

Testimony in support of Filipino veterans' health care.

Randy "Duke" Cunningham

13 June 2002

Mr. Chairman, I thank you for the opportunity to speak about Filipino veterans' health care today. This issue is one of the most important subjects that we will discuss this session. As a member of the Appropriations and Intelligence committees, I am fully aware of the other issues that we face. Defense spending, our response to terrorism, making America safer, social security, Medicare, prescription drugs, immigration, and energy policy all capture the headlines and the minds of most Americans. I contend, however, that there is healthy debate that must occur to reflect the will of the American people as to how we address those issues. The subject we are talking about today is different. It does not capture the headlines and few Americans are even aware of it. And it requires no debate to determine the only honorable and right course of action.

When we went to war in 1941, the people of the Philippines, then an American Commonwealth, went with us. Under Executive Order by President Roosevelt, the 4000,000 men of the Philippine military were called on to join our forces under General Douglas MacArthur. They faithfully fought with us throughout the war. They walked side by side with us during the Bataan Death March, dying at a rate exceeding that of the American troops. After the war, we passed legislation that denied these brave men status as US veterans, denying them access to veterans' benefits. I am proud to count myself among the many that feel this was wrong and not worthy of our Nation's honor.

I believe that a promise made is a debt unpaid, and it is far past the proper time to correct this longstanding wrong. I call on this body to pass H.R. 491 and officially recognize service in the Philippine Commonwealth Army and the New Philippine Scouts during WWII as worthy of VA benefits. Such recognition would allow Filipino WWII veterans to receive VA health care, give them access to non-service connected disability benefits, and give their surviving spouses dependency indemnity compensation. Recently, the Department of Veterans' Affairs has proposed a partial implementation of portions of H.R. 491. These portions would extend the above-mentioned benefits to the approximately 11,000 Filipino WWII veterans that are living in the United States. I encourage the passage of legislation to accomplish this. While this would get us partway to our goal, I still firmly hold the passage of the rest of H.R. 491 in my sights as our final goal. This would ultimately affect the 34,000 Filipino WWII veterans who live in the Philippines. Failure to take action is a stain on our national character. As Americans we can and must set a higher standard.