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House of Representatives

THE U.S. MERCHANT MARINE: WE DELIVER THE GOODS!

HON. BOB FILNER

OF CALIFORNIA
IN THE HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES

Mr. Speaker: When I introduced HR.23, the “Belated Thank You to the Merchant Mariners of World War II Act” the positive response was overwhelming. Many of these Merchant Mariners have shared their harrowing, 60-year-old stories and experiences with me, and each personal account strengthens my resolve to see that these brave heroes are treated with respect by the U.S. government.

In my ongoing fight to correct the injustice being done to the U.S. Merchant Marines—men who have yet to be given full benefits as World War II veterans—I would like to submit the following article from The American Legion by Dan Allsup, a freelance writer from the St. Louis area, entitled, ‘We Deliver the Goods’:

It’s not that Bob Bodine wanted to avoid the World War II draft in 1943. He just didn’t think being an Army infantryman sounded like a whole lot of fun.

Bodine tried to join the Army Air Corps but failed the vision test. He talked to a Navy

aviation recruiter, but the Navy was bringing on 17-year-olds at the time. Bodine was too old at 18.

“What else is there?” he asked the recruiter. “Well, there’s the Merchant Marine, but they’ve got a hell of a casualty rate,” the recruiter said.

Bodine, now 80, recalls the conversation. “What does a teenager care about casualty statistics? I always liked boats, so the Merchant Marine sounded pretty good to me.”

He secured a slot at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point, N.Y. In his second year, Bodine sailed off on a required nine-month cruise to the Mediterranean. It didn’t take long for him to realize that if he was trying to avoid the draft, he could have taken an easier route. Bodine was a crewmember aboard the USS Fleming, which was hauling a dozen P-51 aircraft and a huge load of vehicle and aviation fuel to the troops. The Fleming was part of a 110-ship convoy. While it escaped the

war unscathed, 50 of her sister ships were sunk by German U-boats and floating mines.

Bodine is one of the more than 243,000 civilian volunteer mariners who served aboard ships that provided the greatest sealift in history. Critical to the war effort, the U.S. merchant fleet delivered troops, supplies, ammunition and equipment all over the world. It took part in every invasion from Normandy to Okinawa, often becoming sitting-duck targets for enemy submarines, mines, bombers and kamikaze pilots. Fighting was especially fierce in the Atlantic, where “wolf packs” of German submarines and deadly U-boats prowled the ocean destroying Merchant Marine ships in an attempt to isolate Great Britain. Closer to home, enemy submarines sank hundreds of ships off the eastern coast of the United States.

In the first six months of 1942, German U-boats alone sank more than 400 U.S. merchant ships. Because no official history has been written of the Merchant Marine in World War II, casualty numbers vary from source to source. It is believed, however, that about 9,300 mariners were killed during the war, and more than 1,500 of their ships were sunk. Fortunately, because most Merchant Marine ships traveled in convoys, many of the mariners aboard wounded vessels were fished from the sea by nearby ships. About 600 mariners were prisoners of war and another 11,000 were injured.

Susan Clark, public-affairs officer for the U.S. Maritime Administration – the federal agency most involved with the Merchant Marine – said that other than the U.S. Marines, mariners had a higher death rate than any other branch of the service during the war. (Some mariners may take exception to that statistic. A web site for Merchant Marine veterans says their death rate was 1 in 26 and the Marine Corps was 1 in 34.)

President Franklin Roosevelt summed up the war contributions of the U.S. Merchant

Marine: “The (mariners) have written one of its most brilliant chapters. They have delivered the goods when and where needed in every theater of operations and across every ocean in the biggest, the most difficult and most dangerous job ever taken.”

Despite their losses and their importance to the war effort, surviving mariners weren’t met with parades and flags when they returned home. They weren’t considered veterans. They couldn’t take advantage of the GI Bill, small business loans or medical care for disabilities. Officially, they were civilians. If they were lucky, they received a thank-you letter and a lapel pin from the president. After years of fighting the system and a long court battle, some World War II mariners finally received limited veteran status on Jan. 19, 1988.

Sixty years after he last hung up his Merchant Marine uniform, Bodine and many of his Academy classmates still can’t believe they weren’t considered members of the U.S. Armed Forces during the war. “I didn’t know otherwise until I realized that I wasn’t eligible for the GI Bill or any other veterans benefits,” he said.

Although some bitterness about the lack of recognition remains, the Merchant Marine sails on today. After the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, 29 Merchant Marine Academy students operated a fleet of boats into New York Harbor, transporting firefighters and other emergency workers, along with food and medical supplies.

Today, more than 8,000 mariners serve in the Military Sealift Command, most of them working in support of the Iraqi war. An average vessel moves the equivalent of about 300 C-17 cargo aircraft, freeing up aircraft for other critical missions.

From the Revolutionary War to Operation Iraqi Freedom, the U.S. Merchant Marine has delivered the goods.