

To the Members of the Veterans Affairs Committee:

My name is Lou Diamond Phillips, an American citizen of Filipino descent. I am proud to say that I come from a family on both sides who have performed military duty in the service of this country. I have five Filipino uncles who have proudly served in the U.S. Navy; two of whom went on to become staff members of the White House under President Nixon. Both my father and stepfather were ACX sailors in the Navy; my stepfather, George Phillips, having served two tours of duty in Vietnam. My father was so proud of his military affiliation that he named me after a war hero of the Second World War, Gunnery Sergeant Lew Diamond, a Marine legend in the Pacific Theatre.

I stood proudly beside my mother, Lucita, as her witness when she took her oath of citizenship to become an American. Like many immigrants who choose to become citizens of this country, my mother and the remainder of her Filipino family have become proud and contributing members of the American society, eagerly embracing opportunities that this great country has provided their families. They have watched their children, first generation Americans, as they became doctors, lawyers and teachers. I, myself, realize that my career in the film industry would probably not have been possible anywhere else in the world and, for that, I am eternally grateful. I truly believe in America as a shining light, as the symbol in the world for democracy and freedom. It is for these reasons, and many more, that, today, I consider it not only my privilege but my duty to speak for the Filipino Veterans of World War II.

As many of you know, President Franklin Roosevelt drafted the Commonwealth Army Soldiers of the Philippines who were United States Nationals into American Military Service on July 26, 1941. Many of these soldiers were still teenagers. Yet, they bravely answered the call to battle, fighting side by side with their American allies. Farm boys from different parts of the world became fast friends and comrades; brothers in arms. Many thousands paid the ultimate price. For those Filipino soldiers who survived the horrific battles and the ghastly conditions of the infamous prisoner of war camps, the promise was made by the American government that they would be considered United States Veterans with "active service" by the Veterans Administration and, therefore, be entitled to all of the benefits that that designation entailed.

However, a scant five years later, after victory in the Pacific was assured, these guarantees were rescinded by the U.S. government on February 18, 1946, when it enacted the "Rescission Act" (public law 79-301 now U.S. code sec. 101, title 38). Effectively, this action seemed to deny the involvement of the Filipino soldiers in the war effort and, certainly, was a poor repayment for the loyalty shown by the Filipino people. In fact, many war historians and American Veterans of the Pacific Theatre have noted that, if not for the contributions of the commonwealth Army Soldiers, the Filipino guerillas and the scouts and event the Filipino citizens who served as spies and couriers for U.S. Intelligence, the tide of the war, which at the time of conscription was in a desperate state, may not have turned toward an American victory. The brave contributions of the men and women of the Philippines cannot be quantified and certainly should not be

diminished.

In the sixty years since official U.S. recognition of the Filipino Veterans was withdrawn, a few positive steps have been made in reparation. In 1990, 26,000 Filipino Veterans were naturalized as U.S. citizens under the 1990 Immigration and Naturalization Act because of their U.S. military service. Additionally, under public law, PL 106-419, they may be buried in VA National Cemeteries as U.S. Veterans. However, while they live, they are denied eligibility to be patients in the VA Hospitals. Many of these men are well into their eighties and beyond. They are now certainly in need of the kind of medical attention that the VA benefits would provide. But, perhaps, even more importantly, they desire as their last wish the recognition that they so richly deserve for the sacrifices that they made in the fight for freedom and democracy.

I know a little something about the Filipino culture. We are a proud people. It is my observation that many Filipinos would rather have the respect of their families and their communities than have material gain. Since 1990, _____ Filipino Veterans have died waiting for recognition for the single greatest achievement of their lives. In the last two years alone, we have lost _____ more. Time continues to run out for the ones who remain, and a posthumous award in the form of a military burial can only be considered the next best thing.

Let us celebrate these men while they still live. It is important to note that U.S. recognition of these veterans would not just be a token gesture. There are

presently an estimated 13,849 Filipino Veterans who reside in the United States and another 46,050 who live in the Philippines. That is nearly 60,000 families that will be impacted by your decision. Nearly 60,000 men whose wives and children and grandchildren will know, without qualification, that their husbands and fathers were heroes.

Additionally, and certainly not unimportantly, with the passage of these bills before you, these men in the twilight of their lives will become eligible to receive Veteran's benefits from the U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs. Benefits such as VA Health Care at VA hospitals, out patient clinics and nursing homes in the U.S., including a clinic in Manila and a monthly permanent disability pension if they are poor and disabled. I hasten to remind you that these benefits are not new prizes to be awarded, but guarantees that need to be re-instated after our government promised and then rescinded this status after services had been rendered in good faith.

Today, we can right a wrong and pay respect where it is long overdue. Please join your colleagues in the speedy passage of these bills; S. 1042 was introduced by Sen. Daniel Inouye (D-HI) a WWII veteran and co-sponsored by nine Senators: Akaka (D-HI), Allen (R-VA), Boxer (D-CA), Feinstein (D-CA), Clinton (D-NY), Sarbanes (D-MD), Miller (D-GA), Durbin (D-IL) and Murray (D-WA). H.R. 491 was introduced by Rep. Benjamin Gilman (R-NY), another WWII Veteran and Rep. Bob Filner (D-CA) and has 49 co-sponsors in the House.

In closing, I am reminded of the words of General Douglas McArthur when he said to the Filipino people and to his American troops hopelessly entrenched in the islands, "I shall return." It is my belief that he didn't mean that he would return empty-handed. It is my hope that he intended to return the loyalty, commitment and respect shown to him and to America by the Filipino people. We have before us an opportunity to uphold the word of America and continue to be a shining light of democracy and fairness.

Thank you so much for your time and consideration.