

**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF
HB 2147
CREMAINS BILL**

Testimony for HB 4082 (from 2022) and current HB 2147(2023):

My name is James Little. I am a retired Navy CWO4 with 30 years active duty. I am baffled why anyone would object to HB 4082? I pray that no one experiences the trauma veterans and citizens of Douglas County experienced with the discovery of 28 forgotten unclaimed cremains over three years ago. I am alarmed at the attitude of any American citizen who would deny the proper burial and the performance of military honors to a veteran who has served America. If money is the issue, what is the right amount America should spend to provide honor to those who asked only to protect and defend our peace and freedom? To leave a veteran behind is a disgrace that should not be in the state of Oregon.

Below is a letter I submitted to the house committee considering this important bill: My contact information is included at the closing of the letter.

Very Respectfully: James Little

This is written to those honorable men and women who are considering Mortuary Bill HB4082. Before introducing who I am. I respectfully would like to ask you a question.

Have you ever stood in a 10 x 10-foot room surrounded by the deteriorated and neglected veteran cremains of 28 human beings? I have in May of 2019 and that image is forever burned in my memory.

My name is Jim Little, Chief Warrant Officer 4, US Navy Retired. I served for 30 years from 1960-1991 on active duty. Since retiring over 30 years ago I have remained active in veteran issues and causes. One of the many veteran committees I served on was the Douglas County Veterans Advisory Committee (DCVAC). This committee is comprised of county veterans and veteran supporters who are selected by the Douglas County Commissioners to serve on the committee after a proper application is submitted. The purpose of this committee is to assist and advise the Douglas County Veterans Service Officer (DCVSO) and the board of commissioners on matters and issues concerning veterans.

In the summer of 2018, it was discovered by Carol Hunt a member of the VAC, and Glenda Grimes a VA Cemetery Technician, that a number of forgotten veteran cremains were stored in a dark and dusty neglected storage area of a local mortuary, members of the DCVAC were appalled and distraught upon learning of this. Over the course of the next few months an investigation by DCVAC veterans determined that only one of the four local mortuaries were guilty of forgetting and neglecting the cremains of twenty-eight (28) unclaimed veterans. Four of the veteran cremains were those of WWI veterans who had lain forgotten for decades in an unspeakable disrespectful and dishonorable manner to them and their honorable service to our country.

It was my privilege along with other members of the DCVAC, Oregon Army National Guard and county officials to officiate over a period of three days providing proper military funerals and military honors to these 28 forgotten veterans. I was honored to be a part of this effort, but it is my earnest hope and prayer that I am never again called upon to be a part of such an attempt to right a horrible disgrace. A disgrace our country should ensure never happens again. The Washington Post published an article about this travesty on January 29, 2022, by Joe Davidson.

Returning to the initial question I asked at the beginning of this letter. County veterans had many contentious and sometimes hostile meetings with the offending mortuary before finally gaining custody of the forgotten veteran cremains. DCVSO Mary Newman Keyes was given rights as next of kin and prior to funeral arrangements for inurnment in the Roseburg VA Cemetery the cremains were placed in a secure storage room in the Douglas County Courthouse. As we who had worked so hard to do the right thing for our brother veterans I offered up this prayer:

“Lord God, we give you thanks for the Many blessings you give to us. Most importantly the breath of life. We praise You as our creator. The author of our beginnings and the One who determines the time to be called home to You. We fellow veterans who have served our beloved nation are now tasked with providing care, and honors to these comrades who have long been in your arms in eternity. We did not know them in life, but it is our wish and desire that we care for them as though they were our family and loved ones during our time here on earth. We ask for your watch care and protection over these 28 veterans’ remains that have long awaited being placed to rest. Please be with each one here that have come together with a sense of duty and service. I ask your blessings on each one as we together do the best we can to show honor and respect to these brothers in arms who have served America. And may we be ever ready to serve others and to serve you, even as we have served our nation. Now may all that is said and done from this point forward for these who are now in eternity be pleasing to you our Lord and Savior ...Jesus,,for it is in His holy name we pray AMEN”

Prior to this prayer, during and after we all felt a sense of final peace and finality. I share with you a story we all heard shortly after the 28 cremains were stored at the county courthouse. A lady who shall remain unnamed contacted the DCVSO and wanted urgently to speak about a dream that was so realistic to her.. She was an employee of a nearby county who had never been to the hall storeroom where the veteran cremains were stored. She described her dream in vivid detail and said, "I have not been in this area of the courthouse" and she describe the hallway where the storage room was located and said, "I walked by this room (she described the locked storage room) and I heard a large group of military men inside laughing happily." We felt perhaps this dream was an affirmation that a horrible wrong was finally being made right.

I am honored to take part in a solemn quarterly Roseburg National VA Cemetery Remembrance Service that honors those veterans who passed in the previous three months that were not given a proper memorial service or the military honors they deserved at their death. Prayer is given, we fold the flag and present it to an appropriate person substituting for the receiving family, play taps, give a rifle salute along with playing of the bagpipes. This is an example of veterans ensuring a veteran that has been forgotten or in some cases, have had their family pass before their death, a proper memorial service and military honors he or she earned and deserve. This quarterly service emphasizes that those who do not have an earthly family have a family in their earthly brother and sister veterans. They are cared for the same as the family they were born into. I hope HB 4082 takes into consideration the love and respect veterans who have served this nation have for any forgotten or unclaimed veteran remains.

I personally cannot say strongly enough, please do all you can to make sure the sad case of forgotten, unclaimed veteran remains and in a way unloved veteran remains, never again occurs in the state of Oregon. Our citizens have always honored that military code of never leaving anyone behind. Please seriously deliberate HB 4082.

Thank you for all that you do for veterans and all the good citizens of Oregon. Thank you for reading this lengthy letter and my brief description of the Douglas County unforgotten veteran cremains. May God Bless the State of Oregon and may God Bless the United States of America.

Very Respectfully:

James S. Little, CWO4, US Navy-Retired.