

The Honourable Meka Whaitiri

Minister for Veterans

Message for Merchant Navy Day, Friday 3 September 2021

E rere nei aku mihi ki ngā ika a Whiro,
Ka eke panuku, ka eke Tangaroa
Ka mahara ki a koutou kua haere ki tua o te ārai,
Tēnā tātou.

Acknowledgments foremost to our veterans, who brought us success upon the tides of Tangaroa, we acknowledge those who passed over to the other side. Greetings all.

On Merchant Navy Day today we honour civilian New Zealand seafarers who served in times of war and conflict. I know many will be disappointed that lockdown restrictions have prevented the customary commemoration at Pukeahu National War Memorial Park in Wellington from taking place.

First and foremost, today we pay tribute to all New Zealand's veterans of the Merchant Navy wherever they are in New Zealand and worldwide. We also remember those who have passed in the last year.

Falling annually on September 3rd, Merchant Navy Day marks the anniversary of the sinking of the first merchant ship in the Second World War – the British passenger liner SS *Athenia*.

The sinking of the *Athenia*, which was torpedoed without warning mere hours after Britain's declaration of war in 1939, was a reminder of the strategic importance of sea transport in wartime and a signal of losses to come.

Mostly sailing under the British Red Ensign – colloquially known as the 'red duster', several thousand New Zealanders were part of merchant navy crews during the First and Second World Wars.

Sailing in slow, vulnerable vessels, their work was especially dangerous. Yet it was essential to the war effort – with merchant ships and their civilian crews responsible for transporting service personnel, supplies and equipment, and some vessels converted to military hospital ships for wartime service.

No other group of New Zealand civilians faced such overt danger and sustained risk during the World Wars.

The [roll of honour](#) illustrates the many ways merchant navy crews came under threat – from submarines to surface raiders, aircraft and sea mines.¹ It also reminds us that New Zealand merchant seafarers faced many of the same risks as enlisted personnel, including being taken prisoner and severe illness.

2021 marks 80 years since the refrigerated cargo liner *Zealandic* was torpedoed by *U-106* in the North Atlantic. All 73 on board were lost, including seven New Zealand seamen, ranging in age from 19 to 37. The *Zealandic* was one of many merchant navy losses of the Second World War – during which almost 5,000 Allied merchant ships were sunk and around 60,000 Allied merchant seafarers lost their lives, including at least 140 New Zealanders.

The Merchant Navy continued to serve after the war ended. Many ships took part in the significant repatriation efforts, including the New Zealand liner *Monowai*, which repatriated Auschwitz survivors from Russia to France in 1945 and the *Dominion Monarch* which brought the war weary Māori Battalion home in 1946.

I know many were disappointed by the cancellation of the special event to mark the 80th anniversary of the sinking of the New Zealand Shipping Company freighter *Turakina*.²

As we face a second year of ongoing restrictions and uncertainty, we think of the many seafarers maintaining the world's supply chains and exemplifying the spirit of service that saw them dubbed the 'fourth service' during wartime.

Border and health restrictions mean crews are often out at sea for months on end with limited ability to contact their families, with shore leave increasingly difficult for seafarers.

I was pleased that earlier this year, New Zealand was the first government in the world to pass legislation that provides nationwide welfare support to seafarers visiting New Zealand.³

The amendments to the Maritime Transport Act fulfil our commitments under the Maritime Labour Convention, known internationally as the *Bill of Rights for Seafarers*. By enabling funding from maritime levies to be provided to shore-based welfare organisations, seafarers can continue to access vital welfare services – including mental health and advocacy support.

¹ First World War Roll of Honour: <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/merchant-marine/roll-of-honour> Second World War Roll of Honour: <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/the-merchant-navy/roll-of-honour>

² <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/turakina-sunk-by-german-raider-in-tasman-sea>

³ <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/govt-fulfilling-commitment-improve-seafarer-welfare>

While measures against COVID-19 prevent us from commemorating in person, we reach out to our merchant navy veterans today and we thank you for your service and your courage.

As we remember your colleagues who did not return from sea, we reflect on the courage and resilience shown by merchant seafarers in times both of conflict and of peace.