

World War II U.S. Merchant Marine Made Victory Possible

First to Go • Last to Return • Highest Casualty Rate • No Promised Benefits

Merchant Marine: First to Go

The first American victim to Axis aggression was the *SS City of Flint*, captured by a Nazi battleship in October 1939. The first U.S. ship sunk was the *MS City of Rayville*, which hit a German mine in Nov. 1940, killing one mariner.

The toll of men killed grew to 243 before Pearl Harbor. Mariners were among the first U.S. Prisoners of War and many were held by both the Germans and Japanese.

Highest Casualty Rate

President Roosevelt said mariners were “fighting side by side with our Army and Navy.”

Mariners were at the front the moment they left port, subject to attack by submarine, surface raider, mines, bombers, kamikaze, and land-based artillery. Each was assigned a battle station and manned guns or passed ammunition during battle.

About 9,300 mariners were killed and 12,000 wounded. Mariners suffered the highest casualty rate of any service during World War II, with 1 in 26 killed.

Over 1,500 ships were sunk, with 1 in 8 mariners losing their ship. Casualties were kept secret during the war to avoid providing information to the enemy and to keep mariners at sea.

Merchant Marine Delivered

It took 15 tons of supplies to support one soldier for one year at the front. Mariners delivered tanks, amphibious craft, airplanes, jeeps, ammunition, PT boats, gasoline, aviation fuel, trucks, medicines, and food rations while taking part in every invasion from Normandy to Okinawa.

Manning the Ships

During the War the number of seamen grew from 55,000 to 250,000, mostly recruited by the U.S. Maritime Service, the official training organization. The Merchant Marine took volunteers 16 to 78 years old, some with one eye, one arm, one leg, or heart disease. Many were high school dropouts, eager to help win the war.

The Merchant Marine was the only racially integrated service.



Merchant Marine: Last to Return

Mariners remained in war zones long after the fighting troops came home to enjoy the benefits of the GI Bill. Mariners suffered many casualties as 54 ships struck mines after V-E or V-J Day.

No Promised Benefits

As he signed the GI Bill in June 1944, President Roosevelt said:

“I trust Congress will soon provide similar opportunities to members of the merchant marine who have risked their lives time and time again during war for the welfare of their country.”

With his death, mariners lost their champion.

Mariners were denied benefits: unemployment, education, home or small business loans, priority for postwar jobs, and medical care for disabilities. Mariners were urged to stay at sea with promises of benefits and “your country needs you,” but only received a “Thank-you” letter from President Truman and a lapel pin.

They suffered financial repercussions from this lack of benefits and opportunities all their lives.

Struggle for Veteran Status

Congress created an application process for Veteran Status in 1977. Mariners were continually denied, while telephone operators and even Women’s Air Service Pilots who washed out of training were approved.

In 1987, three torpedoed mariners successfully sued the government, resulting in veteran status in Jan. 1988, too late for most benefits.

Mariners are honored on countless memorials across the country, including the new World War II Memorial in Washington, DC.

Sadly, in some places, they are deemed “civilians” and relegated to the back of the monument.

Mariners still seek full, official recognition for their heroism and vital role in making World War II victory possible.

Comparison of Casualties

1 in 26 Mariners killed
1 in 34 Marine Corps killed
1 in 48 Army killed
1 in 114 Navy killed
1 in 421 Coast Guard killed

American Merchant Marine at War

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