ALLIED MERCHANT NAVIES 1943

Capt. Tony Francombe

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The Australian War Memorial has noted that it is difficult to put a number on Australian merchant mariners killed in World War 2. 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.

American, British, Greek, Chinese, Yugoslav, Norwegian and Dutch seamen all served in ships engaged in Australian trades, many being refugees or caught here together with their ships when war was declared.

Available records show that during World War 2 around 5000 Allied Merchant Navy ships were lost, and 50,000 merchant mariners died. British registered ships bore the brunt of these losses.

The role of the Merchant Navy in wartime was well expressed by King George VI when he said:

> **'..the task of the Merchant Navy is no less essential 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.'*

2013 is being remembered by World War 2 Allied countries as the 70th anniversary of the time when the Allies got the upper

hand in the Battle of the Atlantic and the German threat to Britain was brought under control.

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.

Earlier this year the Department of Veterans Affairs arranged for eight Australian veterans, aged between 86 and 95, representing the RAN, RAAF and Merchant Navy to travel to Britain to attend commemorations marking the anniversary. **Those representatives of the Merchant Navy were Mr. Don Kennedy, Mr. Phil Orchard and Mr. Thomas Kirkham. Other Australian veterans attended under their own steam.**

The main events took place in Liverpool on Sunday 26 May. Liverpool, being the principle point of arrival and departure of convoys, was where the British established the Headquarters for the Battle of the Atlantic.

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 Canada, Australia 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.

Until mid-1943, the Germans were sinking merchant ships faster than the Allies could build them and building submarines faster than the Allies could sink them.

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, until the U-boat menace was brought under control.

Major factors in overcoming the U-boat menace in the North Atlantic included the great efforts made, particularly in the USA, to increase the rate of merchant shipbuilding for the war effort. The most common type of ship built was the **'Liberty ship'** capable of carrying a wide range of cargoes required for the war effort.

While initially 'Liberty' ships took 244 days to build, American shipyards managed to reduce this to about 5 days. As part of the increased shipbuilding effort 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.

Early in 1943 advantage shifted to the Allies and by 'Black May' German U-boat losses were unsustainable and they were temporarily withdrawn from the Atlantic. As a result, the battle was effectively won. However, enemy attacks against allied merchant shipping continued until the end of the war.

In the course of the battle, Allied losses totaled around 3,500 merchant ships and 175 warships, as well as around 65,000 Navy and Merchant Navy seamen. In addition, around 6,000 Allied airmen were killed in operations to protect merchant shipping.

German casualties numbered 783 U-boats and around 30,000 sailors.

Turning to activities in Australian and adjacent waters

During World War II many merchant seamen sailed in the regular supply runs around the Australian coastline and to Papua New Guinea, servicing Australian, American and Dutch forces.

Australian shipping lines such as **Burns Philp, BHP, Australian United Steam Navigation and Huddart-Parker** played a vital role in supporting military operations in this theatre. Dutch, Norwegian and American merchant ships were also involved in these operations.

Examples of the role of Australian merchant ships in World War 2 include the passenger ships *Wanganella, Manunda*, and *Centaur* which were commissioned as hospital ships; the *Duntroon, Ormiston, Taroona* and *Zelandia* commissioned as troop carriers; and the *Westralia and Kanimbla* commissioned as an armed merchant cruisers.

The *Westralia* and *Kanimbla* were among the merchant ships that supported American landings at Leyte Gulf and the *Zelandia* was hit and sunk during the Japanese air raids on Darwin in 1942.

Also, ships of the Burns Philp Line were involved in the evacuation of many families from the Netherlands East Indies through to Papua, New Guinea and Solomon Islands. Though no figures exist, the evacuees numbered in the thousands.

Another important venture in which Australians participated was the Small Ships Section of the United States Army Services of Supply' known as **the 'Small Ships'**. Headquarters were established in Sydney, with responsibility for overall administration, maintenance, repair, supply, and crew recruitment

Around 3,000 Australians volunteered to serve in the Small Ships Section which comprised a variety of craft including fishing trawlers, schooners, tugs, ferries, apple boats from Tasmania,

wheat ketches from South Australia and there was even an ancient paddle-wheeler.

The Small Ships went where larger ships could not go and were a crucial part of the lifeline of the Allied armies' advance during the whole New Guinea campaign, especially during 1942 and 1943.

The vast majority of merchant ship losses in Australian and adjacent waters were due to attacks from Japanese forces although German raiders also operated off the West Australian coast and Indian Ocean sinking merchant ships.

Between 1941 and 1943 Japan deployed fifty-eight submarines and sank 186 ships in the Indian and South Pacific Oceans and Australian waters. In addition, areas off northern Australia, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia were mined by enemy forces.

Merchant ship losses off the Australian coast included:
- The Hospital ship *Centaur* with the loss of 268 lives.
- three BHP operated bulk carriers: the *Iron Chieftain, Iron Knight*, and *Iron Crown*. Being carriers of heavy bulk cargoes, these ships sank within minutes with the loss of 85 crewmen.
- the small freighter *Woolonbar,* torpedoed and sunk off Coffs Harbour with the loss of 32 of her crew of 37.
- the *Kowarra*, sunk on passage from Bowen to Brisbane with the loss of 21 of her crew of 32; and
- the *Fingal* sunk off Nambucca Heads with the loss of 12 of her crew of 31.

In respect of the loss of the *Centaur* and *Iron Knight*, 2013 has been remembered in a number of ceremonies as the 70 anniversary of these war casualties.

On 12 May 1943 the hospital ship a *Centaur* sailed unescorted from Sydney carrying her crew and normal medical 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, only 64 survived. These survivors spent 35 hours on rafts before being rescued. Sister Ellen Savage, the only one of 12 nursing sisters to survive, though injured herself, gave great help to the other survivors and was awarded the George Medal for her courage.

The *Iron Knight* was part of a convoy of ten ships travelling up the east coast of New South Wales on February 8, 1943. At approximately 2:30 am a Japanese submarine fired a torpedo at the naval ships flanking the *Iron Knight*. The torpedo passed under the bow of the HMAS *Townsville* and struck the *Iron Knight*, sinking her with the loss of her master, Captain D. Ross and 36 crewmen in less than two minutes.

Most of *Iron Knight's* crew were below decks and were unable to escape as the ship went down. Only 14 survived, clambering aboard a single lifeboat to be picked up by the French destroyer *Triomphant*.

Australia's war time Prime Minister John Curtin acknowledged the role of the Merchant Navy when he said:

> *'The merchant navies of the United Nations are constantly in the fighting line. Silently, efficiently and without fuss they carry on the unending task of keeping the fighting men and supplies moving. The men of our merchant navy have established a high tradition and the Australian Government warmly acknowledges the great part they are playing in the war effort.'*