

Leaders Honor Merchant Marine Bravery in World War II, Ongoing Pandemic for National Maritime Day



Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg speaks at the DOT's National Maritime Day observance. *SEAPOWER / Brett Davis*
WASHINGTON, D.C. – Transportation and military officials observed the annual National Maritime Day on May 24, saying the Merchant Marines were the unsung heroes of the second world war and continue to be heroes by shipping vital supplies during the ongoing pandemic.

"We have always been, and always will be, a nation whose destiny is connect to the sea," Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg said during the ceremony at the Department of Transportation headquarters.

The ceremony especially honored the Merchant Mariners who helped win World War II, losing their lives at a higher rate than any other services. On May 18, congressional leaders revealed a new Congressional Gold Medal for American Merchant Mariners.

During World War II, they delivered an average 17 million pounds of cargo to the armed forces every hour, and “often they did so without protection against U Boats, destroyers and the aircraft that menaced the waters,” Buttigieg said.

Now, during a pandemic, “you have kept America afloat,” he said.



Daniel Maffei. left, Ann Phillips, the new administrator of the Maritime Administration, and Polly Trottenberg, the deputy secretary of transportation, during the presentation of a wreath to honor fallen Merchant Marines. *SEAPOWER / Brett Davis*

Daniel Maffei, chairman of the Federal Maritime Commission, said the COVID pandemic put current mariners to the test again, and “they put their lives on the line for our country.”

Americans stayed home to help fight the spread of the virus, but “thanks especially to the workers in our ports, America was never cut off.”

Retired Navy Rear Adm. Ann Phillips, sworn in as the 20th administrator of the Maritime Administration on May 16, also cited maritime bravery during World War II and said, “today, our mariners continue to navigate historic challenges” such as the pandemic and supply chain disruptions.

Strengthening the maritime services is critical, said outgoing Coast Guard Commandant Adm. Karl Schultz.

Maritime officials like to talk about ships and boats and ports, he said, but “it’s really the mariners. It’s not the steel, it’s not the concrete ... mariners deserve the best support we as a nation can provide,” including updated technology, streamlined induction processes and a renewed fight against sexual assault to create a safe environment for all mariners.

Rear Adm. Michael A. Wettlaufer, command of Military Sealift Command, said his service is also embarking on modernization to improve the environment for the maritime fleet. He cited the 2021 delivery of a component from a Navy ship and Coast Guard vessel as an example, and said in the future “I expect to be able to deliver key components between ships” at distances of up to several hundred miles.