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# *Merchant mariners in the Battle for Australia*

**Keith Pryor<sup>1</sup>**

It is an honour and a privilege to share with you the commemoration of those who played their part in the Battle for Australia, and to speak about the merchant mariners who supported our armed services during that grim period from early 1942 when war reached our shores and we faced the real prospect of invasion by Japanese forces.

The fall of Singapore hit Australia like a thunderclap. It heralded a struggle that stretched our nation's resources to the limit. Prime Minister John Curtin called it the Battle for Australia and declared: "It is now work or fight as we have never worked or fought before". That desperate need for resources caused the Australian government to call upon the Merchant Navy to transport troops, equipment, ammunition and supplies to support our armed services. The Merchant Navy also had to maintain trade links, including those to support industries vital to the war effort, like the steel industry.

## **Australia's Merchant Navy**

Merchant mariners were civilians, accustomed to dealing with the ever present hazards of seafaring, but they were not trained for war. Some were very young – there were deck boys as young as 14; and some were quite old – and for most there was no retiring age.

During World War II, some Australian merchant mariners were drafted to fill vacancies in overseas ships whilst in Australian waters and they went on to serve in areas of conflict remote from Australia. A large but unknown number of them lost their lives.

I finished school in December 1941, within days of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour. I had no plans to become a merchant mariner, but took a job with The Adelaide Steamship Company Ltd., intending to follow my two older brothers into the Australian Military Forces when I turned 18. Part of my job was to board the Company's ships when they came to Sydney. How vividly I remember the grim sight of the *Allara* when towed in for repair with her stern section blown away after being torpedoed by a Japanese submarine just off Newcastle, claiming the lives of five seamen. I met with many of the Company's seagoing staff and learned of some of their terrifying experiences. Still I developed a fascination for ships that endured throughout my long career in the Australian maritime industry.

After further education and training with The Adelaide Steamship Company, I saw it as a great opportunity to join the company owned AHS<sup>2</sup> *Manunda* as the Assistant Purser, at the age of 17, and that ship then became my home over several years.

At the outbreak of World War II, Australia had a large fleet of cargo and passenger ships that were versatile and adaptable to military needs. Some were commissioned into the defence forces, and others were used as hospital ships and troopships crewed by merchant mariners. Many of the cargo ships were old hand-fired coal burners; they were slow and left a trail of smoke from the funnel that made them highly visible and easy prey to submarine attack.

War touched our coastline from late 1940, when German mines were laid off the south-eastern and southern coasts of Australia. Two allied merchant ships were destroyed and one was badly damaged. On 5 December 1940, the New South Wales North Coaster, *Nimben*, struck one of those mines off Norah Head and sank with the loss of seven lives; and, in March 1941, a large fishing trawler fell victim and sank with the loss of another seven lives.

## **The Pacific War**

The outbreak of the Pacific War and the bombing of Darwin on 19 February 1942 heralded difficult and dangerous times for merchant mariners. In the first Japanese air raid on Darwin, apart from the destruction and damage to allied ships, the Australian merchant ships *Neptuna* and *Zealandia* were sunk with the loss of 47 lives, and the cargo vessel *Barossa* was badly damaged. *Manunda's* boats were rescuing burnt and injured seamen from sinking ships when she experienced a near miss and then a direct hit causing severe damage. Despite the chaos, *Manunda* continued to treat the wounded, and crew and staff continued to man the life-boats, rescuing injured from the harbour.

Fifty-eight from the *Manunda's* crew and medical staff were wounded and twelve were killed that day, including a nursing sister, Sister Margaret de Mestre. She was just 26 and the first Australian Imperial Force nurse to be killed in action on Australian soil. This was a deliberate attack on a hospital ship. The Geneva and Hague Conventions – meant to afford immunity from attack on hospital ships – were disregarded on that day, as they were again in May 1943 when AHS *Centaur* was deliberately torpedoed and sank off

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<sup>1</sup>Mr Pryor is a member of the Institute. This paper is based on his address delivered at the Battle for Australia Commemoration Service at the Sydney Cenotaph on 5 September 2012.

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<sup>2</sup>Australian Hospital Ship

southern Queensland, with the tragic loss of 268 lives. This attack was carried out before dawn to achieve maximum effect on sleeping victims, and the ship sank within a few minutes.

After the *Centaur* sinking, concern for the safety of the remaining hospital ships was so great that *Manunda* was laid up in Sydney and had all of the hospital ship colours, illumination and markings removed. She was painted grey and heavily armed and crewed with 15 naval gunners. But having only left port for gunnery trials, the decision was reviewed and she was then reinstated as a compliant hospital ship before returning to its normal wartime role.

After the attack on Darwin, military needs grew more urgent and the need for shipping capacity increased as Japanese submarines began to attack merchant ships off the eastern coast of Australia, targeting vital cargoes like iron ore for steel production. Shipping capacity diminished with the escalating loss of ships and their skilled crews.

Whilst merchant ships were damaged and destroyed in other areas of the Pacific, 19 merchant ships, including several iron ore carriers, were sunk along the New South Wales coast, and many were damaged, sometimes within sight of land. Mostly, the public was unaware of what was happening as news of these attacks was generally suppressed at the time. A total of 30 Australian and allied merchant ships were sunk in Australian waters, and the death and injury toll of merchant mariners from these sinkings was horrendous.

When I joined the *Manunda*, she was transporting sick and wounded Australian servicemen and some Americans from New Guinea to Sydney and Brisbane. The white-hulled ship, banded in green with red crosses, was always fully illuminated at night and became a familiar sight all over the Pacific War areas.

Battle-weary patients were always relieved to be taken aboard into the clean and orderly wards and into the caring hands of the dedicated Australian Army doctors and nursing sisters for the voyage home. Arrival at No. 6 Wharf Darling Harbour was always memorable with the military ambulances queued along that strip of road, then known as the Hungry Mile, waiting to shuttle up to 400 patients to the Concord Military Hospital.

*Manunda* was subsequently kept busy during the Australian-led offensive into Borneo, transporting the sick and wounded from Tarakan, Balikpapan and Labuan.

When Japan capitulated, we were 12 hours into a voyage from Morotai bound for Tarakan when recalled to Morotai to prepare to pick up prisoners of war in North Borneo and Australians in Singapore. Calling first to Labuan to pick up British and Indian prisoners of war from the Batu Lintang prison camp for transport to Singapore, *Manunda* was the first Australian ship to enter Singapore at that time. The approaches to

Singapore had been heavily mined by the British and then again by the Japanese during their occupation. Following a skilfully-piloted British naval escort enabled our passage and we berthed at Empire Dock on 10 September 1945, two days before the official surrender of the Japanese. On arrival, *Manunda's* medical and nursing staff were rushed to Changi, only to be shocked and appalled at the condition of the Australians. For some they had arrived just in time, but for many others they were too late.

When the Australians from Changi were embarked, I watched from the deck with a group of others. I can never forget the abhorrence – those barely living human skeletons being stretchered aboard. Before our eyes was the evidence of years of slavery, brutality, and starvation – this image of shocking inhumanity that affected the mindset of Australians for decades. After a slow and careful voyage with such frail patients, our welcomes at Fremantle, Melbourne and Sydney were unforgettable.

We cared for so many brave and special patients. One of them was Sister Vivian Bulwinkel, who survived the sinking of the *Vyner Brook* and the Banka Island massacre, and who, despite being shot right through her body, continued to care for a wounded soldier for a further 12 days until they were both captured. The soldier died, but Sister Bulwinkel, spent 3½ years in captivity before being taken aboard the *Manunda*.

With other ships' staff, I was proud and privileged to attend the official surrender of the Japanese to Lord Louis Mountbatten at Singapore on 12 September 1945.

On a subsequent voyage, we sailed to Kure, Japan, with a medical unit and for a prolonged stay as a standby hospital for the British Commonwealth Occupation Force. In nearby Hiroshima, we were able to wander among the ruins to see the results of the action that had finally brought about the conclusion of the Pacific War. The almost total devastation of that city was a sight that I can never erase.

## Conclusion

Today, we pay tribute to the men and women of the Army, Navy, Air Force and the Australian Nursing Services, who made their contributions to the Battle for Australia. Let us remember those who are known to us. I think today of my two late older brothers, who both served courageously in the Australian Army. Let us remember the many more Australians who live on in stories and images that speak of courage, service and sacrifice, like those prisoners of war who suffered inhumanity and starvation at the hands of their captors. Let us remember with gratitude the merchant mariners who did all that they were asked and so much more – to 'work and fight as never before' – and who played such a vital role in the Battle for Australia. Let us especially remember those who paid the ultimate sacrifice.