

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON MILITARY AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS

February 11, 2020

2:17 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Laddie Shaw, Co-Chair
Representative Steve Thompson, Co-Chair
Representative Chuck Kopp
Representative Ivy Spohnholz
Representative Chris Tuck
Representative Sharon Jackson
Representative George Rauscher

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

HOUSE BILL NO. 223

"An Act naming the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots' Memorial Bridge."

- MOVED HB 223 OUT OF COMMITTEE

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HB 223

SHORT TITLE: NAMING VIETNAM HELI. PILOTS' MEM. BRIDGE

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) SHAW

01/27/20	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/27/20	(H)	MLV
02/04/20	(H)	MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120
02/04/20	(H)	-- MEETING CANCELED --
02/11/20	(H)	MLV AT 2:15 PM GRUENBERG 120

WITNESS REGISTER

JOSHUA WALTON, Staff
Representative Laddie Shaw
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented HB 223 on behalf of
Representative Shaw, prime sponsor.

LYNN KYLE, President
Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association Alaska Chapter
Eagle River, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 223.

FORREST E. POWELL III, Program Coordinator
Office of Veterans Affairs
Department of Military & Veterans Affairs
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 223.

VIKKI JO KENNEDY
Kodiak and Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 223.

MIKE LESMANN, Legislative Liaison
Office of the Commissioner
Department of Transportation & Public Facilities
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided information and answered committee questions on HB 223.

DAVID EPSTEIN, Traffic & Safety Engineer
Traffic and Safety, Southcoast Region
Department of Transportation & Public Facilities
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided information and answered questions on HB 223.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[2:17:12 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR STEVE THOMPSON called the House Special Committee on Military and Veterans' Affairs meeting to order at 2:17 p.m. Representatives Rauscher, Spohnholz, Tuck, Shaw, and Thompson were present at the call to order. Representatives Jackson and Kopp arrived as the meeting was in progress.

HB 223-NAMING VIETNAM HELI. PILOTS' MEM. BRIDGE

[Contains discussion of SB 4 and SB 84.]

[2:18:12 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR THOMPSON announced that the only order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 223 "An Act naming the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots' Memorial Bridge."

[2:18:52 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR SHAW, as prime sponsor, introduced HB 223. He noted that this bill is close to his heart. He explained that he served two tours in the Vietnam Conflict and has been invited to join as an associate the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association because of his service and because he is a licensed helicopter pilot.

CO-CHAIR SHAW explained that the idea for this bill originated with Representative Tilton, and that she had graciously given him the opportunity to sponsor the bill because of his service during the Vietnam era. Representative Shaw expressed his honor and gratitude to Representative Tilton and to her staff member, Heath Hilyard, for his work in preparing the bill; he also thanked his staff Josh Walton for his "yeoman's effort" in preparing the bill, and finally to the co-sponsors of the bill, who are all veterans.

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CO-CHAIR SHAW displayed a framed photograph of himself in 1970 in Vietnam, with a helicopter in frame. He explained that the photograph depicted his direct involvement with helicopters and their pilots during the Vietnam Conflict. He recounted that the Battle of Ia Drang was the first battle, and thus began the legacy of Vietnam helicopter pilots as the lifeline and life blood to all tasked with their own specific duty, whether it was infantry, or tanks; the helicopter pilots were there for a safe way in and out and were heroes to all who served.

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JOSHUA WALTON, Staff, Representative Laddie Shaw, Alaska State Legislature, presented HB 223 on behalf of Representative Shaw, prime sponsor. He explained that the bill would name bridges numbers 1124 and 1889 on the Glenn Highway - which span the Matanuska River both northbound and southbound at mile 30.4- as "Vietnam Helicopter Pilots' Memorial Bridge." He indicated that a nearby bridge, the Sergeant James Bromsteel Bridge - which spans the Knik River - would not be affected by this bill.

MR. WALTON drew attention to information contained in the committee packet, entitled "HB 223 Bridge Images 2.7.2020" as Google Maps photographs showing the bridges. He cited material in the packet, entitled "HB 223 Additional Info - Helicopters in Vietnam 2.7.2020" as an academic, historical article of interest of the role of Helicopters in the Vietnam Conflict. He also cited other materials in the packet, entitled "HB 223 Additional Info- Air & Space Magazine Article 2.7.2020" and "HB 223 Additional Info- Vietnam Helicopter Memorial - Time Magazine 2.7.2020" as contemporary articles of interest that describe the heroism of the pilots and some of their challenges post-conflict.

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CO-CHAIR THOMPSON thanked the witnesses for their testimony and thanked Co-Chair Shaw for his service to the country.

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REPRESENTATIVE RAUSCHER asked what the names of the bridges are currently and whether bridges are named when they are built or, if not, how naming of bridges happens.

MR. WALTON explained that for any bridge to be named, that requires legislation; it is assigned a number but not given a name when built. He continued that the bridges addressed under HB 223 currently have no name.

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REPRESENTATIVE SPOHNHOLZ inquired as to the plausibility of a list that includes all past or present Alaskans who served as helicopter pilots during the Vietnam Conflict.

[2:25:37 PM](#)

LYNN KYLE, President, Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association Alaska Chapter, explained that the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association (VHPA) consists of approximately 16,500 members nationally; the VPHA Alaska Chapter consists of 82 members and the chapter is in contact with approximately 120 additional individuals regarding membership and activities. He explained that a list for Alaska is estimated to contain over 400 members but is challenging to maintain due to pilots moving in and out of state, the advancing age of the pilots, and the challenge of maintaining current contact information.

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REPRESENTATIVE SPOHNHOLZ noted that similar proposed legislation, SB 4 and SB 84, sponsored by Senator Coghill, do not contain a fiscal note. She asked why this bill is different from those and contains a \$6,000 fiscal note.

[2:27:22 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR SHAW indicated that a representative from Department of Transportation & Public Facilities will address this question later.

[2:27:40 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE JACKSON asked whether there is a female Vietnam Conflict helicopter pilot in Alaska

MR. KYLE indicated that there are certainly female helicopter pilots in Alaska; however, there were no Vietnam Conflict female helicopter pilots.

[2:28:41 PM](#)

MR. KYLE further remarked that the Vietnam Conflict was a "helicopter war." He noted that because of the capabilities of the pilots, 82 percent of the wounded [evacuees'] lives were saved, amounting to more than 900 thousand patients saved. He noted that following the Vietnam Conflict they came to Alaska and contributed their skills to AeroMed and other aviation outreaches to the benefit of Alaska. He noted that although members are now in their twilight years, the passing of this legislation would honor their contribution to Alaska and the nation during the Vietnam Conflict.

[2:30:04 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE JACKSON commented that her husband served two tours in the Vietnam Conflict and thanked [the primary sponsor and co-sponsors] for an opportunity to have a landmark to represent the lives that were saved.

[2:30:42 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR THOMPSON opened public testimony on HB 223.

[2:31:07 PM](#)

FORREST E. POWELL III, Program Coordinator, Office of Veterans Affairs, Department of Military & Veterans Affairs, testified that he is a retired military service member. He recounted his weekly drives over the bridges addressed under HB 223 to the Alaska Veterans Museum. He noted that the children he encounters at the museum are curious and enjoy learning about veterans. He indicated that it was the signage on the Bronsteel Bridge that prompted questions from the children and resulted in an opportunity for learning. Mr. Powell noted that his post-military career with the State of Alaska involved serving Vietnam [era] veterans. He said he enjoys stories that transcend what one sees in movies, and he opined that the Vietnam Conflict veterans are truly heroes. He stated that the Office of Veterans Affairs coordinated with the Alaska Department of Transportation & Public Facilities in naming the Bronsteel Bridge and would be happy to coordinate again for this proposed naming. He testified on behalf of the Office of Veterans Affairs with the support of Director Verdie Brown its endorsement of this bill.

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VIKKI JO KENNEDY testified that there are numerous casualties of the Vietnam Conflict awaiting honorable and proper recognition of their service and sacrifice. She stated her support of HB 223.

[2:37:12 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR THOMPSON closed public testimony on HB 223.

[2:38:00 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE RAUSCHER inquired if someone could put the signs up themselves [other than DOTPF] to avoid cost.

[2:38:27 PM](#)

MIKE LESMANN, Legislative Liaison, Department of Transportation & Public Facilities, answered with a "qualified no." He expounded that DOTPF follows a set of best practices guidelines for signs and traffic devices, found in the Alaska Traffic Manual. He continued that the manual is a version of the [federal] Manual on Uniform Traffic and Control Devices, and specifies things such as color, size, height, and other

considerations with a basis in traffic safety. He noted that DOTPF Maintenance & Operations (MO) staff would be designated to hang the signs as a matter of safety.

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REPRESENTATIVE RAUSCHER noted that in his community, when he was chair of the Sutton Community Council, the council submitted an application to put up signs on either end of the community. He continued that the council received permission with a list of specifications, and the council was able to put signs up without DOTPF being involved. Further, he noted that DOTPF waived the fees.

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CO-CHAIR THOMPSON asked Representative Rauscher on what road [the council hung signs]. REPRESENTATIVE RAUSCHER indicated they were on Glen Highway at mile 54 and mile 67.

[2:40:57 PM](#)

MR. LESSMAN replied that he [has not encountered such] during his time at DOTPF but would be willing to look into it.

[2:41:18 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SPOHNHOLZ restated her earlier question regarding SB 4 and SB 84.

[2:41:34 PM](#)

MR. LESSMAN offered his understanding that SB 4 named the bridge over Tok River after fallen Alaska State Trooper Scott Johnson and that a zero fiscal note occurred with that legislation because there was a reconstruction project of the Alaska Highway underway including signage, and DOTPF was able to absorb cost for that sign into the existing project.

[2:42:32 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE KOPP asked Representative Rauscher how exactly the signs [the council hung] read.

[2:42:51 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE RAUSCHER indicated "Welcome to Sutton."

[2:42:55 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE KOPP asked DOTPF to answer whether there is a difference between a highway sign welcoming [traffic] to a community and one naming a bridge.

[2:43:20 PM](#)

DAVID EPSTEIN, Traffic & Safety Engineer, Traffic & Safety, Southcoast Region, Department of Transportation & Public Facilities speculated that the reason the council was able to hang signs is because they are designated as "destination" signs, which, in Southeast region, DOTPF would not hang.

[2:44:47 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE RAUSCHER clarified that his intent was to provide a basis by which to determine whether signs could be posted without DOTPF involvement in order to avoid cost.

[2:45:05 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR SHAW inquired if it was possible for the [Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association] to reimburse the state for the cost.

[2:45:17 PM](#)

MR. LESSMAN indicated that DOTPF [likely has a funding mechanism to allow a third-party reimbursement].

[2:45:51 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE JACKSON asserted that she does not wish for the discussion regarding a \$6,000 fiscal note to overshadow the importance of [passing the legislation] to honor Vietnam Helicopter Pilots with the proposed memorial bridges.

[2:47:06 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR SHAW moved to report HB 223 out of committee with individual recommendations and the accompanying fiscal note. There being no objection, HB 223 was reported out of the House Special Committee on Military and Veterans' Affairs.

2:47:38 PM

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Special Committee on Military and Veterans' Affairs meeting was adjourned at [2:47] p.m.