

Testimony of Congressman Dana Rohrabacher
“Healthcare for Filipino Veterans of World War II”
Subcommittee on Health
House Veterans Affairs Committee
June 13, 2002

Mr. Chairman:

During the dark early years of the Japanese Army’s onslaught in the Pacific Theater during World War II, the most loyal allies of the United States were Filipino soldiers and guerilla fighters. Trapped behind enemy lines the Filipino and American combined forces waged heroic harassment and sabotage raids against superior Japanese forces. The Filipino guerillas and civilian population paid a very heavy price for their resistance, suffering massacres, torture and slave labor in prison death camps.

I urge the Committee to support S1042, “the Filipino Veterans Improvement Act,” and HR491, “the Filipino Veterans Equity Act,” offered by my friend, Ben Gilman, who not only is the former distinguished Chairman of the House International Relations Committee, but is also a veteran of the World War II Pacific Theater, who as a member of the Army Air Corps flew a number of combat missions over Japan. This legislation would amend title 38, United States Code, to deem individuals who served in the organized military forces of the Government of the Commonwealth of the Philippines and the Philippine Scouts to be eligible for health care benefits under programs administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

The Filipino veterans who would be covered under this legislation served the United States honorably. Even before Pearl Harbor, as the clouds of war gathered in the Pacific, on June 26, 1941 President Franklin Roosevelt drafted Philippine Commonwealth Army soldiers who were U.S. nationals into American military service. At that time, the Philippines was a defacto colony of the United States. During and immediately after the war, Filipino soldiers were considered by our Veterans Administration as U.S. veterans with “active” service. However, in 1946, the law was changed which denied them the rights of other U.S. veterans.

However, under the 1990 Immigration and Naturalization Act, 26,000 Filipino veterans of World War II were naturalized as U.S. citizens because of their war time service. Under U.S. law, if they die, they may be buried as U.S. veterans in national cemeteries. I believe, out of fairness to those remaining elderly veterans who served our country and protected our freedom during wartime, that they also be permitted eligibility at U.S. Veterans Hospitals and clinics, if they choose to seek service at those facilities.

I have very strong feelings about fairness for the Filipino veterans because of my own family’s experience in the Philippines during the War. My father flew missions up and down the Philippines as a pilot with the U.S. Marine Corps. He often told me about

his respect for the Filipinos he fought alongside, and, “I don’t know of finer friends of the United States, than the Filipinos I met during the war.”

Another member of my family, my wife’s Uncle Lou, who gave her hand to me at our wedding, is a survivor of the Bataan Death March where thousands of American and Filipino prisoners of war perished or were murdered by their brutal Japanese captors. Uncle Lou told me that as the American prisoners, who were dying of thirst and starvation, passed through little villages, ordinary Filipinos risked their lives to throw food and water to the prisoners. Some were caught in their acts of mercy by the Japanese. They were bayoneted or beaten to death.

Mr. Chairman:

Out of fairness to U.S. veterans who happen to be Filipino, and to demonstrate friendship to people from a country that is proving to be among our most trustworthy allies in the war against terrorism today, I urge the Committee to support this long-overdue legislation.