

A Bill for an Act Relating to Filipino Veterans Burial Assistance.

*Be It Enacted by the Legislature of the State of Hawaii:*

SECTION 1. During World War II, the Philippines was a commonwealth of the United States. Nearly one hundred thousand soldiers of the Philippine Commonwealth Army fought alongside United States and Allied forces for four long years to defend and reclaim the Philippine islands from foreign aggression. Valiant Filipino soldiers fought, suffered, and died in some of the bloodiest battles of World War II, defending beleaguered Bataan and Corregidor, and thousands of Filipino prisoners of war endured the infamous Bataan Death March and years of captivity.

The sacrifices of Filipino soldiers played a vital role in the Allied victory in the Pacific as their numerous guerrilla actions provided United States forces with time to build and prepare for the Allied counterattack. Filipino soldiers fought side-by-side with United States forces to secure their island nation as the strategic base from which the Allied forces launched their final effort to bring an end to World War II.

Although Filipino soldiers exhibited tremendous courage and risked their lives to win the war in the Pacific, many of these soldiers were denied full veterans benefits, including burial benefits, which had been promised to them by the United States.

While Filipino soldiers meeting specific requirements were eventually provided with burial benefits at national and state veterans cemeteries at no cost, similar to other veterans of the United States Armed Forces, the wish of some Filipino soldiers who were living in Hawaii was that their remains be returned to their homeland. However, this benefit of returning the remains of Filipino soldiers to their homeland for burial was not provided to them.

Many Filipino veterans have unsuccessfully petitioned for decades to have their relatives granted residence in Hawaii. These veterans are elderly and, with each passing year, the veterans are dying in Hawaii without the comfort of family members at their side. Furthermore, the cost of transporting their remains for burial in the Philippines increases as time passes. Accordingly, the legislature provided for burial grants to be given to qualifying Filipino veterans to honor their final wishes and assist with the return of their remains to their homeland for burial.

The Veterans Administration currently pays the full cost of burial benefits for World War II veterans; however, federal law fails to address the costs of transporting the remains of Filipino veterans to, and burial services in, the Philippines. House Concurrent Resolution No. 23, which was adopted by the legislature in 2016, requested Congress to amend the federal law to cover the costs of transporting the remains of eligible Filipino-American veterans of World War II to the Philippines and for burial services in the Philippines. However, as of this date, Congress has not taken any action in this regard. Although burial grants for Filipino veterans are statutorily established under chapter 363, Hawaii Revised Statutes, the office of veterans services has acknowledged that funding for the provision of these grants has been non-existent. As the number of surviving World War II Filipino veterans continues to dwindle, it is important that their sacrifices be recognized and their final wishes of being buried in their homeland be granted as many of these veterans only have family who reside in the Philippines.

The purpose of this Act is to appropriate funds to the office of veterans services for the provision of burial grants for Filipino-American veterans of World War II; provided that:

- (1) Federal funds remain unavailable;
- (2) There remain eligible Filipino-American veterans living in the State; and
- (3) The funds are matched on a one-to-one basis with private funds.

SECTION 2. There is appropriated out of the general revenues of the State of Hawaii the sum of \$50,000 or so much thereof as may be necessary for fiscal year 2017-2018 for burial grants for Filipino-American veterans of World War II, which cover funeral and burial costs, including the cost of returning their remains to the Philippines for burial; provided that:

- (1) Federal funding remains unavailable for this purpose;
- (2) There remain eligible Filipino-American veterans living in the State; and
- (3) The appropriation shall be matched on a one-to-one basis from private sources.

The sum appropriated shall be expended by the office of veterans services for the purposes of this Act.

SECTION 3. This Act shall take effect on July 1, 2017.

(Approved July 10, 2017.)