

**BOB FILNER**  
51ST DISTRICT, CALIFORNIA

2428 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING  
WASHINGTON, DC 20515  
TEL: (202) 225-8045  
FAX: (202) 225-9073

333 F STREET, SUITE A  
CHULA VISTA, CALIFORNIA 91910  
TEL: (619) 422-5963  
FAX: (619) 422-7290

1101 AIRPORT ROAD, SUITE D  
IMPERIAL, CALIFORNIA 92251  
TEL: (760) 355-8800  
FAX: (760) 355-8802



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**STATEMENT OF CONGRESSMAN BOB FILNER**

**before the**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND**  
**MEMORIAL AFFAIRS**  
**COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**

**UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**April 6, 2006**

**JUSTICE AND EQUITY FOR**  
**THE UNITED STATES MERCHANT MARINES**

**MR. FILNER: Mr. Chairman, I would like to thank you for**  
**this hearing on the “Belated Thank You to the Merchant**  
**Marines of World War II Act” – H.R. 23.**

**“CALIFORNIA’S BORDER CONGRESSMAN”**

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**The story of the World War II United States Merchant Marines is a story of patriotism, of youthful exuberance, of dedication to duty, of pride in a job well done, of bravery in the midst of battle, and sadly, of a nation who forgot these heroes for over 40 years after the war's end.**

**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. Troops were trained and supplies, ammunition, and equipment were manufactured in the U.S. and used overseas – and the Merchant Mariners were the necessary link between the two. Without them, we would not have been able to win the war. It is as simple as that.**

**The Merchant Mariners took part in every invasion from Normandy to Okinawa, often becoming sitting ducks for enemy submarines, mines, bombers and kamikaze pilots.**

**Fighting was particularly fierce in the Atlantic, where German submarines and U-boats prowled the ocean, destroying Merchant Marine ships in an attempt to isolate Great Britain.**

**Compared to the large number of men and women serving in World War II, the numbers of the Merchant Marines were small, but their chance of dying during service was extremely high. Estimates range up to 1500 for the number of ships that enemy forces sank. 9300 Mariners lost their lives, 600 were prisoners of war, and 11,000 were injured.**

**Yet, an injustice was inflicted on this group of World War II veterans. All volunteers, once approximately 230,000 strong (estimates range from 215,000 to 285,000), the number of those currently living is estimated to be approximately 10,000.**

**This group of brave men was 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. Only the United States Merchant Marine was not included.**

**The Merchant Marine became the forgotten service. For four decades, no effort was made to recognize their contribution. The fact that Merchant Seamen had borne**

**arms during wartime in the defense of their country seemed not to matter.**

**After years of fighting the system and a court battle, some World War II Mariners finally received a “watered down bill of rights” in 1988. But some portions of the G.I. Bill have never been made available to veterans of the Merchant Marine.**

**What did this mean in practical terms? First and probably most important, it meant no GI Bill educational benefits.**

**Instead of studying to become a lawyer, a teacher, a doctor, or a number of other life-long professions that require a higher education, many Merchant Mariners had to rely on their high school education to get them a job. Lost**

**opportunities, lost careers, lost wages were the results for the Merchant Marines.**

**No low interest home loans were available to Merchant Mariners. No lifetime compensation for related war injuries and disabilities, no use of VA hospitals, no priority for local, state, and federal jobs, no Social Security credit for wartime service (a disparity that H.R. 23 addresses).**

**There is overwhelming support for this bill. At last count, a bi-partisan list of 248 Members of Congress has endorsed this bill. There is support from coast to coast – from the City of Los Angeles, California to the City of New Bedford, Massachusetts who have passed resolutions in support of H.R. 23. Senator Ben Nelson of Nebraska has introduced a**

**companion bill in the Senate, S. 1272. I have received a letter from Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta expressing gratitude for the sacrifice Merchant Mariners gave during World War II in defense of our country.**

**While it is impossible to make up for over 40 years of unpaid benefits, I propose that this bill will acknowledge the service of the veterans of the Merchant Marine and offer compensation for years and years of lost benefits.**

**H.R. 23 will pay each eligible veteran a monthly benefit of \$1000, and that payment would also go to their surviving spouses. Their average age is 82. Many have outlived their savings. 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 Marines.**

**In the words of General of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower, Allied Expeditionary Forces in Europe, “When final victory is ours, there is no organization that will share its credit more deservedly than the Merchant Marine.” And in the words of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, “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.”**



**I urge my colleagues to join me in supporting this legislation.**

**We can fix the injustices endured by our nation's Merchant**

**Marines by passing H.R. 23 as quickly as possible!**