

Manuel B. Braga, Commander, Filipino World War II Veterans of San Diego County

Testimony of Manuel B. Braga, Commander, Filipino World War II Veterans of San Diego County before the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, April 11, 2007

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Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of this Committee!

My name is Manuel B Braga, former SSgt Philippines Scouts, Army of the United States. I am currently the Commander of the Filipino WWII Veterans Federation of San Diego County.

In 1942, during the defense of the Philippines against the Japanese, in the Battles of Bataan and Corregidor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt promised the Filipinos who were inducted into the United States Armed Forces in the Far East or USAFFE, on July 26, 1941, that their loyalty to the United States shall be amply rewarded.

We fought side by side with our American brothers-in-arms and remained loyal to America even after the defense of the Islands was abandoned by the Joint Chiefs in favor of primarily defeating the Axis Powers in Europe.

Left to withstand the relentless and brutal onslaught of a far superior enemy, both in numbers and war materiel, Bataan finally surrendered, followed shortly by Corregidor. The sick and starved Filipino and American soldiers, not being made of impervious steel, reluctantly laid down their arms, and sadly went into captivity.

But even after going through the humiliation of defeat, and surviving the hell that was the Death March and countless atrocities in Japanese concentration camps, we continued to resist the enemy. As guerrillas, some led by U.S. officers who refused to surrender, we relentlessly harassed the Japanese Imperial Army unmindful of the indescribable hardships of trying to survive in the jungles and mountains, with not only the Japanese as enemies but natural dangers, diseases and starvation as well. We fought on until General Douglas MacArthur made good on his promise to return in 1945.

While in the thick of the fight against the forces of Japan, buying precious time for the U.S. to strike a counterblow, a very appreciative Congress enacted in 1944, what is now known as the GI Bill of Rights thus paving the way for Roosevelt to fulfill his promise to us Filipinos of a just reward for our sacrifices. The Filipino soldiers, like all non-Americans who were serving in the U.S. armed forces were entitled, under the GI Bill, to full veterans' benefits to include naturalization as U.S. citizens.

Victory finally came in September 1945. The guns fell silent. It was time to go home. We who survived shed our uniforms and turned in our arms and most of us went back to civilian life. But before the official end of that great conflict, some 50,000 Filipinos were recruited by the US Army and were inducted into the New Philippine Scouts. The Old Scouts organized in 1901, who made a name for themselves in Bataan, were integrated into the regular U.S. Army, and the New Scouts were used as occupation troops in Japan, its territories and possessions which came under U.S. control.

But a suddenly ungrateful U.S. Congress, introduced a rider to the GI Bill of Rights, the now infamous Rescission Act of 1946, unceremoniously taking away from the Filipino veterans and members of the New Philippines Scouts, all benefits, rights, and privileges granted under the GI Bill, and declaring the wartime service of these veterans as "not active service in the U.S. military."

The Rescission Act of 1946 specifically targeted only the Filipinos because all other aliens (Europeans and Asians from 66 nations) who served in the U.S. armed forces in World War II

were not affected. Thus began, in 1946, the 61-year uphill struggle of the Filipino WWII veterans for recognition of their wartime services in the U.S. Army.

In 1946, there were about 250,000 Filipino WWII veterans. There are no more than 20,000 of us at this time. About 7,000, who opted to become U.S. citizens are residents of the U.S. trying hard to survive on their meager Supplemental Security Income, while there remain in the Philippines about 13,000 survivors receiving no benefits of any kind from the United States government.

Today, we Filipino WWII veterans after six long decades, see the light at the end of the tunnel. That light used to be, always, an oncoming train! HR 760 or the Filipino Veterans Equity Bill has passed through Committee in the House, and on this very day this Committee is conducting this historic hearing on S-57, the Senate version of HR760.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of this Committee for inviting me here today. I plead with you on behalf of all my fellow Filipino WWII veterans to enact this Bill into law and restore all the benefits, previously granted to us under the GI Bill of Rights, but taken away by the Rescission Act of 1946, along with our dignity and honor. Please do not make a distinction between Filipino WWII veterans who opted for U.S. citizenship and are residing in America, from those who remained Filipino citizens and stayed behind in the Philippines. All of us fought for America against a common enemy, and of all us should be entitled to the same benefits irrespective of our citizenship and/or place of residence.

Most of us are now advanced in age, sick and frail and living in abject poverty, but we share one thing in common: We all willingly laid our lives on the line for this country in WWII! Thank you for your effort to correct the historic wrong committed against us. Thank you for not waiting until all of us Filipino WWII veterans are gone before taking action on our pleas. There are only a few of us left and we are dying everyday. Soon there will be no more. Helping us now would not really entail a big expense for Uncle Sam because our number has been severely depleted. Any appropriations you may now approve to assist us in our twilight years would diminish on a year to year basis as our number continues to dissipate.

Please do not think about this in terms of money. Think about restoring our dignity, honor and self-respect!

As I conclude my testimony today, I thank you once again, Senator Akaka and all of the members of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee for giving us the opportunity to be heard. God bless you and God bless the United States of America!