

proceed no further with Bill C-87. My party and I would like to give the government an opportunity to change the statutes or, by an amendment to this bill which we can do in 20 minutes, extend all war veterans benefits to Canadian merchant seamen who made at least one trip through dangerous waters in World War II.

It is shameful that in 45 years the government has not recognized the contribution those merchant seamen made. There were 12,000 of them—that is the equivalent of a full Canadian army division—who served in our merchant fleet during the Second World War. There are only about 3,500 of them left. We lost 1,259 of them, which is greater than 10 per cent, to death. Nearly 200 were imprisoned, some of them for up to five years, having been captured in 1940-41 by the Germans. There were those who died in the run to Murmansk and in the Battle of the Atlantic. This was the highest casualty rate, proportionately, of any allied force during the last great conflict. This is puzzling, since merchant seamen have been awarded many of the same medals given to Canadian Armed Forces veterans. The United States and the United Kingdom have recognized their merchant seamen as veterans. Since January 1988, U.S. merchant seamen have become eligible for full benefits from their veterans administration.

Of course the Royal Canadian Legion has passed a resolution calling for the Parliament of Canada to recognize our merchant seamen as full war veterans.

On this issue, the ball is in the government's court. I hope the minister or someone from the government side will tell us why this minister and previous ones have so far failed to act, for 45 years, to give merchant seamen full war veterans benefits, status, and recognition.

Therefore I wish to move:

That this House decline to proceed further with second reading of Bill C-87, an act to amend statute law in relation to war veterans, because it fails to provide for the extension of veterans benefits as outlined in the bill to certain groups heretofore excluded from designation as war veterans, said groups including

- 1) Canadian Merchant Seamen, registered with the Canadian government between 1939 and 1945 end of hostilities in the Pacific, who made at least one trip through dangerous waters.

Government Orders

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Paproski): I will recognize the Minister of Veterans Affairs while I am looking at the amendment.

Mr. Merrithew: Mr. Speaker, my comments were to be on the amendment. I do not know whether or not you have ruled that it is in the right form. Perhaps you could make that decision.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Paproski): I believe it is in the right form. I have no problem with that.

Mr. Merrithew: Mr. Speaker, in that case, I just wanted to make a few comments on it.

This government and all previous governments since the war have dealt with the issue of the merchant seamen. We fully recognize that they served under some very dangerous conditions and that they paid the supreme sacrifice in many cases. However, no previous government decided to take the additional step which would term them as being veterans and give them all the benefits of other veterans.

I think what I have done is a good step. I indicated it in Question Period today. Naturally we will not vote for this amendment. The Royal Canadian Legion, the Army, Navy, Air Force Association, and the National Council of Veterans Associations, along with members of our department and members of the portfolio which would include the Canadian Pension Commission, Bureau of Pension Advocates and the Veterans Appeal Board, would like to put this thing to a major study with all groups present to see if there is anything that can be done and if we can reach a meeting of the minds on this particularly thorny issue.

It is my position and the position of the government that at this time the referral of the matter to that particular veterans study group would be far more profitable than to pass this particular amendment. Therefore, the government will be voting against it.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Paproski): I will propose the motion to the House now, and then I will recognize the hon. member for Kootenay West—Revelstoke.

• (1630)

Mr. Benjamin, seconded by Mr. Blackburn (Brant) moved:

That this House decline to proceed further with the second reading of Bill C-87, an act to amend statute law in relation to war veterans, because it fails to provide for the extension of veterans