

FOREWORD

from Admiral The Right Honourable The Lord West of Spithead GCB, DSC, PC

While many people know that the 3rd of September 1939 marked the outbreak of the Second World War, few are aware that it also marks the first major British maritime casualty, the merchant vessel SS Athenia, torpedoed just a few hours after hostilities were declared, with the loss of 128 passengers and crew. Although many hundreds of merchant ships and thousands of seafarers would meet the same fate in the years to come, 3rd September is now enshrined as 'Merchant Navy Day' to honour the brave men and women who kept our island nation afloat during both World Wars, and even during peacetime faced – and continue to face – the more routine perils of violent storms and mountainous seas.

The Red Ensign, or 'Red Duster' as it is affectionately known, has been the recognised flag of the British Merchant Navy since 1854. It has become inextricably linked with the world-wide trade links that made the United Kingdom's fortune in the intervening years and, while there are now fewer ships on the home register, many thousands of British seafarers still work on the oceans of the world, underpinning the vast majority of the international commerce that keeps our economy buoyant. By volume, 95% of our trade comes by sea; without it, we would surely become an insignificant island off the coast of Europe.

But the majority of today's large ports are high security operations, often miles from population centres. Many young people know little of ships and seafarers, and fail to appreciate their absolutely vital contribution to our way of life. In recent years, campaigns such as 'Seafarers Awareness Week' have tried to highlight this huge impact, and I strongly believe that a visual demonstration of the debt we all owe to merchant seafarers, past and present, should become an annual feature of our national calendar.

I am asking every Local Authority in the nation to fly the Red Ensign on the 3rd of September. Many of our great ports such as Liverpool already do, but we want to carry this message into the heartlands of the nation, just as surely as that essential food, fuel and clothing are carried to our shops. I hope the raising of this flag will be an occasion of pride in every community; I want to see local veterans and Sea Cadets involved, and I would implore civic leaders to be present, adding their own messages of support.

So, celebrate both a glorious seafaring past and a vital part of our economic future as you 'Fly the Red Duster' on Merchant Navy Day!

West of Spithead



THE BRITISH MERCHANT NAVY

The Merchant Navy is the maritime register of the United Kingdom, and describes the sea-going commercial interests of UK-registered ships and their crews. Merchant Navy vessels fly the Red Ensign and are regulated by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency. King George V bestowed the formal title of 'Merchant Navy' on the British merchant shipping fleets – formerly known as the Mercantile Marine – following their vital service in the First World War.

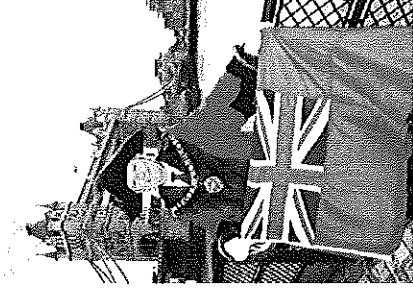
As an entity in itself, the Merchant Fleet can be dated back to the 17th century, when an attempt was made to register all seafarers as a source of labour for the Royal Navy in times of conflict. That registration of merchant seafarers failed, and it was not successfully implemented until 1835. The Merchant Fleet grew over centuries to become the largest in the world, benefitting considerably from trade with British possessions in India and the Far East.

In the First and Second World Wars, the Merchant Fleets suffered heavy losses from German U-boat attacks. A policy of unrestricted warfare meant that merchant seafarers were at constant risk of attack from enemy ships and submarines. Nearly eight million tons were lost to U-boats in the First World War, and 14,661 merchant seafarers were killed. It was the effect of those casualties and their bereaved families - together with those from the Royal Navy and Fishing Fleets - which led to the formation in 1917 of King George's Fund for Sailors – now known as Seafarers UK.

When the UK entered the Second World War in September 1939 George VI issued this message: *"In these anxious days I would like to express to all Officers and Men in The British Merchant Navy and The British Fishing Fleets my confidence in their unflinching determination to play their vital part in defence. To each one I would say: Yours is a task no less essential to my people's experience than that allotted to the Navy, Army and Air Force. Upon you the Nation depends for much of its foodstuffs and raw materials and for the transport of its troops overseas. You have a long and glorious history, and I am proud to bear the title Master of the Merchant Navy and Fishing Fleets."*

In the Second World War, German U-boats sank 2,828 Allied ships, amounting to nearly 14.7 million tons. The United Kingdom alone suffered the loss of 11.7 million tons, which was 54% of the total Merchant Navy fleet at the outbreak of the conflict. In that war, 32,000 merchant seafarers were killed – a higher casualty ratio than for any branch of the Armed Forces – but fighting alongside their Royal Navy escorts, the seafarers of the Atlantic convoys successfully imported enough supplies to allow an Allied victory.

Following many years of lobbying to bring about official recognition of the particular losses made by merchant seafarers in the World Wars and since, Merchant Navy Day was first recognised on 3rd September 2000.



In 2015, six Red Ensigns were flown on Tower Bridge in London

