



Written Statement of
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On behalf of the
Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association
and
the Vietnam Helicopter Crew Member Association

H.R. 4298: The Vietnam Helicopter Crewmember Memorial Act

Before the
House Armed Services Military Personnel Subcommittee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC

Subcommittee Chairman Heck, Vice Chairman MacArthur, Ranking Member Davis, and other distinguished members of the Committee: It is a privilege to appear before you today on behalf of the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association and Vietnam Helicopter Crew Members Association to speak in favor of H.R. 4298, The Vietnam Helicopter Crew Member Act.

The Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association (VHPA) and Vietnam Helicopter Crew Members Association (VHCMA) are non-governmental, non-profit war veterans organizations filed under Section 501(c)(19) of the Internal Revenue Service. Currently over 10,000 members strong, the organizations are comprised of individuals from all branches of military service who earned their membership as combat helicopter pilots and crew members in the Vietnam War, the war commonly described as, “the Helicopter War.” I also speak informally on behalf of many Gold Star Families who still mourn the loss of their husband, son or brother killed while operating rotary-wing aircraft in Southeast Asia between 1961 and 1975.

The goal of H.R. 4298 is to place a simple memorial within the hallowed grounds of Arlington National Cemetery (ANC) to honor those who *died* while flying combat helicopter missions in the Vietnam War. Today, some 41 years after the end of the war, no *single, all-service monument* stands to recognize the combined sacrifice and honor of the approximately 5,000 rotary-wing pilots, crew chiefs, medics and door gunners who gave the last full measure of devotion during the conflict, many of whom lie buried within ANC.

During the Vietnam War the helicopter became the mainstay for joint operational mobility. Approximately 12,000 helicopters operated within the Theater of Operation and were used by all military services: Army, Navy, Marines and Air Force. Of this number, 5,086 were destroyed by enemy fire or mishaps related to combat operations, maintenance and weather.

Pilot, non-pilot crewmember casualties (crew chiefs, door gunners and medics), and passenger losses were also significant. The Department of Defense estimates 2,002 pilots were killed, 2704 non-pilot crewmembers died, and at least 532 United States military passengers perished during UH-1 helicopter missions alone (note: South Vietnamese casualties are unknown). A conservative estimate suggests a minimum of 5,238 Americans, roughly 9 percent of the 58,307 recorded fatalities, died in military helicopters.

Helicopters, and the brave crews who operated these machines, stand as the iconic symbol of the Vietnam War. Virtually all writings, documentaries and films of the War include remembrances of combat helicopters because they were ubiquitous to the experience.

Despite the Vietnam War being described as the “Helicopter War,” and the UH-1 Iroquois Helicopter being recognized as the iconic symbol of the war, no specific memorial exists, anywhere, strictly honoring helicopter pilots and crewmembers who died while serving in combat. Individual branches of service have branch-specific memorials such as the United States Army Aviation Museum Vietnam

Memorial that lists the names of 4,347 aviation casualties, but no one memorial remembers all helicopter losses from all military services. Likewise, no military cemetery possesses a memorial specifically dedicated to those who died in rotary-wing combat in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

No other military cemetery provides a superior location to Arlington National Cemetery (ANC), and it is the logical place to honor those who flew and died in helicopters during the Vietnam War. Arlington holds the remains of many individual pilots and crewmembers who were immediately interred during the war—some 20 percent of all immediately buried—and is the only military cemetery that holds the recovered remains of formerly Missing in Action (MIA) pilots and crewmembers, often whole crews, buried in common plots within Section 60 and elsewhere. Helicopter heroes and Medal of Honor recipients buried in ANC include Ed W. Freeman, Michael J. Novosel, Gerald O. Young, and former MIA Jon E. Swanson.

In addition to the graves of immediate helicopter casualties of the Vietnam War, ANC is also the final resting place for numerous veteran helicopter pilots, crewmembers and passengers who served during the war and have passed away since the conflict's end in 1975. It is reasonable to conclude this trend will continue for several decades to come.

ANC holds symbolic value not found elsewhere. As New York City is the national center of finance, and Washington, DC the center of government, ANC is the heart of remembering the true cost of war; it is the place America goes to honor our nation's military heroes, our fallen warriors; and to we veterans of war, this the place we go visit our friends lost so very long ago.

The proposed Vietnam Helicopter Pilot and Crewmember Memorial is designed to blend into the aesthetic of ANC and share the structural attributes of the existing granite markers used to identify the comingled remains of recovered Missing in Action (MIA) crews. The memorial, as currently designed, portrays a UH-1 "Huey" helicopter with crew approaching a safe landing zone (note: with weapons stowed) at the top, military branch seals at the bottom, and a brief statement honoring the sacrifice of those who died. The Memorial will be constructed, emplaced and preserved by private donations, as required by Department of the Army, DOD § 553.21.

Certain voices state ANC cannot accept additional memorials, and that all unused ground must be reserved for future graves. There is merit to this view, and we agree assigning space within the cemetery should be carefully considered. Space does exist within the grounds that are clearly unsuitable for burial due to submerged utilities and tree roots, however, and these areas remain suitable for small memorials such as that proposed within H.R. 4298.

Some fear passage of H.R. 4298 will result in a flood of legislation placing similar tribute monuments within ANC, but history does not support this idea. The last veteran memorial placed within ANC by legislation, the Battle of the Bulge Memorial, was authorized on December 6, 2002 by The

Veterans Benefits Act Of 2002, Public Law 107-330. Since this act some 14 years ago, no other combat memorial tributes have been legislated into the cemetery.

It is also unlikely many Vietnam-era organizations will also seek tribute space in the future. The average Vietnam Veteran is now 72 years old during this, the 50th commemoration of the Vietnam War. I was a 19-year old combat helicopter pilot in the final full year of the war, and I am now 64. We are aging and almost past the time for seeking memorials.

Arlington National Cemetery is not opposed to honoring the helicopter pilots and crew members who died in the Vietnam War, the question is what is worthy? The VHPA was notified by letter on September 23, 2015 of authorization to place a small, commemorative plaque at the base of a living tree donated in honor of those who died operating helicopters in the war. We find it inappropriate. Of the 142 existing tree marker plaques in ANC, none give tribute to the magnitude of 13 years of war and almost 5,000 combat deaths; the small 1.5 square foot tree marker fails to fully honor the long, painful sacrifice.

H.R. 4298 is important to many attending this hearing today. I, like almost all the Vietnam Veterans in this room eligible for burial in ANC, would gladly surrender my place in exchange for installing this important and overdue memorial to our brothers who gave their very young lives in service to the nation.

During this, the 50th year of the Vietnam War Commemoration, we respectfully come before you asking for three and one-half more feet of hallowed ground in Arlington National Cemetery. For all the right reasons--location, numbers of interred helicopter pilots and crewmembers buried in commonality-of-service without regard to military branch, honor and service--we ask for five square feet of ground to honor, and to remember, the almost 5,000 Americans who gave their lives operating rotary-wing aircraft in the "Helicopter War" of Vietnam. We ask your support of H.R. 4298, The Vietnam Crewmember Memorial Act.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bob Hesselbein". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Bob Hesselbein
Legacy Committee Chairman
Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association