

TESTIMONY

On

HB 3452

POW/MIA MEMORIAL HIGHWAY ON US HIGHWAY 26

OREGON HOUSE RULES COMMITTEE

By

DICK TOBIASON

LTC US Army, Retired

CHAIRMAN, BEND HEROES FOUNDATION

June 18, 2019

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before this distinguished committee today.

I am Dick Tobiason, LTC US Army Retired, Chairman/Bend Heroes Foundation and requestor of this long overdue legislation.

Bend Heroes Foundation mailing address is 1900 NE 3<sup>rd</sup> St., Suite 106 #205, Bend, Oregon 97701.

I am here to recommend passage of HB 3452 honoring Oregon's 1,770 POWs and MIAs, their families and educating the traveling public on Prisoners of War (POWs) and veterans still Missing in Action (MIAs) via prominent highway signs on US Highway 20 funded by veterans' groups and others.

The last time I appeared before this Committee was for hearings on HB 2100 – Oregon Medal of Honor Highway on US Highway 20.

Update: All 12 Oregon Medal of Honor Highway signs have been installed.

Extended thru ID, MT, WY: 40% NMOHHUSA while Robert D. "Bob" Maxwell was living

8 more states committed to legislation to complete the national Medal of Honor Highway across America on US Highway 20 from Newport. OR on the Pacific Coast to Boston, MA on the Atlantic Ocean a distance of 3,365 miles on the longest highway in our nation.

Bob Maxwell died May 11, 2019 one year after completing dedication of the last Oregon Medal of Honor Highway sign. Bob was aware of our proposal for designating a POW/MIA Memorial Highway on US Highway 26.

Thank you for your moment of silence honoring Mr. Maxwell last month.

The enormity of the numbers of our nation's and Oregon's POWs and MIAs is mostly unknown to the public and veterans as well.

Since the Revolution 244 years ago: 355,200 POWs, 86,500 MIAs; Total is equivalent to 110% of America's WWII war deaths!

We still have 86,500 MIAs (WWI – Present), all declared dead: 84% are WWII vets

I have a personal connection with POWs: helped repatriate 27 POWs in S. Vietnam during "Operation Homecoming" in 1973. Three of my unit's flight crew members are still MIA in North Vietnam. I have met 2 Ex POWs and my wife's great uncle was a POW held in the Confederate Prison at Andersonville, Georgia. I have met 2 siblings of Oregon POWs from the Vietnam War.

During WWII, 770 Oregonians became POW with 598 returned to friendly forces and 172 dying in captivity by wars end.

Almost 200 Oregonians have died as POW in captivity:

WWII	172
Korea	16
Vietnam	3

Today 1,000 Oregon Veterans still remain MIA:

WWI	21
WWII	887
Korea	57 (was 61, remains of 4 returned)
Cold War	2
<u>Vietnam</u>	<u>33 (was 49, remains of 16 returned)</u>
TOTAL	1,000

Included in the WWII MIAs is Medal of Honor recipient Army Private Elmer E. Fryar of Portland, one of 29 Medal of Honor recipients connected with Oregon and honored by the Oregon Medal of Honor Highway.

On September 21, 2018 I requested Senator Ron Wyden to request the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency for a summary of all actions taken and planned to be taken to recover the remains of Oregon's 1,000 MIAs.

During WWII, 981 veterans from Oregon were buried overseas in American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC) cemeteries overseas. Together with the 887 MIAs, they represent almost half of Oregon's 3,832 WWII war dead. Including all wars from WWI to Vietnam, there are 1,205 overseas burials and another 940 MIA war dead honored on "Tablets of the Missing" and "Courts of the Missing" plaques at ABMC Cemeteries. That means almost 40% of Oregon's 6,000 war dead cannot be honored by their families with placing flags and wreaths on their graves near home while the other 60% can.

At 471 miles in length, US Highway 26 is a scenic highway as well as the longest highway in Oregon. It stretches between the Oregon Coast and Oregon/Idaho border. It intersects the 7 existing veterans memorial highways created by the Legislature and Bend Heroes Foundation as does the new Oregon Medal of Honor Highway.

At present, there is no POW/MIA Memorial Highway in Oregon honoring Oregon's nearly 2,000 POWs and MIAs.

Seven (7) other states have dedicated POW/MIA Memorial Highways in Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Montana, New York, Washington and Wisconsin. None are border to border. The closest is Montana's 177 mile highway connecting Helena and West Yellowstone. The POW/MIA Highway signs display the well-recognized POW/MIA logo designed by a member of the National League of POW/MIA Families.

Oregon's POW/MIA Memorial Highway on US Highway 26 would be the first such border to border highway in our nation just as the Medal of Honor and Persian Gulf/Afghanistan/Iraq highways are.

US Highway 26 stretches from the Oregon coast to Ogallala, Nebraska, a distance of 1,485 miles. If HB 3452 becomes law, I will request veterans' groups in Idaho, Wyoming and Nebraska to seek similar legislation just as we are doing for the national Medal of Honor Highway across America. Oregon set the precedent!

Today we honor Oregon's POWs and MIA by:

Names of MIAs on ABMC Tablets/Courts of the missing overseas

POW/MIA Flags at USPS, public buildings, Veterans memorials, cemeteries

POW/MIA Flags at Oregon public buildings

+ symbol engraved in front of Bend's war dead names as used on Vietnam Wall in DC

◆ Symbol engraved in front of Bend's names of MIAs returned as used on Vietnam wall in DC

POW/MIA plaque at Bend Heroes Memorial dedicated on June 14 – Flag Day and US Army's 244<sup>th</sup> birthday

EX POW license plate

National POW/MIA Recognition Day

Proclamations issued by the President, Governor and Mayors

On Jan. 9, 2019, I requested the Capitol Foundation to identify Oregon's 887 WWII MIAs with + symbols on the Oregon WWII Memorial here at the Capitol. I requested the same for 49 Vietnam War MIAs (33 MIA, remains of 16 returned) to be honored at the proposed Oregon Vietnam War Memorial on the Capitol grounds (HB 2195).

That might be worth pursuing at the Oregon Fallen Heroes Memorial in Central Point where the names of Oregon's almost 6,000 war dead are displayed on granite panels. That memorial was created under the leadership of the late Dennis Richardson.

Families, friends and VSOs cannot honor 1,000 Oregon MIAs with flags and wreaths on graves as others can whose loved one's remains were returned to them during and often long after war. The POW/MIA Memorial Highway signs should help raise hope and perhaps provide a degree of closure.

Including the POW/MIA logo on highway signs is consistent with the displays of the Purple Heart and Medal of Honor medals on signs on I-5 and US Hwy 20 (slides).

I would think 8-10 POW/MIA Memorial Highway signs would be sufficient.

While many will give the DOD POW/MIA Accounting Agency high marks for finding and returning remains, only a few are returned with great effort each year. In the first 6 months of this year, the remains of 50 MIAs were recovered and returned. For example Edward J. Weissenback was an Oregon civilian captured in Laos on December 27, 1971. His remains were returned to his family on December 20, 2018, almost 47 years to the day he became POW, MIA and dying in captivity. Bend's Bennie Lee Dexter, SMSGT USAF still remains MIA after being captured and dying in captivity in South Vietnam 53 years ago. The families still hold out hope that they will be able to welcome home their loved one's remains.

I request your agreement that "special markers" (page 2, line 11) means the POW/MIA logo to be displayed on POW/MIA Memorial Highway signs. That logo is prominently displayed on USPS buildings and is well recognized by the public. I recommend HB3452 be amended to include a requirement that the POW/MIA logo be displayed on all POW/MIA Memorial Highway signs on US Highway 20.

The motto on the National POW/MIA League of Families logo is **“You Are Not Forgotten”** We have an opportunity now to lend support to those families with designation of US Highway 26 in Oregon as the POW/MIA Memorial Highway.

I would like to close with a quote attributed to famed Roman orator and philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero: **“Poor is the nation that has no heroes, but poorer still is the nation that having heroes, fails to remember and honor them.”**

Someone must speak for Oregon’s POWs and MIAs and that high honor and privilege is ours.

Thank you for your attention. I respectfully request your unanimous AYE votes on HB 3452.

I would be pleased to respond to your comments and questions.