STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ON
H.R. 760, "FILIPINO VETERANS EQUITY ACT OF 2007"

FEBRUARY 15, 2007

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you on the rectifying of the injustice that Filipino veterans are currently enduring. The American Legion applauds the Chairman's leadership in addressing this issue by introducing H.R. 760, the "Filipino Veterans Equity Act of 2007".

The American Legion supports full recognition and benefits to all veterans, American or Filipino, who were part of the defense of the Philippine Islands during World War II. The American Legion has adopted a resolution to "Support Legislation to Grant Filipino World War II Veterans Equal VA Benefits".

In 1941, at the outbreak of World War II, Filipinos were considered nationals of the United States and thousands were conscripted to serve with the U.S. Armed Forces in the Far East (USAFFE) under the command of U.S. officers headed by General Douglas MacArthur, by order of then President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

These Filipino World War II soldiers served and died with courage, loyalty and dedication to stop the Japanese invaders in Bataan and Corregidor, walked the famous Death March together with their American comrades-in-arms and continued guerilla warfare against the Japanese until the U.S. Armed Forces recaptured the Philippines in 1944.

The Department of Veterans Affairs, in VETPOP2001 revised, estimated that there were 60,000 surviving Filipino veterans who are classified as Philippine Commonwealth Army, Recognized Guerrilla and New Philippine Scouts veterans, of whom 45,000 reside permanently in the Philippines and 15,000 reside permanently in the U.S.

Of the 45,000 residing in the Philippines, 41,000 do not receive any compensation or pension benefit from VA, and most are sickly, over 70 years old and live below the poverty level. Those veterans living in the Philippines currently receive only 50 cents on the dollar as compensation for their service-connected disability medical conditions. Veterans of those groups who live in America and were members of the Regular Commonwealth Army receive their full entitlement. This is the only situation where the rate of a disability compensation for a service-connected medical condition is based solely on geographical location.

The current policy has created a virtual caste system of first- and second-class military veterans in the Philippines. These veterans fought, were wounded, became ill, became prisoners of war, were subject to torture, deprivation and starvation and many died in the service of the U. S. Armed Forces at the same rates as regular U.S. soldiers, sailors and Marines who were isolated on those islands during the Japanese occupation.

Filipino veterans have recently been somewhat successful in incrementally increasing benefits to parity with other U.S. veterans; however, the exclusion of these veterans from full benefits remains a fundamental unfairness in the law that has stood for too many years. As the numbers of these deserving veterans quickly dwindle, Congress has little time left to redress this injustice.

The American Legion gives its full support to H.R. 760. Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to present The American Legion's view on this bill. This concludes my testimony.