Congresswoman Speier Spearheads Move to Restore Full Equality to Filipino World War-II Veterans

C HICAGO, Illinois (jGLi) – Congresswoman Jackie Speier (D-San Francisco/San Mateo) introduced on Thursday (Jan. 6) in the United States House of Representatives H. R. 210, the Filipino Veterans Act of 2011, that will make all World War II Filipino veterans fully eligible for the same benefits that other U.S. veterans receive.

Entitled “To amend Title 38, United States Code, to deem certain service in the organized military forces of the Government of the Commonwealth of the Philippines and Philippine Scouts to have been active service for purposes of benefits under programs administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs,” the bill has been referred to House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs.
Because bills are generally sent to the Library of Congress from the Government Printing Office a day or two after they are introduced on the floor of the House or Senate, the text of the bill introduced last Thursday is not yet available to the public.

Congresswoman Speier’s website has also announced that Ms. Speier, Ago Pedalizo, president of Justice for Filipino-American Veterans, San Francisco/Bay Area Chapter, Felino Punsalan, WW II Filipino veteran, and 40 other Filipino veterans and widows will be available for interview today, Monday, Jan. 10, 2011, at 1:45 p.m. at 400 S. El Camino Real, First Floor Conference Room in San Mateo, California, when the bill is formally introduced to the public.

The bill seeks to repeal the Rescission Acts of 1946 that stripped 250,000 Filipino WW II veterans full benefits as American veterans, out of the 66 allied nationalities who fought for the US during the war. Widows and children being survivors of American veterans stand to benefit, too, once the bill becomes a law.

The bill seeks to recognize the US military service of the Filipino veterans whose eligibility can be based not only on the “Missouri List,” the official record of the US army personnel, but also from all military records that would reference to their heroic military service during the war.
“I am 93-years old now and all I want before I die is that the US government recognize me as full American veteran” said Mr. Punsalan whose application for lump sum benefit was denied because his name was not included in the "Missouri List." “This is not only a matter of just compensation but of honor and justice.”

The “Missouri List” at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, Missouri was gutted by fire in 1973 and as much as 80% of the original list of army from 1912 to 1960 was lost, according to a press statement of Mr. Pedalizo and Arturo Garcia, a veterans supporter.

The “Missouri List” of U. S. Army Remains Intact

A letter received by the Journal Group Link International on May 4, 2009 from Scott A. Levins, Assistant Director For Military Records, certified that “(n)one of the claim folders in the Philippine Republic were destroyed or damaged by the fire of 1973. All 1.4-million claim folders were recovered, as were the archival roster.

“There are 386,000 Guerillas listings in the Archives. All told there were over 400,000 USAFFE, USAFFE Guerillas and Guerillas.”
Under the $787-billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) signed in 2009 by US President Barack Obama, Filipino WWII veterans are qualified to get a lump sum of $9,000 (P418,500) while Filipino American veterans who live or have returned to the Philippines are entitled to $15,000 (P697,500) each.

But a week before the deadline of filing for benefits, only 12,600 veterans were found eligible for the benefits although the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs estimated that there were at least 40,000 surviving veterans living in the Philippines and 11,000 in the U.S. The DVA received 41,000 claims for the lump sum benefits so far.

Even if all the 51,000 applicants are approved, it is only 7.5% of the 386,000 Filipino Guerillas found in the “Missouri List.”

The bill also proposes to invalidate the “quit claim” or the waiver of right to receive future benefits like lifetime monthly pension, as provided in the Filipino Veterans Equity Compensation (FVEC) of the ARRA.

“The US government abandoned the brown American soldiers who victoriously defended an
American territory and the principles of democracy in Asia. Now is the chance to redeem herself,” added Pedalizo in a statement.

Last year, the Filipino veterans and widows filed a class lawsuit against the DVA in the light of the fact that at least 42% of all the 41,000 claimants were denied.

“Justice is never begged for, we got to fight for it,” said Washington, DC-based Arnedo Valera, lead attorney of the law suit and Executive Director of the Migrant Heritage Commission (MHC).

A separate lawsuit was initially filed in San Francisco court demanding that the eligibility of WW II veterans be not restricted in the “Missouri List.”

“We can no longer afford to have half-Americans,” said Speier during the election campaign last year in reference to the Filipino WW II veterans who received partial benefits but were never treated as full American veterans and thus not qualified for full benefits. # # #