

## **NORAH HEAD NSW ANNUAL MERCHANT NAVY MEMORIAL SERVICE**

We again assemble at this lovely tranquil venue, to remember the sinking of the Australian coastal ship **NIMBIN**, close by offshore, on **5 December 1940**. A victim of a German mine, with the loss of seven Australian seafarers,

We also again acknowledge the part played by the Members of the Merchant Navy, in the many, now long forgotten wars that Australia has participated in.

President Roosevelt of the USA in WW2 referred to the Merchant Navy as the 'Fourth Arm of the Military Services'. The Merchant Navy and its personnel played the **KEY** role in both the major world wars. Unfortunately for many years, after the war concluded in 1945, former Merchant Navy seafarers, were not treated with the same recognition by the Government, in comparison to those of the other Three Services. These Three Services were almost totally dependent on the Merchant Navy, for their all-encompassing logistic support. Today the Merchant Navy's outstanding record and efforts are not generally known, appreciated, or is their part, even understood by today's public. This lack of understanding or acknowledgement is especially noted in the National War Memorial Museum, Canberra. The only major Merchant Navy exhibit observed, relates to the tragic sinking of the British owned and manned, Australian Government requisitioned Red Cross ship **CENTAUR** tragically sunk off the Queensland.

### **The Dreadful Human Waste of War.**

War is cruel, and the Merchant Navy during WW2 resulted in 36,000 British and Commonwealth Seafarers, became casualties, this included 678 known Australian Seafarers. This casualty figure resulted in a higher proportion per individual than any other Service in that conflict, and sadly many have only the Sea as their resting place.

Those many brave WW2 Merchant Seafarers, gave their lives for the quality of life that each of us present are fortunate to enjoy today. As the diminishing number of WW2 veterans slowly pass away, it is important that we, the modern generations, keep their memory alive, never forgetting their brave and dedicated efforts

**We acknowledge this year the dreadful tragedy of the loss of HMAS SYDNEY**

We have recently been reminded, with the identification of the body of the lone survivor, that just over 80 years ago, the Royal Australian Navy's light cruiser, **HMAS SYDNEY** was sunk on 19 November 1941 with the loss of 683 lives, in a furious gun battle with the fast German Armed Auxiliary Cruiser, a converted merchant ship, **KORMORAN ex STEIERMARK**, off the Western Australian Coast, near Geraldton. **KORMORAN** had previously intercepted as one of the many ships, she had captured and sunk during her voyaging, was the Australian manned and registered steamer **MAREEBA** on 26 June 1941, near Cocos-Keeling Islands in the Indian Ocean, taking the crew as prisoners of war.

**I would like to give three examples of British Merchant Navy Ships,  
with an association with Australia which were lost tragically in  
WW2**

A little-known incident, and long-forgotten short sharp devastating gun battle took place in the Tasman Sea on August 20, 1940. This was the action between another fast German Armed Auxiliary cruiser **ORION**, ex **KURMARK**, also a requisitioned merchant ship, which took place on August 20, 1940. The New Zealand Shipping Company refrigerated cargo ship **TURAKINA**, was intercepted halfway across the Tasman Sea, on passage from Sydney to Wellington. **TURAKINA** had previously loaded 4,000 ton of lead, at Port Pirie, wheat, dried fruit at Melbourne, and wool at Sydney. In New Zealand ports she was to complete the loading of frozen meat, each of these cargoes being desperately needed for Great Britain's War effort, and survival.

At 5.30pm the **ORION** suddenly came out of heavy rain squalls, and ordered **TURAKINA** to stop, and not to use her radio to alert the shore Radio Stations, with the appropriate Raider Distress Signal. Instead, Captain Jock Laird ignored the German orders on both counts, turned his ship stern onto the raider, to allow his sole armament, an ancient 4.5-inch gun WW1 relic to engage the raider. **TURAKINA** proved no match against the **ORION**'s modern armament of six 5.9-inch quick firing guns. The battle is recorded by the Germans as being all over by 6.12pm. **ORION** followed the brutal shelling with two torpedoes with the **TURAKINA** sinking finally at 6.22pm. An extract from the action recorded by survivors was "*having given the order to abandon ship, Captain Laird came down from the bridge badly injured, and wanted "another shot at the bastards". The Third Officer pointed out at that stage only the muzzle of the gun was above the water!*" The raider fortunately picked up 21 survivors, who

became POWs. Captain Laird was amongst the 38 killed. This first enemy engagement in Australasian waters, shattered the calm and complacency of the Australian and New Zealand Navies and Air forces, that had prevailed since the start of the then European WW2, which had begun 12 months earlier.”

I draw two examples of comparisons between the ships of the Merchant and Naval Services as to how they are remembered,

Two examples of tragic mysterious Merchant ship sinkings with an Australian connection occurred also 80 years ago. The first was the brand-new Federal Navigation Company cargo ship, **NOTTINGHAM**, on her maiden voyage from Glasgow, crossing the Atlantic independently to the USA, with a cargo of whisky for much needed US dollars. On completion of discharge, she was scheduled to commence loading for Australian ports. Instead, **NOTTINGHAM**, was torpedoed on 7 November 1941 just two weeks into her voyage, with the loss of all 62 persons. The sinking was not confirmed until after the war from information gleaned from U-boat records. When she failed to arrive at New York it was assumed she had been a U-boat victim.

Another mysterious loss was that of the large British passenger cargo liner **CERAMIC** that visited Port of Newcastle on many occasions and major Australian ports over three decades. This outstanding ship, which was a familiar sight in Newcastle, during her extended service, was the White Star cargo passenger liner **CERAMIC**, of 1913, built for White Star Line's Australasian service, between Great Britain, and Australia. and New Zealand, which that company had inaugurated in 1899. In the case of **CERAMIC** built for the same company, (White Star Line) originally as her more publicized bigger sister **TITANIC**, the story of which is well covered even today, in print and visual media and her memory is in complete contrast to her younger sister. **CERAMIC** originally carried 600 third class passengers, plus large general cargoes outbound, refrigerated cargoes, minerals and wool on her return. Passage was via Capetown, South Africa, each way, with calls at most main Australian ports. A significant aspect of this ship is that it remained a coal burning steamer with a similar engine arrangement as **TITANIC** for all her 29 years of service. This resulted in her being a frequent visitor to the Port of Newcastle, to take on coal bunkers for her return voyage North.

**CERAMIC** was the longest and largest ship, to trade in Australia at 675 feet in length, for her 29 years and had an enormous cargo capacity, for

the time of 19,500 deadweight tons. A comparison with recently remembered ships of last century, she had the same deadweight carrying capacity as BHP's Whyalla, 1960s built ore carrying sisters, **IRON FINDERS/DAMPIER** and was in fact 100 feet longer (33m) than that pair! **CERAMIC** was the longest ship to visit Australia until the arrival of the Orient Line **ORCADES** in 1948. During WW1 **CERAMIC** was utilized both as a troop ship, for the Australian Expeditionary forces and because of her large refrigeration capacity, was also employed mainly on her original trade with Australia. Sold in 1934, to Shaw Savill Line, who retained her in the Australian service. In WW2, she remained sailing independently in the Australian trade, due to her large refrigerated, general cargo capacity and passenger accommodation. As a coal burning ship, was also able to receive large quantities of good steaming coal in Australia, saving on scarce oil fuel at both voyage terminals .

On 23 November 1942, **CERAMIC** left Liverpool for Australia with 378 passengers, including many women and children together with a crew of 278. The first actual confirmation of her loss was when she failed to arrive at Capetown nearly two weeks later. It was many months later, that it was discovered that she had been torpedoed and sunk by U-boat U-515 at midnight, on the night of 6 December 1942, west of the Azores in the Atlantic. Due to heavy winter gales in the area at the time, there was only one survivor, an Army Engineer which the U -boat picked up the next day, and incarcerated as a POW and not released till wars end. Retribution did come some months later, when U-515 was sunk by US Navy Destroyers, who captured her Captain and Crew with the former being killed trying to escape.

**CERAMIC's** end received no initial publicity due to war time censorship and not much is known about her actual demise, due to her sudden disappearance without even apparently a distress radio signal. In one short action, a ship was lost with 656 deceased nearly as many as the complement of **HMAS SYDNEY** or the total of all the Australian Merchant Seafarers WW2 casualties. In this case however, the casualty list, besides that of the ships Company also included civilians passengers , men, women, and children, destined for Australia. It would have been a horrendous unthinkable death, for her passengers and crew especially the engine room ratings.

**A Final Thought on the predicament of Current Seafarers in this Covid Pandemic World** Now days, Merchant ships are not being

subjected to sinking by Military action, but instead their crews are treated everywhere, like seagoing pariahs, not allowed shore leave, in most ports of the world, unable to be relieved or replaced, difficulty obtaining Covid vaccination, or in many cases remaining unvaccinated. This all exacerbates their predicament, stuck in their steel prisons, with minimum communications, with their families and loved ones far away, as they go about their normal duties. Please always remember today's Merchant Seafarers of the World and their Families as they go about their business keeping the wheels of industry moving and all far from home.

Thank you for your attention as we all look forward to a better 2022.

Iain Steverson 4/12/21