

Hi, Fred Nelson for Community Comment,

The following comment was aired by me on July Eighth, Nineteen Ninety Nine and I think that it is appropriate to repeat at this time: Each year we honor our veterans who have served our country over the years. We should never forget them as their sacrifices have enabled our nation to stay as free as it is. Veterans of the American Merchant Marine, who served with many lives lost, during World War Two, are also remembered for their efforts. Here is one example: On the morning of September Twenty Seventh, Nineteen Forty Two, two German surface raiders, the Stier and Tannenfels appeared out of the fog to attack the American freighter S.S. Stephen Hopkins, steaming from Capetown, South Africa to Dutch Guiana to pick up a load of bauxite. The raiders pounded shell after shell into the Hopkins. She fought back with her four inch stern gun, mounted machine guns and a thirty seven millimeter bow gun. Lieutenant J.G. Kenneth Willet of Sacramento, commander of the fifteen man Navy gun crew, was killed early in the action. Shells from the German raiders destroyed the port side life boats and blew up the starboard boiler. The Hopkins lost all headway becoming a twisted, burning wreck. Her crew, on the four inch stern gun, continued to fire until all were killed by a close hit. Engine Cadet-Midshipman Edwin J. O'Hara from Lindsay, California making his way topside from the engine room, emerged near the four inch gun. Seeing the gun apparently undamaged, he single-handedly fired the five shells remaining in the ready box, scoring hits on both raiders. O'Hara was mortally wounded by shrapnel while on his way to a life boat. Captain Paul Buck, skipper of the Hopkins, gave the order to abandon ship. Number one lifeboat was intact so Captain Buck and Second Engineer George Cronk lowered it to the water. Captain Buck, spotted on a life raft later, was never seen again. Nineteen survivors from the crew of forty mariners, and fifteen gun crew managed to rig the lifeboat which they sailed for thirty one days, making the coast of Brazil on October twenty seventh. Four of the nineteen in the lifeboat died before reaching land. As a result of Edwin O'Hara's action, the Stier sank from a direct hit in her ammunition magazine and the Tannenfels was so damaged that it had to return home for repairs. The Hopkins was the only American merchant ship to sink a German Navy warship during World War Two. The War Shipping Administration gave the Hopkins, its officers, crew and Navy armed Guard the Gallant Ship Citation. Five merchant mariners were awarded the Merchant Marine Distinguished Service Medal. Many Naval Armed Guardsmen suffered and died beside their Merchant Marine ship mates during World War Two. The American Merchant Marine Veterans of World War Two are proud to include these brave men as members of their organization.

Fred Nelson for Community Comment.