



STATE OF RHODE ISLAND

RIVETS

OFFICE OF VETERANS SERVICES

Daniel J. McKee **Governor**
Kasim J. Yarn **Director**

March 14, 2023

The Honorable Samuel Azzinaro
Chair, House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
State House
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903
via email: Rep-Azzinaro@rilegislature.gov
via email: HouseVeteransAffairs@rilegislature.gov

RE: H-5728 – An Act Relating to Military Affairs and Defense – Extension of Veterans' Benefits

Dear Chairman Azzinaro:

I write today regarding H-5728 – An Act Relating to Military Affairs and Defense – Extension of Veterans' Benefits, which would include Hmong or Lao veterans who served in military operations in support of the United States during the Vietnam Conflict any time between February 28, 1961, to May 7, 1975, within the definition of 'active conduct of and/or fighting in the Vietnam Conflict.'

During the Vietnam War between 1961 and 1975, Hmong Special Guerilla Units were defacto commando war fighters, many of whom sacrificed their lives to recuse American forces and protected Laos against North Vietnamese expansionism. The Hmong were among America's staunchest allies and fought bravely. The United States should recognize these soldiers for their service and sacrifice.

The director of the National Cemetery Administration at the United States Department of Veteran Affairs notified the Rhode Island Veterans Memorial Cemetery that interment of Hmong/Laotian guerilla fighters in state cemeteries would cause the VA to recapture funding or downgrade the Rhode Island Veterans Memorial Cemetery upon audit. Downgrade of the cemetery would result in inability to obtain federal funding for operations and capital improvement projects. Despite my great respect and appreciation to the Hmong or Lao guerilla fighters, I must inform the committee that granting special rights for Hmong or Lao fighters would represent a precedent. Any honor bestowed on Hmong guerilla fighters would have to be provided equally to others, such as Vietnamese, Iraqis, Afghans, Somalis, and others who have fought for the United States in a guerilla/commando capacity.

RHODE ISLAND OFFICE OF VETERANS SERVICES

Additionally, this legislation charges the Office of Veterans Services with determining proof necessary to show that a person is a Hmong or Lao veteran. Our office has no capability of verifying service as a guerilla fighter, nor would the Department of Defense or the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs provide us with such information.

For Rhode Island to provide Veteran status to Hmong/Laotian guerilla fighters which then provides eligibility for state-level Veterans' benefits, such as interment in the state's Rhode Island Veterans Memorial Cemetery, federal legislation must be enacted to ensure states are not penalized and to provide a mechanism for verifying service.

As always, I thank you for your partnership and consideration of this letter. Your leadership and advocacy for Rhode Island's Veterans and their families are appreciated.

Regards,



Kasim J. Yarn
Director

cc: The Honorable Members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
The Honorable Arthur J. Corvese
Nicole McCarty, Esq., Chief Legal Counsel to the Speaker of the House
Lynne Urbani, Director of Policy, House of Representatives