

In 1999, the Asian Law Journal—which would later become the Asian American Law Journal—published an examination of the United States’ denial of veterans benefits to Filipino World War II veterans.¹ During World War II, the United States government promised Filipino soldiers U.S. veterans benefits in exchange for their participation in the U.S. war effort in the Pacific. At the time, the Philippine Commonwealth was a U.S. protectorate, and Filipino soldiers fought as American nationals alongside American citizens. After the war, the United States Congress swiftly passed legislation denying benefits to Filipino World War II veterans. At the time the article was written, the Filipino veterans had been struggling against this injustice for over half a century. Another decade would pass before some measure of justice would be done.

In February 2009, Congress, at long last, passed legislation that included benefits for Filipino World War II veterans.² This bittersweet victory comes at the end of a fifteen-year legislative battle, every year of which has seen hundreds of veterans lose their lives to the passage of time.

The following is a statement from U.S. Representative Michael Honda (CA-15), Chairman of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, chronicling this struggle for justice.

Justice for Filipino Veterans, at Long Last

Rep. Michael Honda

After a decades-long struggle, Filipino World War II veterans have finally received the recognition and compensation they deserve for their brave service to the U.S. during World War II. This recognition and compensation, coming in the form of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act signed by President Obama on February 18, 2009, represents the culmination of an advocacy effort led by the veterans themselves with the support of Filipino community organizations, and congressional leaders such as Rep. Xavier Becerra, Rep. Bob Filner, Senator Daniel Inouye, Senator Daniel Akaka and other members of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus (CAPAC).

1. Michael A. Cabotaje, *Equity Denied: Historical and Legal Analyses in Support of the Extension of U.S. Veterans’ Benefits to Filipino World War II Veterans*, 6 ASIAN L.J. 67 (1999).

2. American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, Pub. L. No. 111-5, 123 Stat. 115 (2009) (benefits for Filipino veterans were included in the Stimulus Bill).

The story of these veterans begins more than sixty years ago when the U.S. government asked Filipino soldiers to serve under U.S. authority during World War II. The people of the Philippines valiantly stepped up to the challenge and played a vital role in securing a victory for the U.S. and its allies. Fighting a ruthless enemy, countless Filipinos sacrificed their lives to uphold democratic principles and to rid the world of tyranny and fascism. At the time of recruitment, the U.S. government promised that these Filipino soldiers would be treated as U.S. veterans and entitled to full benefits.

The courageous efforts and sacrifices of Filipino soldiers were central to the allied victory in the Philippines and in the Pacific theater. Indeed, historians have concluded that valiant efforts by Filipino soldiers in Bataan helped keep Midway and the Coral Islands in American hands at a crucial time during the War. In one of the low points of the American war effort, more than 60,000 Filipino soldiers, along with more than 15,000 American soldiers, were captured and suffered gross indignities during the infamous Bataan Death March.

As World War II came to close, however, Congress acted shamefully, passing the Rescission Act of 1946, revoking the full eligibility rights of Filipino soldiers and turning its back on the approximately 250,000 brave Filipino soldiers who fought under our flag and shed blood for our freedom. Despite their undeniable contributions and sacrifices, the Rescission Act contained specific provisions that declared that service by Filipino soldiers should not be deemed to have been service in the U.S. military. While some Filipino veterans recovered their full veterans' benefits, most others waited until February 2009 for Congress to do the right thing: provide some of the compensation that was promised to them over six decades ago.

Efforts to redress the injustice of the Rescission Act began in the 1990s when U.S. citizenship was offered to Filipino veterans living in the United States. In 2000, Congress passed a law allowing them to be buried as American veterans in U.S. military cemeteries. Over the past decade, advocacy for full recognition and compensation of the aging Filipino soldiers as U.S. veterans intensified as the number of surviving veterans, most of whom are poor, dwindled. The Filipino community, led by the Philippines Embassy, the American Coalition for Filipino Veterans (ACFV), and the National Alliance for Filipino Veterans Equity (NAFVE), began an aggressive effort to give the veterans a national voice, working closely with members of Congress to push for legislation restoring recognition and benefits for the veterans.

In Congress, Rep. Bob Filner, Senator Daniel Inouye, Senator Daniel Akaka, and CAPAC led the efforts for redress for the veterans. Prioritizing the plight of the Filipino WWII veterans as a top legislative goal, I, along with CAPAC Executive Board members Rep. Madeleine Bordallo and Rep.

Mazie Hirono, testified at the successful Filipino Veterans hearing before the full Committee on Veterans' Affairs. Rep. Robert C. "Bobby" Scott, who has Filipino heritage, was also instrumental in these educational outreach efforts. Additionally, CAPAC Executive Board members, including Rep. Neil Abercrombie and Rep. Xavier Becerra, met with Filipino American community leaders and worked in partnership with them to push for the passage of the Filipino Veterans Equity Bill.

Throughout the years, advocacy on behalf of the Filipino Veterans was met with great resistance. Despite the veterans' fierce advocacy, as well as that of the Filipino community and supportive members of Congress, every attempt to pass an equity bill restoring recognition and benefits for Filipino soldiers failed to overcome objections to "unnecessary spending," until this past year. Many members of Congress, unaware of the history of Filipino contributions and sacrifices during World War II, seemed unmoved by appeals to make good on our country's broken promise to these veterans.

With the clock ticking as more veterans passed away, supporters of the veterans in Congress finally inserted the provision in the stimulus bill. In the Senate, Senator Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii), chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee and a World War II veteran himself, pushed to include authorization for payments to the veterans in the stimulus bill, concluding that a stand-alone bill would not succeed. CAPAC, along with Rep. Bob Filner, chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, Senator Akaka, Rep. Becerra, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, played a vital role in shepherding the bill through both houses of Congress and ensuring that the provision was preserved in the final bill that was signed by President Obama.

While they had to wait for wait more than six decades, Filipino veterans now have received the recognition and some of the compensation they so greatly deserve. Even though they did not receive the full compensation they were promised, the fact that that Congress even considered a \$198 million benefits package for the veterans during this economic crisis is a testament to the dedication of the leaders on the executive board of CAPAC and other congressional leaders who championed the cause of the Filipino veterans. Signed two days after the 63rd anniversary of the 1946 Rescission Act that deprived the veterans of their rightful benefits, the stimulus bill offered a one-time payment of \$15,000 for Filipino veterans in the U.S. and \$9,000 for those in the Philippines.

For the veterans, this victory came none too soon. Today, out of the quarter of a million Filipino soldiers who fought for the U.S., fewer than 18,000 are still alive. In their late 80s and early 90s, 3,000 veterans have passed away in the last two years alone. These are honorable, hardworking men like Faustino "Peping" Baclig who currently resides in Los Angeles,

CA. Peping was among the 75,000 Filipino and U.S. soldiers subjected to the Bataan Death March. He survived the atrocities of Japanese occupation and fought side-by-side with the Americans, only to have his service as a U.S. national and a veteran denied by the 1946 Rescission Act. As Peping reflected during the struggle to win these benefits, “they pay us to die, but they cannot pay us to live.”

Although this moment came six decades late, I am proud of the efforts of CAPAC and my colleagues in Congress to honor the surviving Filipino veterans for putting their lives on the line for our country, and rectify the injustice done to them by a shameful act of Congress decades ago.

We must learn from this decades-long struggle for justice. Let us look ahead and keep our word to never again treat our veterans this way. All our veterans deserve the best treatment, whether they fought in Iraq, Afghanistan or Corregidor. Since our nation’s founding, the U.S. military has been dispatched to all parts of the world to defend our freedom and that of our allies. In battles big and small, the men and women fighting on our behalf have distinguished themselves through their strength, loyalty and valor. Let us treat them with the same dignity with which they made their sacrifices, and care for all of our veterans when they return home.