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Written Testimony for
House Rules Committee
Re: Senate Concurrent Resolution 3
Recognizing the Contributions and Sacrifices of
Peace Corps Volunteers

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My name is Robert H. Thornhill. I live in Beaverton, Oregon. I consider it a privilege to submit this testimony in support of Senate Concurrent Resolution 3. It is my opinion that along with members of the US Armed Forces, Peace Corps volunteers represent America's finest.

In the course of my work and travel, prior to becoming a Peace Corps volunteer myself, I had the opportunity to associate with Peace Corps volunteers and see their achievements first hand. I will describe one of those encounters, as an example. I will then describe how I became a Peace Corps volunteer and my work as a volunteer on the faculty of the Latvia Maritime Academy, Riga, Latvia, 1996-98. My aim is to convince you, if you were not already convinced, that Peace Corps volunteers have earned and deserve the recognition embodied in SCR-3.

I first encountered Peace Corps volunteers and their work when serving as the Director of Personnel on the staff of Headquarters, US Army Support, Thailand, 1967-1971, under the command of, among others, Brigadier General John Vessey, later four star Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. As USARSUPTHAI supported the US missions in Vietnam and Laos, it also engaged in nation building in Thailand itself. For example, among USARSUPTHAI's many nation building projects, its two engineer battalions constructed hard surface roads from the Gulf of Siam in the south to the Mekong River in the north, with connecting hard surface roads to the several air bases from which the US Air Force bombed and strafed enemy forces in Vietnam. For the first time these roads truly opened the furthestmost northeast of Thailand to the rest of the nation. Some of the air bases presently serve as commercial airports. (Utapao, the former B-52 base in south Thailand is an example.)

(Other nation building projects in which USARSUPTHAI was involved include a deep-water commercial seaport on the Gulf of Siam, an army headquarters kaserne and hospital in Korat left to the Thai army, a modern microwave and tropospheric(?) communications system.)

The aforementioned engineer battalions were called Type B units. They had a command structure of perhaps six US Army personnel including the commanders, usually Lt Colonels. All the employees below this small command staff were Thai civilians, approximately 800 in each battalion. Few, if any, of the US personnel spoke Thai. They communicated with and directed

their Thai employees through Thai interpreters. These Thai interpreters were crucial to the effective operation of the battalions, and on occasion they acted toward the Thai workforce pretty much as deputy commanders. Many, if not all, of these skilled interpreters gained their knowledge of the English language from Peace Corps volunteers teaching in the elementary, secondary and post-secondary schools of Thailand.

Peace Corps volunteers took America and its values into Thai communities. They lived with and like the Thais. No indoor plumbing (flush toilets, hot showers, indeed no cold showers either), few homes in north and northeast Thailand enjoyed electricity at that time. They ate the same food and suffered the same occasional stomach ailments as the Thais. No Post Exchanges, no Commissaries, no Post Theaters and Libraries, no EM, NCO or Officer and Civilian Clubs. Being in effect a real part of the communities in which they lived, their impacts and influences as Americans were magnified.

Prior to the introduction of Peace Corps volunteers in the early 1960s, English was not widely spoken in Thailand. Japanese and German were the predominant foreign languages. Thais studying abroad usually went either to Japan or Germany. In large measure due to the work of Peace Corps volunteers, English became widely spoken, and eventually became the predominant foreign language. And I believe the United States is now the country of choice for Thai students studying abroad. Undoubtedly the work of Peace Corps volunteers contributed significantly to the establishment and continuance of the good and mutually beneficial relations between the peoples and governments of Thailand and the United States.

In 1994, retired after 45 years of Federal military and civilian service, and occupied only with a bit of volunteer work with the Lions and at the University of Oklahoma, I took off and visited Vietnam and Thailand, where I had spent about 6 years of my life (65-71). At the conclusion of my visit to Vietnam and Thailand, I decided to stay a little longer in order to fulfill a long-held dream of visiting China. I bought a Chinese language phrase book, and backpacked around China for about 6 weeks.

In China I was invited into several high schools and a college in Beijing to speak with the students and faculty, primarily those engaged in studying and teaching English. I was asked several times to stay and teach English. As I talked with students and attempted to answer their questions related to the English language, its grammar, etc., it became clear that while I could speak English fairly correctly, I didn't know the first thing about teaching English.

From what I had learned about the Peace Corps in Thailand, I knew the Peace Corps, if I was accepted as a volunteer, could and would teach me how to teach English. I had found no satisfaction in retirement. Serving in the Peace Corps could fill that void. In addition, it would be a way to pay back, in small way, for the good life America had provided me. Therefore, I returned to Oklahoma and joined the Peace Corps with the goal of returning to China as a Peace Corps volunteer. The Peace Corps, however, had other ideas. Rather than China, the Peace Corps sent me to Latvia.

Latvia, along with the other Baltic nations of Estonia and Lithuania, declared independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. All three immediately initiated actions to integrate politically and economically with Europe and the United States, and, in the case of Latvia, eventually militarily into NATO. Knowledge of the English language was essential to such integration as English is the language of the sea, the air, international commerce, and of NATO.

Under the Soviets the teaching of English in public education institutions was generally forbidden. To make up for the deficiency in English, one of the first acts of all three Baltic nations was to request assistance from the Peace Corps, not only in teaching English but also in others areas such as small business development. The Peace Corps responded with alacrity. The first contingent of Peace Corps volunteers arrived in the Baltics in 1992.

After becoming acquainted with the effectiveness of Peace Corps volunteers in Latvian high schools and colleges, the Latvian Maritime Academy (LMA) requested that a volunteer teacher of English be assigned to the Academy. I happened to be the first such volunteer, assigned in the fall of 1996. I suspect my service in the US Submarine fleet during the Korean War, plus subsequent work on commercial vessels in three voyages across the Pacific, had something to do with that assignment. Anyway, at the Academy I was able to put those experiences to good use.

To me my start at the Academy was rocky. When given my class assignments, I was instructed to give priority to teaching the English language of Oceanography to a group of students scheduled to shortly go to Great Britain to study advanced hydrography. I asked where I could find the text books for the Oceanography class, as well as for my other classes. It turned out that a text book for Oceanography did not exist at the Academy; indeed there were no English language text books for any of my assigned classes. Moreover, there were no class-size sets of English text books for any course taught at the Academy. My supervisor advised that the Latvian English instructors developed course outlines, lectures, etc. from their own knowledge of the subject and from Russian language text books. Like I knew more than a few words of Russian.

Panic set in as I scurried around Riga searching for an English language book on Oceanography. The British Council, the British equivalent to the Peace Corps, after I found them, finally saved me. From their library they gave me a book on Oceanography authored by a US Navy Captain.

While I was searching around Riga for books related to my assigned courses, I called on friends in the United States. A friend at Fort Belvoir's army transportation school sent all kinds of material related to movement of cargo by ship. Soon friends from Fort Bliss, Texas; Camp Pendleton, California; US Army headquarters in Hawaii and other places started sending material and or small amounts of cash to buy books. In short order I was flooded with English language material related to all aspects of the maritime industry. Thus the beginnings of the Latvian Maritime Resource Center located in the Maritime Academy but available to all Latvians practicing and/or aspiring to careers in the maritime industry.

Before turning to a detailed description of my service as a volunteer, I want to address, from my perspective, one significant difference between Peace Corps volunteer service and military service. To properly assess Peace Corps service, it is essential to understand this difference. As a Guardsman in the Oklahoma National Guard, as a sailor in the submarine fleet, as a Department of the Army civilian in Japan, Korea, southeast Asia, in Europe, in the Middle East, and in the US (including the Pentagon), I was always a part of a team, a team that had frequently trained together, had a clear understanding of the total mission and each individual's part in that mission. If I failed or fell short in my part, there was always a team mate to take up the slack.

Not so with my assignment to the Latvia Maritime Academy. I was the sole American on the faculty, perhaps the first American many of the students had ever seen. All eyes were on me, always, or at least I felt they were. Could and would I contribute, what did I have to offer, how would I behave, make a fool of myself, would I succeed or fail? I represented more than just myself and the Peace Corps; I represented the United States of America. There were no other Americans around to take up the slack if I failed. Not even my Latvian colleagues could pick up where I fell short. They did not have the knowledge and skills I brought to the job, otherwise I probably wouldn't have been there. Being constantly observed, this prominence, so to speak, constituted not only a burden and stress factor, but also, a strong motivator. I could not, would not fail my country or my students, or myself, for that matter. Fortunately, as indicated by the attached enclosure I did not fail.

Every one of the Peace Corps volunteers in my cohort were, like me, the lone American in their assigned organization, and in cases of assignments away from Riga, many were the only American in the entire community. From my discussions with several of them, I discerned that they too, much as I did, felt the burden and the strain, plus the motivation of being the sole rep of America in their community and organization, with eyes always on them, judging them, their behavior and their competence. In my opinion, my cohorts did not fail themselves, the United States, the Peace Corps, their students or Latvia and its people. Google Peace Corps in Latvia and you will find several websites confirming that Peace Corps volunteers succeeded in making a long-lasting impact for the better on Latvia and its people.

Upon completion of Peace Corps service each volunteer in the Baltics was issued a Volunteer Description of Service prepared by the country staff, signed by the Country Director and countersigned by the volunteer. (Presumably this is, or was, a Peace Corps-wide practice.) A copy of my Description of Service is attached. It specifies the training I received and the duties I performed during my service in Latvia.

I much appreciate the initiative of Senator Dembrow and others to acknowledge the contributions of Peace Corps volunteers by introducing SCR-3. Everybody likes to be recognized for their good deeds, and I suggest deserve to be recognized when they make a difference for the better in the lives of others.

I suggest Senate Concurrent Resolution 3 has the potential to serve a function equally important as recognition of contributions and sacrifices of returned volunteers. As an older Peace Corps volunteer myself, I see SCR-3 as having the potential to convince retired Americans that the Peace Corps offers opportunities to put their experiences to good use, for America and for an underdeveloped nation.

My impression is that in the early years of the Peace Corps, the popular notion was for the young to serve the Peace Corps right after completing college and before starting a career and a family. Then the Peace Corps was not considered really appropriate for the older citizen; it was for the young, the single, and the exuberant. No question the young served well the Peace Corps and the countries to which assigned.

However, as the Peace Corps has grown older the intake of older volunteers has increased. As opposed to intake only before careers and families are started, the Peace Corps now offers more opportunities to those at the other end of the spectrum. Those who have raised their families and completed their careers are now considered good prospects for Peace Corps service. It is suggested that SCR-3 has the potential to make the Peace Corps known and appealing to retirees in good health, with energy and a desire to continue to make a difference.

Recommend this committee approve SCR-3.

Robert H. Thornhill

Enclosure
Volunteer Description of Service