

## H.GERALD STARNES, U.S. Merchant Marine during War World II

### STATEMENT OF H.GERALD STARNES

Mr. Chairman, and members of the Committee, my name is H. Gerald Starnes. I am here today as an old veteran in support efforts to move S961, a "Belated Thank You to the Merchant Mariners of World War II" Act of 2007. We would like to express our compliments to Senator Akaka on getting S.1315 passed over some opposition to increase veterans' benefits for Filipinos who fought alongside US forces in that war and to Senator Nelson for his "aye" vote. Their situation is very similar to ours, but I must say they are ahead of us in that they have had inadequate compensatory benefits while we've yet to get a penny from our government for our part in winning that greatest of our country's wars.

I am speaking for about 2,800 still living veteran Alumni of the United States Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point, NY, combined with about 8,000 members of the Just Compensation Committee of the American Merchant Marine Veterans in this legislative effort. The U.S. Merchant Marine Academy is the only one of the five federal services academies that sends their cadets into wartime combat zones. I was one of those cadets. The memorial monument on campus bears the names of 142 young men who lost their lives in combat.

For over six decades, every Congress has denied veteran's benefits and recognition to thousands of World War II (WW II) Mariners. Records show 260,000 served in "harm's way" and 106,000 were certified to receive the Combat Bar. A half billion tons or more of tanks, PT boats, gasoline, aviation fuel, trucks, jeeps, amphibious craft, medicine and food rations along with thousands of troops were delivered. These cargoes were transported on 5,500 ships the Mariners manned over dangerous seas to our and our allies' ports and bases all over the world. Students of and historical writers on the Merchant Marine in the war, estimate that 833 ships and 6,834 men were lost. Their casualties were 1 in 26 compared to the U.S. Marine Corps with 1 in 34. 240 Mariners were killed before Pearl Harbor, 604 became POW's. Others died after the war as 54 merchant ships struck mines.

With the anticipation of some 12 million WW II veterans coming home, Congress passed the famous GI Bill of Rights. When President Roosevelt signed the bill in June of 1944, he said, "I trust Congress will soon provide a similar opportunities to members of the merchant marine who have risked their lives time after time for the welfare of their country." He died in April 1945 and any thoughts of a Merchant Marine bill died with him. The GI bill denied us by Congress entitled the armed forces veterans, many of whom had never left their chairs in stateside assignments, to four years of college, low interest home mortgages, job priority or guarantees, mustering out pay, Veterans Administration (VA) medical benefits, funding for widows and children, 52 weeks unemployment insurance and travel pay home. President Truman sent each of us a tiny lapel pin and a thank you note. The Navy gun crews on Merchant Ships with whom we helped man the guns were entitled to all the GI Bill of Rights benefits.

Myths and untruths concerning Merchant Mariner's compensation and benefits are often told to the Veterans Affairs Committees of the House and Senate relative to excess pay, veterans benefits, civilian or military status, and cost estimates.

\*Mariners pay was a bit over military pay, but they received pay only when signed on a ship as a crewman or officer. If you had signed off on a vessel, you were on your own for lodging, meals and travel. When signed on any meals, lodging and travel you chose to take on shore were for your account.

\*Not until 1977 could a merchant seaman apply for benefits of any kind. In 1986 a federal judge in New York ruled that Merchant Mariners were victims of discrimination. In 1988, 43 years after the war ended we were officially recognized as veterans by a paper discharge from the USCG, limited VA medical attention if homeless or on Medicaid, a flag and a tombstone.

\* All the cadets and officer graduates of the Merchant Marine Academy were sworn in as U.S. Naval Reservists and subject to Navy discipline and call to active duty. According to international law, all mariners lose their civilian status when they man offensive weapons and are subject to courts martial by the armed force with whom they served. By an act of Congress in Nov. 1941, the navy mounted guns on merchant ships and issued orders to the masters of those vessels that directed gunnery training be given to the officers and crewmen. In 1942, Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral King, directed that Naval Discipline and Control be exercised against the Merchant Marine in all theaters of war.

\* Our calculations show the first year cost estimate to be less than several of the current individual earmarks and will diminish significantly each passing year due to the high death rates of all WW II veterans now about 1,100 -1,500 a day. The bill will self destruct in 10 years at a total cost estimate of about half or less than the projected \$1.4 billion that concerns some Senators.

All the old Mariners are over 80 years of age and have served in combat zones. Many are enfeebled, in ill health and in pitiful situations, financially, physically, and mentally. The economic stress of inflation and higher and higher costs of living is especially stressful as they enter the last years of their lives still proud and talkative of their wartime experiences at sea during WW II in defense of this country. This is our last chance to get the recognition we earned as young men years ago.

Mr. Chairman, may I, as a tired old leader of tired old men, with all due respect, take the liberty of suggesting that you, sir, and your staff probably have many bills requiring your attention, Therefore, would you please seriously consider having Sen. Nelson and staff "turn too" fore and aft, port and starboard to help you get S961 to the senate floor before we all have gone down to "Davy Jones Locker."

Mr. Chairman, we sincerely thank you and the committee members for giving us the privilege of listening to our story. And we certainly appreciate Senator Nelson's testimony in our behalf. Thank you all very much.