

TESTIMONY TO THE VETERANS AFFAIR COMMITTEE

PH LICENS PLATE PROGRAM

FEBRUARY 19, 2013

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. Members of the Veterans Affairs Committee. I want to first thank you for the opportunity to speak to you on behalf of the Connecticut Members of the Military Order of the Purple Heart concerning proposed Bill NO 700. A bill we vehemently oppose. Specifically that which:

2. Allows the DMV to verify that a veteran who applies for a Purple Heart License Plate has been awarded the Purple Heart. This verification to be accomplished by obtaining a copy of the veterans DD-214.

3. Deletes the requirement for the veteran to join and pay dues to the MOPH.

4. Procedures that we the MOPH have performed since the advent of the Purple Heart Special Interest License Plate Program. Procedures that our Organization submitted and received approval for

some 20+ years ago. A Special Interest License Plate that we took the initiative to establish, obtained the necessary signatures and legislative support, paid the startup cost and developed the necessary procedures to assure the applicants are in fact Purple Heart recipients. A task that is increasingly important in today's world.

5. Please note that The State of Connecticut has not authorized any license plates for Connecticut Veterans who earned Military Awards for Valor, Heroism or wounds received in action.

II. HISTORY

- a) Before I address why this bill is so concerning to us it is important that I tell you a little about our organization, and its' history.
- b) General George Washington, Cdr and Chief of the Continental Army established an award called the Military Badge of Merit in 1782. It was created to recognize "singularly meritorious service, instances of unusual gallantry and extraordinary fidelity and faithful service" The award is recognized as the precursor to today's Purple Heart Medal.

- c) During the Revolutionary War only 3 individuals received this award. All were from Connecticut.
- d) The 3 soldiers were:
- (1) Sgt. Elijah Churchill from Enfield, CT
 - (2) Sgt. William Brown of Stanford, CT
 - (3) Sgt Daniel Bissell from East Windsor CT
- e) The award was discontinued after the Revolutionary War never officially abolished.
- f) In 1931, some 150 years after the award of Military Badge of Merit, the War Department announced that the Purple Heart Medal had been revived as a military decoration. It took the form of today's decoration and was made retroactive to WWI
- g) Many of the WWI soldiers had been released from service, and returned to their homes. They were to receive their Purple Heart Medals in the mail. Not content with this process, recipients, once again, towns of Derby, Ansonia, Seymour and Shelton were awarded their decorations in an elaborate ceremony and parade that were made part of the Washington Bicentennial Celebration of Sept 21, 1932. Some 150,000

people attended the event which took place at Community Field in Ansonia, CT.

h) Following the celebration the Purple Heart recipients decided to form a national organization called the Purple Heart Association. The motivation being that the soldiers wanted to establish organization to support other returning veterans. The local group called themselves the “George Washington Chapter 1”. National Officers were elected and Sgt Frank Cushner from Ansonia, CT elected as National Commander.

i) A constitution was established.

j) The State of Connecticut incorporated the Association on September 30, 1933.

k) On Aug 1958 the Congress of the US Chartered the Organization and the name was changed to the MOPH

Today our mission statement reads, ‘ The Mission of the Military Order of the Purple Heart, is to foster an environment of goodwill and camaraderie among combat wounded veterans, promote patriotism, support necessary legislative issues, and provide service to all veterans and their families.

l) Our Order includes a National Headquarters in Springfield, VA, 45,300 members; 50 State Departments and 478 Chapters. Our National Service Program employs some 137 Trained National Service Officers (NSO)

m) In FY2012 NSO' obtained over \$298 Million in VA Benefits, submitted over 26,000 claims to the VA; processed 272 appeals and appeared at 169 hearings and made 1, 340 outreach visits to Vet Center, hospitals etc.

n) These numbers do not reflect work effort of the Department and Chapters

B. THE BILL

1. Supporting Legislative Issues and advocating for veterans is very important to us. In fact, last year at the Veterans Day at the Capitol Event, our previous Commander Leon Brown, who is now Regional Commander, surfaced the issue and questioned as to why the Veterans Affairs Committee was a "Select, and not a "Standing Committee". We felt a need to address this issue and give equal standing to this committee. We along with other veteran organizations

pursued a goal to provide you with equal influence, and a less burdensome and more efficient process to promote Veterans' issues. We were successful in achieving this goal and today we are before a "standing "committee. Many of these veteran organizations that we worked alongside with to promote this change utilize exactly the same procedures as we do. Procedures that only the MOPH is being challenged for and must defend. Some of these organizations are here on our behalf and for fear they may be next in line. It's ironic that one of the first bills by the committee that we just advocated for is one that presents us with a proposal to amend a 20 + year old process. One that was previously approved by the Connecticut General Assembly and Dept of Motor Vehicles. Procedures that benefit PH veterans by providing low cost Purple Heart License Plates, minimum inconvenience to obtain them and acquainting them with an organization whose sole mission is to support veterans and their families. One that is dutiful in maintaining the integrity of the PH plates by providing proper vetting of applicants; and when needed assisting them in obtaining necessary records and documents that are important to them. Documents, needed to verify receipt of the PH.

C. THE VETTING PROCESS

1. The vetting of Purple Heart License Plate applicants is very important to us. It is one we believe is our duty and responsibility to exercise. Our members, who own these plates have been vetted properly, are enormously proud of the plates and what they represent. A major concern of our members is that only validated PH Recipients have access to the PH License Plates. This does not include spouses listed on the Registration who are allowed to keep the plate, provided they do not re-marry and pay the respective fees.

2. Recently the Governor of Virginia, at the prompting of MOPH, directed that the DMV PH Licensing Program that utilizes the same DMV vetting process as proposed in Bill No 700, be investigated. MOPH and DMV conducted the investigation and found that 20% or 1 in 5 of the PH issued plates was obtained fraudulently. We cannot let that happen in Connecticut.

D. PURPLE HEART IMAGE & LICENSE PLATE

1. The Purple Heart image on the plate is trademarked by the U.S. Army Department of Heraldry. Our organization was given unfettered use of the PH image License Plates, PH Trail signs and other uses.

This authority was given to MOPH by the Army Trades Mark Licensing Program. The image is often used on correspondence, signage and other approved uses by our organization. In some instances it used in lieu of or in conjunction with our MOPH Logo.

2. The PH image and the words "Combat Wounded" on the License Plate identify the registered owner of the license plate as a Combat Wounded Veteran who received the PH Medal. When the plates were secured they were not intended to reflect that he was a member of the MOPH. Only that they are an individual who performed essential service to our country and was wounded in combat.

3. Please note that The State of CT does not require that our plate specify that it is a fraternal military organization or any kind of organization, only that the logo used on the plate is authorized for use and will not cause legal issues. We satisfied this criterion when obtaining the plates. The procedures that established the plates remain in effect today and have not changed for 20+ years.

4. The cost to join MOPH is a onetime cost of \$50 for a lifetime membership. There are no annual dues or other cost. Often, the \$50 to join is absorbed by our department. A benefit of membership is that it

provides for an opportunity to connect and interact with the veteran, offer camaraderie and too do good work..

5. Many License Plate applicants from all wars but especially Vietnam Vets have never enrolled in the VA and not familiar with benefits available to them. I was one of them. I had 22 years of active duty service as a Regular Army Officer. I retired in 1986 and did not join MOPH until 1998. I joined to get my license plates. I have tri-care for life and medical benefits from other sources and did not believe I needed anything. This is true of many applicants. These are benefits available from the VA not MOPH. MOPH members simply convinced me “go enroll” Here are some of these benefits: A PH recipient is automatically placed, into VA Priority Group 3 for treatment. This is regardless of disability claims. The same priority group as a Medal of Honor recipient and POW’s; recipients also qualify for cost free care and are not required to make co-pays with the exception of medications which requires means testing; free eye exams and eyeglasses; free burial for the veteran and family at one of our National Cemeteries including Arlington. Is DMV going to tell these vets about this?

E. In Closing

1. Everything we do is in support of our entire Veterans Community and their families.
2. The Department of the Army has given MOPH unfettered use of the trademarked Purple Heart Image.
3. The design of the plate, procedures for issuing, including the process for vetting and membership requirements were all approved by the CT General Assembly and Department of Motor Vehicles. The process has been in effect for 20+ years and works flawlessly.
4. We believe we own the plate and any changes to the process, the plate itself or otherwise should be at our discretion.
5. We believe in the sanctity of the plate and the PH Medal it represents.
6. The verification of receipt of the PH is scrutinized properly and the chance of fraudulent procurement of our valued PH Plate minimized.
7. The Purple License Plate is a "Special Interest Plate"! Created and issued by MOPH under the rules laid down by the State of Connecticut, exclusively for use by our MOPH Members. MOPH has followed the rules to the letter and does not deserve to lose the plates.

8. The State of Connecticut has not authorized any special plates to recognize Connecticut Veterans who earned Military Awards for Valor, Heroism or wounds received in combat. **WE HAVE.**

Thank you for your interest in this issue and God Bless You.

Ronald W. Vedrani

Commander, MOPH

Department of Connecticut