

July 19, 2017

Sent Via US Mail and Email: www.bergman.house.gov/forms/writeyourrep/

Jack Bergman
US Representative
414 Cannon HOB
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Bergman;

I am writing in regards to an issue that is important to me. It involves a military encounter that my cousin, Private Robert Booth, was part of in the Philippines in 1901 and the subsequent taking of three bells from the Church of San Lorenzo de Martir. My cousin died as a result of wounds inflicted during the battle. Two of these church bells are presently on display at F.E. Warren Air Force Base in Cheyenne, Wyoming.

In 1901, during the Philippine American War, there was a military engagement in the small town of Balangiga, Eastern Samar between Filipinos fighting for their independence and Company C of the 9th US Infantry of which my cousin was assigned. Forty-eight of the 74 soldiers garrisoned there died. It was a major embarrassment for the US Army - - akin to Custer's defeat at the battle of the Little Big Horn.

After the encounter, the town was burned and the bells taken. In 1904, the 11th Infantry, who later deployed in Samar, gained custody of the bells. The 11th then returned to the states keeping two of the church bells. These bells then ended up on Fort D.A. Russell in Cheyenne, later to become F.E. Warren Air Force Base. When the 11th was decommissioned in 1915 they sent their colors, battle streamers, records, and important artifacts to Army archives, but not the bells, the bells were not important to their history. They abandoned the bells in place. Then in 1947 when the Army turned the base over to the Air Force, the Army again did not hold any affinity for the bells and once again abandoned them in place. The Army did not care about these bells. Later in 1967, an Air Force Colonel found them and put them on display. Wyoming has no linkage to the bells, not one single Wyoming veteran served in the 9th or 11th or stationed in Balangiga, just by happenstance the 11th ended up there when it was decommissioned and later an air force colonel found them and thought they were neat.

Wyoming has fought to keep these bells, despite having no relationship to them or the Balangiga encounter. This is wrong. There is a small, but influential minority of veterans in Cheyenne who think of these bells as their own private property, yet they have no privity to them. They have managed to mislead their Wyoming congressional delegation who in the 2000 timeframe managed to insert language in the National Defense Authorization Act to preclude return of the bells, albeit based on misinformation. At that time, others like myself, were unaware of the issue and no one spoke out. These bells belong in a church, not on a Minuteman Missile Base.

I understand that the Wyoming congressional delegation is once again working to continue the language in the National Defense Authorization Act to block the return of the bells. This is not right. Those in Wyoming have no connection to the bells, however I do have a vested interest, my cousin died in the military encounter. If I can forgive and reconcile history, then so can they. I ask for your support to exclude the Wyoming language and allow it to lapse - -

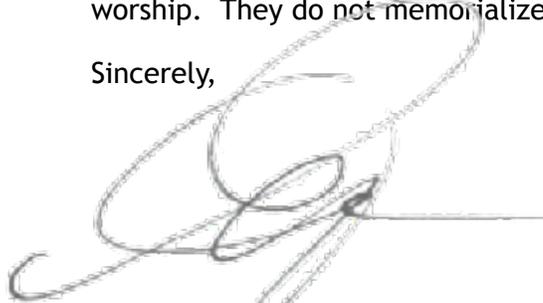
or better yet, support language directing return of the bells. The Philippines has long been a friend to America and later this year congress approved presentation of the Congressional Gold Medal to Filipino veterans for their service during WWII.

VFW Post 2485 in the Philippines submitted a Resolution in support of the return of the bells to the Church of San Lorenzo in Balangiga and asked for my help. The Resolution was approved at the District level and again at the Department level which represents over 11,700 veterans. It is now pending approval at the VFW National Convention in New Orleans later this month. The bells should go home. Church bells at Warren Air Force Base do not honor my cousin or make up for his loss. There are better ways to honor those that served. Instead I would much rather see the Wyoming veterans and others lobby to get the US Army to open a case of denied valor as those in Company C were never recognized for the valor they displayed.

There are many precedents for returning the bells. Last year, a group of US veterans successfully secured the return of another similar bell, the San Pedro Bell, also taken from the Philippines in 1901 that had been on display at West Point for over a century to the church it was taken from. Similarly, Annapolis returned a bell to Japan that had been on display outside Bancroft Hall. VMI and the cities of Atlanta, Detroit, Deluth and Topeka have done the same returning Japanese temple bells. Harvard returned 18 bells to Russia. The movies "Woman in Gold" and "Monuments Men" also underscore the ethics of protecting and returning private property during times of conflict. It is time Warren Air Force Base did the same. If we can return bells to enemies we fought in WWII, we surely can forgive and reconcile with Filipinos who we fought with over 115 years ago.

I would like to ask for your personal support to defer any continuance of the Wyoming delegation language in the NDAA, and insert language recommending the bells be returned. Additional factual information concerning this matter can be found and reviewed from an Essay authored by a retired Navy Admiral and hosted on the VFW Post web site: www.vfwpost2485.com/BELLS.pdf. Church bells belong in Churches calling the faithful to worship. They do not memorialize the sacrifices of our troops.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Samantha Hoifman', written over a horizontal line.

Samantha Hoifman
851 Indian Trail Blvd
Traverse City, Michigan 49686