

Veterans Affairs

will not have to search for a technicality in order to give them simple justice.

Let me say, as one who is not a member of the Veterans Affairs Committee, as one who does not normally participate in these debates, but as one who brought the conditions of former prisoners of war to the Minister's attention, that I think the change the Minister has made to ensure that all legitimate prisoners of war are compensated is an important one and goes far beyond simple housekeeping. In fact, it is an entrenchment of the principle of simple justice in Bill C-100.

There is no question that justice and fairness do not have price tags and cannot be measured in dollars and cents. It struck me, as I know it struck the Minister as we discussed the matter, that in the case of Laghouat, those people were less interested in receiving financial compensation for being recognized as prisoners of war than they were in receiving the dignity of recognition for the price they had paid in the service of their country. They asked for recognition that they had indeed served Canada and paid a price as prisoners of war—not as interns at some resort, but as prisoners of war. That was their first interest.

• (1640)

The Minister has given to all of those in similar circumstances, not only benefit of a pension provided under the Pension Act—which is important and not to be belittled—but their dignity. That is what they asked for first and foremost. For that I heartily congratulate the Minister of Veterans Affairs today.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Paproski): Before I recognize the Hon. Member for Regina West (Mr. Benjamin) I would like to remind him that the Bill is to go through all stages before Private Members' Hour.

Mr. Les Benjamin (Regina West): Mr. Speaker, I guarantee you that that will happen. When have I ever caused you any trouble? Perhaps in other places, but not with you.

I will keep my remarks brief. I would like to congratulate the Minister on this legislation. I want to appeal to him as well. The Minister is making some corrections of errors of omission or commission and giving some recognition to veterans and their survivors. I hope he will address himself to two further areas.

By the way, I enjoyed watching the brief exchange between our honorary member at the Clerk's Table, the former member for Winnipeg North Centre, and the Minister of Veterans Affairs (Mr. Hees). The honorary member at the Table carried on the fight for veterans in this place along with the Hon. Minister since 1942. I would like to carry on the fight which my former colleague carried on with previous Ministers of Veterans Affairs.

The first appeal I would like to make is with regard to the Spanish Civil War veterans. Several thousand of them fought the Fascists in Spain between 1935 and 1938. Most of them

volunteered for the Canadian Forces in 1939 and fought in the Second World War. In fact, for some of them it was a third war. They had been in World War I, the Spanish Civil War, and then World War II.

As I am sure the Minister knows, there are only about 200 of these veterans left of the several thousand who served, and a few surviving widows. I had a Private Member's Bill before this House for many years, to which predecessors of the Minister responded, in the bureaucrats of the Department, that they were mercenaries. The Minister and I know that that is not true. Most of them paid their own way. They were all volunteers. None of them made any money. Some of the 200 who are left served as prisoners of war, and a few were even tortured by the Fascists in Spain.

All they really want is recognition as veterans. I doubt whether very many, if any, are looking for any benefits. They only want recognition as veterans. The handful who are left are now in their 70s, 80s, and 90s I think that recognition long past due is deserved. I hope the Minister, unlike at least five of his predecessors with whom I have dealt, will recognize that.

In this Bill the Minister is dealing with the criteria for the awarding of decorations. Over the last couple of years I have been working with him on the case of a veteran who served for five years overseas. This veteran did not spend the 160 or 180 days on continental Europe, which is the criterion for the 1939-45 Star, because so much of his time was spent in England and Ireland. I did not know that England and Ireland had been moved out of northwest Europe, but the Department of Veterans Affairs has done so. This veteran manned anti-aircraft guns for the Canadian Forces on the south coast of Britain. There is no way that that was not the front line. The criterion for the 1939-45 Star should be changed to include England and Ireland.

Another case has come to my attention recently, about which I will be writing to the Minister. I will tell him now that it is with regard to a person who was in the RAF for approximately five years. He served in England with RCAF squadrons, but a lot of the time was spent in Canada as an instructor. All he would like to have is the War Medal or the 1939-45 Star as recognition of his service with the Canadian Armed Forces in World War II.

I plead with the Minister to review the criteria for those medals. I want to plead, for the umpteenth time in this place since 1968, for recognition of the veterans of the Spanish Civil War. If the few survivors who are left are entitled to a few tens of thousands of dollars, let us give it to them.

Mr. Hees: Mr. Speaker, I would like to advise the Hon. Member, who I know has always taken a very sympathetic and energetic interest in veterans, that the case of the Mac-Pap is now before the Committee on Veterans Affairs. I can assure him that we will review the findings of that committee very sympathetically indeed. I am sympathetic to the case and will do everything I can.