

United States Senate

October 19, 2021

The Honorable Peter May
Chairman
National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission
1100 Ohio Drive S.W.
Room 220
Washington D.C. 20242

Chairman May,

Thank you and the rest of the commission for the opportunity to submit a statement for the record regarding my bill, S. 1891 – the Flying Tiger Flight 739 Act. I would also like to thank my colleagues Senators Stabenow and Shaheen for their co-sponsorship of this bill. It is my profound honor to be able to write today in support of recognition for the 107 brave souls who were lost when Flight 739 went down over the Philippine Sea. One of whom was Army Staff Sgt. Melvin Lewis Hatt, a Lansing native and a proud Michigander. It was his daughter, Donna Ellis, who first brought this tragedy to my attention and highlighted the need for official recognition of the ultimate sacrifice made by the men aboard Flying Tiger Flight 739.

In the early morning hours on March 14, 1962, Flying Tiger Flight 739 took off from Travis Air Force Base in California bound ultimately for Saigon. There were four refueling stops planned before reaching Vietnam; Hawaii, Wake Island, Guam and the Philippines. After departing Guam en route to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines, Flight 739 ceased all contact and was not heard or seen from again. On board were 107 individuals, consisting of 93 U.S. army personnel, 3 Vietnamese military personnel and 11 U.S. civilian flight crew. These soldiers were heading to Vietnam to assist U.S. efforts in training South Vietnamese forces to combat the Viet Cong insurgency. They were intended to replace a group of U.S. soldiers who were already in South Vietnam battling the communist guerrillas. They signed up knowing the risks associated with military service. They boarded that plane knowing the risks of heading to a war zone. Yet they still went and in doing so they left behind sons and daughters, mothers and fathers and communities to grapple with their tragic loss.

Next year, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial will celebrate its 40th anniversary. For 40 years, the family, friends and loved ones of those killed in the Vietnam War have visited the memorial. They have been able to walk up down the memorial wall, searching for a particular name, in the hopes to achieve some sense of closure. To feel some sense of pride that their loved ones devotion to their country is being honored in the very heart of our republic. While the

remembrance will never assuage their anguish, the ability to get closure can be a powerful part of the healing process. And yet, for the family and friends of Flying Tiger Flight 739, they will never get that sense of closure. They will never feel that pride. Instead of thinking that their country is proud of their family's sacrifice, they are faced with the idea that their country does not care about the loss or worse, is ashamed of this chapter in its history.

This is not the first bill to expand the list of names at the Vietnam Memorial and I am not the first Member of Congress to advocate for its expansion but let us use this opportunity to move past the bureaucratic hesitancy of the past and deliver for those families what has been denied to them for so long. This is an opportunity to stop hiding behind procedure and protocol and to finally right a grievous wrong. Even after all these years, the families of Flying Tiger Flight 739 have not given up their fight and it is because of their effort and drive that I will not either.

Earlier this year, a memorial was unveiled in Columbia Falls, Maine to honor the 107 men. After all these years, these families and friends can still wake up every morning and push to get their loved ones the recognition they deserve.

I ask the commission to support my legislation so that our country can finally honor these men as they deserve to be, as heroes.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Gary C. Peters". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Gary" being the most prominent.

Gary C. Peters
United States Senator