Wednesday, 3 September 2008

SALUTING OUR MERCHANT NAVY

The Minster for Veterans' Affairs Michael Atkinson will pay tribute to the courage and sacrifice of the merchant seamen who served Australia, as part of today's inaugural national Merchant Navy Day.

"A debt of thanks is owed to Australia's little-known merchant mariners. Merchant Navy Day gives these veterans the respect they deserve as a critical part of Australia's war history," Mr Atkinson said.

The Merchant Navy is the name given to the collection of commercial ships and their courageous crew that carried precious cargo during wartimes, dating back to the 1800s.

"During war, merchant mariners were legally obliged to serve the nation despite not being enlisted servicemen. The men worked long hours with low pay to supply the Allied war effort,"

"They suffered, as other servicemen suffered. It's believed 435 Australians lost their lives serving as part of the Merchant Navy and countless more were wounded," Mr Atkinson said

In July, the Rudd Government declared 3 August Merchant Navy Day, fulfilling its election promise. The day marks the anniversary of the loss of the first Allied merchant ship in the Second World War in 1939. The United Kingdom and Canada also commemorate Merchant Navy Day on 3 September.

"In wartime, the merchant ships and their crew were in perilous danger, no different from the Royal Australian Navy. The ships were attacked sailing regular trade routes close to home shores and when in deep sea," Mr Atkinson said.

"This day pays tribute to these war heroes who are not often singled out for praise. We salute those who gave their lives and remember those who returned after their courageous duty.

"Through their sacrifice Australia is a safer and more prosperous country," Mr Atkinson said.

"I congratulate the Port Adelaide Seafarers Memorial Community Committee who have managed to stage what is set to be the premier event of Merchant Navy Day in Australia.

In April, the Rann Government established the first Veterans Affairs Ministerial portfolio. In June the Government purchased Major Peter Badcoe's Victoria Cross in partnership with media owner Kerry Stokes. Last month, the Tom 'Diver' Derrick Bridge was opened crossing the Port River.

A wreath floating ceremony will be held in front of Port Adelaide's Fishermen's Wharf Markets Building at 11 a.m. TODAY followed by a march and short service.