

AUSTRALIAN NAVAL ASSOCIATION (WA BRANCH)

ANZAC DAY 2025 PRESENTATION

by Captain Royce Spencer

IMAGINE, QUIETLY DOING YOUR DAY TO DAY JOB, SUPPORTING YOUR COUNTRY, PROVIDING THE VITAL SUPPLIES FROM COAST TO COAST OR COUNTRY TO COUNTRY. YET YOUR COUNTRY, INDEED MOST PEOPLE DON'T EVEN KNOW OR ACKNOWLEDGE THE IMPORTANCE OF WHAT YOU'RE DOING. MUCH LESS, THAT YOU ARE DOING THIS UNDER CONSTANT THREAT OF DEATH.

YOU ARE A MEMBER OF THE MERCHANT MARINE (LATERLY KNOWN AS THE MERCHANT NAVY). THE QUIET, HIGHLY IMPORTANT AND MUCH FORGOTTEN PART OF THE WAR EFFORTS SINCE WWI, AND ALMOST EVERY WAR SINCE.

THE MERCHANT MARINE (NAVY) , COMPRISED COMMERCIAL SHIPS AND THEIR CREWS REQUISITIONED BY THE COMMONWEALTH GOVERNMENT (OR THE BRITISH SHIPPING CONTROLLER IN WWI) TO SERVE AS TRANSPORTS , HOSPITAL SHIPS, TROOP CARRIERS, OIL AND FUEL SHIPS, SUPPLY SHIPS, AMMUNITION SHIPS, LOGISTICS SUPPORT SHIPS AND CAPTURED ENEMY SHIPS IN SUPPORT OF THE WAR EFFORTS.

THE LOGISTICS OF MOVING THOUSANDS OF MEN AND TONS OF EQUIPMENT, HALF WAY ROUND THE WORLD IN WWI WAS ENORMOUS. EARLY IN WWI, THE GOVT CHARTERED 28 AUSTRALIAN SHIPS TO MOVE THE AIF TO THE MIDDLE EAST AND EUROPE. THESE 28 SHIPS WERE TO BE SUPPLEMENTED AS THE WAR PROGRESSED AND DURING THIS TIME, SHIPS WERE SUBJECT TO ZEPPLIN RAIDS, SUBMARINE ATTACKS, ENEMY WARSHIP & RAIDER ATTACKS AND RAMMINGS.

ALL IN ALL IN WWI, AUSTRALIA HAD A TOTAL OF 74 COMMERCIAL SHIPS (MOSTLY UNARMED) EITHER CHARTERED OR TAKEN UP FROM TRADE. OF THESE, 26 WERE SUNK, RESULTING IN THE DEATHS OF AUSTRALIAN MERCHANT NAVY SAILORS AND OFFICERS AND MANY MORE BADLY INJURED , BURNT AND SCARRED , OFTEN SPENDING DAYS IN THE OCEAN AWAITING RESCUE.

THE COMMONWEALTH MERCHANT NAVY LOSSES DURING WWI WAS, 5,000 SHIPS AND 15,614 SAILORS AND OFFICERS. A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER , WHICH STILL TODAY REMAINS LARGELY UNKNOWN OR ACKNOWLEDGED, WHEREAS THE TOTAL OF WARSHIPS SUNK WAS IN THE REGION OF 520 (A TENTH OF THE MERCHANT NAVY LOSSES).

PERHAPS THE MOST FAMOUS COMMERCIAL SHIP SUNK IN WWI WAS THE SINKING OF THE PASSENGER SHIP 'LUSITANIA' TRAVELLING FROM NEW YORK TO LIVERPOOL UK. SHE WAS JUST 11 NM OFF THE IRISH COAST. SHE TOOK ONE TORPEDO HIT FROM THE GERMAN UBOAT U20 AND SANK IN 18 MINUTES FOLLOWING A "SECONDARY INTERNAL EXPLOSION"

THERE WERE 1266 PASSENGERS, 696 CREW (A TOTAL OF 1962 SOULS) ON BOARD AND ONLY 761 SURVIVORS. MANY QUESTIONS WERE ASKED AS TO WHY A SHIP OF THAT SIZE AND CAPABILITY, COULD SINK IN SUCH A QUICK TIME. UNFORTUNATELY, WAR TIME SECRECY DICTATED THE GOVERNMENT NOT DISCLOSE TO THE SUBSEQUENT ENQUIRY, THAT THERE

WERE ALSO, 4.3MILLION .303 BULLETS, 5000 SCHRAPNEL SHELLS & 3240 BRASS PRECUSSION FUSES SECRETLY LOADED FOR THE UK WAR EFFORT AND IT IS SUSPECTED THAT THESE WERE THE SOURCE OF THE “SECONDARY EXPLOSION” THAT ACTUALLY SANK THE SHIP.

THE TOTAL LOSS OF SOULS DOES NOT DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN PASSENGERS AND CREW, BUT ONE CAN ASSUME THE CREW LOSSES WERE SIGNIFICANT.

GERMANY SANK ALMOST 50 PASSENGER SHIPS (SOME OF WHICH HAD BEEN CONVERTED TO TROOP SHIPS) BETWEEN 1914 – 1918 THROUGH DIRECT ATTACK OR MINING. SO WITH CREWS AVERAGING IN THE 100’S ON THESE TYPE OF SHIPS, THE LOSS OF MERCHANT MARINERS WAS VERY CONSIDERABLE INDEED.

AS I SAID BEFORE, A TOTAL OF 5000 MERCHANT SHIPS AND 15,614 MARINERS WERE LOST DURING THIS FIRST WORLD WAR.

IN WWII, THE DANGERS WERE GREATLY INCREASED, IN THAT, WE WERE UNDER CONSTANT THREAT IN OUR OWN WATERS, AS WELL AS ALL OVER THE MULTIPLE WAR FRONTS AROUND THE WORLD.

IN THE EUROPEAN THEATRE:

THE MERCHANT NAVY, IS OFTEN SAID TO BE THE 'UNSEEN' SERVICE. THOUSANDS OF AUSTRALIANS SERVED AS MERCHANT MARINERS, SHIPPING TROOPS AND SUPPLIES AROUND THE WORLD AND SOMETIMES DIRECTLY SUPPORTING MILITARY OPERATIONS.

MERCHANT SEAMEN GENERALLY “**SIGNED ON**” TO A MERCHANT SHIP, RATHER THAN BEING “**POSTED**” TO ONE. AUSTRALIANS COULD SERVE ON SHIPS OF VIRTUALLY ANY NATIONALITY SERVING THE ALLIED CAUSE. THUS, ALTHOUGH MOST SERVED ON VESSELS BELONGING TO AUSTRALIAN SHIPPING LINES, MANY WERE ON BRITISH, NORWEGIAN, AMERICAN AND OTHER ALLIED NATIONS SHIPS.

MEN WHO SERVED IN THE ATLANTIC CONVOYS SAILING BETWEEN NORTH AMERICA AND BRITAIN FACED SOME OF THE HIGHEST CASUALTY RATES OF THE WAR. GERMAN U-BOATS WAGED A HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL CAMPAIGN AGAINST MERCHANT SHIPPING REACHING ITS PEAK IN 1942-43. IN JUST THREE MONTHS BETWEEN JAN – MAR 1943, 85 MERCHANT SHIPS WERE LOST FOR THE LOSS OF JUST 8 UBOATS.

THIS IS RECOGNISED AS THE LONGEST BATTLE OF WWII, LASTING FROM 1939 RIGHT THROUGH TO 1945. THE LOSSES WERE A TOTAL OF 2603 SHIPS, 783 UBOATS AND OVER 30,000 SAILORS.

THEN WE ALSO HAD SHIPS AND MERCHANT NAVY PERSONNEL SERVING ON THE VERY DANGEROUS ARCTIC CONVOYS WHERE OVER 100 FURTHER SHIPS WERE LOST ALONG WITH OVER 3000 MERCHANT MARINERS. CREWMEN OF ANY SHIP SUNK, HAD LESS THAN A 5% CHANCE OF SURVIVAL, UNLESS PICKED UP QUICKLY FROM THE FREEZING NORTH ATLANTIC WATERS.

MERCHANT SEAMEN ALSO SUFFERED HEAVY LOSSES AGAINST ENEMY AIRCRAFT WHILE RUNNING SUPPLIES TO THE ISLAND OF MALTA, IN THE MEDITERRANEAN, AND OFF GREECE AND CRETE.

A NUMBER OF SHIPS HAD ANTI-AIRCRAFT AND ANTI-SUBMARINE GUNS FITTED, TURNING THEM INTO “DEFENSIVELY ARMED MERCHANT SHIPS”, WITH NAVAL RATINGS POSTED

ABOARD TO PROVIDE GUN CREWS. BUT IN PRACTICE, THESE GUNS WERE LITTLE DEFENCE AGAINST DETERMINED ENEMY ATTACKS.

AUSTRALIA DID NOT FARE WELL EITHER.

MERCHANT SEAMEN WERE AMONG THE FIRST AUSTRALIANS CAPTURED BY ENEMY FORCES DURING THE WAR. IN 1940, SEVERAL MEN WERE CAPTURED BY GERMAN RAIDERS OPERATING IN THE INDIAN OCEAN. MERCHANT SHIPS IN THIS AREA OFTEN SAILED UNESCORTED, UNLESS THEY WERE CARRYING TROOPS OR COULD ACCOMPANY A TROOP CONVOY, SO THEY PROVED TO BE EASY PREY.

SOME MEN WERE TAKEN AS PRISONERS OF WAR TO ITALIAN SOMALI LAND, BUT WERE RELEASED WHEN BRITISH FORCES OCCUPIED THE TERRITORY IN 1941. OTHERS WENT TO GERMANY AND A FEW TO ITALY. IN LATE 1941 AND EARLY 1942, SEVERAL AUSTRALIAN MERCHANT SEAMEN WERE KILLED OR TAKEN PRISONER BY JAPANESE RAIDERS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN OR WHEN THEIR SHIPS WERE SUNK IN AIR OR SEA ATTACKS IN MALAYAN, NETHERLANDS EAST INDIES OR NEW GUINEA WATERS.

FROM 1942, MANY MERCHANT SEAMEN SAILED IN THE REGULAR SUPPLY & HOSPITAL SHIP RUNS AROUND THE AUSTRALIAN COASTLINE AND TO PAPUA NEW GUINEA, SERVICING AUSTRALIAN, AMERICAN AND DUTCH FORCES.

MANY OF THE MERCHANT SHIPS WERE DUTCH OR AMERICAN, BUT AUSTRALIAN SHIPPING LINES SUCH AS BURNS PHILP, AUSTRALIAN UNITED STEAM NAVIGATION AND HUDDART PARKER, PLAYED A VITAL ROLE IN SUPPORTING MILITARY OPERATIONS IN THIS THEATRE. MANY MERCHANT SHIPS WERE SUNK BY JAPANESE SUBMARINES OR MINES, MOSTLY OFF AUSTRALIA'S EAST COAST, OR ATTACKED BY ENEMY AIRCRAFT IN OPERATIONAL AREAS.

PERHAPS THE MOST FAMOUS OF THESE WAS THE SINKING OF THE HOSPITAL SHIP THE "CENTAUR". MY MOTHER WAS A SERVING ARMY NURSE IN NEW GUINEA AT THE TIME, AND COULD EASILY HAVE BEEN POSTED TO THAT SHIP ON ONE OF HER TRIPS, BRINGING WOUNDED BACK FROM NEW GUINEA TO AUSTRALIA. THANKFULLY SHE WASN'T, BECAUSE I WOULD NOT BE HERE, ADDRESSING YOU THIS MORNING.

I PROUDLY WEAR HER SERVICE MEDALS ON MY RIGHT CHEST TODAY.

AUSTRALIAN MERCHANT SEAMEN CONTINUED SERVING IN EVERY THEATRE OF WAR. AUSTRALIA WAS A SIGNIFICANT PRIMARY PRODUCER, SENDING BULK AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS AND MILITARY SUPPLIES TO BRITAIN AND INDIA, WHILE ALSO REQUIRING MILITARY AND COMMERCIAL SUPPLIES TO BE BROUGHT FROM BRITAIN, NORTH AMERICA AND ELSEWHERE.

SHIPPING LANES, REMAINED DANGEROUS PLACES, AS WAS THE AUSTRALIAN COAST. THE JAPANESE CONTINUED THEIR ASSAULT ON SHIPPING AROUND AUSTRALIA, SINKING 30 SHIPS OFF NSW, 5 OFF QLD, 2 OFF VIC & 4 OFF WA.

THE GERMANS ALSO HAD A ROGUE U BOAT (U862) WHICH SANK 2 SHIPS OFF NSW AND 2 OFF SA.

50 SHIPS WERE LOST TO ENEMY ACTION OFF THE AUSTRALIAN COAST. 45 SHIPS WERE ATTACKED & OR SUNK BY SUBMARINES WITHIN AUSTRALIAN WATERS, 5 SHIPS SUNK BY GERMAN RAIDERS, AND 2 OTHERS OFF THE SOUTH COAST OF AUSTRALIA, SUNK BY MINES.

BY THE END OF THE WAR, ALMOST 4,000 ALLIED SHIPS COMPRISING 175 WARSHIPS & 3,500 MERCHANT SHIPS HAD BEEN SUNK WITH THE LOSS OF 65,000 ALLIED NAVAL AND MERCHANT SAILORS. THE MAJORITY OF WHICH, WERE MERCHANT NAVY MEMBERS.

REGRETFULLY, THERE IS CONFLICTING AND CONFUSING HISTORICAL DATA IN RESPECT TO THE CORRECT NUMBERS OF “OFFICIAL” DEATHS DURING WWII. BUT, ACCORDING TO THE AWM WEBSITE ROLE OF HONOUR, AUSTRALIA HAD OVER 39,657 DEATHS AS A DIRECT RESULT OF SERVICE WITH AN AUSTRALIAN SERVICE DURING WWII.

OF THESE, 845 ARE AUSTRALIAN MERCHANT MARINERS LISTED IN THE ROLE OF HONOUR , WHO MADE THE ULTIMATE SACRIFICE, IN THEIR QUIET AND MOSTLY UNRECOGNISED SERVICE TO THEIR COUNTRY.

WE THANK THEM FOR THEIR SERVICE AND MAY THEY REST IN PEACE,

LEST WE FORGET