

lack of attention given to their wartime efforts. The bands played and the crowds waved for members of the armed forces at the end of the war, but the reception given to our merchant seamen was too often muted. There was that perception and it has been the same ever since.

Until recently the story of our merchant navy has been lost in a fog of indifference. Only the perseverance of a handful of former merchant seamen has brought this story to the attention of members, the media and the public.

The history of our wartime merchant navy is one of bravery, stamina and success. They did indeed deliver the goods. Just how important was the merchant navy during the Second World War? Was it, as some claim and as the hon. member has mentioned, the fourth arm of the fighting services? Here is how General Eisenhower saw it.

It was 1944 and the allied advance toward Germany had stalled through lack of supplies. It was vital for our Canadian troops to clear the approaches to the great port of Antwerp. This they did and in November 1944 the Canadian built vessel *Fort Cataraqui* sailed into Antwerp to a joyous reception. Said General Eisenhower:

The end of Nazism was in clear view when the first ship moved unmolested up the Scheldt.

High tribute, Mr. Speaker. The three fighting services relied upon the merchant fleet who with courage and stamina maintained the lifeline between North America and Europe. We have not forgotten their efforts.

Canada has indeed done a lot for its merchant seamen for a very long time. For example, a Civilian War Allowance Program was introduced in 1962 that gave merchant seamen the equivalent of the War Veterans Allowance. Today's legislation is asking us to do more, but that does not obscure the fact that there is a generous and varied package of programs available to our merchant seamen right now.

It has been said that the United Kingdom and more recently the United States and Australia have given their merchant seamen the status of veterans. The United States declared the service of their merchant seamen to be active service and that triggers the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs benefits. Australia has not given

them veterans' status but has given them health care benefits comparable to those of veterans. In any case I very much doubt if any of those three countries has done as much for its merchant seamen since the end of the war as we have done for ours in Canada. This is something this House and the Canadian public should understand. Canada has probably the most generous package of veterans' benefits and programs in the world. The large majority of this package is already available to our merchant seamen and has been available for many years.

Now the member for Regina—Lumsden wants the government to eliminate all differences in treatment between those who served in the army, navy and air force and those who sailed with the merchant navy. He wants merchant seamen to carry that proudest of all titles: Canadian veteran.

Mr. Benjamin: Hear, hear.

Mr. Richardson: However the title wartime merchant seaman is also a very proud title, one that was earned at great sacrifice. The challenge now is to ensure that we are being absolutely fair to them but not to confuse the issue by improper and insensitive use of two justly proud titles. These arguments deserve every attention.

The Minister of Veterans Affairs has shown a great interest in this matter. He has met with individual seamen and representatives of their associations. He has asked the leaders of our veterans' organizations to get together and give him their views. This they have done. The Senate subcommittee on veterans affairs has also presented the minister with a set of recommendations.

The House Standing Committee on National Defence and Veterans Affairs has released a comprehensive report on the subject, complete with recommendations. The member for Regina—Lumsden is a member of that committee, and it is a bit surprising to see that he has decided to go outside the committee and freelance on his own.

Mr. Benjamin: I rise on a point or order. Maybe the hon. parliamentary secretary does not know any better but my bill was put in long before there was any veterans affairs committee report.

Mr. Richardson: As usual an irrelevant comment from the member, Mr. Speaker.