

Remarks of Ron Davis
President, Marine Engineers' Beneficial Association
National Maritime Day Observance
Calhoon MEBA Engineering School
May 24th, 2007

Thank you, Lou. I am pleased to see so many friends and colleagues here today.

I would like to thank all the MEBA members, retirees MEBA employers and friends of MEBA who helped make this wonderful memorial a reality.

On the 22nd of May in 1819, the SS *Savannah* sailed on the first transatlantic voyage under steam propulsion. In 1933, Congress named May 22nd National Maritime Day. Since that time we merchant

mariners, along with the rest of America, have celebrated this day as one of reflection and remembrance. Today, Maritime Day serves as a living tribute to the dedication and sacrifice that all merchant mariners have made over the centuries.

But for those of us who have made our living by the sea, Maritime Day has a deeper meaning. This is the second time that I have had the opportunity to participate in the Maritime Day observance here at this beautiful Merchant Marine Memorial at the Calhoun MEBA Engineering School. This memorial, dedicated to those who have lost their lives at sea, stands as a living tribute to those who have given

their lives for the benefit of others. And for those of us who have sailed, who are sailing and those who will set sail long after we here have crossed the bar, it serves as a reminder of the awesome power of the oceans on which we travel.

As a young sailor in the US Navy, I was taught to respect the sea. And as I matured, spending more and more time on the merchant ships that carried the fruits of the labor of millions of our countrymen to markets abroad, I never forgot that lesson. At sea, you are alone. You, your shipmates, and a few inches of steel are all that stand between you and eternity. It is a sobering realization. And nearly all of us have

had experiences, good and bad, where we have seen what the sea can do. Death is a fact of life in this business, but it is a fact that is easily lost on those who have never experienced a life at sea. Many of us have stories that we will remember forever.

I would like to share one of those stories with you today.

It is the story of how baseball and the Philadelphia Phillies probably saved my life.

As a young engineer, I had been sailing out of MEBA's Philadelphia Union hall. It had been a few

months since my last job, and I had a good shipping card. Then, as it is today, priority goes in our Union halls to those who have been waiting to work the longest. Many a day I had been sitting in the hall, waiting for a job to be posted on the job board so I could ship out.

I didn't really complain – it was an exciting time to be in Philly that year. For the first time in 77 years, the Phillies had a shot at winning the World Series. After a great National League Championship Series against the Astros, the Phils were scheduled to begin playing the Kansas City Royals at home at Veterans Stadium.

I was a big baseball fan, but even if you weren't, being in Philly in the fall of 1980 would have made you one. And I was lucky enough to snag tickets to one of the games played at home.

It was early October, and a job came across the job board. It was on the SS *Poet*, a reconditioned Liberty Ship hauling corn from Philadelphia, by way of the Azores, the Straits of Gibraltar to Port Said in Egypt.

It was not quite what I had been waiting for –but I was short on money and it was a job and the job would have been mine if I wanted it. The *Poet* had been considered old when I was in high school, and it

was even older now, so the opportunities for overtime would have been plentiful. It would have been a worthwhile trip for me.

This was a tough choice. I needed to work, and I wanted to work, but if I took that job, we would have been loading and prepping the ship to sail while the games played on. And, of course, I had access to World Series tickets. It was a tough decision for me.

After mulling it over for while, I decided to skip the job and stay in town. The Series was a once in a lifetime experience – but another job would be up on the board eventually.

Because of that World Series I am still on this earth today. The *Poet* sailed on October 24th, and was never heard from again. The thirty four men who crewed her were lost and presumed dead.

This is my story. I am sure that many of you have similar stories. And I am sure that many of those whom this memorial stands to remember had many too. Many of them were not as fortunate as I was. They took the job, and lost their lives, and for that we as a nation owe them a debt of gratitude that we can never truly repay.

Each May 22nd, as we gather to celebrate Maritime Day, as we remember those who have gone before, and teach the lessons we have learned to those who will go after, let us remind ourselves of the sacrifices made by the brave seafarers who have risked their lives to keep the sea-lanes open.

Earlier this month, the maritime industry came together at the Propeller Club of the United States annual Salute to Congress dinner. The recipient of the annual award this year went to Senator John Warner of Virginia. In his remarks, Senator Warner reflected on his own life in politics and his experience with the sea. And then he told the audience that we had been

remiss in our duty. He said that we had not done enough to make the American people aware of the blood, toil, tears and sweat that have been expended by our merchant mariners in bringing the goods they use and need daily to them. We had been, as he said, “too efficient” at what we do. The millions of tons of cargo we move each year has lulled America into forgetting the role we merchant mariners play in their daily lives.

We here know how important Merchant Mariners are. We know the tons of cargo we’ve moved, whether it is food to foreign markets, or bullets to our brave men and women on the front lines. We know

the difference we make on a daily basis. But if we never speak up – if we never point out that role to our neighbors – if we do not advocate for this industry we support, we cannot complain when we go unacknowledged.

As we remember the fallen and look to the future, let us all pledge ourselves to increasing public awareness of the American Merchant Marine and what it means to our economic, national and homeland security.

Thank you and God bless the United States and her Merchant Marine.