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Army cuts off pay for World War II Alaska Guard veterans

Rachel D'Oro/The Associated Press

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ANCHORAGE, Alaska -- The Army is terminating retirement credit for time served in a largely Native militia formed to guard the territory of Alaska from the threat of Japanese attack during World War II.

The change means 26 surviving members of the Alaska Territorial Guard - most in their 80s and long retired - will lose as much as \$557 in monthly retirement pay, a state veterans officer said Thursday. The pay claims of 37 others have been suspended.

"This is earned income and it's not being paid," said Jerry Beale of the state Department of Military and Veterans Affairs.

Gov. Sarah Palin said the state is pursuing a remedy for "these brave Alaskans, who did so much for the cause of freedom during a time of great national peril."

The action comes almost a decade after Congress passed a law qualifying time served in the unpaid guard as active federal service. The Army agreed in 2004 to grant official military discharge certificates to members or their survivors.

"It took nearly 60 years before the federal government honored these defenders of our territory for their service," Palin said in a statement. "While most died waiting for this recognition, the few who survive are now being told their Territorial Guard service is not worthy of federal recognition. This is unacceptable. These people are no less heroic than the militias at Lexington and Concord, or the defenders of the Alamo."

An Army official said the law was initially misinterpreted.

The reversal follows an analysis by the Department of Defense that determined that the Army is not authorized in the law to count territorial guard service for the purpose of calculating retirement pay, said Lt. Col. Richard McNorton, the Army's human resources command in Alexandria, Va.

"The focus is to follow the law," he said. "We can't chose whether to follow the law. We have to follow the law."

The Army doesn't intend to seek to recoup past pay, he said.

An estimated 300 members are still living from the original 6,600-member unit called up from 1942 to 1947 to conduct various functions including scouting patrols and construction of military airstrips. But only a fraction had enough other military service to reach the 20-year requirement for retirement pay.

Among those who did is 88-year-old Paul Kiunya in the western Alaska village of Kipnuk. Kiunya was 16 years old when he joined the Territorial Guard. His worked in communications, reporting by radio any unusual noises or the direction of aircraft including some Japanese planes he spotted.

"We did not get one cent being in the Territorial Guard," he said. "And we worked hard."

Kiunya - who later put in 22 years in the National Guard and another decade in the Guard reserves - will lose more than \$358 in his retirement package because of the Army's decision. With gasoline in his village at almost \$10 a gallon, that's a huge amount to lose.

"I don't know why they trying to cut the pay. It's not good for us right now," he said in a phone interview. "It's not right."