

Hi, Fred Nelson for Community Comment,

I would like to thank the Southwest Rotary Club of Eureka for their sponsorship of the salute to veterans held in the Adorni Center on November Eleventh. The organization always presents an excellent program. In addition to the five branches of our military, they also include the United States Merchant Marine. This is not always the norm in Veterans Day programs. I am proud to say that I have represented the Merchant Service for the past two years. In fact, this year, I was the only member of the Merchant Marine in the building. The reason that many programs such as this do not recognize the Merchant Marine is the fact that it is not a member of the Armed Services. The group has always been an organization of civilians that operated our merchant ships. Military discipline does not exist nor do the seamen wear uniforms except for the officers. This will get you an argument that we are not part of a strictly military organization. Why should the group be recognized? Stop and think of our nation at war, especially during World Wars One and Two. Our nation was fighting on battle fronts throughout the World. We could not fight without ammunition, heavy equipment and supplies of many types. All of this had to be transported across the seas not only for use by U.S. troops but also by our allied troops. The initial transport was handled by our civilian mariners. They were not trained to fight nor did they have arms to defend themselves against attacks from the air and the sea. When the merchant ships were outfitted with guns, they brought U.S. Navy personnel aboard to man them. The merchant ships were formed into convoys for the long voyages across the Pacific and Atlantic and were flanked by naval escort vessels. Imagine, fifty or sixty ships traveling together, with the idea that several might be torpedoed and never reach their destination, yet all these civilian crewman signed on including the elderly and those that could not pass a military medical exam but still wanted to do their part to defend their country. Thousands of merchant sailors never reached their destination. For those that survived a sinking, their pay stopped when the ship was destroyed and many had to find their way back to the United States at their own expense. I have great respect for the World War Two mariner and was proud to be one of them if only for a short time. I have had the honor of interviewing some of the old timers (all gone now) and listening to their experiences. A close friend of mine, was on an ammunition ship that was hit by a Kamikaze at Okinawa. A large number of his fellow crewmen and the captain were killed. Jim survived. Many years after the War, merchant seamen were officially recognized as veterans but most had died of old age before it happened.

Fred Nelson for Community Comment