

Bill would get Medevac fliers due recognition

By JOHN LATIMER

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From Lebanon Pa. Press Conference

The image of a military helicopter kicking up dust as it lands at an Army hospital has been seared into America's consciousness by the iconic 1970s television show "M*A*S*H."

That show, still in syndication, takes place 50 years ago, during the Korean War.

Until now, the Medevac pilots and crews who risked their lives rescuing the wounded from the front lines in Korea, and every conflict since then, have not been eligible for a Combat Medic Badge recognizing their service in a combat zone.

Rep. Tim Holden, a Democrat whose 17th District includes Lebanon County, visited Lebanon yesterday to explain how he recently helped to introduce legislation into a \$500 billion defense spending bill that will correct the oversight, attributed to a glitch in the law written in World War II.

Since learning about the issue from members of Harrisburg's Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 542, Holden has been working with the group to get the law passed for two years.

Several of the organization's members accompanied the congressman yesterday, including President John Travers, Vice President Mike McLaughlin and treasurer Mike Groff of Lebanon.

Holden noted that Travers was a Medevac pilot in Vietnam who flew with Lebanon native John Chrin, who was killed in action. Groff was in an air cavalry unit in Vietnam and was evacuated by helicopter when wounded in the arm.

"They brought to my attention, through (Harrisburg) Mayor Steve Reed, this problem which really needs to be addressed ... to get this just recognition for these brave men who served so proudly in the Vietnam war," Holden said. "Of the 57,000 who made the supreme sacrifice, 214 of them were in (Medevac) crews. One of them was from right here in the city of Lebanon, John Chrin, who graduated from Lebanon Catholic."

Standing in front of the Vietnam Veterans monument in Fisher Park -- a small, triangular patch of land at Ninth and 10th streets -- Holden explained that current law excludes Medevac pilots and crews from receiving the Combat Medic Badge because the eligibility standards were written during World War II, when helicopters were not used for medical rescue and evacuation.

Army officials have stubbornly resisted making the badge available to Medevac crew members, Travers said.

"There are a lot of reasons," he said, "but suffice it to say that within the higher ranks of the Army ... if you are not armored, artillery or infantry, you are not, quote, a soldier. ... It is easier to

move a mountain than change an institution."

In 1991, McLaughlin said, the rules were relaxed to allow ground-based medics who served in the Gulf War to receive the badge.

"Then they awarded 3,238 Combat Medic Badges for a war that lasted 70 hours and had less than a 100 killed," he said. "I think there is a gross inconsistency in their position."

Holden said his legislation, introduced with Republican Rep. Joe Pitts of Lancaster, will make any person since the Korean War who served in combat as a pilot or crew member of a Medevac unit eligible for the Combat Medevac Badge. An identical bill has been introduced in the Senate by Pennsylvania's senior senator, Arlen Specter, and, Holden said, he is hopeful the law will be signed by President Bush soon.

The Vietnam veterans from Harrisburg have been working hard to get the legislation passed. In Vietnam alone, from 1963 to 1973, nearly 500,000 medical evacuations -- called "Dustoff" missions -- were conducted, evacuating more than 900,000 wounded, according to the group. The casualty rate for Medevac units was 40 percent, Travers said.

At the Vietnam Veterans Wall in Washington, D.C., last month, members of Chapter 542 made a statement in their quest when they placed a "Combat Aeromedic Badge" they had specially designed in front of each panel containing the name of a fallen medic.

One of those panels contained the name of Chrin, Travers said.

"This hits close to home for you (Lebanon) folks," he said.