**MERCHANT NAVY PRESENTATION** - **Stories of the Merchant Navy in the Second World War and its subsequent place in the national memory[SLIDE 1]**

**[SLIDE 2]**

*On the night of 11 July 1942, a torpedo fired by U-582 exploded in a munitions hold in SS Port Hunter;*

*‘The Port Hunter rolled over and sank within minutes. Three crew members were rescued after six hours afloat, but the other 88 on board – including at least seven New Zealanders – went down with their ship. Among the victims were Thomas Burke and Edward Walls from Moera, Lower Hutt, who had joined the vessel as deck boys after sailing from New Zealand to Britain on another merchant ship. They were both 15 years old.’[[1]](#footnote-1)*

The *Port Hunter* was one of at least 64 ships trading between New Zealand and Britain to be sunk in the Second World War *–* at the cost of over one thousand lives.

**Introduction**

The term merchant navy refers to a nation’s commercial shipping and crews – also known as the mercantile marine.

This presentation focuses on both the British and New Zealand Merchant Navies because in order to provide a comprehensive record it is important to note that as well as those serving on locally owned ships, about 1000 New Zealanders sailed on British vessels during the war years.

This approach does not set out to ignore the historical reality that the merchant fleets of other nations also made a vital contribution to the defeat of Hitler. The United States Merchant Marine lost 733 cargo ships in the War, and 8,651 of the 215,000 seafarers who served were killed. When the War began, Canada had 38 ocean-going merchant vessels. By war's end 410 merchant ships had been built in Canada. 59 Canadian-registered merchant ships were lost during the War. Some 12,000 sailors served in Canada’s merchant marine, of that number, 1,451 lost their lives on Canadian-flagged ships.

The Norwegian Shipping and Trade Mission (Nortraship) was established in London in April 1940 to administer the Norwegian merchant fleet outside German-controlled areas. Nortraship operated some 1,000 vessels. Of a total of about 30,000 Norwegian merchant seafarers, seamen, 3,670 lost their lives.

**In the beginning**

The British mercantile marine had been bloodied in the First World War - 2500 ships and 15,000 seafarers were lost. New Zealander merchant seafarers had also made an important contribution to the defeat of Germany. In 1914 – more than 5400 New Zealanders earned their living at sea. Over half of these men sailed with one shipping line - Dunedin’s Union Steam Ship Company owned 75 ships. It was the largest shipping line in the Southern Hemisphere – bigger than the five largest Australian companies combined. During the war at least 70 New Zealander mariners were killed – the youngest aged 15, the oldest 59.

The official history of the British mercantile marine records that:

*‘This history will have been written in vain if it does not show conclusively that, had it not been for the devotion, initiative, and hardihood of these merchant seamen and fishermen, the war fleets could not have fulfilled their mission, and the armies of the Allies, so widely distributed, would have failed in their purpose, not from lack of valour but from want of supplies of food and munitions. "An army," it has been said, "moves on its belly," but the army of an island country must necessarily move in ships to its place of action, and the unique characteristic of the Great War was the distances which armies and munitions had to be transported by sea in face of unparalleled dangers.’[[2]](#footnote-2)*

In recognition of their wartime service, the title 'Merchant Navy' was subsequently formally assigned to the British mercantile marine by King George V.

And so, it was as the Merchant Navy that British shipowners and merchant seafarers entered the Second World War. The outbreak of war caught the Merchant Navy largely unprepared. It had suffered grievously from years of depression since World War I. Rivers and lochs were choked with laid-up, rusting ships, and many seafarers had left the service. In some years, the loss in manpower had exceeded 15,000.

**[SLIDE 3]**

At the outbreak of the Second World War, Britain lay vulnerable to defeat by the interruption of her sea lines of communication. She had to be able to move trade, war supplies(equipment and people) across the world’s oceans. A requirement that imposed unusually long hauls on the British merchant fleet, including 186 New Zealand ships, of 3,000 ocean-going ships operated by some 120,000 merchant seafarers. About 185,000 men and women, including 40,000 men of Indian, Chinese and other nationalities, and around 3,000 New Zealanders, served in the Merchant Navy during the Second World War.

New Zealand's shipping links with the United Kingdom were largely in British hands – reflecting our economic dependence on Britain: 84% of New Zealand's exports were sent there and it was the source of 48% of New Zealand’s imports. The Home trade, as it was called in New Zealand, was dominated by four British companies known collectively as the Conference Lines: Shaw Savill & Albion (SS&A), the New Zealand Shipping Company (NZSCo) and its affiliated Federal Line, the Port Line, and the Blue Star Line.

**[SLIDE 4]**

For the Merchant Navy, the war had added new dangers to those that came with working at sea – and its men and women were exposed to them from Day 1. The first merchant vessel to be sunk in the Second World War, SS *Athenia*, was torpedoed by the German submarine, U-30, off the north-western coast of Ireland, at twenty to eight on the evening of 3 September 1939. She sank the next morning – the first of many ships to suffer that fate over the next six years.

**Life in the Merchant Navy[SLIDE 5]**

From August 1939, ships' cargoes, destinations and routes were placed under government or naval control. Nevertheless, the wartime Merchant Navy remained, as it was before, a diverse collection of private companies and ships crewed by a multinational workforce of civilian volunteers who ranged in age from 14 to at least 75. Aside from officers, cooks and stewards, merchant seafarers did not wear uniforms; ashore, they were identified only by a silver lapel badge bearing the letters ‘MN’.

Merchant seafarers are civilians who choose to work at sea. Their working practices in 1939 had changed little in hundreds of years. Seamen lived in dark, confined, damp, poorly ventilated and often rusty dormitory accommodation with wooden board bunks three or more high, without running water and lacking heating. Each man might be provided one or two blankets at best and was expected to bring his own "donkey's breakfast" – a sack cloth bag containing straw which was to serve as a mattress.**[SLIDE 6]**

**[SLIDE 7]**

The most startling example to me of the parlous conditions under which they worked, is that until May 1941, merchant seafarers sailing aboard British vessels attacked and sunk by enemy action received no pay from the moment that their ship sank. If the seafarer was fortunate to survive the sinking only to spend days or weeks in an open lifeboat hoping for rescue, it was regarded as "non-working time", the seafarer was not paid for that time because their employer, the shipping company who had owned the lost vessel, no longer required their services. These circumstances were changed when ‘Emergency Work (Merchant Navy) Order, Notice No. M198’ was passed by the British Parliament. It established a Merchant Navy Reserve Poo, which was to ensure that available seamen were allocated to ships which needed crew, it required seamen to continue to serve for the duration of the war, and they were guaranteed a wage for that period including time spent in lifeboats or in captivity and it provided for two days paid leave earned per month served.

**The perils of war**

**[SLIDE 8]**

Month after month through the war, in both fair and foul weather, the merchant ships and their crews plied back and forth, singly or in convoy. Day and night, lookouts and gun crews stood watch, eyes strained for black specks in the skies that could be enemy planes, and tirelessly scanned the waves for the tell-tale wake of a submarine periscope. It was harrowing, nerve-wracking duty as the seamen sailed on, living day by day and praying for a safe landfall.

At night, they lay in their bunks and hammocks trying to sleep but dreading the sudden thunder of explosions and clangor of bells that signaled a U-boat or air attack, injuries, breathless dashes to the lifeboats, or, at worst, a struggle to survive in frigid waters. Survivors of sinkings told of the fearful minutes between an explosion deep in the bowels of the ship and its final plunge to the bottom, the heartbreak of losing shipmates, and the frenzy of having to fight their way clear through twisted steel, scalding steam, and flames in a desperate effort to reach a lifeboat, sometimes only to find that it had been destroyed. When tankers were torpedoed, survivors who made it overboard found themselves struggling amid burning oil.

The New Zealand History website records: ‘Merchant seafarers often found themselves in the front lines of the war at sea. Many ships were torpedoed or bombed; survivors sometimes spent days or weeks in lifeboats before being rescued. More than 140 New Zealand merchant seafarers lost their lives, and a similar number were taken prisoner. No other group of New Zealand civilians faced such risks during wartime.'

**Surviving a sinking**

During the war, the Merchant Navy recorded many incredible sagas of survival by sailors after their ship had been sunk. One able seaman found himself drifting alone in the Atlantic, clinging to a substantial piece of wreckage, after his ship was sunk in the spring of 1943. All that he had was a raw cabbage and a snapshot of his wife. Occasionally munching a leaf of the cabbage, drinking rainwater and melted hail or snow, and talking to the photograph, he managed to survive for 18 days until a ship picked him up.

**[SLIDE 9]**

Even more remarkable was the story of Poon Lim, a young Chinese steward who took to a life raft when his ship, the *Benlomond*, was torpedoed on November 23, 1942, while sailing westward unescorted from Cape Town to Paramaribo, Dutch Guiana. He was the only survivor of a crew of 47. Subsisting on the small provisions he found on the raft, augmented by whatever fish and seagulls he could catch, Poon drifted for week after week. The combined effect of the equatorial sun, winds, and salt rotted his clothing to shreds and turned his skin into a mass of blisters, but he kept fighting to stay alive. He became so weak that he could not sit up, let alone catch fish with his makeshift line.

On the 133rd day, reduced to a scarcely breathing bundle of bones and in the last stages of starvation, Poon was spotted by Brazilian fishermen. They landed him at the port of Belem, where he was cared for at the local hospital. The Chinese sailor amazed his doctors and nurses by making a full recovery in just over two weeks. He was later decorated as a Member of the British Empire.

**The experiences of captivity**

**[SLIDE 10]**

Around 140 New Zealand merchant seafarers were taken prisoner during the Second World War.

The first large group of New Zealanders to be captured during the Second World War were seamen (and passengers) from the *Holmwood*, *Komata*, *Rangitane* and other ships sunk by German raiders in late 1940. Some 70 New Zealand seamen from these ships were subsequently released on Emirau Island, after signing an oath not to 'bear arms' against Germany for the remainder of the war.

Additionally, at least 21 New Zealanders, mostly captured in the Atlantic, were interned in a special Merchant Navy camp, Milag Nord, at Westertimke, near Bremen.

However, for Allied servicemen and civilians alike, captivity in the Far East was generally more gruelling than it was in Europe. In contrast to the Germans, Japan's treatment of captive merchant seafarers was unpredictable and often brutal.

Fifty-five officers and crew from the Union Steamship Company vessel MV *Hauraki* were the largest group of New Zealanders to fall into Japanese hands during the War. In 1940 the *Hauraki*, manned principally by New Zealanders and Australians, was requisitioned by the British Ministry of War for use on wartime ‘special services’. In June 1942, laden with war supplies destined for the Middle East, she sailed from Wellington to Sydney, and then to Fremantle for re-fuelling. The departure from Fremantle was delayed due to some storm damage and it was not until 4 July that the ship resumed her voyage and set off for the next port - Colombo.

About 100 kilometres south of Sri Lanka, at approximately 2230 on 12 July, *Hauraki* was intercepted by two Japanese armed Merchant Cruisers. A shot across the bows was followed by a Japanese boarding party. The Second Engineer recalled that:

‘The 2nd Officer Allan McIntyre (the coolest man on the ship) was sent to collect the firearms from the cabins, which he did under the eye of the guard and when walking along the deck to deliver same, deliberately walked to the ship’s side and dropped them over. The Nips were too amazed to speak and after a little talk among themselves let the matter drop.’

After the War two *Hauraki* officers, Allan McIntyre and the Chief Engineer, William Falconer, were awarded the OBE to recognise, in the words of their citation, that when ‘MV *Hauraki* was captured by two Japanese raiders both Officers displayed courage and resource in planning and executing extremely hazardous tasks whilst under the surveillance of armed guards.’

*Hauraki* was forced to sail under armed guard to Singapore where most of the passengers and non- essential crew members were placed in Changi Jail. However, twenty-three of the crew, mainly engineers, were made to steam the ship to the Mitsubishi Dockyard in Yokohama Harbour in Japan. There they were interred and forced to work alongside military prisoners in, first, a shipyard and later at a steel works.

Of life in a Japanese Prisoner of War Camp, a Hauraki crew member, Bill Hall, reflecting some sixty years later, is quoted in the book ‘Hell Or High Water – New Zealand Merchant Seafarers Remember The War’:

*‘The trouble was the low amount of food and the hard work. They really bloody worked us like slaves. It was a great strain living and working in those conditions. You didn’t know if you were going to be alive the next day. It was just a matter of staying alive, day by day. I’d say, I’m alive for another day’. Conditions were so grim. It was a hell of a life.’*

One of the casualties of that life was the ship’s Australian master, Albert Creese. He never recovered from his ordeal and died on 31 August 1947. His name does not appear in any Roll of Honour – but it does appear in the Australian War Memorial’s Commemorative Roll which ‘records the names of those Australians who died during or as a result of wars in which Australians served, but who were not serving in the Australian Armed Forces and therefore not eligible for inclusion on the Australian Roll of Honour. It includes those Australians who died while members of Allied Forces, the Merchant Navy, philanthropic organisations attached to the forces, or as war correspondents or photographers.’

Five of the *Hauraki* crew died in captivity – one in Singapore and four in Japan; among them were one Australian, one Englishman and three New Zealanders. Each of their names is recorded in the Roll of Honour in the National War Memorial in Wellington.

**The Battle of the Atlantic**

**[SLIDE 11]**

In fighting the long and bitter Battle of the Atlantic, the longest and one of the most decisive campaigns of the War, more than 36,200 Allied sailors, airmen and servicemen and women died. Alongside these, some 36,000 merchant seafarers were lost and 2,232 vessels sunk. Almost all of the New Zealand merchant seafarers who served in the Atlantic did so under the British flag.

The Germans paid a high price too. Forty thousand German officers and men went to war in U-boats. Only 7,000 went home. Eighty percent of all operational U-boats were sunk.

At its core was the Allied naval blockade of Germany, announced the day after the declaration of war, and Germany's subsequent counter-blockade. It did not reach its conclusion until the War itself ended; although it was evident by March 1943 that the Allies had prevailed – and the will of those who manned the convoy ships had not been broken.

**[SLIDE 12 and Slide 13]**

The campaign peaked from mid-1940 through to the end of 1943. It involved thousands of ships in more than 100 convoy battles and perhaps 1,000 single-ship encounters, in a theatre covering millions of square miles of ocean. The situation changed constantly, with one side or the other gaining advantage, as participating countries surrendered, joined and even changed sides in the war, and as new weapons, tactics, counter-measures and equipment were developed by both sides. The Allies gradually gained the upper hand, overcoming German surface-raiders by the end of 1942 and defeating the U-boats by mid-1943, though losses due to U-boats continued until the war's end. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill later wrote, *‘The only thing that really frightened me during the war was the U-boat peril. I was even more anxious about this battle than I had been about the glorious air fight called the 'Battle of Britain'.’*

In their Second World War history, American historians Murray and Millett conclude:

*‘In the end, though, it was the courageous willingness of Allied merchant sailors to go down to the sea despite the appalling conditions of the North Atlantic and the terrifying losses on some convoy runs that won the day. As the solemn service of celebration at Liverpool Cathedral noted in August 1945: These were then men/who were her salvation/who conquered the waters and underwaters/who/in storm and calm/taught England to live anew,/and fed her children.’*

**[SLIDE 14]**

In his history of the Battle of the Atlantic, the American author David White, writes:

*‘Beneath these waters (of the Atlantic Ocean) lie the countless graves of navy sailors and merchant seamen who perished at the hands of German U-boats to keep the supplies flowing to feed World War II. There are no headstones out here, no markers, no monuments. For sailors lost at sea, there are no tablets. There is only this place, the wind-whipped, empty, anonymous ocean.’*

**The Arctic Convoys**

**[SLIDE 16]**

In telling the stories of the heroic efforts of the Merchant Navy that were vital to any hope the Allies had of victory in the Second World War, the focus has been on the Battle of the Atlantic – with the Arctic Convoys, in the words of one writer, being ‘*obscured by the great struggle in the Atlantic’*.

After Germany invaded the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, the Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin, demanded help and Britain and its allies provided supplies by sea. The most direct route was by sea, around northern Norway to the Soviet ports of Murmansk and Archangel. The route passed through a narrow funnel between the Arctic ice pack and German bases in Norway, and was very dangerous, especially in winter when the ice came further south. Many of the convoys were attacked by German submarines, aircraft and warships.

There were 78 convoys between August 1941 and May 1945, with two gaps with no sailings between July and September 1942, and March and November 1943.

**[SLIDE 16]**

About 1,400 merchant ships delivered the supplies to the Soviet Union under the Lend-Lease program, escorted by ships of the Royal Navy, Royal Canadian Navy, and the U.S. Navy. Eighty-five merchant vessels and 16 Royal Navy warships (two cruisers, six destroyers, eight other escort ships) were lost. Nazi Germany's Kriegsmarine lost a number of vessels including one battleship, three destroyers, 30 U-boats, and many aircraft. The convoys demonstrated the Allies' commitment to helping the Soviet Union, prior to the opening of a second front, and tied up a substantial part of Germany's naval and air forces.

In his history of the Second World War, writing of the Arctic convoys, the British historian, Sir Max Hastings writes: *‘Merchantmen crawled across the chill sea more slowly than a running man, exposed to bomb and torpedo assaults more deadly than those of the Atlantic campaign. A cruise senior officer warned the Admiralty in May(1942): ‘We in the Navy are paid to do this sort of job. But it is beginning to ask too much of the men of the Merchant Navy. We may be able to avoid bombs and torpedoes with our speed – a six- or -eight knot ship has not this advantage.’*

**The courage of merchant seafarers**

For their service and gallantry during the War, men and women of the Merchant Navy were awarded five George Crosses, 213 Distinguished Service Crosses, 18 Distinguished Service Orders, 1,077 Orders of the British Empire, 1,717 British Empire Medals, 50 Commanders of the British Empire, and 10 knighthoods. They paid a high price—at the Merchant Navy War Memorial in London, a sunken garden walled with Portland stone close to the Tower of London, the names of 23,837 seamen who have no grave but the sea are emblazoned in bronze. The graves of another 8,000 of their shipmates lie in cemeteries scattered around the world.

**[SLIDE 17]**Here is the posthumous George Cross citation for one nineteen-year-old merchant seafarer, Apprentice Donald Clarke - who managed to get his shipmates clear of their burning ship though mortally injured himself:

*‘When the painter was cast off the boat drifted back towards the burning ship and it was clear to all on board that it would require a tremendous effort to pull it out of danger. Most of the occupants, however, were so badly burned that they were unable to help, but Apprentice Clarke took an oar and pulled heartily for two hours without a word of complaint. It was not until after the boat was clear that it was realized how badly he had been injured. His hands had to be cut away from the oar as the burnt flesh had stuck to it. He had pulled as well as anyone, although he was rowing with the bones of his hands. Later when lying at the bottom of the boat his thoughts were still with his shipmates and he sang to keep up their spirits. Next day he died, having shown the greatest fortitude. By his supreme effort, undertaken without thought of self and in spite of terrible agony, Apprentice Clarke ensured the safety of his comrades in the boat. His great heroism and selfless devotion were in keeping with the highest traditions of the Merchant Navy.’*

**The vulnerability of the Merchant Navy - Convoy PQ17**

Convoy PQ 17, consisting of 36 merchant vessels, mostly British and American, sailed for Russia from Iceland on 27 June 1942. This is the convoy which the British historian Max Hastings has described as, ‘*the most discreditable episode of the Royal Navy’s war.’* After its decimation he writes, *‘ The shame of the Royal Navy was plain to behold, as were the disgust of the Americans and the contempt of the Russians.’*

The convoy’s close escort was six British and French destroyers – which were joined by two American destroyers four days later on 1 July, two anti-aircraft ships, four corvettes and two submarines. Three rescue ships accompanied the convoy. Close cover to Bear Island, one weeks steaming from Iceland and about 1600 miles from its final destination, was to be provided by two British and two American cruisers and three destroyers. Distant support was one British and one American battleship, the aircraft carrier HMS Victorious, two cruisers and fourteen destroyers including two from the United States Navy. In addition, thirteen submarines patrolled the exits off the bases of the German surface forces.

By 1 July the German’s knew the whereabouts of the convoy and on 2 July a torpedo-bomber attack had been ordered. On 3 July British signal intelligence had evidence of German fleet movements. The principal German Navy threat to the convoy was the battleship Tirpitz – and knowing the whereabouts of this ship became an obsession of the Royal Navy’s Chief, Admiral Sir Dudley Pound from around 3 July as the convoy edged closer to Russia.

The next day, 4 July, there was no intelligence information indicating the Tirpitz at sea and there was none indicating she was in harbour. And, in the words of the British historian Correlli Barnett, ‘*Thus far PQ17 had come through almost unscathed and in high fettle…That evening of 4 July a feeling of elation buoyed up the ships’ companies of PQ17 and its escorts.’*

And then in the course of less than 30 minutes the lives of everyone involved with the convoy were changed forever. Pound had determined the Tirpitz was at sea and posed an immediate threat. At 10pm a signal was received from the Admiralty ordering the cruiser force to withdraw westward at high speed. It was followed 12 minutes later by a signal which said ‘*Owing to the threat from surface ships, convoy is to disperse and proceed to Russian ports.’*  Three minutes later the infamous signal *‘Convoy is to scatter’* was sent.

The Tirpitz was not at sea and, but U-boats and German aircraft were. As a consequence of Pound’s decisions. They were able to attack the unprotected merchant vessels as they wished – sinking twenty-three of them. **[SLIDE 18]**

A government minister was sent to Glasgow, in Scotland, to speak to returning PQ17 survivors.

‘*We know what the convoy cost us,’* he told them. *‘But I want to tell you whatever the cost, it was worth it.’* Max Hastings records that, *He was howled down by embittered men. The government threw a censorship blanket over the whole episode…Only after the war was the magnitude of the Admiralty’s blunder revealed to the public.’*

In his book on the Arctic convoys, the British historian Richard Woodman writes of Convoy PQ17, ‘*It has been suggested that the cost of PQ17 has been exaggerated…but the surviving merchant seaman remembered not that ‘only’ 153 of their comrades died in the catastrophe that followed the scattering of PQ17, but that not one naval sailor died in their defence.’*

**The end of the War in Europe**

During the six years of the War in Europe, the war at sea never ceased. And, late in the evening of 7 May, 1945, the day of Germany’s unconditional surrender and the day before VE-Day, Kapitanleutnant Klusmeier, commanding a new Type XXIII U-boat, sighted one last Allied convoy sailing out of Edinburgh into the Pentland Firth. The submarine captain—in disobedience of German Navy orders—fired his torpedoes into the Canadian steamer *Avondale Park* and the old Norwegian tramp steamer *Sneland*. Twenty-three seamen were killed. These were to be the last sinkings by a U-boat in the Battle of the Atlantic, and a short while later, the war in Europe officially ended.

In summing things up, the British historian Correlli Barnett writes:

*‘For the second time in 25 years, the Royal Navy had had to fight the U-boat and a German fleet of formidable ships. To wage war against such odds had cost the Navy in casualties nearly one tenth of its total wartime strength…The British Merchant Marine, staunch shipmate of the Royal Navy throughout the worst of the storm, the very sinew of Britain’s survival and victory – it too had paid dearly, with 30,248 crewman drowned or killed in action.’*

In October of 1945 the British House of Commons passed a resolution that read:

*‘That the thanks of this House be accorded to the Officers and Men of the Merchant Navy for the steadfastness with which they maintained our stocks of food and materials; for their services in transporting men, munitions and fuel to all the battles, over all the seas; and for their gallantry with which, though a civilian service, they met and fought the constant attacks of the enemy. This House doth acknowledge the Merchant Navy with humble gratitude and the sacrifice of all those who have given their lives that others may live as free men, and offers its heartfelt sympathy to their relatives in their proud sorrow. We shall never forget them.’*

**After the end – and in the national memory**

If the military history of New Zealand were to be portrayed in a tapestry, it would essentially be all khaki coloured thread, and barely discernible would be one thin dark blue one representing the Navy contribution, and one thin light blue one the Air Force. Of the Merchant Navy there would be no indication at all. And yet – and yet – and yet they have served valiantly in two World Wars – and vitally in the many years outside war. It has been said that wars are fought twice – first on the battlefield, and then in their remembrance.

So, how does the Merchant Navy and its seafarers sit in the national memory.

A useful starting point to search for the answer is the National War Memorial. In the Hall of Memories, the New Zealand Red Ensign brings a spark of colour along the ensigns of the three Services. And the Merchant Navy is similarly acknowledged by a plaque on the western wall of the Hall of Memories – and the ‘Seven Seas Bell’ in the carillon acknowledges the service of the mercantile marine in the First World War. The inscription on the bell reads:

*My Name is*

*The Seven Seas*

*Cherish me as a Tribute to the*

*British Mercantile Marine, 1914-18.*

*‘If blood be the price of admiralty,*

*Lord God, we ha’ paid in full.’*

*- Kipling*

*‘Lights are bright and all’s well.’*

The Merchant Navy’s presence in the National War Memorial is not as the so-called ‘fourth Service’ – in my view it stands there in its own right, with its own identity, heritage and rituals. And, since 2010, on 3 September every year a Merchant Navy Day ceremony is held there – the date an acknowledgement to the attack on SS *Athenia.*

**BUT** at the entrance to the Hall of Memories is the Roll Honour which records the names of the men and women in the Navy, Army, Air Force and Merchant Navy who have died in the service of this country. There is also a 1939-1945 Merchant Navy Roll of Honour on the Ministry of Culture website with the following note: *The exact number of New Zealand Merchant Navy war deaths will probably never be known with certainty, as the recording of personal information, nationality, next-of-kin and service in the Merchant Navy was not as comprehensive as it was for the armed forces.* **AND** only about half the names in that Roll of Honour are recorded in the Hall of Memories.

**BUT** more often than not there will be no mention of the Merchant Navy in national speeches outside Anzac Day and the Merchant Navy wreath is laid among those of various Veterans’ organisations.

In 2005, the Ministry of Culture and Heritage produced a book, *‘Hell or High Water – New Zealand Merchant Seafarers Remember the War’* which is based interviews with fifteen Second World War Merchant Navy Veterans.

**BUT** in New Zealand and the United Kingdom, in the stories of the Second World War, those of the Merchant Navy are only to be found as fragments scattered among those of ‘the Navy’ in the multitude of books on the war at sea.

**AND** to acknowledge the maritime component of the First World War centenary was about New Zealand’s hospital ships. Nothing about merchant ships and their indispensable role in moving troops and trade.

**AND** in the around 600-page *Oxford Companion to New Zealand Military History* the merchant marine, as it is referred to, gets one page.

In his book on the Arctic convoys, the British historian Richard Woodman writes:

*‘…the greatest lesson of the Second World War was that supply by sea is vital. Naval histories concentrate upon naval affairs, yet the contribution of merchant shipping and its seamen is often overlooked, its ships anonymous, its seamen forgotten. A convoy’s heart is its mercantile core, justifying the very existence of a fleet, but merchant ships are ordinary things, and like all ordinary things are not noticed, even in their absence. They do not conspicuously cover themselves with glory…’*

**Closing**

I will close with this proverb:

He heu uta ka kitea, he heu moana e kore e kitea *– A clearing on land can be seen, but at sea any disturbance soon disappears – from sight and memory*

**[SLIDE 19]**

1. Hell or High Water – edited by Neill Atkinson [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. World War 1 at Sea - THE MERCHANT NAVY, Volume 3, Spring 1917 to November 1918, by Sir Archibald Hurd [↑](#footnote-ref-2)