

HENRY J. COOK, III, NATIONAL COMMANDER, MILITARY ORDER OF THE PURPLE HEART

MILITARY ORDER
OF THE PURPLE HEART

HENRY J. COOK, III

APRIL 3, 2008

TESTIMONY

BEFORE THE JOINT SENATE AND HOUSE COMMITTEES ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

Chairmen Akaka and Filner, Ranking Members Burr and Buyer, members of the Committees, ladies and gentlemen.

I am Henry Cook, the National Commander of the Military Order of the Purple Heart (MOPH). It is an honor to appear before this distinguished body on behalf of the members of our Order. As each of you know MOPH is unique among veterans' service organizations in that each member of the Order has shed their blood on the battlefields of the world while serving America as a member of the armed forces. For their sacrifices they were awarded the Purple Heart Medal. I would like to express our appreciation to you for allowing us the opportunity to testify at this most important hearing. We look forward to it each year as an opportunity to exchange views on issues affecting veterans.

MOPH enjoys an excellent relationship with your committees. We recognize and appreciate the dedication and hard work of each of you and your staffs. You may always count on the support of MOPH on issues that are for the good of our military personnel in uniform and America's veterans.

I am accompanied today by Senior Vice Commander Jeff Roy, National Adjutant Joe Palagyi, and National Legislative Director Hershel Gober.

In an effort to be as concise as possible, during my verbal testimony, I respectfully request that my entire written testimony be entered into the record.

I would like to begin by thanking the committees for their efforts and successes that have been made for veterans and their families since last year's hearing. MOPH is keenly aware that with the ongoing conflicts securing budget dollars for most programs is difficult. Your Committees were successful in securing the largest annual increase in the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) budget in history and for this we are most appreciative. This increase was not only needed but was imperative to ensure that veterans currently enrolled in the VA Health Care system receive proper and timely medical care. The increase was also justified to guarantee that

members of our military who are returning from Iraq and Afghanistan receive the best medical care available our country can provide. To settle for anything less would be a betrayal of America's contract with members of our armed forces.

VA MEDICAL CARE

While the VA's FY 2008 budget was increased, the VA did not receive its full appropriations until January 2008 rather than October 1, 2007. This is the 13th year out of the last 14 years that the VA has experienced a delay in receiving its appropriations. As MOPH National Commanders have testified before your committees the past four (4) years, this delay in providing the VA with appropriations in a timely manner, so that they may carry out their mission must be corrected. It is difficult for the VA to make program decisions, recruit needed professionals and plan when they never know when or the amount of appropriations they will receive.

MOPH calls on Congress to consider legislation that would provide the VA with some manner of guaranteed funding. MOPH has supported Assured Funding/Adequate Funding and, legislation was introduced in both Houses of Congress but has not moved forward. MOPH now believes, as do some of the other VSOs, that perhaps Advanced Funding is the approach that should be taken. Under this scenario Congress would retain its ability to set discretionary funding levels but a "baseline" for veterans' medical care would become the basis for Veterans Health Care funding.

MOPH is on record as supporting the FY 2009 Independent Budget.

Congress has rejected previous attempts for increases in the pharmaceutical co-payments and VA Health Care enrollment fees for some veterans in the past and we are pleased that you have indicated that you would continue to reject these fee increases. Veterans have already paid their fees by their service on many battlefields around the world and with their twenty four - seven duty days. Military veterans, above all others, have earned their entitlements by their service to America.

This same argument applies to increases in the Tri-Care program.

CONCURRENT RECEIPT

Notwithstanding some of the legislation previously enacted into Law, MOPH believes that it is time for Congress to do the right thing and authorize Concurrent Receipt of Full Military Retirement and VA Compensation for all eligible military retirees. MOPH supports all Legislation, such as the Retired Pay Restoration Act, that would accomplish this.

SURVIVOR BENEFIT PLAN (SBP) AND DEPENDENCY AND INDEMNITY COMPENSATION (DIC)

Again this year MOPH urges Congress to address this grievous wrong. While Congress included a modest increase of \$50.00 for Fiscal Year 2008, with this amount to increase to \$100.00 by 2012, for which MOPH is appreciative, it is simply wrong not to address this issue and right the wrong completely.

DIC and SBP are separate issues. SBP is like an insurance policy that active duty military personnel purchase. They pay for it. DIC is awarded from a grateful nation to the survivor(s) of a military veteran who paid a price for their service to America. MOPH believes that if military service caused a retired member's death, then DIC should be added to the SBP benefit, that the retiree paid for, not substituted for it.

SUPPORT FOR THOSE CURRENTLY SERVING IN UNIFORM

MOPH is in total support of any and all legislation that recognizes the unwavering and dedicated support of America's men and women serving in uniform in the on-going conflicts. We, as a nation, can never repay or do enough for these brave men and women. Several things that we can do is insist that they have the best equipment available to accomplish their mission, and that, when they return home, our nation provides them with the best medical care they require and the benefits they have earned by their service, and that they are treated with respect and dignity. This war, like none ever, has placed a tremendous requirement on the National Guard and the Reserves. We must recognize that the members of the Guard and Reserves were never envisioned to serve 2, 3 or more periods of activation to combat zones. Many have lost their homes, their jobs and suffered other tragedies. These are issues that we are pleased to see that Congress is addressing but there is more that needs to be done. America can never repay its debt to those engaged in one of the most difficult conflicts this nation has ever faced, just as it cannot repay its debt to those that have served in previous conflicts. We, as a nation, must provide all the support, as it is in our power to do so, for those serving us now.

On a personal note, during my service in Vietnam, I experienced the threat of attacks and booby traps, but I never had an enemy come up to me who wanted to blow a body mine to kill me and themselves. Our troops in South East Asia are encountering enemy personnel everyday that willingly sacrifice themselves to kill Americans. This is a war like no other we as Americans have ever encountered and we must recognize it as such. Because of the brutality of the enemy, the incidents of lost limbs and Traumatic Brain Injuries have increased dramatically and the VA must be prepared to deal with them. Incidents of Post Traumatic Stress Disorders are on the rise and, again, must be dealt with.

MOPH supports Senator Webb's Legislation (S. 22) that would institute a WWII version GI Bill for education. History has shown that the WWII GI Bill was one of the most effective economically enhancing pieces of Legislation in our Nations' history and repaid more on the dollars invested than any other piece of legislation ever passed.

MOPH CHARTER AMENDMENT

MOPH has requested that its Charter be amended to allow for the acceptance into the Order those male spouses of the female recipients of the Purple Heart. When MOPH was chartered by Congress there were few female recipients of the Purple Heart. With the current conflict there are many females receiving the Purple Heart medal. Under the current charter we have no place to accept their male spouses. H. R. 1119 passed the House and is pending in the Senate (calendar number 447). MOPH would appreciate it if you, Senator Akaka, and other Senators would vote this legislation out so that we may accommodate these spouses. There is no cost to the government on this issue.

THE FOREVER PURPLE HEART STAMP

The U. S. Postal Service (USPS) first issued the Purple Heart Stamp in 2003 as a 37 cent stamp. They later re-issued it two additional times when rates were increased to 39 and 41 cents. We have been informed that it will be re-issued in May 2008 as a 42 cent stamp. We greatly appreciate the USPS issuing and re-issuing the stamp but we believe that this stamp should be issued as a "forever stamp." As stated by one of our Past National Commanders, "the Forever Flag Stamp is a symbol of our freedom, the Purple Heart Stamp is a symbol of the cost of that freedom."

The Purple Heart Medal is the oldest Medal of our country and the first medal in history to be awarded to military personnel without regard to their rank, including enlisted personnel. It was instituted by General George Washington during the Revolutionary War and was revised by General MacArthur when he was the Chief of Staff of the U. S. Army in 1932.

With the on-going conflicts that our nation is engaged in and many men and women combatants being awarded the Purple Heart Medal, it seems appropriate to MOPH that this stamp should be a "Forever Stamp."

MOPH urges the members of these Committees to request that your leadership pass H. R. 2303 and S. 1390.

VA BENEFICIARY TRAVEL

While MOPH is appreciative that the VA mileage rate for beneficiary travel has been increased from 11 cents per mile to 28.5 cents per mile, MOPH believes that this is still too low, considering the cost of gasoline. In addition, we are opposed to the deductibles. MOPH believes that VA patients who are eligible for beneficiary travel should receive the same rates as government employees receive for travel by privately owned vehicles without any deductibles.

DOLE-SHALALA AND VETERANS' DISABILITY BENEFITS COMMISSION REPORT

While MOPH views this report as a positive step in ensuring the needs of the men and women returning from the current conflicts, we believe that two issues must be addressed. First, no current benefit or service for today's veterans must be diminished. Secondly, there should be no distinction between combat and non-combat related disabilities or where the disabling event occurred. MOPH does not support a two-tiered system.

We fully support the Commission's recommendation to establish a single medical examination with a clear delineation of the responsibilities of DOD and the VA. We are aware that a Pilot program is being tested between DOD and the VA.

H. J. R. 12: DESECRATION OF THE U. S. FLAG

MOPH by Resolution is in support of this Legislation.

OTHER LEGISLATIVE ISSUES

MOPH supports H. R. 343 and H. R. 1223, which would amend the IRS code to allow a refundable credit/or waive premiums to military retirees for premiums paid for coverage under Medicare Part B.

Chairmen Akaka and Filner, members of the Committees, once again thank you for the opportunity to testify. This concludes my testimony and I will be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

Henry J. Cook, III
National Commander