

Gerald Harvey, National Commander American Ex-Prisoners of War

Testimony of National Commander Gerald Harvey  
American Ex-Prisoners of War  
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Chairman Craig, Ranking Member Akaka, Distinguished Members of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee and Guests

I welcome the opportunity to again speak on behalf of American Ex-Prisoners of War (POWs). We are deeply grateful for all that Congress and VA have done for POWs over the last thirty years. As you know, prior to that POWs were an invisible part of this nation's veterans. It has been incorrectly stated we preferred it "this way" out of shame over being captured. This is not true, we are proud to have lost our liberty while defending the right of all Americans to be free. We were so happy to be free we simply wanted to again enjoy that freedom with our homes and families. As a result, we made few requests upon our government at that time.

Public awareness about the plight of aging POWs in general was reawakened by the plight of the Americans held for months and years by North Vietnam. Max Cleland, then VA Administrator and, later, Senator from Georgia - took the lead in correcting our country's failure to remember POWs from earlier wars, including WWII. For the first time, Total Captured, Repatriated, and Currently Alive were obtained from original military records.

VA then immediately took steps to identify all POWs receiving health care or disability benefits. Congress, too, responded promptly and directed VA to conduct a review of all policies and procedures relevant to POWs and established a POW Advisory Committee to review and advise VA and Congress on matters related to POWs. In a very real sense, POWs were changed to a high priority group within VA and Congress.

Over the past thirty years many presumptives were established to simplify the process by which POWs could obtain needed disability benefits and medical care. The ongoing research conducted on POWs by the National Academy of Sciences provided the basis for these Congressional and VA actions. At present most of the long term health problems causally associated with the brutal and inhumane conditions of captivity have been identified and made presumptive.

We urge Congress to act on the several remaining medical conditions identified in current legislation. The first of these, "chronic liver disease" is simply a clarification of a current presumptive - "cirrhosis of the liver?". The National Academy of Sciences has stated in writing, this more accurately reflects their findings - cirrhosis is simply the final stage of chronic liver disease.

The second is diabetes. It has already been established for Vietnam veterans exposed to certain chemicals and other factors. POWs were similarly exposed to adverse factors while in captivity that are causally related to diabetes.

Third - osteoporosis. This is directly related to the absence of the calcium needed to maintain bone structure, a common situation for POWs. This condition becomes apparent after a bone break. Adjudicators typically already decide these claims for POWs. Making it a presumptive simplifies the process for adjudicators and POWs alike.

H. R. 1598 introduced by Rep. Michael Bilirakis and S. 1271 introduced by Sen. Patty Murray cover these presumptives. We call to your attention that there is virtually no increased cost to any of these proposed presumptives. Costs are more than off-set by rapidly diminishing numbers of POWs already on the disability rolls or favorably acted on by VA adjudicators via a longer process of evaluation.

Senator Harry Reid introduced S. 2385 earlier this month known as the Combat Related Special Compensation Act. Rep. Michael Bilirakis, a long time advocate of concurrent receipt legislation, previously introduced the companion bill H. R. 1366 in the House. It is currently before the Armed Services Committee. This legislation will amend some parts of The Combat Related Special Compensation Act chapter 61 of the Defense Authorization Act to an earlier effective date of January 1, 2006. With the current effective date of 2014 and their current advanced age it is a statistical probability WWII military retirees will not live to receive this deserved compensation. Rep. Bob Filner introduced H. R. 2369 to provide for the Purple Heart to be awarded to prisoners of war who die in captivity. We ask the committee to give their full support to these bills.

In closing, I want to again express our deep appreciation for identifying POWs as a high priority and worthy segment of the veterans population. We are also gratified for VA's ongoing efforts to identify every POW and be processed for applicable VA benefits by adjudicators specially trained to handle POW claims.