

Private Members' Business

As members have heard, our merchant seamen have certainly received attention in the last year. I suggest this interest has been helped by way of the Minister of Veterans Affairs. He has gone a long way and has welcomed this advice.

He and his officials have a lot of material to work through. There are matching recommendations in some cases but there are some differences. This legislation containing a retroactive measure adds to the suggestions for consideration.

Surely the member for Regina—Lumsden would have the minister properly assess and compare his amendments with the recommendations he has received from other quarters. Surely he expects more than a cursory review. Officials of Veterans Affairs will obviously have to cost out the individual proposals. Surely proper consideration requires more than a few hours of review.

Appropriately the minister is not yet in a position to say whether or not some or all of the various recommendations can be acted upon. After all, it has been less than a month since our own House of Commons committee released its report.

In the meantime let me repeat that our merchant seamen will continue to enjoy the vast majority of the generous benefits available to all other veterans of Canada.

Mr. John Manley (Ottawa South): Mr. Speaker, I consider it an honour to be able to speak on this Bill C-251 presented by the hon. member for Regina—Lumsden.

In so doing I am pleased to be able to speak on behalf of not only myself but a number of members of my party who would have liked to contribute their thoughts to this debate, including the member for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce who has been concerned with this issue for many years, the members for Hillsborough and Kent who are critics of Veterans Affairs and who I think share the deep feelings of the member for Regina—Lumsden.

It is unfortunate that the tone taken by the parliamentary secretary suggests something of a partisan element, particularly in light of the report the House of Commons committee recently released. I would like to read from that report, because it does set a very clear tone for the matter we are considering: "On the basis of evidence

heard before the committee, there can be little doubt that our wartime merchant mariners have been unfairly treated. We are unable fully to correct old mistakes, but we believe it to be appropriate and necessary for the Government of Canada to recognize the errors of the past and make the proper amends".

It goes on to say: "The committee is in full agreement with the Royal Canadian Legion when it stated: 'Let us now obtain full access to all veterans benefits for those who so gallantly served in wartime aboard the ships of the merchant navy. The Royal Canadian Legion has long accepted these men as veterans but the name veteran without access to the benefits is cold comfort indeed. We should treat them as full veterans and identify them as such'".

For many Canadians it would be helpful to think back to the days particularly of World War II. I was not born yet but I have heard and read the stories. It is a fascinating tale. There was a German naval staff memorandum dated 1939, for example, in which the German high command defined the target of its principal strategy as: "The merchant ship, not only the enemy's but every merchantman which sails the sea in order to supply the enemy's war interests". The memo goes on to say that: "The final aim of such attacks is to cut off all imports into and exports from Britain".

Of course the merchant navy played a role in World War I, as well as in the Korean War. Its role in World War II is that I suppose for which it is most famous and most well known. If we follow the speeches of Churchill, for example, in those early days of the war, 1939-1940 and on into 1941, we find the incredible peril Britain was in. The Nazi war machine swept across continental Europe, took France almost without a battle, marched to the very shores and began the aerial invasion of Britain, the Battle of Britain. Had Britain been lost, according to President Roosevelt: "All America would be living at the point of a gun". I think he is referring to the North American continent.

• (1630)

Some of the statistics have already been introduced into the record by my colleagues. However, I think it is important to highlight the fact that of about 12,000 Canadian merchant seamen 1,146 were killed in the line of duty, a ratio of nearly 1 in 10. This compares with a ratio of 1 in 47 for the Royal Canadian Navy. The