

**STATEMENT OF
CONGRESSMAN ROBERT A. UNDERWOOD
BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH
FOR FILIPINO WORLD WAR II VETERANS**

JUNE 13, 2002

Mr. Chairman:

I appreciate the opportunity to testify at this important hearing to discuss the restoration of veterans' benefits for Philippine veterans of World War II. I stand in support of the Health Care for Filipino Veterans of World War II Act, introduced by Congressman Bob Filner, ranking member of this subcommittee. I also applaud his steadfast diligence to this issue and your commitment, Mr. Chairman, to honor the valiant service of Filipino soldiers who fought alongside and under the command of the United States Armed Forces during World War II. I am also supportive of H.R. 491, the Filipino Veterans' Equity Act, jointly introduced by Congressman Gilman and Congressman Filner, which would provide full restoration of veterans' benefits to members of the Philippine Commonwealth Army and the Philippine Scouts.

The resolution of this issue has been long overdue as it has been 60 years since more than 140,000 Filipino soldiers who fought under the command of General Douglass MacArthur of the United States Armed Forces in World War II were promised the same veterans benefits given to American soldiers. Today approximately 13,000 Philippine-born veterans living in the United States and some 35,000 veterans living in the Philippines are in their twilight years still awaiting their just compensation and most importantly the restoration of their dignity as honored veterans of World War II.

As it was for my district of Guam, the Philippine Islands became a possession of the United States in 1898, when it was ceded from Spain following the Spanish-American War despite their prior declaration of independence from Spain. In fact this week marks the celebration of the 104th anniversary of the Philippine Declaration of Independence.

In 1902, Congress granted the Philippines the right to elect two Resident Commissioners, who were non-voting delegates to Congress. During the periods under which the Philippine Islands were a territory of the United States, 13 Resident Commissioners served the U.S. House of Representatives and were among the first Asian Pacific Americans to Congress.

In 1934, Congress enacted the Philippine Independence Act, which provided a 10-year time frame for the independence of the Philippines. With the advent of World War II, the implementation of this act was delayed until 1946. During the time between 1934 and 1946, our nation retained certain powers over the Philippines, including the right to call all military forces organized by the newly formed Commonwealth government into armed service under the United States flag.

When President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued an Executive Order on July 26, 1941 calling the members of the Philippine Commonwealth Army into the Service of the U.S. Armed Forces of the Far East, more than 140,000 Filipinos volunteered and fought alongside American soldiers under the U.S. flag against the onslaught of Japanese Imperial Forces. Philippine forces fought on the front lines of the Battle of Corregidor and at Bataan.

Despite of all of their sacrifices and the commitment made to extend veterans' benefits to these courageous soldiers by President Roosevelt, Congress voted to rescind promise on this commitment when it passed the Recission Act of 1946, stripping these benefits away from Filipino veterans. Despite this gray period in our history, Filipinos have remained the closest ally of the United States standing shoulder-to-shoulder with U.S. Armed Forces in World War II and as our closest ally in this war against terrorism.

Today we have before us the opportunity to right a wrong committed decades ago when the Recission Act denied Filipino veterans of their just and noble service to the defense of this country and the Asia-Pacific region. Although much has been discussed on this issue and some progress has been made in the effort to restore some of the benefits denied by the Recission Act, Filipino veterans of World War II are literally dying in the fight to receive the just recognition and compensation they have awaited most of their lives. This Congress along with the support from the Administration has now seized the opportunity to restore the dignity of these veterans with the restoration of health care benefits and burial services to these veterans.

I also ask that this subcommittee solidify President Bush's commitment to Philippine President Arroyo to provide assistance for the modernization of the Veterans' Memorial Medical Center in the Philippines and provide for the deployment of medical missions to the Philippines supported by Veterans Affairs medical personnel. I also urge this subcommittee to further the restoration of veterans' benefits for World War II veterans living in the Philippines.

My district of Guam has the distinction of being the closest U.S. jurisdiction to the Philippines. Being the closest U.S. neighbor to the Philippines, our island has a large population of Filipinos who make up nearly 30 percent of the island's population. Our large citizenry of Filipino veterans are indeed dying in wait for the restoration of these benefits. Let us not deny them any longer the honor and recognition they deserve. Let us fulfill our solemn commitment.

Mr. Chairman, I join my colleagues today in support of this measure and urge your leadership in moving this legislation towards final passage and enactment.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.