## <u>SB0159</u> <u>Courts - Military Records - Recordation and Inspection</u> Judicial Proceedings Committee – January 30, 2024 Sponsor: Senator Dawn Gile Position: Favorable

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

Thank you, Chairman Smith, Vice Chairman Waldstreicher, and members of the committee, for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 159. For the record, my name is Denise Robinson, in 2016 I founded The Legacy of Honor Project: researching, telling the stories, and honoring the men and women who served in WWI and WWII with an emphasis on those who died while serving.

To keep my testimony short, I am going to concentrate my testimony to WWII discharge & separation paper and why access be granted for historical and other purposes- Why I support this bill.

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. Their discharge 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, and a right to a headstone by the VA.

Besides their WD-AGO 53-55 papers the only other proof of honorable service was the service member's actual military record which was 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 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 a WWII service record 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. The process from start to finish could take months to 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 chronological history is the WD-AGO 53-55. If a service member filed their papers at the courthouse, a more accurate and complete military history can be compiled in less time.

Some of the information on the discharge papers the National Archives and the State of Maryland have already been released to the public. In 1965 The War Records Division of Maryland released a 5-volume set, Maryland in the World War II; Register of Service Personnel containing the name and service number of every Marylander that enlisted or was drafted from Maryland. In 2004, the National Archives released enlistment records which included the person's name, place of enlistment, home state, birth year and service number.

The above information is not enough to compile a person's service record or prove benefits. In World War II- there were 91 Army Division, 42 National Guard Divisions. Each Division had approximately 15,000 troops. The Army Air Corps (Air Force) had an additional 15 divisions. The Navy had 7,601 ships, add land units, and Air wings- over 10,000 division type records to search. The Marines had 6 Divisions-589,852 Marines served in those six. To find one person's military history in over 17

million records is near impossible unless a person has access to the service member's discharge papers.

(To help with the next section, at the end of this written testimony I have included my great Uncle Howard's discharge papers.)

The most important information a historian or researcher needs to accurately put together a full military history or prove 'actual' service are;

The top stamp-Honorable Discharge- proves eligibility for VA benefits- including burial and the right to a VA headstone (even if burial is in a private cemetery)

Box 9- company and unit. This one box narrows the search from 17 million records to their company of 150 – 200 troops. Now one can search unit histories, morning reports (usually listed promotions, transfers), after-action reports, rosters, and general orders. One can also search for oral histories of others who served in the unit for additional details.

Box 7- date of discharge- this date is needed to complete an application for a headstone request from the VA.

Box 24- Date of entry – date of enlistment and date of entry can be different. It verifies they served. A person can enlist, have a service number and never serveexample they were denied service due to medical conditions.

Box 33 decorations and citations. This box is proof needed to register a service member in the National Purple Heart Registry and other military registries. This box entitles them to designation of the award on their headstone.

The discharge papers allow me and others to complete the family service record of our Gold Star families. Many of our fallen had siblings, nieces, nephews, fathers, uncles, aunts, and grandfathers who served.

The most urgent need today- discharge papers are proof of honorable service. It allows historians, relatives, cemeteries, churches, etc, to request and obtain a VA headstone and place it on the unmarked graves of our service members.

Until I began work on The Legacy of Honor Project I had no idea how many men who served and/or died in WWII that are buried in unmarked graves. The vast majority never married/had children. Until I located their final resting place, 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 unmarked graves over time have become a path to other graves. No one realizing as they walked across the empty plot of grass, they were walking across the grave of one of our heroes.

Many of the 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. It is the final benefit promised to them from a grateful nation and state for their service.

I urge the committee to give a favorable report on SB 159 so we can honor the men and women who fought and died for our freedom.

I would like to thank Senator Gile 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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