

# Honolulu Advertiser

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## Filipino veterans rally for equality

*House bill granting one-time payment falls short, they say*

Local Filipino-American veterans of World War II and their supporters say they're not satisfied with a bill passed by the U.S. House yesterday that would pay the veterans \$15,000 rather than the monthly benefits that other U.S. veterans get.

The bill, approved on a 392-23 vote, would authorize a one-time payment of \$15,000 to Filipino veterans of the U.S. Army during WWII if they are now U.S. citizens, and a payment of \$9,000 to noncitizens.

"By doing this, we will provide a small, yet meaningful, measure of recognition and thanks to these brave men who deserve far, far more," said U.S. Rep. Bob Filner, D-Calif., sponsor of the bill and chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, during debate yesterday in Washington, D.C.

Art Caleda, president of the World War II Filipino-American Veterans Hawai'i Chapter, told a rally of about 50 fellow veterans and their supporters at the Filipino Community Center in Waipahu that \$15,000 is too little.

"We will never, never surrender!" Caleda shouted. The crowd responded: "No surrender!"

The bill must be passed by the Senate before it can go to the president for his signature.

Organizers of the rally in Waipahu said Filipino-American veterans should get the average \$900 a month pension that other veterans get. They also said the \$15,000 could only go to living veterans, not spouses or other survivors, and would prevent the estimated 18,000 veterans across the country from filing further claims with the U.S. for their service.

They also would not receive the expedited immigration of their sons and daughters from the Philippines as had been promised, they said.

Angelicio Pagar, 82, of Kalihi, brought to the rally a copy of a 2008 Department of Veterans Affairs' handbook that said specifically that Filipino-American veterans are entitled to the same benefits as other veterans.

"This is already in the book," Pagar said.

Leon Tabaniag, 84, said he fought alongside U.S. soldiers against the Japanese in three different battlefronts and was in the mountain province of North Luzon when the Japanese commander in the Philippines, Gen. Tomoyuki Yamashita, surrendered.

"They have to help us for the sacrifice that we made," Tabaniag said. "I have many friends who died as we were fighting, especially at Casamata Hill in Abra."

Nic Musico, an adviser to the World War II Filipino-American Veterans Hawai'i Chapter, said: "They call you heroes, but they don't give you what you deserve."

next step: senate

The House bill now goes to the Senate where it faces an uncertain future as Congress tries to wrap up work before heading home for the fall election campaigns.

Senators could take up the House version or meet in conference committee to work out the differences between the two versions of the legislation. The Senate had earlier passed a bill to give full veteran status to the Filipino veterans, most of whom are now in their 80s and 90s, including special pensions.

Filner, the California congressman, said the House bill was a "second choice" since Republicans blocked his first choice, which was the Senate bill.

Although the Filipinos came under U.S. Army command in 1941, Congress took away their entitlement to full veterans' benefits in 1946, Filner said.

"It is time that this Congress and our nation recognize their contributions to the successful outcome of World War II, recognize the injustice visited on them and act to correct this injustice," Filner said.

But U.S. Rep. Cliff Stearns, R-Fla., argued that the money is better spent to improve benefits for other veterans.

"Obviously, there are many, many higher priorities that we as a nation at war should be meeting," he said.

U.S. Rep. Neil Abercrombie, D-Hawai'i, said he looked at the lump sum bill as a stopgap measure because the Senate provisions were blocked.

"I supported the Filner measure to make sure that the 20,000 surviving Filipino World War II veterans are assured of at least some of the benefits they were promised 67 years ago," Abercrombie said. "I'll continue doing everything I can to see that the U.S. government lives up to its obligations to a gallant group of soldiers who answered the call."

U.S. Rep. Mazie Hirono, D-Hawai'i, said the bill was not perfect or a final answer to fulfilling the nation's obligation to the Filipino veterans.

"However, we need to keep all options open at this point," she said.