

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

STATEMENT OF
CARROLL BOGARD
NATIONAL COMMANDER
OF THE
AMERICAN EX-PRISONERS OF WAR
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEES ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. SENATE/U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, D.C.
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Messrs. Chairmen and Members of the Veterans' Affairs Committees:

My name is Charles Susino, Sr. Vice Commander of the American Ex-Prisoners of War. I am honored to testify before you again today on behalf of National Commander Carroll Bogard.

Senator Murray, Senator Burr, Representative Miller and Representative Filner, I congratulate your efforts as you navigate your committees through the second half of the 112th Congress. Our organization has watched you and your colleagues grapple with hard decisions while attempting to provide for America's veterans, their families and survivors.

This year marks the 70th 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.

Since World War I, more than 142,000 Americans - including 85 women - have been captured and interned as POWs. Today, former POWs number just about 15,000. And soon the concerns of our tiny group of heroes will matter not—to this committee or any other. Some of our youngest members are in their early thirties; however instead of 142,000, 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.

As we look to the future, we want to lend our small voice and support to America's aging veteran population from WWII, Korea and Vietnam – veterans who may have fallen through the cracks of care because of rulings enacted to cope with the frightening possibility of many millions of applicants to the Veterans Administration.

16,112, 566 individuals were members of the United States armed forces during World War II. In November 2011, the Department of Veterans Affairs estimated that approximately 1, 711,000 American veterans were still living. More than 1,100 WWII veterans die each day. The average age of a WWII veteran is 92.

1,800,000 individuals were members of the United States armed forces serving in Korea during the 3-year period of the Korean War. Only about 1/3 of that number are still alive today. The average age of a Korean War veteran is 85.

2,594,000 individuals served in South Vietnam Jan. 1, 1965 - Mar. 28, 1973. Of this number of Americans who served in Vietnam, less than 850,000 are estimated to be alive today. The average age of a Vietnam veteran is 66. These are our “youngsters” in the time frame I'm speaking on today.

The clock is ticking and time is running out for the brave men and women who fought the good fight to keep America free. And while the debt we owe them can never be repaid in full, you can make their next days, months, years better.

There are less than 3 million heroes alive from these three great conflicts. You could fit them all into the city of Chicago. As they have aged, their disabilities have left many of them with poor quality of life and financially burdened.

Many of these Wartime Veterans are in the VA Category 8 or lower, which means they are not entitled to VA care at all. These Veterans are designated as Priority 8 when their income exceeds a pre-set threshold classifying them as “affluent”. They are the most affluent category of vets, yet some earn as little as \$28,430 a year – hardly affluent.

A significant change was made in health-care eligibility in 1986. Congress mandated VA health care for veterans with service-connected disabilities as well as other special groups of veterans, such as former prisoners of war, veterans exposed to herbicides and ionizing radiation and veterans of World War I. The average age of the WWI veterans was 88 in 1986 ... younger than today's WWII veteran; virtually the same age as today's Korean War veteran.

Today, we have a request of you, the 112th Congress: please update the 1986 law to add WWII,

Korean, and Vietnam War veterans to this special group of veterans to make them eligible for health care. Please also consider including the Gulf War veterans in this special group as well. It is overdue to update Congress' actions in 1986. From a health benefits standpoint, this puts these war-time veterans on par with WWI veterans, the special groups, and the current warriors who are fighting in the middle-east, all of which we strongly support. Please let them not be forgotten. Please do not continue to allow these war time veterans to be excluded and deprived health benefits.

It's the right time to add these heroes to this special group of veterans. It's the right thing to do. We are willing and able to work with you or your staff on drafting this amendment.

We would also like to join our brother veteran service organizations in asking your consideration of the following bills:

HR 813, introduced by Representative Bob Filner (CA), which would amend section 1318(b)(1), title 38, United States Code, to allow dependency and indemnity compensation (DIC) to be paid to the survivor of a veteran whose was continuously rated totally disabled for at least one (1) year immediately preceding death, whereas, eligibility under current law requires the veteran to be rated totally disabled for a minimum of ten (10) years.

S423 introduced by Richard Burr (NC). Authorizes the Secretary of Veterans Affairs (VA) to provide an effective date of an award of disability compensation, in the case of a veteran who submits a fully-developed claim, of up to one year before the date of receipt of such claim.

HR28 introduced by Mike McIntyre (NC). Veterans Outreach Improvement Act of 2011. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to improve the outreach activities of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.

HR23 introduced by Bob Filner (CA) Belated Thank You to the Merchant Mariners of World War II Act of 2011. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to establish the Merchant Mariner Equity Compensation Fund to provide benefits to certain individuals who served in the United States merchant marine (including the Army Transport Service and the Naval Transport Service) during World War II.

HR178/ S.260 introduced by Joe Wilson (SC)/Bill Nelson (FL). Military Surviving Spouses Equity Act. A bill to amend title 10, United States Code, to repeal the requirement for reduction of survivor annuities under the Survivor Benefit Plan for military surviving spouses to offset the receipt of veterans dependency and indemnity compensation.

HR309 introduced by John Mica (FL). Samuel B. Moody Bataan Death March Compensation Act. A bill to provide compensation for certain World War II veterans who survived the Bataan Death March and were held as prisoners of war by the Japanese.

HR303 introduced by Gus Bilirakis (FL). Retired Pay Restoration Act. A bill to amend title 10, United States Code, to permit additional retired members of the Armed Forces who have a service-connected disability to receive both disability compensation from the Department of Veterans Affairs for their disability and either retired pay by reason of their years of military service or Combat-Related Special Compensation and to eliminate the phase-in period under current law with respect to such concurrent receipt.

HR812 introduced by Bob Filner (CA). Agent Orange Equity Act of 2011. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to clarify presumptions relating to the exposure of certain veterans who served in the vicinity of the Republic of Vietnam.

HR3 712 introduced by Martin Heinrich (NM). Bataan Defenders Congressional Gold Medal. A bill to grant the Congressional Gold Medal to the troops who defended Bataan during World War II.

The American Ex-Prisoners of War are proud supporters of The Independent Budget. The FY2013 edition represents the 26th consecutive year that our partnership of veterans service organizations has joined together to produce a comprehensive budget document that highlights the needs of every generation of veterans. During that time, The Independent Budget has improved significantly while gaining much more respect and recognition.

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.