**MERCHANT NAVY MEMORIAL SERVICE NORAH HEAD 1ST December 2018**

**Introduction:**

We gather at this beautiful tranquil setting, to remember with gratitude the Service and Sacrifices of Seafarers of the Merchant Navies during the two world wars. This year our emphasis is on WW1.

The Merchant Navy is as we in attendance appreciate unfortunately described as the ‘Forgotten Service’, in the eyes of the general public. Certainly not acknowledged formally at the National War Memorial, Canberra.

As it is the centenary year of the conclusion of the disaster that was The Great War of 1914-18, optimistically described at the time as the ‘War to End all Wars’. What a dreadful waste of young lives from our fledgling Dominions. Such a futile effort, as are most wars. In my opinion I consider it was basically a Family feud between Queen Victoria’s progeny, King George the Fifth and his German cousin the Kaiser which resulted in the death of at least 20 million, with 24 million maimed and mentally scarred for life. Horrific.

It is appropriate for us to reflect today, on the part that was played by the Merchant Navy in that war which Australia and New Zealand willingly supported with never a backward look initially, their King, the ‘Mother Country’, Great Britain, and the ‘glorious British Empire on which the sun never sets’.

Australian ships both Mercantile and Naval of course, were at the immediate beck and call of the British Government and featured in that initial massive troop convoy. The first Expeditionary Force consisted of 38 British flagged Merchant ships, that departed so dramatically from the Western Australian port of Albany, at dawn on the 1st November 1914. This convoy including 10 New Zealand troop transports which had rendezvoused with the Australian troop transports in King George Sound. The convoy was escorted by only two Australian light cruisers **HMAS Melbourne** and **HMAS Sydney** plus the Japanese heavy cruiser **Ibuki.** The Royal Navy initially supplied the lead ship, the heavy cruiser **HMS Minoutaur,** which was suddenly diverted to Africa the day before the convoy passed Cocos Island and the **SMS** **Emden**!

The convoy which the troops anticipated was to proceed to Britain was described at the time as, “the longest journey to war in the history of the world”. It comprised 19,779 Australians troops, about 10,000 New Zealanders together with their 7,843 horses. It was the precursor to what became the Anzac tradition. In the end the troops were landed in Egypt then of course Gallipoli. This first convoy narrowly missed destruction, as the German raider the light cruiser, **Emden** which was aware of theconvoywas just 50 miles to east, having landed a shore party to destroy the Telegraph station on nearby West Island Cocos-Keeling Islands. The island telegraph station just managed to send an SOS that a ‘strange’ ship was approaching. Convoy escort **HMAS Sydney** was despatchedto deal with this ‘strange’ ship. Fortunately, for the convoy the dangerous **Emden** was caught by surprise the **Sydney** out gunned her and Commander Muller finally beached her on North Keeling having been totally destroyed.

The carnage and horrendous loss of life that could have resulted if the German cruiser had managed to infiltrate the lightly protected convoy of unarmed Merchant troopships and engaged the convoy the Gallipoli misadventure may not have happened. **Emden**  had previously sunk allied 26 merchant ships.

Subsequently a further 43 convoys of Merchant ships were despatched by the two ANZAC countries carrying reinforcements of men, equipment and supplies which did not cease with the Armistice. Merchant ships then spent the remainder of 1918 to 1920 repatriating the troops back to Australasia

Australian manned cargo ships and passenger ships that had not been commandeered by Britain continued to serve in various roles during the war including troop transport in the later convoys. Britain tried to commandeer the British ships in the coastal iron ore and coal trade in 1917. Billy Hughes stood on his dig and they were retained. The WW1 war effort was wholly reliant on merchant shipping for the total transport component. A similar scenario was repeated in WW2 in 1941-42 where the German U-Boats as they had done in 1917 again almost brought Great Britain to its knees, saved only by the supplies delivered by Merchant ships and their thankless crews in the battle of the Atlantic.

In WW1 the Australian Merchant Navy significantly manned five unarmed Australian passenger ships, designated as His Majesty’s Hospital ships, each with a full Australian Medical staff of Doctors and Nurses. The years of secondment noted. They were Australasian United Steam Navigation Co’s **Kyarra** (1914-15), **Kanowna** (1915-19), McIlwraith McEachern’s **Karoola** (1915-19), and Adelaide Steamship Co’s **Wandilla** (1916-18) and **Warilda** (1916-18).Mid 1917 saw Germany’s in increased desperation, which resulted in their implementing indiscriminate submarine warfare, resulting in the sinking of increasingly large numbers of allied merchant shipping including eight clearly marked ’red cross’ allied hospital ships. **Warilda** was one, torpedoed by a German submarine in the English Channel on the 2nd August while carrying 700 war wounded from Le Havre to Southampton resulting in the loss of 123 lives. The New Zealand Government as their contribution to this ANZAC Hospital fleet employed the Union Steamship Company’s **Marama** (1914-19) and **Maheno** (1915-19) which included in their manning numerous Australian based seafarers. **Maheno’**s remains are still visible to this day on Queensland’s Fraser Island where she ran aground in 1935, while under tow to Japan for scrap.

Those much maligned and ignored Australian Merchant seafarers in WW1 earned as much respect as their successors, the WW2 Merchant seafarer, virtually Nil, suffering discrimination and denial by both the Returned Services and Government. Many also suffered the indignity of the ’white feather’ being thrust at them, due to their lack of uniform confirming certainly the ‘Forgotten Service’.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge an unsung group of seafarers that are now long gone, certainly forgotten who played such an important role in the war effort and whose efforts were hardly ever mentioned in the stories of wartime history. They were the members of the ‘black gang’ who worked down in the bowels of the Engine Room, which in those far off days when all Merchant ships were ‘hand fired’ coal burning steamers. These engineers, firemen /stokers and boiler attendants were the unsung heroes of the Merchant Service, continuously working down in the stoke holds in unbelievable conditions of heat, grime, coal dust, confined head room and with minimal safety. This specific group of seafarers could possibly compared, with old time under-ground coal miners, yet they were the reason that the war effort was able to be completed successfully. The difference between coal miners and the engine room ‘black gang’ was that the former managed to return to their homes, while the latter should their ship be torpedoed were often caught below with little chance of escape or survival, their only grave the sea.

The numbers of Merchant Seafarers that served in WW2 are now extremely thin on the ground and in this regard, I acknowledge the passing of my former ship mate during the year, Alan Renwick who attended this service last year and was a veteran of the American small ships. Those WW2 veterans still with us should be revered and acknowledged with grateful thanks. I again reiterate the importance of the Merchant Navy and its contribution to Australia which is albeit ignored by the uninformed and distracted general public and by disinterested politicians. This attitude would alter abruptly should the country run low or out of imported refined fuel products. We must not forget the efforts of those Merchant Seafarers who served. We ignore our rich Maritime History at our peril as exemplified by the dis-interest shown by individuals of the current Newcastle City Council, who see no specific need for a Maritime Museum. Thank You. Iain Steverson