



George Le Porte

National Commander

Italian American War Veterans of the U.S., Inc.

72 Oswego Street

Baldwinsville, New York 13027-2426

Tel: 315-635-9289 Fax: 315-635-0026 Cell: 315-480-4453

e-mail: gleporte@twcny.rr.com

February 16, 2009

The Honorable Charles Schumer, Senator
841 Federal Building
PO Box 7318
Syracuse, New York 13261—7318

Senator Schumer,

It has just come to my attention that there has been a great travesty among the great number of American patriots who had fought alongside of their brother and sister service personnel during World War II. They are the brave and heroic men and women conscripted into the Merchant Marine Service and given veteran status through public law 95-292 and 105-368 provided they meet certain criteria. Trip discharges and entries in ship's logbooks were the primary criteria for proof of service. On March 20 of 1944 the Commandant of the United States Coast Guard issued an order to the Masters of tugs, towboats and seagoing barges that relieved them of the responsibility of issuing shipping and discharge papers to seamen shipping. Additional research from the National Archives and Records Administration brought forth this report, "After WWII, the deck and engineering logbooks of vessels operated by the WSA were turned over to that agency by the ship owners and were later destroyed by the Maritime Administration in the 1970's on the grounds that they were voluminous and costly to house and service, and very seldom used for research." Without discharges and ship's logbooks makes applying and obtaining a form DD-214 next to impossible.

Efforts to gain recognition as veterans are repeatedly rejected by the National Maritime Center because they cannot find records that show service for the periods

required and they accept little else. Alternate methods to prove employment must be made available in order for these seamen to become veterans. But, these brave men and women have long since been forgotten.

There are some 10,000 Merchant Marine seamen who served on seagoing tugs and barges carrying war materials up and down the east coast. Consider this: Days at sea were spent in the presence and fear of enemy submarines continuously. Waters off the United States' East Coast were a war zone 24/7 and merchant ships were constantly being attacked by the vicious German submarine wolf packs plying the Atlantic waters. Seagoing tugs and barge tows moved at the slow pace of 4 to 6 knots and were sitting ducks for the taking. The threat of being attacked by the enemy submarines was constant.

Now, if we can give recognition and veteran status and citizenship to Filipinos who fought under the American Flag and who have little or no "hard proof" that they served why then can't we do the same for our own American men and women who served on these tugs and towboats? I refer to the following article by Ken Mc Laughlin in the *Mercury News*, February 9, 2009.

"It looks as though it took the collapse of the American economy to get the Filipino veterans of World War II the recognition and compensation they have been seeking for more than six decades. The stimulus bill approved by the U.S. Senate on 9 FEB and approved by the House and Senate conferees authorized the release of \$198 million to rectify Uncle Sam's postwar snub. About 18,000 Filipino vets who fought in the war under the American flag will now receive up to \$15,000 for their service. Key representatives had previously stated they felt confident that the vets' benefits would be in the final version of the bill for President Barack Obama to sign. "Both the House and Senate leadership have been supportive of this issue, and I trust that the leadership will move this forward," said Rep. Mike Honda (D-CA 15th), chairman of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus. And "given President Obama's support of this issue, "... I'm confident that it'll remain."

"The vets' quest for compensation stems from President Franklin D. Roosevelt's decision in JUL 41 to draft 140,000 soldiers from the Philippines, then an American colony. A year later, Congress passed a law allowing Filipino soldiers to become U.S. citizens with full military benefits. But in 1946, after Filipino soldiers fought and died side by side with U.S. troops, President Harry S. Truman signed two bills denying them citizenship as well as most veterans' benefits. The bills were postwar cost-saving measures that Truman said he regretted. The vet compensation was not in the House version of the stimulus bill. But it was inserted by Sen. Daniel Inouye (D-HI) who lost

an arm in combat in World War II. The compensation provision has not been without controversy. CNN's Lou Dobbs is railing against it, and several senators — including Arizona Sen. John McCain — objected to including the lump-sum payments in a bill whose purpose is to stimulate the U.S. economy. Inouye, speaking last week on the floor of the Senate, said he didn't necessarily disagree with some of the critics. "This is not a stimulus proposal. It does not create jobs," he conceded. "But the honor of the United States is what is involved."

"Of the 250,000 Filipino vets of World War II, about 12,000 live in the Philippines and 6,000 in the United States. About 30,000 came to the country in the early '90s after President George H.W. Bush signed a bill granting them instant citizenship. About 2,000 settled in the Bay Area. But all but a few hundred in Northern California have either died or returned to the Philippines because life here was too hard. Last April, the Senate by a vote of 96-1 passed a bill that would have given the Filipino vets a pension from the Department of Veterans Affairs of \$900 a month if they lived in the United States, \$300 plus VA health care if they lived in the Philippines. But the bill stalled in the House and was eventually replaced by the lump-sum provisions. Vets who are U.S. citizens would get \$15,000; vets who are citizens of the Philippines would get \$9,000. Honda noted that Congress in September had set aside the funds for the vets — and just not released them. "They have been waiting for over 60 years," he said. "This is an opportunity for America to honor its promise."

Please have your staff look into this situation and then propose the necessary legislation that will correct this tragedy.

Yours in Service,

George Le Porte