

Maritime community commemorates Merchant Navy

With thanks Lindsay Reed, DCN Daily Cargo News



On Sunday 14 April the newly finished stone plaques were in place at the Merchant Navy War Memorial in Rookwood cemetery as representatives from naval and maritime organisations took their seats at the 59th Annual Commemoration.

Sister Mary Leahy led the opening prayers, acknowledging the tragic events in Bondi Junction the previous day – sentiments that were echoed by all who spoke on the day. Finola McMahon then lifted the spirits as she led the congregation in a rousing rendition of *God is Our Strength and Refuge*, accompanied by the Bankstown and Yagoona Brass Band.

Following Captain Ted van Bronswijk's gospel reading, MNMWF Chairman elect Sean Barret introduced the guest of honour, NSW Governor Margaret Beazley, who delivered the 2024 Merchant Navy Address. In her address, the governor commended "the work done here to enhance the memorial, in particular the inclusion of the four stone tablets". Together, she said, they "form a record of the names and respective ships of 864 Australian Merchant Mariners who sacrificed their lives in the first and second world wars".



Newly installed stone tablets

Quoting Australian wartime prime minister John Curtin, Ms Beazley spoke of the vital role of the merchant mariner, and of their importance to Australians: “Have you ever contemplated, what would be Australia’s position if the lend lease lifeline with America was snapped ... have you paused to realise what would be our plight, if nothing at all were to be brought here?” The governor impressed what a difference those merchant mariners made – and what a price they paid.

Of the inception of the merchant navy memorial fund committee, Her Excellency noted that its formation was first announced in the *Daily Commercial News* (now *Daily Cargo News*) in July of 1945, when reporting on a meeting held at Sydney Town Hall. She reflected on the journey of that committee, from then until present day and the official opening of the MNWMF new and remedial works. Concluding her address, she again quoted the wartime prime minister in praising the merchant mariner: “He doesn’t wear a uniform as we know uniforms, but nevertheless he wears a uniform of service, without which, we would be lost.”

Merchant navy veteran Don Kennedy then delivered the Ode of Remembrance and in his speech that followed, he heartily and genuinely thanked David Field for the work he has done for the Merchant Navy Memorial. “David, I want to thank you for what you’ve done. I want to thank you for what you’ve done in Canberra, and for what you’ve done here for us.” David Field has stepped down as chairman of the Merchant Navy War Memorial Fund, and will be officially succeeded by Sean Barrett on 17 May, 2024.

Following Mr Kennedy’s address, and led by the governor, wreaths were laid by representatives from a range of industry groups.

Rounding off the proceedings, Ms Denise Ora, CEO of the Metropolitan Memorial Parks Land Manager also addressed those gathered, emphasising the importance of ensuring these “brave individuals never, ever are forgotten” and that future generations “understand and respect, the significance of the Merchant Navy in history”. She concluded: “May their memory continue to inspire generations to come. Lest we forget.

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