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58TH ANNUAL COMMEMORATION – MERCHANT NAVY MEMORIAL & COLUMBARIUM ROOKWOOD GENERAL CEMETERY SUNDAY 16 APR 2023



The Merchant Navy War Memorial Fund Ltd

GUEST OF HONOUR DELIVERING THE 2023 MERCHANT NAVY ADDRESS

REAR ADMIRAL CHRISTOPHER SMITH AM, CSM, RAN

COMMANDER AUSTRALIAN FLEET

SUNDAY 16TH APRIL, 2023

<p>THEMES As requested by David Field, Chairman The Merchant Navy War Memorial Fund Ltd (MNWMF)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• AUSTRALIAN MERCHANT NAVY'S ROLE DURING WWI/WWII• 80TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE SINKING OF AUSTRALIAN HOSPITAL SHIP CENTAUR<ul style="list-style-type: none">• STRATEGIC FLEET TASKFORCE• AUKUS
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Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, fellow Mariners.

I am honoured to be here with you today for the 58th commemoration at the Merchant Navy Memorial here in Rookwood. Today we honour the courage, resilience and sacrifice of Australian Merchant Seamen who served our great nation in conflict and in crisis.

The 14th of May this year will mark the 80th Anniversary of the sinking of the Australian Hospital Ship *Centaur*. The *Centaur* left Sydney, unescorted, at 0945 on May 12 1943, bound for Port Moresby, tasked to transport wounded soldiers from the battlefields of Nuna and Gona. On board were 75 Merchant navy crew, one ship's pilot, 64 medical staff, including 12 nurses of the Australian Army Nursing Service, and 149 members of the 2/12th Field Ambulance and 44 embarked members heading for a tour in Papua New Guinea. On May 14, at 0400 hours, The *Centaur* was torpedoed without warning by a Japanese submarine, approximately 50 miles east of Brisbane. Only 64 of the 332 passengers on board survived. The sinking of The *Centaur* was viewed as an atrocity, as it had been properly illuminated and adorned with Red Crosses to indicate her status as a Hospital Ship. On the day of a merchant ship's sinking, the crewmembers' pay was terminated. They did not start getting paid again until they transferred to another ship. A 30-day survivor's leave was granted, beginning on the day the ship went down. Survivor's leave was unpaid. Any time spent in a lifeboat, regardless of length, counted towards the 30 days leave. Many merchant seaman joined the Navy, due to a severe shortage of experienced seaman. These men wore naval uniforms, served on commissioned naval ships under the white ensign, were subject to naval regulations and discipline, and were

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paid at naval rates. However, at the end of the war, they were discharged as merchant seaman, and so were not eligible to receive any benefits or compensation.

The first combat fatality in World War Two was a merchant seaman, when a German U-boat sank the *Athenia* off the coast of Ireland. The last fatality, after the cessation of hostilities with Germany, was also a merchant seaman, whose ship was torpedoed in the North Atlantic three days after the war ended.

The Merchant Navy was to serve as The Commonwealth's lifeline during both the First and Second World Wars. In particular, the 48 million-person island nation of Britain relied on marine trade to survive in 1939. Her 1,900 ocean-going commerce ships were a part of the biggest merchant fleet in the world, with personnel drawn from all around the Commonwealth.

When the war started, shipping lanes across the North Atlantic gained a lot of significance. Without a wide range of crucial imports from the United States and Canada, Britain would not be able to hold off Nazi Germany's superior military and industrial might for very long. The Battle of the Atlantic, between Allied and German naval forces, was fought mainly by merchant ships and it was the longest and most intense naval battle of World War 2; some 3,500 allied merchant ships sunk and more than 72,000 allied naval and merchant mariners were lost. The Australian Merchant Navy played a critical role during this battle. Australian sailors were among the brave mariners who risked their lives to keep the supply lines open and were instrumental in protecting Allied ships from enemy submarines and ensuring that vital supplies continued to reach Europe.

Merchant men suffered the greatest percentage of deaths of any service during the Second World War but the number of Australian Merchant Mariners killed during conflict is difficult to estimate; not only were they attacked within sight of the Australian Coastline, but many of them travelled around the world and migrated from ship to ship, supporting the Allied effort. Over seventy years of peace, liberty, and our material wealth are owed to those gallant merchant naval sailors, who served under the red ensign. The strong and spirited character of our nation rests firmly on the inheritance from every one of the Merchant Naval Personnel who paid the ultimate price. It is our duty to ensure that their great sacrifice continues to be remembered and honoured.

We will remember them. Lest we forget.

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Those of us gathered here today would be aware that international trade, and consequently the global economy to this day is heavily reliant on maritime transport. Over 80% of global trade, by volume, are handled through ports all over the world. We are an island nation, we are *girt by sea*; Australia depends on the sea for trade more than this global average. Maritime security and open sea lines of communication are crucial to our economic growth on the global scale.

A Strategic Fleet Taskforce was established by the Australian government on October 20 2022 to provide guidance on the development of a maritime strategic fleet that will enhance our economic independence and promote enhanced national security objectives.

The fleet will consist of ships with Australian crews flying the red ensign. As we embark on this new chapter with the Strategic Fleet, we must not forget the contribution of the Merchant Navy. Their experience and expertise will be invaluable in supporting the success of this Fleet.

I would also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge our Merchant Mariners who serve in support of the Royal Australian Navy, on board our Australian Defence Vessels and fleet support vessels. Whether it is providing a platform for Fleet Air Arm training, supporting and keeping our submariners safe, or the vast network of tugs and fuel barges that provide logistical support in our ports. Without them, we would be unable to achieve our mission.

As I am in the company of professional mariners, I am sure many of you have a keen interest in the recent AUKUS announcements and while I have this opportunity, I have been asked to briefly touch on the AUKUS nuclear-powered submarine ‘Optimal Pathway’.

This is a crucial time for Australia’s Defence capability; the Optimal Pathway for Australia to acquire conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines has now been determined. This Optimal Pathway will transform Australia’s strategic posture and enhance security and stability in the Indo-Pacific into the future. Acknowledging that Australia has successfully maintained a strong and reliable submarine capability for many decades, the Collins Class Submarine is still among the most effective diesel-electric submarines in existence today. As we move towards nuclear-powered submarines, the Collins Class will continue to be essential to our ability to deter and defend ourselves. However, stealth is the most critical characteristic of a submarine. With shifts in the Indo-Pacific region, there is a demand for stealth, higher levels of speed, range, manoeuvrability, survivability and endurance; demands which can be fulfilled by nuclear-powered submarines.

The Optimal Pathway is only the first pillar of AUKUS – building a lasting capability relationship through the acceleration of advanced strategic capabilities is the focus of Pillar II. Future military capability will be most significantly enhanced by the six areas selected for this pillar: undersea

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warfare, electronic warfare, hypersonic and counter-hypersonics, advanced cyber, quantum technologies and artificial intelligence. The ADF's lethality will be fundamentally increased by these capabilities.

I would like to acknowledge how important our people will be in ensuring the success of our mission, and in crewing and utilising the capabilities we are acquiring. Our people are at the heart of all that we do, and are the most important component of any military capability.

Thank you.

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