

Charles Susino, Junior Vice Commander, American Ex-Prisoners of War

TESTIMONY BY
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BEFORE THE
JOINT HEARING OF THE COMMITTEES
ON
VETERANS' AFFAIRS

UNITED STATES SENATE
AND
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MARCH 30, 2011

PRESENTED BY
CHARLES SUSINO
JUNIOR VICE COMMANDER

Messrs. Chairmen and Members of the Veterans' Affairs Committees:

My name is Charles Susino, Junior Vice Commander of the American Ex-Prisoners of War. I am honored to testify before you today on behalf of National Commander Morris Barker.

Before I begin, I want to thank Senator Burr for introducing the Resolution creating March 30, 2011 as "Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Day".

On March 30, 1973, all U.S. troops withdrew from Vietnam under the terms of the Treaty of Paris. This Resolution encourages Americans across the country to recognize Vietnam veterans for their sacrifice and demonstrate a warm welcome to these soldiers who returned from war to a politically divided country. As I returned home from World War II, the support of a grateful nation helped immensely with my recovery and return to civilian life. Thank you, Senator.

Senator Murray, Senator Burr, Representative Miller and Representative Filner, I congratulate you on your leadership roles in this new 112th Congress; I wish you and your colleagues heartfelt best wishes as you grapple with providing for America's veterans, their families and survivors.

This year marks the 69th birthday of the American Ex-Prisoners of War. On April 14, 1942, two mothers whose sons had been captured on Bataan formed the Bataan Relief Organization; in

1945, after the POWs returned home, we became the Bataan Veterans Organization; and in 1949, expanding our membership to encompass ALL former prisoners of war from ALL wars, we became the American Ex-Prisoners of War.

At that time, there were more than 116,000 ex-POWs alive.

In 1987, when President Ronald Reagan wrote the Proclamation commemorating National Former Prisoner of War Recognition Day, he stated:

More than 80,000 Americans living today are former prisoners of war. Many of these courageous men and women were subjected for months and years to brutal and inhumane treatment by their captors, in violation of international codes and customs for the treatment of prisoners of war. Many prisoners died or were disabled; all suffered prolonged and extraordinary hardships. The members of their families also endured torment, the agony of prolonged separation or of having no word of their loved ones.

Today, just 24 years later, there are less than 16,000 former prisoners of war alive FROM ALL WARS -- WWI, WWII, Korea, Vietnam and Post-Vietnam.

Soon the concerns of this tiny group of heroes will matter not to this committee or any other.

On February 27th, the American Ex-Prisoners of War lost their oldest member. Frank Woodruff Buckles, of West Virginia died at the age of 110. At 16, the Marines told him he was too young and too skinny, and the Navy told him he was flat-footed, so he lied to the Army recruiter about his age and entered service in World War I. As his oral and written history in the Library of Congress details, after the Armistice was signed, he acted as Army escort taking POWs back to Germany.

His WWI discharge papers as a Corporal were dated 11/13/1919.

But in addition to his service in World War I, Mr. Buckles went to work for the White Star steamship line in the 1930s and 1940s. After stints in Canada and NY, he was living in the Port of Manila, The Philippines. He was captured by the Japanese shortly after Pearl Harbor, was held at Santo Tomas and Los Banos for 3 years, 2 months and joined more than 14,000 civilians caught up in World War II.

Some of our youngest members are in their early thirties; however instead of 116,000, as in the past, we're talking of just 23 former POWs from current conflicts.

We are immensely grateful for past Congressional actions to help ex-POWs. It was our organization who pushed in the early 1980s for "Presumptives" and because of the efforts of your committees, the Veterans Administration and the heroes in red jackets walking the halls of Congress telling the stories of former prisoners of war, we now have benefits and entitlements that protect us...and the POWs that will surely come after we are gone.

We thank you for all you have done for us.

And we especially thank the 111th Congress for passage of The Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act giving severely wounded warriors and the family members who care for them some much-needed support to ensure the warriors receive the highest quality of care available and remain out of nursing homes. Senator Murray, I know your office has been especially vigilant with the Veterans Administration on the implementation of this new law.

As we look to the future, we want to lend our small voice and support to our brother Veterans Service Organizations. Our numbers may be dwindling, yet our commitment to living up to our slogan "We exist to help those who cannot help themselves" remains strong.

We join the American Legion, MOAA and the DAV in supporting

S-344. The Retired Pay Restoration Act of 2011. Passage of this bill would authorize full concurrent receipt of retired pay and veterans' disability compensation for all disabled military retirees. Under current law, only a disability rated at 50% or more is considered. It makes the veteran eligible for the full concurrent receipt of both veterans' disability compensation and either military retired pay or combat-related special pay those individuals who were retired or separated from military service due to a service-connected disability. I understand this bill has been referred to the Committee on Armed Services.

S-260. This would repeal the deduction of VA survivor benefits from Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) annuities. It prohibits recoupment by the Secretary of Defense (DOD) of certain amounts previously paid to SBP recipients in the form of a retired pay refund. And it repeals the optional authority of (and instead requires) the Secretary of the military department concerned to pay an annuity to a member's dependent children when there is no eligible surviving spouse. Directs the Secretary concerned to restore annuity eligibility to a surviving spouse who earlier agreed to transfer such eligibility to a surviving child or children of a member. This bill, as well, is in the Committee on Armed Services.

The DAV is supporting a bill for former prisoners of war. S-68 authorizes use of Department of Defense (DOD) commissary and exchange stores by former prisoners of war who have been honorably separated from service and have a service-connected disability rated at 30% or more. We lend our support to this bill.

We join with DAV in support of S-67, which directs the Secretary of Defense (DOD) to permit any former member of the armed forces who is entitled to compensation for a service-connected disability rated total by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs (VA) to travel on military aircraft to the same extent as retired members of the Armed Forces.

And we join our small voice to the millions of other voices in our brother VSOs who are working to ensure full and adequate funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Caring for the casualties of America's conflicts is a fundamental part of who we are as veterans. We are aware of the budget concerns within this new Congress; however it would be unacceptable to the 23 million veterans* alive to allow this burden to fall on the shoulders of those who have already given so much. We believe that as our increasing veteran population and the increasing age of many of our veterans, we need to keep pace to ensure they are not financially harmed for their sacrifices. We believe this is a debt to be paid willingly, if not enthusiastically.

I would like to personally thank Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman, Senator Patty Murray, for her recent statement on the President's 2012 budget request for veterans programs. The President's budget requests an increase of approximately \$2.7 billion for VA health care over current year VA funding in a very difficult budget year.

"When we send servicemembers into harm's way, it is our non-negotiable duty to take care of them when they come home. I know that the President understands that veterans' health care cannot be jeopardized, that mental health concerns must be treated with the same seriousness as physical wounds, and that our benefits process needs to be improved. His overall request for increased funding for VA health care during an exceedingly difficult budget year appears to reflect that understanding."

Messrs. Chairmen and Committeemen, this completes my testimony. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to appear before you on behalf of the American Ex-Prisoners of War to share our goals for the 112th Congress. Thank you also for all that your Committees have done and for all that you will do for our nation's veterans and their families in the future.

God bless America.

*2009 est.