**HB0125** Courts - Military Records - Recordation and Inspection

Judiciary Committee - January 24, 2024

**Sponsor: Delegate Mike Rogers** 

**Position: Favorable** 

Testimony of Denise Robinson, founder, The Legacy of Honor Project.

Thank you, Chairman Clippinger, Vice Chair Bartlett, and members of the committee, for this opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 125. For the record, my name is Denise Robinson, in 2016 I founded what is today known as The Legacy of Honor Project.

I support this bill. For the purpose of this hearing, to keep my testimony short, I am going to concentrate my testimony to WWII discharge papers and why they should be opened for historical and other purposes.

Over 16 million Americans served in WWII. Approximately 288,000 Marylanders served- of those- 61% drafted, 39% enlisted. Service members at the end of the war were issued a WD-AGO- 53-55- separation papers. If they were part of the National Guard or the Reserves they were issued a Certificate of Service.

After World War II, service members could **voluntarily** file their papers at the local courthouse. The papers were filed to prove honorable discharge status so they could receive military benefits such as hospital care, college tuition, mortgages, land lotteries, burial rights, etc.

Besides their WD-AGO 53-55 papers the only other proof of honorable service was the service member's military record which were filed in St. Louis at the National Archives by the military. On 12 July 1973, there was a massive fire at the Archives in St. Louis- 80% of the records were destroyed for men/women who served between 1

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November 1912- January 1950. 80% of Air Force records were destroyed for those who served from 25 September 1947 – 1 January 1964.

If a person requests WWII service records from the National Archives, the archives staff will try to recreate the record- i.e. see what burned pieces may be left and put together a partial record. Sometimes that isn't even possible. This process from start to finish could take years- for only a partial or no record. There is also a fee for their research.

The one document that has a service member's complete history is the WD-AGO 53-55. If a service member filed their papers at the courthouse, an accurate and complete military history can be compiled in less time.

At the end of this written testimony — inserted is my great Uncle Howard's discharge papers. Like the majority who served in WWII, my Uncle Howard did not talk about his WWII service. We knew my grandfathers served in the Pacific (one died while serving) and my Great Uncle Howard in Europe, all were in the Army. There were 91 divisions in the Army during WWII- without any knowledge of unit, it is almost impossible to discover when and where a person served. Uncle Howard died young; when I was three.

Everything a historian/researcher needs to accurately put together a full military history is listed in this one document. Starting with -

Box 9- company, and unit. With this information one can search unit histories, morning reports (usually listed promotions, transfers), after-action reports, rosters, and general orders. Can also search for oral histories of others who served in the unit for additional details. The other vitally important boxes are 7- date of discharge- 24- Date of entry - 33 decorations and citations.

These boxes are proof of service and awards which allow myself and others to register a service member in the Purple Heart Registry, the ABMC WWII Registry, the WWII Theater Registry. The WD-AGO allows me and others to complete the family service record of our Gold Star families.

The most urgent need today- the proof of service for the VA to obtain a headstone for our service members who served in WWII who are lying in unmarked graves.

Until I began work on The Legacy of Honor Project I had no idea how many men who served and died in WWII that are buried in unmarked graves. The vast majority never married/had children. Until I found them, they never had a flag placed on their grave on Memorial Day or Veterans Day. No flowers on their birthday, no wreath at Christmas. Their graves were often walked over, and no realized they had just crossed the grave of a hero.

Many of these men in unmarked graves were only children, so under the current law, there is no one who can access their discharge papers, prove their service so a headstone can be placed on their grave. Placing a headstone on an unmarked grave is the very least we can do for the men and women who fought for our freedom.

I urge the committee to give a favorable report on HB 125 so we can honor the men and women who fought and died for our Freedom.

I would like to thank Delegate Rogers for sponsoring this bill. Thank you for the opportunity to comment, and I am available if you have any questions.

Denise Robinson

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