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House of Representatives

JUSTICE AND EQUITY FOR MEMBERS OF THE UNITED STATES MERCHANT MARINE!

HON. BOB FILNER

OF CALIFORNIA
IN THE HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES

Mr. FILNER. Mr. Speaker and colleagues, I rise today to correct an injustice that has been inflicted upon a group of World War II veterans, the World War II United States Merchant Mariners.

World War II Merchant Mariners suffered the highest casualty rate of any of the branches of service while they delivered troops, tanks, food, airplanes, fuel and other needed supplies to every theater of the war.

Compared to the large number of men and women serving in World War II, the numbers of the Merchant Mariners were small, but their chance of dying during service was extremely high. Enemy forces sank over 800 ships between 1941 and 1944 alone.

Unfortunately, this group of brave men were denied their rights under the GI. Bill of Rights that Congress enacted in 1945. All those who served in the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force or Coast Guard were recipients of

benefits under the GI. Bill. The United States Merchant Marine was not included.

The Merchant Marine became the forgotten service. For four decades, no effort was made to recognize the contribution made by this branch of the Armed Services. The fact that Merchant Seamen had borne arms during wartime in the defense of their country seemed not to matter.

No legislation to benefit merchant seamen was passed by Congress until 1988 when the Seaman Acts of 1988 finally granted them the a "watered down" GI. Bill of Rights. Some portions of the GI. Bill have never been made available to veterans of the Merchant Marine.

In addition, they still have not received proper recognition as veterans for Social Security purposes. If they had the "veteran" designation, their Social Security would be calculated as if they had earned \$160 more a month than they did earn during their time in service in the Merchant

Marines. Of course, what this means is a smaller Social Security check, now that they are retired.

While it is impossible to make up for over 40 years of unpaid benefits, I propose a bill that will acknowledge the service of the veterans of the Merchant Marine and offer compensation for years and years of lost benefits. H.R. 23, the "Belated Thank You to the Merchant Mariners of World War II Act of 2004", will pay each eligible veteran a monthly benefit of \$1000, and that payment would also go to their surviving spouses. It will also give them the Social Security that they are due by providing them with the status of "veteran" under the Social Security Act.

The average age of Merchant Marine veterans is now 81. Many have outlived their savings. An increase in their Social Security and

a monthly benefit to compensate for the loss of nearly a lifetime of ineligibility for the GI Bill would be of comfort and would provide some measure of security for veterans of the Merchant Marine.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Ian Allison of Santa Rosa, California and Henry Van Gemert of Palmetto, Florida who are Co-Chairs of the Just Compensation Committee of the U.S. Merchant Marine Combat Veterans, and to Ted Metula of Lemon Grove, California for bringing this issue to my attention.

I urge my colleagues to join me in supporting and cosponsoring this legislation. We can fix the injustices endured by our Nation's Merchant Marines by passing H.R. 23 as quickly as possible!