

Senate Committee on Transportation

Testimony in support for HB2124

Designating a portion of United States highway 160 as the CPL Monte Wayne Forrest memorial highway, a portion of United States highway 77 as the POW MIA memorial highway and bridge No. 82-14-6.88 (026) in Clay County as the POW MIA memorial bridge.

Committee Chair, Senator Petersen, and other committee members,

Thanks for allowing me to speak before you today.

My name is Jon Gran, MSG Retired Army, I am currently representing the VFW in Wakefield Kansas as their Commander. It is the second part of HB 2124 that we were able to have introduced by Representative Bloom on January 28, 2025. This bill Designating a portion of United States highway 77 as the POW MIA memorial highway and bridge No. 82-14-6.88 (026) in Clay County as the POW MIA memorial bridge.

Currently Kansas does not have a POW / MIA Memorial Bridge or Highway.

After High School, I joined the US Army from Garden City Kansas in November of 1987 and started my 26 years plus experience that taught me a lot. During my Army career as a Combat Medic and Practical Nurse I saw duty at:

- Bremerhaven Germany
- Fort Carson Colorado (twice)
- Heidelberg, Germany
- Fort Bragg, North Carolina (twice)
- Fort Hood, Texas
- Soto Cano Air Base, Honduras
- Balad, Iraq
- Talil, Iraq
- Mosul, Iraq
- Basrah, Iraq
- Shindand Air Base, Afghanistan
- Bala Morgab, Afghanistan (FOB Todd)
- Fort Riley, Kansas
- Fort Sam Houston, Texas

These experiences not only took me to many more places than I never thought I would, but they impacted on my learned values and morals that I had from growing up in Kansas and Texas. My duty as a healthcare worker was rarely in providing healthcare but I did see my share of infant births and the joy it brought to their families, patients smiling as they got better or just got a visit from that special person. I watched Soldiers reunite with their excited families after deployments during our welcome home ceremonies.

Since I spent a large portion on my career stationed away from my family so my welcome home took place later when I would visit my family during leave. When I was stationed with my family my redeployments were after the main party returning and these welcome homes were again personal and usually involved getting a ride to where my car was stored. My family seemed to miss out on a lot also. Most of my early deployments meant very little or delayed communication with family. During my deployment's my wife received some messages that were often a result of mistakes or just poor rumor control.

- Our unit was hit with mortars and many of them were wounded.
- Truth: Soldiers near our unit were injured with mortar attack and we were treating them in our field hospital.

- Our unit was attacked and overrun; some are missing.
- Truth: Our base was getting mortar attacks daily but not overrun and we were safe and doing our job.

- Red Cross phone call my wife received: Your husband is being transported to Landstuhl, Germany. We are unaware of his status. In shock my wife did not know who to tell and kept quiet until two days later when another call told her it was an error.

- Truth: I had received a red cross message about the passing of my wife's father. I was authorized leave; it took me three days to get down to Kuwait where I could get to a phone and tell family I was on my way.

One of my worst experiences happened in Afghanistan, I was the Detachment Sergeant of the 274th Forward Surgical Team from Ft Bragg, NC. A twenty Soldier unit with medics, OR techs, nurses, CRNAs, and Surgeons. Our Detachment was split and sent to two remote locations in western Afghanistan to provide surgical support. We were unarmed and busy unloading medical supplies from a helicopter when one of the on base Afghan Soldiers providing security opened fire on us. Our attacker was within 10 meters of us all and started firing with his AK47 before some of the Soldiers nearby were able to subdue him and stop the attack. One of my Soldiers, Ronald Jay Spino was mortally wounded and despite our efforts on the surgical table died with nine of his friends struggling to save his life. SSG Spino died on 29 December 2009. After, I sent the team away to go clean up and reflect on the fact that they had just been fired on. This was the closest any of us had come to being under attack, all of them had been missed by inches during the shooting just a short time earlier. They were still fighting with our attacker as we carried Ron to the surgical tent.

I cleaned up the area around Ron and prepared him for transport. Then, as I thought about my family and my wife Elizabeth (Betty), then all my attention turned to Ron's wife SFC Betty Spino. We were on a small base run by a unit with the 82nd Airborne Division. I knew that news of Ron's death would be reported through the 82nd and end up going back to Ft. Bragg within hours. Betty, Ron's wife was assigned to the 82nd and worked in Operations, she would be getting information about her husband's death. One of Bettys Soldiers lived across the street from me back at Ft Bragg so quickly got out my phone and called my wife, I could only tell her the facts and was already breaking the rules by calling. She answered, "I can only tell you're the facts and then have to get off the phone, Ron has been shot and is dead, everyone else if OK. You have to go across the street now, tell Eric that the report on Ron is coming, and someone has

to get it before his wife Betty does.” I told her that I loved her and hung up. SFC Betty Spino was on duty, her leadership got her away from the desk and had support there as they waited for the report. I was told that a few minutes later it came.

My family and I might share some of the experience that the family of or someone who becomes a Prisoner of War or is declared Missing in Action might experience, but not even close to the real thing. Many parents have experienced the fear you get when you are looking for a child when they wander off at the store or even the mall. Fear of the worst possible outcome runs through their thoughts, hopefully it is only a few minutes. This experience losing a child even for a short moment can feel like a knife straight into your chest and seem unbearable even for a moment.

Families of some POW/MIS's may never know what really happened with their loved ones. What a POW/MIA might experience is just too difficult to understand. What their families experience may never get closure.

Kansas owes it to past, present and sadly future POW/MIA's and their families to have something that reminds Kansas citizens of their sacrifices. Kansas needs to have a POW/MIA Memorial Highway and Bridge. It is the right thing to do and it's way overdue!

We look forward to having HB2124 passed and hope anyone willing to support us financially will please contact us and pledge their support in funding this bill as well.

Thank you for your time and please support HB2124.