



**AMERICAN ARMY SMALL SHIPS
30 April 2008**

Mrs PENFOLD (Flinders) (15:22): A largely unknown aspect of the Second World War is an amazing story of youthful courage, dedication to a dangerous mission and putting others above self. The service of these men has never been properly recognised; however, those who are left and their families continue to fight for the recognition they believe they deserve and need to be supported.

I have written to the federal Minister for Defence, the Hon. Joel Fitzgibbon, supporting a review and asking for an official citation and/or the Pacific Star Medal to be awarded to the people concerned. I have asked that others also write. I refer to the men who served in what was called the American Army Small Ships World War II.

In 1942, the battle for the Pacific was at its height and the Japanese forces were on Australia's doorstep. Ships were desperately needed to supply Australian and American troops in New Guinea. Australia's Merchant Navy answered the call to arms from around the Australian coast with trawlers, schooners, tug boats, ferry boats, and even an ancient paddle wheeler. These ships' sailors, some as young as 15, others old and infirm, all came under American command when General Douglas MacArthur was appointed Supreme Commander, South-west Pacific area. I understand that MacArthur was almost universally disliked by those under his command because of his flawed personality, lack of military judgment and lack of concern for his troops.

Three men from Ceduna on Eyre Peninsula—Melville Dawes (who is still alive), Alan (Ginger) Lucas and George Walport (both of whom are deceased) served in the small ships. They were three of about 3,000 Australians deployed to serve with the US Army's Small Ships Section. Their role was crucial, their efforts heroic. They were in the front line or even behind enemy lines taking troops, guns and supplies to the beach heads under exposed and sometimes impossible conditions.

I understand that only about 140 of the 3,000 or so men who served in these ships are still alive. In a speech made on 24 April 1998, the then president of the Mariners Association noted that 55 merchant ships were sunk in Australian waters in the Second World War and another 25 were attacked. He said that about one-quarter of the seamen died—a higher proportion than any of the other fighting forces, and these figures are only for Australian waters.

Melville said their work was some of the most dangerous in the war, going in under cover at night to deliver food and munitions to the Australians and Americans at the start of the Kokoda Trail and in other battles around Papua New Guinea and neighbouring islands. Much of these waters were uncharted, and the small ships faced reefs and unknown obstacles, tropical storms and enemy attack; however, they could go where large vessels could not, they could pass through enemy lines when warships could not.

Melville went to sea at the age of 13 on the vessel *Coorabie*, that originally carted bagged wheat from Fowlers Bay and Streaky Bay to the port of Thevenard near Ceduna for shipping overseas. On his 15th birthday he found himself still with Australians, but under American command in the battles of Buna, Sallanada and Gona.

Melville has medals from the Australian government for the time he was in the Australian Merchant Navy before

the Americans took over, but the service under the US Army has not received recognition from Australia, meaning that many of his colleagues have received no Australian recognition at all. It took a number of these men 40 years to receive even a discharge from the American government. However, there have been some medals and recognition in the form of a thank you citation signed by US President Harry Truman since then.

There was a degree of jealousy towards the small ships sailors from the mainstream defence forces and ex-personnel, which continued after the end of the war. This jealousy arose on various counts. Americans were paid £51 a month compared with the Diggers, who were paid £12 a month. After the war the Americans had everything—cigarettes, chewing gum, silk—and, to quote one source, 'they lured over 60,000 Australian women to America as war brides'. So despite being Australians, the 3,000 who served in the small ships fleet, risking their lives for their country, were ignored even by the RSL, according to Alan Lucas's son Lyle.

My father served in New Guinea, and would have been just one of the Australian soldiers who benefited from their service, without which we may well have become a Japanese country. I for one would have been unlikely to have been born.

The US Army Small Ships Association installed an apprentice seaman's plaque at Walsh Bay, Millers Point in New South Wales, which was unveiled on 8 March 2008. The association's president, Mr Ernest Flint MBE ED, commented that it was an opportunity to tell a little-known story of the small ships, when 15 and 16 year old boys played a vital part in the defence of Australia. May we all honour them, and may their efforts to gain recognition for their service to their country be successful.