

the opportunity to speak, just so we could get the bill passed before the weekend. I thank them all very much. I also give great credit to hon. members on the other side. This just shows that Canadians as a people are fond of their veterans and know that they should have continuing hearings with this committee and with this House of Commons until all their grievances and requests are settled to the best of our financial ability.

Hon. J. A. MacLean (Malpeque): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to have been asked to speak on behalf of our party on this bill for the next five minutes. This bill is a very welcome one. Its content was unanimously recommended by the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. I think it will especially be appreciated in those areas of the country where units were recruited which later were taken prisoner in Hong Kong or in Dieppe. These groups are the members of our forces, generally speaking, who were prisoners of war for the longest period of time. I am particularly pleased that the anomaly which exists with regard to the benefits already paid to Hong Kong prisoners of war has been removed.

● (1240)

I want to spend a minute or two to express my regret that the minister insists on creating another anomaly. I think it is a great misfortune that the definition of "prisoner of war" does not include evaders and escapers. This refers chiefly—not entirely, but almost entirely—to air crew members of the Royal Canadian Air Force who, along with other members of the allied air forces in those dark days from 1940 to 1944, when the invasion of Europe took place, were about the only harbingers of hope for the people of occupied Europe.

It was the duty of these people, if they came down in an occupied country, to attempt to escape. They were especially equipped and trained to some extent to do this. It seems to me morally wrong and completely unjust that those who were able to take advantage of a situation which allowed them to evade capture for a time, or to escape entirely, should be precluded from benefiting under this bill when, on the other hand, if they had been immediately captured and remained prisoners of war, they qualify under the bill. Instead of rewarding risk-taking and enterprise the reverse is true, these military virtues are being penalized. The reverse is true. When the legislation as amended is administered, some very hard cases will emerge which will be difficult for the minister to refuse, and I hope the law will be amended at a later time so that these people can be accommodated. They are very few in number, perhaps a couple of hundred as far as Canada is concerned, and I hope the minister will take what I have to say to heart and give further study to this particular problem.

It seems to me completely unjust that one man out of a crew who, under great hardship, succeeded in avoiding being made a prisoner of war for perhaps months, should be excluded, by virtue of that, from benefiting under this legislation. I want to tell the minister, as he probably knows, that under those conditions the greatest problem an escaping airman had was to reject the temptation in his mind and the terrible psychological pressure he was under to turn himself in, because in turning himself in he would

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have been relatively safe and his next of kin would have known he was alive.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Stanley Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Mr. Speaker, some of us have pressed vigorously and for a long time for this legislation, and I am very happy to be able to participate in these few minutes in the final stage of Bill C-92 in this House. I believe, there are congratulations which can well be extended, and I will start with the minister. I suspect he had a difficult time in the cabinet getting this bill brought forward and that it was only the case he was able to make that won the day. We congratulate him on this important battle and on this important victory.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): I also want to pay tribute to all the members of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs representing all parties. I have seldom been involved in a project in the House of Commons where there was so much unanimity and such universal determination. I also congratulate the organizations representing veterans from Hong Kong, Dieppe and other prisoner of war veterans. They, too, did a good job in the material that they brought to our attention. We extend our thanks, also, to Dr. Hermann for his report which was the basis for the recommendations we made.

Of course, one cannot look at this bill without realizing that there are two or three things missing which we wish were in it. I support wholeheartedly the plea just made by the hon. member for Malpeque (Mr. MacLean) regarding escapees and evaders. In the recommendations of our committee which were set out in our seventh report, we recommended that they be included. Unfortunately, they are not included in the bill, but I hope at some point, especially as the applications come in, that the minister will find it possible to amend the statute in that respect.

I also regret that there is nothing in the bill to carry out Dr. Hermann's recommendation and the unanimous recommendation of our committee that there be a change with respect to the way pensions are granted to widows of disabled veterans. Without going into detail, I am referring to the present 48 per cent cut-off. I remind hon. members that the Woods report suggested a change in that, that several reports of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs recommended a change in that respect, and that the report on which this legislation is based also recommended such a change, namely, that there be pensions for widows where the veteran's pension was less than 48 per cent on a pro rata basis.

As strongly as I feel about that and about the point raised by the hon. member for Malpeque, we do not want to hold back this bill. It is good that we are getting it. It will mean a great deal to Hong Kong veterans to have their position improved, and it will mean a great deal to those who were prisoners of war in Europe, after all these years, to have the recognition and the compensation which are provided in this legislation. I believe that in achieving this legislation the House of Commons has shown itself to be the kind of place it ought to be. The Chair reminded us this morning of all the difficulties because of the rules we are