



# MILITARY ORDER OF THE PURPLE HEART

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## STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

SUBMITTED BY

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NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR

MILITARY ORDER OF THE PURPLE HEART

TO

THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

WITH RESPECT TO

### **The Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017**

WASHINGTON, DC

JULY 17, 2017

Chairman Roe, Ranking Member Walz, and Members of the Committee, on behalf of the Military Order of the Purple Heart (MOPH), whose membership is comprised entirely of combat wounded veterans, I thank you for allowing us to testify today on H.R 3218, the *Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017*. MOPH strongly supports this landmark legislation, which would accomplish many of our legislative goals relating to veterans' education. These include extending the Yellow Ribbon Program to Fry Scholarship recipients, granting GI Bill eligibility to Reserve Component members activated under 12304(a) and 12304(b) orders, restoring entitlement to education assistance for veterans affected by school closures, and eliminating the requirement that veterans use their education benefits within 15 years of discharge. While MOPH is proud to voice our support for these and all other provisions of this important bill, we would like to focus our statement on the section that most specifically affect MOPH members, section 103, which would finally grant full education benefits to all Post-9/11 Purple Heart recipients, regardless of the amount of time they served on active duty.

There is no doubt that the Post-9/11 GI Bill is among the most significant benefits available to current-era veterans. Its popularity is also without question. According to research recently published by Student Veterans of America, 347,564 student veterans have completed a total of 453,508 post-secondary certificates or degrees using the Post-9/11 GI Bill since its inception. While it is impossible to know at this point what the long-term return on investment will be for the program, MOPH is confident that it will eventually prove to have contributed significantly to the American economy, similar to previous iterations of the GI Bill. Simply put, when a veteran's military experience is combined with quality higher education opportunities, they are bound for success.

Still, there is room for improvement in the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Since it first went into effect in 2009, there have been multiple changes made to the program to address oversights in the original legislation. MOPH strongly believes that Congress should act to improve the Post-9/11 GI Bill once again to extend 100 percent eligibility to all Post-9/11 Purple Heart recipients.

Currently, only veterans who either serve at least 36 months on active duty or are discharged due to a disability receive Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits at the 100 percent rate. Those who were not medically discharged and serve less than 36 months receive only a portion of the benefit on a prorated basis.

MOPH strongly believes that any veteran who sheds their blood for our country on a Post-9/11 battlefield should be automatically granted the full benefit of the GI Bill that bears the name of the era in which they served. While we fully understand that there must be minimum service requirements for any benefit as generous as the Post-9/11 GI Bill, we firmly believe that every single current-era Purple Heart recipient is equally as deserving as any other servicemember, regardless of total time they served on active duty. Put another way, MOPH strongly believes that any veteran who was wounded on the battlefield has indeed already met the service requirement for full GI Bill eligibility by virtue of their personal sacrifice in our nation's efforts in fighting the Global War on Terror.

According to the report issued by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), it is estimated that 660 Purple Heart recipients would see increased GI Bill benefits each year under this bill. While this is a relatively low number as compared to overall GI Bill usage, we believe it is certainly significant enough to warrant action by Congress. CBO also estimates that the cost of this provision would be a relatively modest \$65 million over the next 10 years. Still, MOPH understands that any new spending presents challenges in the current fiscal environment, and we are grateful that other provisions of H.R. 3218 fully offset the cost of section 103.

MOPH suspects that the majority of Purple Heart recipients who are eligible for less than the full benefit are veterans of the Guard and Reserve. Often activated only to deploy and then deactivated once they return home, it is not unusual for combat veterans of the reserve component to amass less than 36 months of active service before they are discharged.

It is also not uncommon for Purple Heart recipients not to receive medical discharges, even if their wounds are relatively severe. All too often, veterans who are wounded close to the end of their enlistments, or while on stop-loss, are simply discharged on schedule rather than initiating the lengthy medical board process necessary for a medical discharge. Anecdotally, we hear that this is also more common in the Reserve Component.

To better illustrate our point, please consider the following examples:

Servicemember A enlists in the U.S. Air Force for three years. She is stationed at Dover Air Force Base where she works as a pay distribution specialist. She serves honorably and is discharged at the end of her three year term having never left the United States. Servicemember A is eligible for the Post-9/11 GI Bill at the 100 percent benefit level.

Servicemember B enlists in the U.S. Navy, also for three years. He is stationed at Naval Station Norfolk. One year into his assignment, he steps in a pothole during a unit run, fracturing his

ankle. His unit initiates a medical board and it is determined that he can no longer perform his duties as an electronics technician. Having never left the United States, Servicemember B is granted a medical discharge and becomes eligible for the Post-9/11 GI Bill at the 100 percent benefit level.

Servicemember C is an infantryman in the Tennessee National Guard. After spending five years drilling with his unit, he is activated for the first time to deploy to Iraq at the height of the conflict. Ten months into his one year deployment, his night patrol is struck by a command-detonated improvised explosive device, signaling the beginning of an ambush by insurgents. Shrapnel from the blast rips into his lips, exiting through his cheek and causing him to lose three teeth. After he and his squad suppress the enemy, he is evacuated to Baghdad where he receives a dozen stitches in his face, a partial denture, and a Purple Heart. After being allowed to convalesce for two weeks, a medical officer determines that he can still perform his duties as an infantryman. He rejoins his unit, and returns home two months later. Having completed his six year enlistment, he is discharged honorably. Since only 12 months of his service was spent on active duty, Servicemember C becomes eligible for the Post-9/11 GI Bill at only the 60 percent benefit level.

In using these examples, we are in no way implying that Servicemembers A and B are somehow undeserving of the benefits for which they qualify. All honorable service to our country is commendable and should be rewarded. We are only trying to illustrate how a Purple Heart recipient who serves less than 36 months on active duty and is not medically discharged is at least equally as deserving.

However, examples of how this legislation would help Purple Heart recipients are not only hypothetical. Consider the case of Sergeant Jonathan Goldman of Boston, Massachusetts, a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve and Operation Iraqi Freedom. On September 4, 2006 while serving in Iraq with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 25<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment, Jonathan's vehicle was struck by an improvised explosive device, injuring him and two other Marines. For his wounds, included a concussion, burns to his face and arm, an ankle injury, and shrapnel to his left knee, he was awarded the Purple Heart. Fortunately, he was able to remain with his unit, which redeployed November of 2006, at which time he was separated from active duty. Although he spent a total of six years in the Marine Corps Reserve, less than one year of that time was on active duty, while deployed to Iraq. As a result, Jonathan qualified for only 60 percent of the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

Another example is that of Sergeant Adrian Aranda of El Paso, Texas. Adrian served a total of four years on active duty in the United States Marine Corps, separating in June 2002, and was among the first U.S. service members to deploy to Afghanistan following 9/11. On December 16, 2001, while serving with the 15<sup>th</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit, his foot patrol was struck by a land mine, wounding him and two other Marines. For his injuries, which included shrapnel wounds to his left arm, back, and both legs, a fractured left hand, minor burns, hearing impairment, and a traumatic brain injury, he was awarded the Purple Heart. Following his recovery, Adrian was separated honorably from the Marine Corps the following year. However, since most of his time on active duty was served prior to September 11, 2001, he was awarded only 50 percent of the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

In our view, our nation must do better by wounded warriors like Jonathan and Adrian. Although they were both eventually able to complete degrees using the diminished GI Bill eligibility, they both suffered unnecessary financial hardships in doing so. We believe it is also worthy to note that being wounded on the battlefield tends to present additional readjustment challenges for transitioning veterans, and we believe that Congress and the American people must do all they can to ensure Purple Heart recipients have access to the best educational opportunities possible when they return home. In light of this, MOPH strongly urges the Committee to advance the *Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017* without delay.

Chairmen Roe, Ranking Member Walz, this concludes my statement. On behalf of the Order, I thank you for the opportunity to submit our statement, and would be happy to answer any questions for the record that you or other Members of the Committee may have.

Disclosure of Federal Grants and Contracts:

The Military Order of the Purple Heart (MILITARY ORDER OF THE PURPLE HEART) does not currently receive, nor has MILITARY ORDER OF THE PURPLE HEART ever received any federal money for grants or contracts other than the routine allocation of office space and associated resources at government facilities for outreach and direct veteran assistance services through its Department of Veterans' Affairs accredited National Service Officer Program.