Australian merchant mariners have played an important role in three major conflicts in which Australians have been involved – World Wars I and II, and the Vietnam War.

During World Wars I and II, men who were professional sailors became caught up in the life-and-death struggles against Germany and her allies. Though they were not combatants, merchant mariners made a vital contribution to the outcome of both conflicts, transporting men and resources that were essential to the war effort. Merchant ships were either unarmed or lightly armed. They carried heavy, sometimes highly explosive or combustible cargoes, and were slower and less manoeuvrable than naval ships. Tens of thousands of merchant seamen lost their lives as enemy submarines, surface vessels, aircraft and mines took a heavy toll on Allied shipping.

In World War II merchant convoys crossing the Atlantic, the most violently contested shipping lane in the world, were protected by naval vessels. Every ship was compelled to travel at the speed of the slowest, which was often slower than a submarine. The danger was enormous, and in the war’s opening years no-one sailing from a British or American port could be sure that they would reach their destination. Many merchant ships were also sunk in Australian waters and around New Guinea.

During the Vietnam War, Australian National Line ships MV Boonaroo and MV Jeparit carried military supplies between Australia and South Vietnam. Boonaroo made two voyages, including one as a commissioned naval vessel while Jeparit, which was also commissioned into the navy, made forty-three.

IMAGE: An Allied transport sinks after being torpedoed by a German submarine, November 1942. (AWM P01165.003; photographer Colin Donaldson)