At age 84, Michael Boosalis has lived the life of at least three men. He joined the Merchant Marine when he was just 16. He worked in the restaurant business and eventually owned his own bar. And he became a Local 548 millwright from 1978-1990, now retired and living in Richfield, Minn.

The United States Merchant Marine is a fleet of civilian-owned merchant vessels that transport goods or services over oceans, the Great Lakes, rivers, canals, harbors and other waterways. During peace time it transports cargo and passengers. In time of war it is auxiliary to the U.S. Navy and can be called upon to deliver troops and supplies for the military. Since the Merchant Marine is a civilian branch, it is not a uniformed service.

Boosalis said he wasn’t always well behaved in school and that his family put him to work in a restaurant. He hated it, and ran away from home. When he returned, his dad took him to the old federal building on Third and Marquette in Minneapolis and signed him up with the Merchant Marines, asking them to make a cook out of his son.

Boosalis joined in 1944, near the end of World War II. Since he was only 16-1/2, his dad had to sign for him. He traveled to the United States Maritime Service Training Station in Sheepshead Bay, New York, for 90 day training, but received only 45 of the intended 90 days due to an urgent need for ships and seamen. He — like many other merchant mariners — had no other ship experience.

He trained as a steward, learning cooking and baking, but worked as a mess man, serving food during meals and washing pots and pans. He served on ships for three years, which hauled everything from troops and supplies to railroad ties and beer, crude oil and cattle.

His first ship out of Baltimore, Md., was “an old tanker from World War I, a bucket of rusty bolts,” said Boosalis. He soon went to San Francisco, where he sailed a modern-day tanker in the South Pacific. After World War II ended, he served on cargo ships as part of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration program.

“We were feeding Europe then,” he explained, “bringing wheat and grains to France, Italy, Greece and Russia.”

Often referred to as “the forgotten service”, Merchant Mariners suffered air, surface and submarine attacks but were not really considered part of the U.S. military. According to Wikipedia, “3.1 million tons of merchant ships were lost in World War II. Mariners died at a rate of 1 in 24, which was the highest rate of casualties of any service.”

Boosalis is a 15-year member of the local Viking chapter of the Merchant Marines, which consists of a group of men in their 80s and 90s who meet the second Monday of each month for fellowship at American Legion Club Post #66 in Richfield.

Although Merchant Mariners weren’t recognized as an integral part of the Armed Forces until 60 years later, finally receiving veteran benefits under the direction of President Ronald Reagan, not one member of the group regrets his contribution to the war.

“It was a different time,” said a member in Boosalis’ group. “Everyone at that time had a goal of helping the war effort. It was expected and we anticipated it.”

“It was a very patriotic thing to do, so the vast majority of people joined up,” added another.

After Boosalis returned from the Merchant Marines — not yet 21 — he met and married Stella, his wife now for 64 years, and got back into the restaurant business. “I hated it with a passion, but I was good at it,” said Boosalis.

After his father passed away he was able to get out of the restaurant business and was running a bar on 35th and Hiawatha in Minneapolis, Mike’s Escape. He became friendly with the grain elevator and construction people who came into his bar, and one of them suggested he become a millwright. He joined Local 548 in 1978, working until 1990 when he was forced to retire due to knee problems.

“They needed people to work, and this was before the training school,” Boosalis explained. “Some old timers took me in and showed me the ropes. I didn’t even know how to read a ruler when I started, but I loved working with my hands. I worked with terrific guys.”

During his time as a millwright he worked at IBM, Koch Refinery, grain elevators, hospitals, power plants, Ford plant, Honeywell and many other sites around Minnesota.

“I enjoyed working as a millwright,” Boosalis said. “I really did. I felt I was building America.”

He is also proud to have served as a delegate at three UBC conventions.

“God was really, really good to me with Local 548,” he said. “There was a comradeship there, a tight bond with the millwrights. We all looked out for each other on and off the job.”