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Minister for Defence
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National Merchant Navy War Memorial 30th annual commemoration, Canberra

Thank you, David, for that warm welcome. Let me begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet — the Ngunnawal People — and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. Also as Minister for Defence, I would like to acknowledge in particular, the service provided by our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women who have also served with great distinction in times of war and peace.

We have a number of distinguished guests here with us today that I would like to acknowledge and welcome. First of all to my West Australian friend and colleague the Honourable Nola Marino, Assistant Minister for Regional Development and Territories; Vice Admiral Michael Noonan AO, Chief of Navy; Representatives of the Diplomatic Corps; David Field, Chairman of the Merchant Navy War Memorial Fund who kindly introduced me; and Mr John Kewa, Lay Chaplain Missions to Seafarers in Port Kembla. John thank you very much for your heartfelt and warm prayers today.

To the wonderful musicians and especially Finola with her beautiful voice who battled on despite some technical problems with the microphone and to the band as well. And to our Merchant Navy vets, their family members; and friends of our Merchant Navy organisations, you are most welcome and we are very honoured to have you here today.

Welcome, all. It is my great pleasure to join you here today to officially acknowledge the important new works to our National Merchant Navy War Memorial. The new panels and plaques bear the names of all of the 862 Australian merchant mariners who made the ultimate sacrifice for Australia during the First and Second World Wars. For far too long their stories, their service and their sacrifice were unknown and unrecognized here in Australia.

Little was told about their deaths during the war years, and little has been told since. But just because these men did not die in military uniform — just because their names cannot be found on the Australian War Memorial's Roll of Honour — does not lessen their sacrifice, both of them or of their loved ones. Service is service. Sacrifice is sacrifice.

Today we pay tribute to those men, and their families. We honour their courage, bravery, service and sacrifice. I congratulate the Board of the Merchant Navy War Memorial Fund and the National Capital Authority on your cooperation in completing this meaningful work. I also join David in acknowledging the work of the project's architect and construction managers. It's wonderful and it's certainly time that our merchant sailors now get the recognition they so rightly deserve.

Let's recall the vision of the Merchant Navy War Memorial Fund: 'The Australian Merchant Navy — a titled emblazoned in battle and honoured in freedom — [to be] recognised as an important part of Australian maritime history and social culture. And this memorial here today, certainly does that. Increasingly, because of your work — because of memorials like this and days like today — Australians are learning more about the brave merchant sailors who sacrificed so much for our nation. For that, I sincerely thank you and I applaud you.

Our merchant sailors were simply ordinary men — ordinary Australians — doing a job they had done for many years. But when World War One broke out, and then again during World War Two, their daily workplace became a bloodied battlefield — and merchant ships became a lucrative target. That's because their contribution to the war effort was vital. They crewed hospital ships, and transported food, water, fuel, ammunition, and so many other vital supplies. Attacks on those merchant ships amounted to attacks on our front line soldiers.

As the crew member of a German raider once said: "Every ounce of petroleum, every grain of wheat, every piece of war equipment that we could stop reaching the enemy would be so much nearer to starving [them] into submission." Responsible for a number of submarine attacks off Australia's east coast in 1942 and 1943, it's clear the Japanese thought that way, too. Merchant shipping was dangerous work — and sailors knew that.

It is said, during the Second World War, the rate of merchant sailors who died was higher than Australia's fighting services.

But despite this grave risk, merchant sailors pressed on with the job at hand. They were not trained for war, and their ships were not prepared for bullets, bombs and torpedoes. What it must have taken them to pack their bags, kiss their family members goodbye, dig deep and board those ships — is unimaginable to most of us. And the desperate fear they must have felt when a torpedo struck their ship in the middle of the night, as was so often the case. None of them wore a uniform, yet their courage equalled that of our uniformed sailors, soldiers and airmen and women.

Among the ranks of our merchant navy are stories of war heroes. Like the story of S. F. Stafford, whose name you will find on this memorial. Stafford was a wireless operator on the Iron Chieftain, which, on a chilly winter's night in 1942, was attacked just east of Sydney. He went down with the ship. But he had stayed on board to signal the ship's position to rescuers.

Survivors said they owed their rescue, and their life, to him. Like the other men whose names are on this memorial, his final resting place is an unmarked grave at the bottom of the sea.

It's so important on days like today, we acknowledge that merchant sailors were not given the same recognition, respect and recompense as our servicemen and women. Also, those left widowed by the sinking of a merchant ship were not given a war widow's pension. And it wasn't until the mid-1970s that sailors from the merchant navy marched on Anzac Day. We cannot re-write history, but we can make sure history is properly recorded for future generations.

With us today are survivors from merchant ships that were attacked during the Second World War. And I was delighted to meet them earlier. We have Don Kennedy, Frank O'Dwyer, Captain Michael Mortimer, John Hargreaves, Ken Edwards OAM, and, Don Capone and Mr Patrick O'Donnell who informs me that he's a Kiwi and came here to serve in the Australian Merchant Navy. Gentleman thank you all very much for your service. On behalf of the Prime Minister, myself as Defence Minister, you served with great honour and you made an important contribution to our nation. Again I thank you very much for that service.

Also here with us is Ken Iredale. Ken was just two months old when the Iron Knight was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine, killing his father. Ken where are you? Today we honour Ken's father's

service and sacrifice, just as we honour all the other Australian merchant sailors who died at sea during the wars. We also honour and remember all of the families. Australia is so lucky that throughout our history— and, indeed, today — brave men and women, in and out of uniform, put themselves in harm's way for the betterment of our nation.

For all of the family members here, the widows and to your families, your children and your grandchildren, I say thank you very much for your service in supporting your merchant navy seaman. Your service was just as important and your sacrifice was just as important as any other in service of our nation. Today we honour that Australian spirit. Lest we forget.