

advice as to their concerns on the application of benefits to the veterans they represent.

We had the pleasure of hearing evidence by the Minister of Veterans Affairs, the three largest and prominent veterans' organizations—the Dominion Command of the Royal Canadian Legion, The Army, Navy and Air Force Association and the National Council of Veterans Associations of Canada. We heard from the National Prisoners of War Association, European Theatre, the Merchant Navy Association, the Merchant Navy Prisoners of War Association, the Federation of British Canadian Veterans, the Sir Arthur Pearson Association of the War Blinded, and a small group of veterans who suffered beyond belief and who were confined to the Lager Buchenwald, the concentration camp.

Honourable senators, we chose the title of the report "It's Almost Too Late" because it is literally true when we consider that the average age of our First World War veterans is over 90 and the average age of our Second World War veterans is around 70. Even our Korean veterans are approaching 60 years of age. We have only a few more years in which to show those who serve that we care by ensuring that they and their surviving spouses spend their last few years in dignity and comfort.

Since the committee's last report in 1982 entitled "They Served, We Care" the passage of nine years has brought improvements to veterans' programs and to government policy. Most notably, the introduction of the Aging Veterans Program, later called the Veterans Program, assisted veterans to stay in their own homes rather than go into an institution, where they could be far away from their families. The government provided funds for assistance in housekeeping, ground-keeping, transportation, intermediate nursing care and many other benefits which allowed them to live in comfort in their homes.

At the same time, the hearings of the Subcommittee on Veterans Affairs highlighted the unequal treatment of our veterans who served in the Merchant Marines and the Merchant Navy. It also mentioned the continuing plight of some of our veterans living abroad. Some 50 years after the war, they are denied benefits which all other veterans receive because they chose to live in another country, even though that was their right under the Charter. There is a need for realignment of prisoner-of-war compensation in groups of veterans with deserving claims, who were overlooked when the veterans' independence program was extended to Canada's service veterans. The report mentioned other anomalies in the legislation and ways in which our treatment of veterans could be improved.

I should like to deal with some of the highlights of the report. The wartime service and post-war treatment of the veterans of the Canadian Merchant Navy was a major focal point of the committee's concerns. This brought about some heavy debate when Bill C-87 was introduced in the House of Commons and here in the chamber some months ago. The subcommittee heard from a number of groups and individuals who represent Merchant Navy veterans and Merchant Navy

[Senator Marshall.]

prisoners of war. As far as we were aware, our investigation mark the first occasion on which a parliamentary committee had been made aware both of the service and sacrifices of merchant seamen during World War II and of the shabbiness of their treatment in the years following the war. We also became aware of how little we and other Canadians know of the wartime history of the Merchant Navy.

I commend honourable senators to read the opening section in the report which capsulizes the story of the merchant seamen and the startling tales of the dangers experienced by merchant seamen equal to those of any of the military. Yet successive Canadian governments stubbornly refuse to grant these gallant men veteran status.

Without going into too much detail, I should like to quote from former senior officers of the navy. The Minister of Transport, for example, in April 1943 said:

Merchant seamen virtually formed the fourth arm of the fighting services, and despite their reticence to blazen abroad their heroic exploits, we feel that in fairness to them and to their next of kin the Canadian public should be told of their work.

A rear admiral, the Commander-in-Chief of the Canadian North-West Atlantic, uttered these telling words:

Make no mistake, the real victors of the Battle of the Atlantic were not the navies or the air forces, but the Allied merchant seamen.

Following the war, the survivors of this fourth arm of the fighting services were not granted veteran status. They were called non-combatants, which is a despicable characterization of their service. How can anyone consider they were non-combatants, untrained and unarmed, in the navy ships, out in the worst dangers? When the bombs and the bullets hit them and killed them, the bullets did not say, "We cannot touch these people because they are civilians."

• (1120)

I repeat that I commend the opening section on merchant seamen for reading by senators. I am sure you will be interested. I must now take the opportunity to congratulate Senator Neiman for her speech on Bill C-87 in which she gave some history of the merchant seamen.

In order to save some time today, honourable senators, I am going to present the 12 recommendations. This should take only a few minutes. I refer, first of all, to the merchant seamen again, and these are the recommendations we are making to the government:

1. That, at the earliest possible opportunity, the Government of Canada introduce legislation to extend full veterans' benefits to all Canadian merchant seamen who served in dangerous waters in Canada's armed conflicts.
2. That the War Veterans Allowance Act be amended to define as "veteran" all merchant seamen who made at least one trip through dangerous waters.
3. That the Government of Canada prepare and place in the Peace Tower a Book of Remembrance honouring