

H.R. 7361, Flowers for Fallen Heroes Act. 118 Congress. Submitted by: Robert M. “Bob” Holliday, Rony Elliott, Rik Peirson Marilyn Rustand Lieurance, and General (R) John H. Kelly, (USMC). All Gold Star family members. Verbal presentation by Bob Holliday

While no one in our country truly wants a War, unfortunately War has been a major historical fact for our country. Yet, our wars have not been fought to take over other countries, nor to enforce our way of life on others. Instead, our wars have been fought to protect our freedoms, and the freedoms of other freedom loving people in the world. As Americans, we are blessed to live in the freest country in the history of the **world**, but freedom comes with a price. **With few exceptions, WWI and WWII are the ONLY wars we have found ourselves in where not all the bodies were returned home for burial here in American soil. This is extremely important when considering the passage of the pending Bill. H.R. 7361 Flowers for Fallen Heroes.**

In 1923, Congress created the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC), directing that entity of our Executive branch to build and maintain overseas American military cemeteries. There are 26 ABMC cemeteries in 17 countries throughout the world. WWI saw approximately 116,700 Americans lost. More than 407,000 American soldiers were lost in WWII alone. This averages 220 Americans per day lost in that War, with many of them in their teens and early twenties. According to the ABMC website there are more than 200,000 Americans honored at ABMC sites spread around the world. **Any American who visits such a cemetery and leaves without a lump in their throat fails to understand why we live as free as we do in this great country of ours.**

Approximately 183,000 American kids lost their fathers in WWII. I happen to be one of them. My Father, **Captain Karl O. “Hap” Holliday**, was killed by gun fire in an ambush by German Infantry on April 13, 1945. My Dad was 26 years old when he was KIA; I wasn't quite 2 years of age. He is buried in the ABMC American Cemetery in Margraten Holland. Most Americans KIA in WWII were first buried in temporary cemeteries with the body encased in a mattress cover. Beginning in 1947 the bodies were exhumed where positive identification and, as best as could be done, a cause of death was given with a permanent burial following.

In 1950, those in charge of the ABMC, realizing families of soldiers buried in ABMC cemeteries couldn't just hop into the family car to visit an overseas cemetery, thus those themselves who administered the ABMC gave birth to the Flower Program. It was a simple process to use, with the ABMC providing a one-page form the person ordering the flowers completed. Information called for identified the fallen soldier, rank, together with the cemetery and grave location. Gold Star families and friends filled-in the date flowers were to be delivered mailing this back to the ABMC together with a check to pay for their flowers. **Those ordering flowers have always paid for them. The Government has not.** The ABMC assisted those ordering flowers by placing the floral orders, in the language of the country, with florists near the cemeteries. A photo of the flowers in front of the grave was taken and mailed to the Gold Star family or friend who had placed the order.

In later years, the ABMC suggested, thus allowed, those ordering flowers to include a personal note to their fallen soldier. It was printed and set beside the flowers and included in the returned photo. If

flowers were to be delivered for Memorial Day, the hand-out at the respective ceremony for the Memorial Day services was also included with the returned photo.

Just prior to Memorial Day, in 2015, and ***without any involvement or input from Gold Star families***, the ABMC announced it was no longer going to provide a Flower Program. A group of WWII adult war orphans quickly formed, coming together from different parts of our country to meet with the ABMC. Our pleas to reinstate the Flower Program were shared with the ABMC. To date all of that has fallen on deaf ears. Our committee has quietly worked over nine years toward reinstating the Flower Program. It's been almost 10 years since Gold Star families, ***with our government's assistance***, have been able to place flowers of Honor, Respect, and Remembrance on the graves of our fallen American Heroes no matter in which ABMC cemetery they are buried. **There is nothing right about this, no matter how you look at it.** The ABMC told us they do NOT want to be in the Flower Business anymore. The ABMC has never been in the flower business. Their business is to assist Gold Star families with the ordering of flowers for their loved one from florists who neither speak English nor accept our form of money. The ABMC has turned over Gold Star families and friends of our fallen who want to remember and honor their loved one, to FTD, the internet and, or the telephone. **In other words, the ABMC simply walked out of the room holding Gold Star family and friends, closing the door behind them.**

Our group of Gold Star family members has been joined by 3 Four-Star American Generals, John Kelly, US Marines, Chuck Horner, US Air Force, and Tommy Franks, US Army all of whom bristled when they heard about this problem, with all offering to help. We also have been joined by the Society of Former Guards of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, together with many other patriotic groups, and finally by many American Gold Star family members. Even with that, the ABMC's interest proved to be in a different direction, thus turning away from Gold Star families, **focusing on increasing the visitors experience**, telling the stories of the soldiers buried in their cemeteries, and educating about war. This is all well and good and should be done. However, doing so should not be accomplished by dropping support for Gold Star families. Over nine years those that administer the ABMC made it clear they have no intention of reinstating the Flower Program.

So, what has happened in the almost 10 years since the ABMC announced it would no longer assist with the ordering of flowers for American overseas graves? Gold Star family and friends of our Fallen have found that without the ABMC's assistance, there is a language barrier that, in most all cases, makes it virtually impossible for American Gold Star families and friends to place a floral order in foreign countries. Unlike the Flower Program, there was nothing simple or easy about it. The ABMC pushed Gold Star families to place their flower orders locally here in America with FTD, however the result of that decision was disastrous. A strong language barrier still existed. **Simple things like Red was interpreted as rosy or pink. Many florists in foreign countries don't take credit cards.** There's a currency exchange between countries that most of us don't understand, and the rates are flexible, changing with the value of the U.S. dollar. In addition, there's a **significantly higher cost to families ordering flowers locally from America.** International fees, taxes, and delivery fees, **doubling and even tripling the cost to families** and friends wanting to Honor and Remember, their fallen American soldiers with flowers. One American military alumni group (the 34th Infantry Division Association) is particularly upset as due to cost increases it can no longer afford Memorial Day wreaths to be placed in ABMC cemeteries in honor of their comrades in ABMC cemeteries in Italy and North Africa. The 34th ID had more continual days in combat in WWII than any other American Division.

The few who managed to order *direct from a florist in a foreign country*, had no way of knowing if their flowers were delivered on the day requested (Memorial Day, Birthday, Anniversary of the death, Christmas, etcetera), or delivered at all.

A war orphan, Marilyn Rustand Lieurance, who will be attending the hearing this July 10th was planning on visiting her father's grave in Luxembourg. Preparatory to traveling, Marilyn called every florist in that country. She found none that spoke English. She sent a picture of what she wanted, and waited to learn the cost, but instead learned the florists couldn't understand that all she wanted was a wreath of white flowers, and nine red roses. The language barrier prevented it. It was Marilyn's first visit to her dad's grave, and she arrived in the country a day early to take care of her flowers. Upon her return home, an email from the florist who couldn't create a white wreath was now requesting her credit card numbers for flowers that were never ordered thus obviously not delivered. This is just one of many such problems our committee of Gold Star WWII, now adult, kids have heard about since the ABMC did away with the Flower Program. Marilyn's is but one of many such instances of failure for an American Gold Star family to be able to order flowers through the ABMC.

Included in the evidence attached hereto are several letters and recognition of support we would suggest you should read. You're sure to recognize the names of organizations like **A Soldiers Child Foundation, American Ex-Prisoners of War, Buffalo Soldiers 9th and 10th (Horse) Calvary Association, The Eighth Air Force Historical Society, Gold Star Children, Military Order of the Purple Heart, 91st Bomb Group Memorial Association, Society of Former Guards of The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, the Sons and Daughters in Touch**. The important thing here is to read *their words*, why they're in support of reinstating a Flower Program, for the families and friends of our fallen--too far for most families to EVER visit. For your convenience, please see the attached list of Co-sponsors, and a few of many letters from members of the American WWII Orphans Network (AWON), who are affected by the ending of the Flower Program.

You might like knowing that the Buffalo Soldiers, mentioned above, were under the command of **General John Pershing, who Congress commissioned to build the ABMC cemeteries. As you'll see in their letter of support, the Buffalo Soldiers are looking at the original intent of the ABMC Flower Program.**

To come to grips with this problem, we began networking and moving forward with major help from General John F. Kelly, former White House Chief of Staff, US Marines (Retired). General Kelly has helped in areas we were not able to reach. General Kelly himself is a Gold Star parent having lost his son, Marine 1Lt Robert Kelly on November 9, 2010, in Afghanistan. Montana Congressman Ryan Zinke drafted and filed the **Flowers for Fallen Heroes Act, 2024 H.R. 7361** legislation and introduced it into Congress: Kyle Egan, Military Legislative Assistant to Congressman Zinke has worked tirelessly to move us forward and helped us understand the process.

The original Flower Program was named the Flower Fund Program, however the name is a bit deceiving, as the families or friends of the Fallen always paid for their flowers, our Government, the ABMC, never did. Annually, the ABMC furnished a sheet giving the price of flowers per cemetery respectively. Ordering flowers for our Fallen was quite simple. This was a very much appreciated program that worked as smooth as glass for 65 plus years.

As we look at all of this, let's remember that our soldiers put America first, (before self, family, friends, careers and generations to come). All their hopes and dreams of a future together with their loved ones

were gone forever. **America also needs to know that when our United States asked the families of these fallen soldiers for help, they too met the needs of the America they love,** as our country desired to avoid the expense of bringing thousands of dead soldiers home for burial. **EVERY SINGLE FAMILY** of an American Soldier buried in an overseas ABMC cemetery **answered the call of the United States of America,** giving our government permission to bury their loved one overseas. A terrible separation that comes with no real closure for these families. Losing one's loved one, or friend, to a sudden violent death met while protecting our freedoms and very way of life produces a hole in one's heart that simply never closes. Not easily, if at all, being able to visit a loved one or friend's grave overseas simply adds to the misery of America's Gold Star families and friends.

Today, when a soldier is KIA, **seven soldiers accompany the ride home with the soldier's remains.** Government officials, together with the soldier's family are at the airport to receive the remains. A parade of cars travels to the cemetery. Fellow Americans line the streets and bridges waving American Flags. A military memorial service takes place. Patriotic speeches are given. **All these things are well deserved,** and both honor and show respect to **an American Soldier who gave all he/she had to give for their country. The grieving family is also recognized for the loss of their soldier.** America understands the loss to these families and lifts them up with a distinction of being Gold Star families, those who lost a loved one to war. This is the way such a tragedy should be handled by an understanding country such as ours. Not the case in prior wars. In WW II, the family was notified by a knock on the door with a telegram handed over announcing the death. The telegram was one sentence which stated:

**"The Secretary of war desires me to express his deep regret that your (husband, son, brother) (name) was killed in action in (location given) on (date) confirming letter follows
Signed, by the Adjutant General"**

The family was left to deal with it themselves. Our country has come a long way since then, starting with the Flower Program. One needs to consider those buried in ABMC cemeteries served our government and our people, protecting our freedoms and very way of life. As stated, **the Flower Program was the one thread of connection through our Government that Gold Star families had with their soldiers buried in faraway lands.** The ABMC, as an entity of the Executive Branch of our Federal Government, **providing their personal assistance** meant more to Gold Star families and friends than others might have ever realized. It gave Gold Star families the feeling that our own Government understood their loss and stood beside them. **The Flower Program sent a strong message that although a Gold Star family's soldier was buried across an ocean, our government hasn't forgotten that soldier, nor the family and friends left behind,** and always will appreciate their sacrifice for all people fortunate to be citizens of this great country. Ending the Flower Program felt like a slap in the face to Gold Star families. Particularly the manner it was ended. Maybe it wasn't meant that way, but somebody needs to know that's how it feels. **Ending the Flower Program, told those left behind that those sudden violent deaths met while defending our freedoms and basic way of life no longer hold the same meaning to our own Government they have held since the death occurred. This certainly is not a legacy in which our country can be proud.**

If the ABMC had brought Gold Star families into discussions regarding the idea of ending the Flower Program, **they, the ABMC, would have understood the damage ending the flower program would do to American's Gold Star families, those being the most important segment in our society the ABMC was formed to serve in the first place.** We're not the enemy of the ABMC, but we're the voices of our Fathers, and the voices representing all the Gold Star families and friends of our war dead, who are buried across the seas. Ending the Flower Program should never have happened, and we're here today

working through the process of getting it reinstated and helping all of you to understand what it feels like to walk in our shoes. The loss is hard to define at times.

We understand one of the main reasons the ABMC dropped the Flower Program was so it (the ABMC) could then concentrate on building more contemporary visitors centers at the cemeteries. Welcome Centers are a great addition to ABMC cemeteries but should not be built in place of the recognition of individual soldiers or their Gold Star families. There's no real reason both programs can't be done. One or two Gold Star family members, those who used the Flower Program, should be included in reinstating the Flower Program. The Flower Program should never have been looked at or felt as a burden, but instead a simple assistance of service to be proud of, and at least twice per year advertised across the nation as a show of respect to the soldiers and their families left behind. Ending the Flower Program says little about the heritage and freedoms of our country, as well as the price paid for those freedoms.

Sometimes when a person focuses on only one or two things, other things of equal or more importance fall by the wayside, and no longer seem important. This may be the case of focusing so totally on new Welcome Centers, and etc., what a cemetery is was lost in the shuffle. Particularly overseas cemeteries holding the remains of fellow Americans who paid with their lives for our freedoms. While planning and details can create the world's best cemetery, it should be done on its own merit, and not on the backs of Gold Star families. In 1950, a precedent was set when the Flower Program was created. A favor to our government by the families who gave permission to bury their soldiers so far from their home.

While America's fallen should always be the focus at an ABMC cemetery, such a cemetery is NEVER ONLY about those buried there. When a person visits the grave of a loved one, it's a time of remembrance, grieving, and a form of comfort being close; and this should never be forgotten. Yet not everyone with a loved one or friend buried in an ABMC cemetery has the wherewithal to visit a cemetery located overseas. As stated above, the Flower Program stood as the sole thread of connection through our government a Gold Star American family or friend had to their soldier buried so far from home.

While Welcome Centers enhance the visitors experience it should be remembered that visitors and education are **an important addition** to ABMC cemeteries, we should never lose sight of the fact that these are American Military Cemeteries, American soldiers are buried there, and there is a grieving American family connected to **every Soldier buried in an American AMBC cemetery. This will always be true.**

Furthermore, while stories about American soldiers buried in ABMC cemeteries and providing education about war geared to future generations, are additions to such cemeteries, it should never be done at the expense of turning away from our American Heroes and their families. **This honors no one** and should NOT be any part of America's Legacy.

Anybody can recognize the design and plan of every detail at an ABMC cemetery has resulted in wonderful accomplishments and magnificent beauty. The ABMC boasts of having the World's Best cemeteries and this may very well be true. The ABMC is **deservedly proud** of the cemeteries they've created, and the care of these cemeteries reflects the greatness of the America we all love.

The ABMC's Flower Program always provided needed assistance to Gold Star families and friends with a basic traditional privilege of decorating the graves of their soldiers. It worked well for over 65 years and sent a further message that our government has not forgotten the American soldiers, who are buried in

foreign countries, nor their families or friends. The very idea of farming out the Flower Program to an outside source would be viewed as one of total disrespect by Gold Star families. Simply put, the ABMC's Flower Program needs to start and fully operate in-house at the ABMC. It did so with great success for 65+ years. Handing it off to an outside source defeats the very purpose the ABMC was created in the first place. Furthermore, such would leave a terrible feeling of disgust with Gold Star families and friends if this were allowed to occur. Following the ending of the Flower Program by the ABMC in 2015, trying to accomplish the ordering of flowers outside the ABMC's assistance proved to be a disaster with language barriers, currency exchanges, and a significant rise in costs to the families and friends of our fallen.

The ABMC now says it wants to get out of the flower business. The ABMC has never been in the flower business. What the Flower Program accomplished was assisting Gold Star families wading through a foreign process of ordering flowers from overseas florists to put Flowers on their soldier's grave. No matter what the ABMC now says, leaving American's Gold Star families to fend for themselves here simply is not working. The ABMC never sold nor offered to sell flowers. Prior to making the decision to end the Flower Program, the ABMC understood what that program meant to those Americans whose soldiers are buried overseas.

On the other hand, reinstating the Flower Program within the ABMC (our government) also sends a message to Gold Star families and friends, and the population of our country, that our government still gives thanks for the sacrifice and loss of hundreds of thousands of soldiers, who laid their lives down for you, me, and all of us. It truly speaks as to the goodness of our country. We're seniors, and after we're gone, we'd like to think our grandchildren and great-grandchildren will want to continue remembering the family member(s) who paid for the freedoms we all enjoy every day. As stated, it was the ABMC itself that started the Flower Program, running it with great success for many years. Surely, with such a record restarting and operating it in a similar vein would present little problem for the administration of the ABMC. Considering what the Flower Program stood for, what it represented, the service it provided to America's Gold Star families and friends from both World Wars, it never should have ended. The Program should be reestablished to operate in perpetuity to ensure it continues.

It is important to restate that with a few exceptions, both world wars are the only wars our country found itself in where not all the bodies were returned home for burial. With the ABMC itself coming up with the idea to start the Flower Program, followed by operating it flawlessly for 65 + years, then suddenly killing it begs the question: what happened to the reverence to be shown by our own government to our fallen and their families?

Thank you for taking your time to read this piece, along with the accompanying documents. The hearing on July 10th offers an opportunity to embrace the service of the ABMC's Flower Program to Gold Star families and friends, which **both honored and reflected respect to the soldiers for their service and sacrifice, and the American Gold Star families and friends grieving their loss.**

All things considered here, H.R. 7361, Flowers for Fallen Heroes is perhaps as non-political and as patriotic a piece of legislation as most of us will see in our lifetimes. It is respectfully requested this bill become law. Thank you.

In Their Memory and not forgotten,

By /S/ Robert M. Holliday, signed electronically

Date:

OUR LEAD GROUP

Bob Holliday, Proud son of Captain Karl O “Hap” Holliday, Headquarters Battery Commander, 561st Field Artillery Battalion, KIA 4/13/1945 Germany, KIA by gun fire in an ambush by German Infantry. Buried ABMC Cemetery, Margraten Holland

Susan Hadler, Deceased, Proud daughter of 2Lt David Selby Johnson, Jr. KIA 4/12/1945 when stepped on a mine in Germany, his body disintegrated, he is noted on the Wall of the Missing, ABMC American Cemetery, Luxembourg

Rondy Elliott, Proud daughter of CPL Frank M. “Bud” Elliott, 741st Tank Battalion, KIA 6/6/1944, CPL. Elliott was KIA when stepped on a mine on Omaha Beach France, buried Normandy ABMC American Cemetery, Omaha Beach France

Marilynn Rustand Lieurance, Proud daughter of 1LT Hanford “Rusty” James Rustand, 323rd Bomber Squadron, 91st Bomber Group, Heavy, pilot, B17 on one of the largest air raids in WW II, was KIA 11/2/1944 when his B17 was shot down. Buried ABMC American Cemetery, Luxembourg

Rik Peirson, Proud son of 1LT John Silas Sheffield Peirson, 75th Infantry Division, KIA on Christmas Day 1944 by a German 88 on the Northern Shoulder of the Battle of the Bulge. Buried American ABMC Cemetery Henri-Chappelle, Belgium

General John Kelly, Proud Father of 1LT Robert Kelly, USMC, KIA November 9, 2010, War on Terror, stepped on an IED. buried in Arlington National Cemetery