

House Committee Chairman Bob Filner

STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN BOB FILNER

before the

UNITED STATES SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

"S. 961, the Belated Thank You to the Merchant Mariners of World War II Act"

May 7, 2008

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs, I appreciate this opportunity to speak on the Belated Thank You to the Merchant Mariners of World War II Act, introduced in the Senate as S. 961. The companion bill, H.R. 23, which I introduced, was passed by the House of Representatives on July 30th of last year. This legislation corrects 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, fuel and other needed supplies to every theater of the war. Without their service, the troops and weapons and supplies could have not been transported to where they were needed. Their chance of dying during service was extremely high. Enemy forces sank over 800 ships between 1941 and 1944.

Unfortunately, these brave men were denied their rights under the G.I. 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 G.I. Bill. The United States Merchant Mariners were not included.

The Merchant Mariners 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. The result of being left out of the G.I. Bill meant that the Mariners could not buy a home or go to college, as their counterparts in service were doing. Without a college education, the jobs that were open to them paid significantly less and were less fulfilling in many cases. It was impossible for them to become a doctor, lawyer, teacher, engineer. And it was impossible to purchase a home, one of the stepping stones to the middle class. My father was a World War II veteran, and his ability to buy a home for our family changed our lives!

Legislation to benefit Merchant Seamen was finally passed by Congress in 1988 when the Seaman Acts of 1988 granted them some benefits in the G.I. Bill of Rights. While it is impossible to make up for over 40 years of unpaid benefits,

S. 961 will acknowledge the service of the Merchant Mariners and offer compensation for their lost benefits by paying each eligible veteran a monthly benefit of \$1000.

The average age of Merchant Mariner veterans is now 82. Many have outlived their savings. A monthly check to compensate for the loss of a lifetime of ineligibility for the GI Bill would be of comfort and would provide some measure of security for these older veterans, many of whom are living on meager funds.

There is great bi-partisan support for this bill among the Members of this Congress. 59 Senators and 244 Representatives have co-sponsored S. 961 and H.R. 23. They realize that it is a question of morality and integrity. Is our nation completely indifferent to the welfare of the men who made our success in World War II possible?

I thank you for granting me this opportunity to speak on the importance of S. 961. I urge you to support this legislation and to bring it to the full Senate for a vote, so that we can regain our nation's moral ground and can say "thank you" with compensation for the injustices endured by our nation's Merchant Mariners!