



## **H.R. 23- Belated Thank You to the Merchant Mariners of World War II Act of 2007**

H.R. 23 is being considered on the floor under suspension of the rules and will require a two-thirds majority vote for passage. This legislation was introduced by Representative Bob Filner (D-CA) on January 4, 2007 and was referred to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs and reported out by voice vote.

H.R. 23 is expected to be considered on July 30, 2007.

*\*Note – Ranking Member Buyer expressed reservation about this legislation in Committee. His principal concern was that there are 30 other World War II veterans groups recognized by the government that do not receive a service pension. In addition, Buyer and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) are concerned that this legislation will set a precedent and later require them to extend a service benefit to the other groups and potentially to civilian contractors who have an increasingly larger role in U.S. military operations. Currently, the only veterans authorized to receive a service pension are Medal of Honor recipients.*

### **Summary**

H.R. 23 sets up what is effectively a service pension of \$1000 a month to be paid to WWII Merchant Marines who have veterans' status. Called a "thank you," part of the rationale for this payment has been to make up for the "lost" GI Bill benefits for which mariners were ineligible when they were young. This benefit would be extended to any Merchant Marines who served overseas from December 7, 1941 to December 31, 1946 (the official U.S. end of WWII).

The legislation would also create a Merchant Marine Equity Compensation Fund within the general fund of the Treasury. This fund would be subject to appropriations and would not have a fiscal year limitation. No current appropriations measure would provide funding.

### **Background**

The U.S. Merchant Marines contributed to the WWII effort through the transportation of goods, materials, and personnel to the various theaters of war. These mariners were considered civilians and not members of the U.S. Armed Forces. As such, they did not get veterans' benefits after the war, including the 1944 GI Bill.

In 1977, the GI Improvement Bill was passed. Contained within this legislation was a provision that set up a process to determine eligibility for veterans' benefits to groups of civilians that assisted in wartime efforts. In 1988, the Secretary of the Air Force, via litigation, determined that the Merchant Marines who served from December 7, 1941 to August 14, 1945 (Victory over Japan Day) would be eligible for all benefits. These benefits include healthcare, old age pension and other benefits afforded by the VA.

Merchant Mariners who served between August 14, 1945 and December 31, 1946, only receive veterans' burial and cemetery benefits.

*\*Note – During the contentious Committee hearing on this legislation, concerns about the funding mechanism were also raised. In previous Congresses when this legislation was introduced, it was subject to PAYGO rules because the payment will be an entitlement.*

*By setting up a separate fund in the Treasury and making it subject to appropriations, this authorizing legislation essentially “passes the buck” to the Appropriations Committee and forces them to find a way to fund this new program. If sufficient funds are not appropriated, some mariners would receive their payments, but some would not.*

*Additional concerns were voiced regarding the amount of the monthly payment. \$1000 is, in some cases, significantly higher than the pensions received for many WWII combat veterans. Outside groups have argued that this is necessary because it wasn't until 1988 that the Merchant Marines were recognized for their service. It should be noted though, that the VA typically does not offer any sort of retroactive compensation.*

### **CBO Estimate**

The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimates that implementing H.R. 23 would cost \$120 million in 2008 and \$485 million over the 2008-2012 period, assuming appropriation of the authorized amounts. Enacting the bill would not affect direct spending or receipts.

### **Staff Contact**

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