**Speech for the Norah Head Memorial Service**

**7 December 2019**

Thank you, for allowing me the privilege of presenting the keynote speech, at this Annual Merchant Navy War Memorial, here in this beautiful setting, close to our iconic Norah Head Light House. This light has been a beacon of comfort to every seafarer sailing by since its opening in 1903. Especially to those little ’60 milers’ of yesteryear, transporting coal from Hunter Valley ports, to the various Sydney Gasworks, hugging the coast and navigating with only a magnetic compass. Always a case of keeping the friendly beam of Norah Head light on the port hand sailing North, the starboard hand heading South.

The speech today is dedicated to all those Woman ‘the wartime homemakers’, that have no War Memorials.

It acknowledges the ‘silent witness’ of Seafarers Families, as they waited patiently for the return of their men folk, serving aboard Merchant ships. These ships were virtual death traps, vulnerable, ill equipped, poorly defended, always in continual and unknown danger, as they transported the vital supplies for the war effort, through what was the World’s greatest problem of last Century, World War Two. To all those brave Grandmothers, Mothers, Wives, Sisters and their Children who waited patiently and in fear for the safe return of their men.

To the many of you of the post war generation, in attendance here today, you must *never* lose sight of the contribution made by our Seafarers, together with their unfailing home support to our proud Maritime History, in this dreadful period in history.

We need firstly to acknowledge, sadly, that there are now very few WW2 Seafaring Veterans still with us, similarly those rapidly thinning ranks of Veterans from all the Services, who experienced that dreadful war emergency period. It has resulted in we the assembled here today, being able to enjoy the freedoms that we take so easily for granted.

In these days where some scribes suggest, that Climate is the greatest problem that the world has *ever* encountered, it could be disputed that WW2, which fortunately for the few of us, who were old enough to remember that conflict, was a sobering event, such that we are now lucky not having to speak Japanese as our first language. We do however enjoy eating sushi! Such are changing times. Firmly entrenched in my memory, was building together with my Father, then on leave, an air raid shelter in the back yard, optimistically covering it with a sheet of corrugated iron for protection!

Now to the major subject of today’s address, which relates to that valiant group of citizens who have received little or no form of recognition, for their wartime efforts, namely the Women folk who stayed at home. Many waited stoically in fear of the dreaded telegram, announcing the death of a loved one serving overseas or on a coastal ore carrier closer to home.

To my knowledge there is no specific memorial to those Australian women who kept their family homes functioning and raised their children during those perilous worrying times.

To me there is just a solitary exception, incorporated in, what is a truly outstanding War Memorial, sited on Scott Hill, overlooking the Western Australian port of Geraldton. It commemorates the sinking of the RAN cruiser **HMAS Sydney,** on 19 November 1941, with the loss of all hands close by, off the West Australian coast.

It is in my opinion, the most impressive and moving wartime memorial certainly from a Maritime aspect in Australia, and despite relating specifically to the largest single loss of life by the Royal Australian Navy, it reflects appropriately also to the brave women with families serving as seafarers in the Merchant Navy.

This beautifully crafted bronze statue standing in the concourse of the memorial is of the grieving figure of a lady, with wedding ring in place, holding her hat in the breeze, with a look of despair, looking out to sea waiting hopefully for the return of her husband, father, brother, or son amongst the 645 sailors, lost in that 1941 disaster. Behind her is a large stainless-steel dome incorporating 645 stainless steel seagulls each representing a lost sailor. When it was constructed at the original initiative of the Rotary Club of Geraldton the wreck of **HMAS Sydney** had not then been found.

I worked in the Queensland Maritime Museum in the 1990’s, with the sister of one of the lost sailors from a prominent seafaring family, who was still grieving for the loss of her elder brother. Subsequently, when the wreck was found a commemoration service on 16th March 2008 was held and saw this lady, invited to accompany the Naval party, together with other relatives and cast a floral wreath for her brother over the wreck. As she said“ it was at last, the closure she had wished for”.

Last year the wreck of the Scott Fell freighter **IRON CROWN** (sunk 4 June 1942) was discovered off the Victorian coast, but we sadly are yet to discover the wreck of the **IRON KNIGHT** (sunk 8 February 1943) off Montague Island NSW. Hopefully in my lifetime the wreck will be located so that closure can be given to relatives from the **IRON KNIGHT** who I know still grieve.

At a recent Newcastle Merchant Navy Memorial Service, a poignant letter was given to Hon. Peter Morris from Daphne Roper, the daughter of a former respected, BHP Chief Marine Engineer, Mr. AJT McMorran who fortunately survived the war.

This story emphasizes the secrecy surrounding Merchant ship movements, during the war through the eyes of a seven- year old. Unfortunately I have been unable to contact her as she just slipped away, so I have taken the liberty as its relevance to quote from some of the content, which succinctly describes the difficulties that Australian Merchant Naval families, wives and children were subjected to during the wartime emergency.

This was especially relevant to the sinking of cargo ships off our coast. The War was right there in our very own back door, as exemplified by the sinking of the little **Nimbin** at 1520 hrs on 5 December 1940, going about her business, heading for Sydney from the Richmond River and Coffs Harbour with her cargo of timber, dairy produce, live pigs and empty drums, just eight miles to seaward from here. **Nimbin** unexpectedly suffered an enormous explosion and sank in two minutes, with the loss of seven lives. It was not immediately realized that it was a mine and the rescue ship **Bonalbo** which picked up the survivors, three hours later steamed into the area it being unaware of the mine field so was lucky she didn’t suffer the same fate.

Quote:- “The wives and children of Merchant Seamen lived a life of much fear and sometimes dread . We were aware living in the vulnerable city of Newcastle, with the BHP industrial complex the reason for our being. The merchant ships leaving the port carried vital cargoes on a long, slow, exposed journey to southern ports. The cargoes carried were necessary for munitions building and other manufacturing and to keep domestic fires burning in cold winters. The Japanese with their silent, sleek efficient submarines, which patrolled the coast for easy pickings, from our large fleet of coal burning cargo ships, which were always visible from the smoke, even when well over the horizon. Censorship was worn like a badge in these families. Our lives revolved around ‘berthing‘ and the ‘sailing’ of these ships. My Mothers warning words, with her index finger to her lips, “Don’t tell your friends Daddy is coming home! Or ”ssh, say good bye, but don’t tell anyone Daddy’s ship is sailing”. How we dreaded those “good-bye kisses”. In a way I was envious of my friends whose Fathers were serving overseas who had not seen their Fathers for years. They only had just the one good bye”! This feeling now is understood but at the time difficult for a then seven- year old.

“My parents bought an old 1927 model A Ford, and had the telephone installed. Letter writing was frequent, but no shipping plans were allowed to be shared. Instead a phone call from Dad at a southern port to request the use of the car on such and such a day, after sunset and before sunrise. The time of high tides were then checked AM and PM giving an indication of possible berthing times, at the port of Newcastle, as it had not been dredged then. Mum would wake us and have us waiting at berthing regardless of the time. The drive from Mayfield west down to the BHP wharf had difficult hazards to negotiate. Limited street lighting, dimmed lights and the rickety old wooden Tighes Hill bridge. My sister and I sitting in the back seat, dressed in our pyjamas were terrified of this bridge and Mum would ask, “say a prayer girls” as she negotiated the bridge and this we did. Prayers were frequent during those war years. However, we always arrived safely and then drove down to the wharf. Parked there in the stillness when a swishing sound broke the silence, as suddenly appearing alongside was the bulk of the I**ron King** or **Iron Knight.**  As soon as the gangway was installed and the engines silent, Dad’s quick footsteps striding to the car. What joy, kisses galore. Another safe home coming.”

The sobering aspect is that Chief Engineer McMorran, was not on the fateful voyage of the **Iron Knight** which never made it home, he having been transferred to her sister **Iron King** which survived the war. Such is fate.

So many local and overseas Merchant Seafarers families, were placed in this same invidious position with their men folk sailing on ships that were no better than potential steel floating coffins delivering the essential materials of this dreadful conflict.

The Merchant Navy has been referred to as the ‘Forgotten Service’. In contrast to our close neighbour New Zealand, where the Merchant Navy is recognized on the majority of their war memorials it is very much the ‘Forgotten Service’ locally, as there are very few Merchant Navy plaques on the equivalent Australian War Memorials.

Even more forgotten, are the Women and Families of those Merchant Seafarers dicing with death on ships out at sea, off the Australian coast and in overseas waters, who have no recognition or memorial to their stoic courage, always fearing the worst.

Lest we Forget, sadly, the Forgotten.

Thank You. Captain Iain Steverson FNI

Swansea@parliament.nsw.gov.au