

As a Marco resident in 2019, I attended the Memorial Day Service at Veterans Park and was disturbed that the US Merchant Marine was not recognized. These mariners on board US merchant ships in WWII died at the rate of 1 in 26 which is the highest rate of casualties in any of the services. They received no GI Bill or VA benefits like the other services thereby enduring physical disabilities and PTSD on their own.

I was able to get the US Merchant Marine recognized at the following year's event, hosted by VFW 404, which saluted the role they played. However no flag or service song was presented like the other services. No recognition was made at subsequent events, however Space Force was added though they didn't exist until 2019. As a Master Mariner in the Merchant Marine and a Naval Officer, it was my honor to sail with many WWII merchant mariners through the 70's and 80's. Their stories of heroism are epic.

To this day, the US Merchant Marine is the backbone of any military venture and yet lapses in recognition add to the injustice committed to some of the greatest patriots in our history.

The Government bestowed Veterans status on them in 1988 and the Congressional Gold Medal in 2022. Cape Coral recognizes them with a monument and flag flying proudly amongst the other services. C'mon American Legion 404, the Merchant Marine deserves to have their flag and service song played at your events. Seafarers who performed so outstandingly in a time of need and sacrifice left a legacy and tradition which must be remembered and cherished.

I attended the Eliot Kleinberg presentation about WWII in Florida at the Marco Historical Museum. A full house heard of the significant role the US Merchant Marine played, and the sinking of Merchant vessels at an alarming rate off Florida along with the loss of life of US Merchant Mariners. (US Merchant Mariners in WWII died at the rate of 1 in 26 which is the highest rate of casualties in any of the services). He spoke of the vessels sunk right offshore of Marco Island. In Mr. Kleinberg's book, he references beach rescuers describing mariners being so "burned and swollen we could not even tell what they looked like. On good nights, survivors came ashore. On bad nights, far less washed up".

I spoke to a number of attendees afterwards. They were appalled to hear that these US Merchant Mariners are excluded from recognition on Marco Island and stumped as to why the American Legion, who puts on the Memorial and Veterans Day events, can't add one flag to the Color Guard and play one additional service song. I reminded them that the WWII US Merchant Mariners were bestowed Veterans status in 1988 by our Government with all the rights, privileges, benefits and recognition of the other Services.

Many people are perplexed as to why the American Legion refuses to recognize these heroes that fought for our freedom. Tell the American Legion to do the right thing at

marcoump@aol.com, and copy Marco council at council@marcocitycouncil.com.

We're talking about a flag and a song, both of which have been provided to the American Legion for free.

Most are surprised how young the Merchant Mariners of WWII were. The other services rejected the underaged, the Merchant Marines, without a draft, weren't picky. A 95 y/o recipient of the Congressional Gold Medal bestowed upon these mariners in 2022 was 15 when he shipped. It is hard to envision 15 year olds trading shells with U-Boats, Kamikazes or dive bombers. Harder still that some survived sinkings by swimming through burning oil or freezing water only to be machine gunned by U-Boats.

Because of mariner losses, the cadets of the Merchant Marine Academy, not graduates, but teenage cadets, went in harm's way aboard the ships. 142 were killed in action. Hence the Merchant Marine Academy is the only one of the service academies authorized to fly a "Battle Flag" with its colors. 19 y/o Cadet Edwin O'Hara, is depicted in a famous painting, his ship being attacked by two Nazi surface raiders. A shell killed the gun crew of their 4" gun, whereupon cadet O'Hara, alone, with his ship sinking under him, manned the gun and shelled a surface raider, sinking it. O'Hara went down with the ship.

These Merchant Marine teenagers that fought, and died, for the freedoms we enjoy are among those that the American Legion will not acknowledge in their Veteran's events.

A 101 y/o Merchant Marine Veteran: "say to them what we did; urge them to read about us and find out about us. We gave up our yesterdays for your better tomorrow."

Response to American Legion denying Merchant Marine Veteran Recognition

Mr. Rubenstein's attempt to rationalize discrimination of Merchant Marine Veterans is disturbing. These Veterans, who performed outstandingly in a time of need and sacrifice during WWII died at the rate of 1 in 26 which is the highest rate of casualties in any of the services, left a legacy which must be remembered.

He states that the Memorial in Veterans Park is only for military service organizations. Read its inscription: "Dedicated in honor and memory for **all brave Veterans** who served this country so that we may enjoy freedom and the beauty here forever". Veterans Park is inclusive of all Veterans. Discriminating against a single group is wrong.

It is absurd to compare 15 year olds fighting for their country trading shells with U-Boats to lucratively paid private security contractors. Mostly non-governmental hires providing maintenance and transportation with NO Combat Missions, they are not Veterans.

CFR title 38: Service by the American Merchant Marine in oceangoing service during the period of armed conflict 1941 to 1945 as **active duty in World War II**. Dept. of Veterans Affairs M21-1 Merchant Marine service in WWII: Eligible for benefits in the **same manner as any other Veteran** including receiving discharge certificates (DD214). **Deemed active duty** for all burial benefits (Arlington National Cemetery).

American Legion Posts include the Merchant Marine all over the country. Cape Coral recognizes them I with monuments, displays and flag alongside the other services.

To dishonor these Mariner Veterans by barring them from Veterans events inside our Veterans Park is improper and trying to rationalize this should be embarrassing to such a fine organization.

Capt. Ralph G. Rohena Jr.

Marco Is. Fl.

832 655 2791