STATEMENT OF
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NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE COMMISSION
THE AMERICAN LEGION
TO THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
UNITED STATES SENATE
ON
S. 617, "VETERANS EAGLE PARKS PASS ACT"

JULY 12, 2007

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for this opportunity to submit The American Legion's views on S. 617. The American Legion commends the Subcommittee for holding a hearing to discuss this important issue.

The American Legion fully supports S. 617, a bill that provides that the fee for the annual purchase of an *America the Beautiful - National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass* be available, upon proper identification, to honorably discharged veterans at the cost of ten dollars.

America's military and its National Parks have a shared history. In 1916, the Department of the Interior was responsible for 14 national parks and 21 national monuments but had no organization to manage them. Department of Interior Secretaries asked the Army to detail troops to Yellowstone and the California parks for this purpose. Army military engineers and cavalrymen developed park roads and buildings. They enforced park regulations against hunting, grazing, timber cutting and vandalism. And these soldiers did their best to serve the people visiting these parks.

In 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt initiated an executive transfer order. Under the order, effective August 10, 1933, the Park Service received the War Department's parks and monuments, the fifteen national monuments then held by the Forest Service and the national capital parks, including the Washington Monument, Lincoln Memorial and the White House. The addition of nearly 50 historical areas in the East made the park system and Park Service truly national and deeply involved with historic, as well as, natural preservation.

The national park system has grown to 391 areas in nearly every state and U.S. possession. In addition to managing these parks - as diverse and far-flung as Volcanoes National Park in Hawaii and the Statue of Liberty National Monument - the National Park Service supports the preservation of natural and historic places and promotes outdoor recreation outside the system through a range of grant and technical assistance programs. Included in this preservation mission are significant historic battlefields associated with wars on American soil that is part of the American Battlefield Protection Program (ABPP).

The ABPP promotes the preservation of significant American historic battlefields. The goals of the program are 1) to protect battlefields and sites associated with armed conflicts that influenced the course of our history, 2) to encourage and assist all Americans in planning for the preservation, management, and interpretation of these sites, and 3) to raise awareness of the importance of preserving battlefields and related sites for future generations. The ABPP focuses primarily on land use, cultural resource and site management planning, and public education.

The National Park Service has the honor of preserving many battlefields, military parks and historic sites that commemorate and honor the service of America's veterans. The National Park Service currently honors American veterans by allowing all veterans free access on Veterans Day. Consequently, The American Legion feels the National Park Service should not resist allowing a reduced fee for the rest of the year. This reduced fee would honor our American veterans by allowing them to see these historical sites, enjoy these sites with their families and thus reaffirm the importance of our Nation's history of celebrating the past sacrifices and achievements of our men and women who put themselves in harm's way and fought in America's wars.

The American Legion notes another link that the National Park Service currently shares with our armed forces and veterans. In April of this year the National Park Service hosted three representatives of Afghanistan's Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism. They are charged with preservation and protection of their country's historic and cultural artifacts. The fact that the new government of Afghanistan could turn to the National Park Service for training on how to preserve their historical heritage was only made possible by America's armed forces and its veterans.

America's National Parks are one of the nation's most precious treasures. They represent the vastness, biodiversity, beauty and strength of this great land. America asks her young people to serve in the armed forces to guard and defend freedom and its way of life. Their selfless service provides millions of their fellow citizens the opportunity to pursue their recreational endeavors in peace and safety in our nation's parks. Therefore, The American Legion fully supports the reduced fee for veterans as a fitting honor for these veterans who selflessly risked life and limb, not only in defense of the Constitution, but for the very land in which we live.

The American Legion would recommend the Veterans Eagle Parks Pass include the current fifty percent discount on Federal use fees charged for facilities and services such as camping, swimming, parking, boat launching and specialized interpretive services. This provision is the same discount that is included in the *America the Beautiful - National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Senior Pass*.

We further recommend that the act make clear that only a certified copy of the veteran's DD-214 needs to be provided to purchase this pass. The reason for this recommendation is that the DD-214 is an extremely important document that a veteran must not lose. It is the only document that entitles a veteran many rights, privileges and benefits for the rest of the veteran's life. Should a DD-214 be lost it may cause irreparable harm to a veteran seeking benefits or at least a long delay as the veteran's DD-214 is reconstructed and a new document is provided. We do not

want a veteran to be required to carry an original DD-214 in order to purchase a pass because the original DD-214 rightfully belongs in safekeeping.

The American Legion further recommends this Subcommittee consider amending this legislation to include that this reduced annual fee also be offered to current members of our armed forces in both the active and Reserve components.

The American Legion is glad to support S. 617 and all legislation that honors America's heroes.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, this concludes my testimony. Thank you for the opportunity to present The American Legion's view on this bill.