada, USA, Greece, the Netherlands and Norway. For example, in the 'Battle for Australia' in World War 2 some 30 Dutch ships were involved in the New Guinea campaign in the South West Pacific area and these were managed from a Sydney office.

During World War 2 His Majesty King George VI said:

The task of the Merchant Navy is no less essential to the people's existence than that allotted to the Navy, Army and Air Force, and indeed, none of them would be able to operate without these brave men."

The truth of King George's statement was probably best demonstrated during the Battle of the Atlantic, which Winston Churchill described as *the dominant factor all through the war. In particular he said:*

'Never for one moment could we forget that everything happening elsewhere on land, at sea, or in the air, depended ultimately on its outcome.'

Australians were involved in many facets of the battle, as members of the Royal Navy, Royal Australian Navy, Royal Air Force, Royal Australian Air Force and the Merchant Navies of several allied nations.

The Battle opened on 3 September 1939, the first day of the war, with the sinking by a German U-boat of the ocean liner *Athenia* off the Irish coast. The ship carried a total of 1103 passengers and crew of which 118 lost their lives.

Britain's survival depended very much on Allied countries providing her with essential supplies including food, munitions, and fuel. These were

provided by Commonwealth countries including Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, as well as the United States and South American countries.

Merchant navy ships carrying these supplies all had to run the gauntlet of enemy submarines lying in wait for them in the North Atlantic.

The main weapon used by Germany in the Battle of the Atlantic was the submarine, commonly known as the U-boat. The primary Allied defence against the U-boat was to move merchant ships across the Atlantic in convoys protected by escorting warships from Britain, the USA and Canada. Allied air forces also provided invaluable air cover as well as destroying U boats.

During the early years of the war allied merchant ships were being lost at a greater rate than replacement ships were being built.

Losses were huge. The worst period was from the beginning of 1942 to March 1943 when 7 million tons of merchant shipping was sunk. This situation led to Roosevelt and Churchill agreeing that the Allies could not afford to pursue long-term objectives, such as the liberation of Europe and occupied countries in the Pacific, until the U-boat menace was brought under control.

Enormous efforts were made, particularly in the USA, to increase the rate of shipbuilding for the war effort. The most common type of ship built was the 'Liberty' ship of about 7000 tons capable of carrying a wide range of cargoes required to support the fighting forces.

While initially 'Liberty' ships took 244 days to build, the ingenuity of American shipyards managed to reduce this to about 5 days.

In this increased shipbuilding program Canada contributed the *Parks* and *Fort* ships and Britain produced what were known as Empire ships.

All in all between 1942 and 1943 allied merchant ship construction more than doubled from 7,182 to 14,585 ships.

Following the Pearl Harbour raid in December 1941, Japanese forces moved quickly south and by April 1942 had occupied the Philippines, Hong Kong, Thailand, Malaya, Singapore the Dutch East Indies, Northern New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and several other islands in the Pacific.

Singapore fell on 15 February 1942, and this created a great deal of concern that it would not be long before the Japanese threatened Australia. Indeed, this concern manifested itself a few days later when Japan launched its first bombing raid on Darwin on 19 February 1942.

Approximately 250 persons were killed and 400 injured in the Darwin raids. In addition, there was extensive damage to the port facilities and 8 ships sunk including two Australian merchant ships, the *Neptuna* and *Zelandia*, and two American ships, the cruiser *Peary*, and the army transport ship *Meigs*.

In Australian and adjacent waters during the period between December 1941 and August 1943 Japan deployed fifty-eight submarines and sank 186 ships. They damaged 15 more, and there were other unsuccessful attacks.

During the same period, in the Indian and Southwest Pacific Oceans and Australian waters, Japanese aircraft sank at least 50 merchant ships and damaged 53.

From the start of the war, Australian merchant shipping was controlled by the Shipping Control Board, and many ships were defensively armed.

Large passenger ships like the *Kanimbla*, *Manoora* and *Westralia* were converted to armed merchant cruisers, and the *Katoomba* and *Duntroon* converted to troopships. The passenger ships *Wanganella*, *Manunda* and *Centaur* were commissioned as hospital ships.

Merchant ships used to transport iron ore around the Australian coast were particularly vulnerable to sinking by enemy action. These included the *Iron Knight*, *Iron Crown* and *Recina* which were torpedoed and sank within a few minutes, with over 70 % of their crews losing their lives. It took great courage for seamen to man such ships; sometimes referred to as 'coffin ships'.

The *Wollongbar*, a small North Coast Steam Navigation vessel, was torpedoed and sunk off Coffs Harbour, and took the lives of 32 merchant seamen. including a 16-year-old boy. Only 5 members of the crew survived.

One particularly tragic casualty of the Second World War was the sinking of the hospital ship *Centaur* which had sailed unescorted from Sydney carrying her crew and normal staff, as well as stores and equipment, but no patients. It was sunk without warning by a torpedo from a Japanese submarine on 14 May 1943, about 50 miles east north-east of Brisbane.

Of the 332 persons on board the *Centaur*, only 64 survived. These survivors spent 35 hours on rafts before being rescued. Sister Ellen Savage, the only one of twelve nursing sisters on board to survive, though injured herself, gave great help to the other survivors and was awarded the George Medal for her outstanding deeds of courage.

It is widely recognized that the war, both in the European and Pacific theatres, could not have been won without the bravery, dedication and service provided by the Merchant Navy. Australian merchant seamen played their part with distinction in earning the final victory.

In a tribute to the Merchant Navy's service General MacArthur said:

'They have brought us our life blood and have paid for it with some of their own. I saw them bombed in New Guinea and the Philippine's ports. When it was humanly possible, when their ships were not blown out from under them by bombs or torpedoes, they delivered their cargoes to us who needed them so badly. In war it is performance that counts.'

Sources:

- * Websites of Australian War Memorial and Department of Veterans Affairs.
- * Bill & Ruth Lumney 'Forgotten Fleet (2004) – (Small Ships)
- * BBC website
- * Wikipedia Website