

Bend Heroes Foundation
1900 NE 3rd St., Ste 106 #205
Bend, OR 97701

February 18, 2020

Senator Alan Olsen
Chair, Senate Committee on Veterans
900 Court St. NE S-425
Salem, OR 97301

Dear Senator Olsen.

Re: HB 4083: Relating to memorial highways

I am the requestor of HB 4083 and because I am out of the state, I am submitting testimony in support of HB 4083 by email. I offer an amendment to HB 4083.

If enacted into law, HB 4083 would require ODOT to install roadside memorial markers when those honors are requested and funded by families of fallen POWs and MIAs whose remains have been "Accounted For" and without having to request individual HCRs as now required for all other fallen veterans. The low rate of returns of Oregon's MIA and POW remains suggests very few markers would be requested by families or other parties.

I thank this Committee for creating the Roadside Memorial Marker Program several sessions ago. I had the honor of helping several families of fallen OIF/OEF veterans from Central Oregon draft HCRs as required by law. I also helped dedicate some of the markers. I congratulate ODOT for its fine performance coordinating details with families.

In 2008, I started a 12 year veterans' highways signs project with this committee and its predecessor honoring almost one half million Oregon vets who served in 5 major wars beginning with WWI, almost 6,000 who lost their lives, 15,000 wounded, 800 POWs and 1,000 MIAs and 30 Medal of Honor recipients. We have raised about \$91,000 to pay ODOT and others to install 79 highway signs on 7 border to border highways. The 8 highways are spelled out in HB 4083 and made possible by the Legislature, 3 Governors, ODOT, veterans' groups and many patriotic donors.

HB 4083 is the companion to HB 3452 which designated US Highway 26 across Oregon as the POW/MIA Memorial Highway. Governor Kate Brown signed HB 3452 into law on Sept. 16, 2019. We are almost finished raising \$20,000 to pay ODOT to install 10 POW/MIA Memorial Highway signs along US Highway 26 across Oregon beginning in May raising the total to 89 signs installed on almost 3,000 miles of highways.

Back to HB 4083: As intended, HB 4083 complements the POW/MIA Memorial Highway and existing Roadside memorial sign – aka "Fallen Hero Memorial Highway" sign program which are defined in HB 4083.

According to the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA), the remains of 42 or only 4% of the 1,000 Oregon MIAs have been “Accounted For” over the last 36 years: 18 WWII, 5 Korean War, 18 Vietnam and 1 Cold War. Of the 42 remains returned at least 1 was a civilian. Of the 18 WWII “Accounted For” 11 were returned over the last 10 years or about 70 years since they became MIA – “Unaccounted For”.

The remains of Army PFC Norvin D. Brockett were recovered in Korea last year and still remain with the US Government in Hawaii pending internment in Arlington National Cemetery sometime this summer. According to his family, Brockett’s remains will not be returned to Oregon. HB 4083 requires the remains to be returned “**to Oregon**” (line 26, page 2). That requirement should be deleted as families can choose to have remains returned to locations outside of Oregon for final disposition.

Because PFC Brockett attended Crook County High School in Prineville, which is located on US Hwy 26, we will install a POW/MIA Memorial Highway sign there. His family would be eligible to request ODOT to install a roadside memorial sign if HB 4083 is amended and becomes law.

There are still 998 (including 21 WWI not counted by DPAA) MIAs from Oregon. Based on DPAA’s national statistics, it is likely that nearly half of Oregon’s 885 WWII MIAs will not be recovered as they were either lost at sea (unknown number) or buried at sea (82). The 885 MIAs represent about one - fourth of Oregon’s 3,838 WWII war dead.

Turning to POWs. According to the National Archives Records Administration, 770 Oregonians became POW during WWII with 598 returned to friendly forces thus becoming Ex POWs. One hundred seventy two (172) of the 770 died in captivity either by execution (76), disease and/or malnutrition. Many of them were laid to rest overseas in cemeteries managed by the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC).

ABMC memorializes MIAs with their names engraved on Tablets and Courts of the Missing and DPAA includes them in its “Unaccounted For” lists. Of the 56 Korean War MIAs, 7 died as POW. Of the 34 Vietnam MIAs, 1 died as POW. ABMC lists 21 Oregonians as MIA from WWI. When the remains of an MIA are recovered and returned, ABMC adds a rosette next to the name.

I am completing a study of civilians from Oregon who became WWII POWs during the Japanese invasion and occupation of Wake Island. Thanks to the assistance of a daughter of 1 of them, we now have the names of 111 Oregon civilians who became POW during WWII. Twenty eight (28) died of disease or execution. Some of their remains were recovered in Japanese POW camps and Wake Island and laid to rest in a mass grave in the VA Cemetery in Honolulu. There are 2 WWII war correspondents from Oregon who remain MIA. I mention this because we need to make sure HB 4083 includes provisions for civilian POWs and MIAs. If the Oregon WWII Memorial on the Capitol grounds does not include the names of the fallen civilians, I will request they be added.

According to the Oregon Coast Military Museum in Florence 79 Oregon Merchant Marines died during WWII. Six more became POW with 5 returned to friendly forces. At least 1 still remains MIA. ABMC lists the names of 6 Oregon Merchant Marines buried in its cemeteries but does not include the 1 MIA. DPAA does not list the 1 MIA either perhaps because Merchant Marines were not defined as veterans during WWII. We need to ensure Merchant Marines are included in HB 4083 and other documents as they were belatedly given "Veteran" status (member of the Armed Forces) but only for WWII.

For the reasons stated earlier, I recommend "to Oregon" (line 26, page 2) be deleted.

In closing, I urge this committee to vote unanimously in favor of amended HB 4083. The final law should be publicized widely so qualified POW/MIA Families across Oregon will know about another opportunity for closure created by the Legislature and Governor.

It has been a high honor and privilege for me to work with the Legislature honoring veterans over the last 12 years.

Respectfully submitted,

Signed

Dick Tobiason
Chairman
LTC US Army, Retired