

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

February 27, 2024

1:41 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Stanley Wright, Chair
Representative Laddie Shaw
Representative George Rauscher
Representative Cliff Groh
Representative Andrew Gray

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Ben Carpenter
Representative Dan Saddler

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

HOUSE BILL NO. 158

"An Act relating to the Joint Armed Services Committee; relating to judge advocates; relating to military facility zones; and providing for an effective date."

- MOVED HB 158 OUT OF COMMITTEE

HOUSE BILL NO. 232

"An Act relating to retirement benefits and military service."

- MOVED HB 232 OUT OF COMMITTEE

HOUSE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION NO. 8

Honoring United States military veterans exposed to Agent Orange during the Vietnam War; and expressing gratitude for the courageous service of those veterans to the United States.

- MOVED HCR 8 OUT OF COMMITTEE

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HB 158

SHORT TITLE: MILITARY; UNITED STATES SPACE FORCE

SPONSOR(S): MILITARY & VETERANS' AFFAIRS

04/12/23	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
04/12/23	(H)	MLV

04/27/23 (H) MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120
04/27/23 (H) <Bill Hearing Canceled>
05/02/23 (H) MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120
05/02/23 (H) Heard & Held
05/02/23 (H) MINUTE (MLV)
02/13/24 (H) MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120
02/13/24 (H) Heard & Held
02/13/24 (H) MINUTE (MLV)
02/27/24 (H) MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120

BILL: HB 232

SHORT TITLE: DISABLED VETERANS: RETIREMENT BENEFITS

SPONSOR(s): RAUSCHER

01/16/24 (H) PREFILE RELEASED 1/8/24
01/16/24 (H) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/16/24 (H) MLV, FIN
02/08/24 (H) MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120
02/08/24 (H) Heard & Held
02/08/24 (H) MINUTE (MLV)
02/27/24 (H) MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120

BILL: HCR 8

SHORT TITLE: HONORING VIETNAM WAR VETERANS

SPONSOR(s): SHAW

02/14/24 (H) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/14/24 (H) MLV
02/20/24 (H) MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120
02/20/24 (H) -- MEETING CANCELED --
02/22/24 (H) MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120
02/22/24 (H) -- MEETING CANCELED --
02/27/24 (H) MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120

WITNESS REGISTER

BUDDY WHITT, Staff
Representative Laddie Shaw
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented HCR 8 on behalf of Representative Shaw, prime sponsor.

REPRESENTATIVE LADDIE SHAW
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: As prime sponsor, presented HCR 8 and shared a personal anecdote about the Vietnam War.

KEN GAMBLE, President
Orange Heart Medal Foundation
Nashville, Tennessee

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave invited testimony on HCR 8.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[1:41:21 PM](#)

CHAIR STANLEY WRIGHT called the House Special Committee on Military and Veterans' Affairs meeting to order at 1:41 p.m. Representatives Shaw, Groh, Gray, Rauscher, and Wright were present at the call to order.

HB 158-MILITARY; UNITED STATES SPACE FORCE

[1:41:53 PM](#)

CHAIR WRIGHT announced that the first order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 158, "An Act relating to the Joint Armed Services Committee; relating to judge advocates; relating to military facility zones; and providing for an effective date."

[1:42:27 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SHAW moved to report HB 158 out of committee with individual recommendations and the accompanying fiscal notes. There being no objection, HB 158 was reported out of the House Special Committee on Military and Veterans' Affairs.

[1:42:46 PM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 1:42 p.m. to 1:45 p.m.

HB 232-DISABLED VETERANS: RETIREMENT BENEFITS

[1:45:05 PM](#)

CHAIR WRIGHT announced that the next order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 232, "An Act relating to retirement benefits and military service."

[1:45:32 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SHAW moved to report HB 232 out of committee with individual recommendations and the accompanying fiscal notes. There being no objection, HB 232 was reported out of the House Special Committee on Military and Veterans' Affairs.

[1:45:50 PM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 1:45 p.m. to 1:47 p.m.

HCR 8-HONORING VIETNAM WAR VETERANS

[1:47:44 PM](#)

CHAIR WRIGHT announced that the final order of business would be HOUSE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION NO. 8, Honoring United States military veterans exposed to Agent Orange during the Vietnam War; and expressing gratitude for the courageous service of those veterans to the United States.

[1:48:11 PM](#)

BUDDY WHITT, Staff, Representative Laddie Shaw, Alaska State Legislature, on behalf of Representative Shaw, prime sponsor, presented the sponsor statement for HCR 8 [included in the committee packet], which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

As proud Alaskans and representatives of our great state, we stand united in honoring the brave men and women who served our nation during the Vietnam War. Through this Concurrent Resolution, we pay tribute to the sacrifices made by those who were exposed to Agent Orange, a toxic herbicide used during that conflict.

The Vietnam War was a time of immense courage and dedication, where millions of Americans answered the call to defend our freedoms and uphold our values. Among them were our fellow Alaskans, who exemplified bravery and selflessness in the face of danger.

Agent Orange, deployed as part of Operation Ranch Hand, inflicted profound harm on both the Vietnamese landscape and those who served in the region. It's devastating effects continue to afflict veterans, causing severe illnesses and genetic abnormalities that impact not only them but also their families for generations.

Today, we recognize and express our gratitude to the surviving veterans who were exposed to Agent

Orange. Despite the hardships they endure, their resilience and commitment to service remain an inspiration to us all. While their sacrifices may not always be fully acknowledged, we affirm their place in our nation's history and honor their contributions to our freedom.

Through this resolution, we affirm our unwavering support for these veterans and their families. We pledge to remember their sacrifices, advocate for their well-being, and ensure that their service to our country is never forgotten.

In passing this resolution, we reaffirm our commitment to honoring the victims of Agent Orange and expressing our heartfelt gratitude for their courageous service to our country.

[1:52:01 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE LADDIE SHAW, Alaska State Legislature, as prime sponsor, presented HCR 8 and shared a personal anecdote about the Vietnam War. He explained what agent orange did and how it affected so many of his fellow veterans. He explained the known, long-term health effects of agent orange, citing a study he participated in during his time as a graduate student at the Alaska Pacific University that examined the effects of agent orange on locals. He told of a moment where he and a former Viet-Kong soldier apologized to each other and he was gifted a book, titled Sorrow of War. Representative Shaw held up the book to show committee members. He emphasized that veterans on both sides of the Vietnam War have died from the effects of agent orange.

[1:57:12 PM](#)

MR. WHITT gave his appreciation and recognition to the work of the Orange Heart Medal Foundation (OHMF) and added that today's invited testifiers are members of that organization. He further elaborated about the OHMF and what work it does to support those impacted by agent orange, and said the foundation is advocating for long-term support to veterans affected by the chemical. He pointed out that the United States Senate released a statement that the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has expanded coverage for those affected by agent orange.

[2:00:20 PM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 2:00 p.m. to 2:01 p.m.

[2:01:14 PM](#)

KEN GAMBLE, President, Orange Heart Medal Foundation, gave invited testimony on HCR 8. He began by reading the mission statement of the OHMF. He gave a brief history of formal recognition of agent orange's effects, mentioning Tennessee as the first state to approve an agent orange resolution with 11 other states that followed suit. He highlighted the emotional impact of receiving an orange heart medal and recognizing the impacts of agent orange. He shared that he was compelled to create the OHMF while hospitalized with complications caused by agent orange. He mentioned that with the recent recognition of agent orange's impacts to all exposed, there is a memorial held to offer respect to all affected by the chemical. He said by the time the last Vietnam veteran passes away, there will have been 2.6 million deaths total, in large part because of agent orange. He said that agent orange is one of the most dangerous chemicals ever used in warfare and is 50 times stronger than the chemical known as "Roundup." He explained the differences between different types of agent orange, those that were diluted or chemically different from each other. He emphasized that soldiers were deceived, being told that agent orange was not dangerous. He said he blames no one, but wishes no one was lied to about agent orange. He highlighted the shorter lifespan of those exposed to agent orange, saying they had been robbed of 20 years of their life.

[2:09:52 PM](#)

MR. GAMBLE continued his remarks, saying that the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) denied him agent orange treatment benefits and highlighted that his is a commonality among those affected by agent orange. He spoke about a bill currently in the United States Congress relating to agent orange, House Concurrent Resolution 1828, but expressed skepticism as to whether it would pass the House. He said all that the OHMF is trying to do is seek recognition for veterans affected by agent orange. He said because there is not a national recognition for agent orange, the OHMF is working state by state to achieve OHMF's goals and eventually have nation-wide recognition of agent orange and its impacts on all who were exposed to it.

[2:13:52 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE RAUSCHER thanked Mr. Gamble for his testimony and the bill sponsor for proposing the bill. He shared his own

personal experience with friends and family who have experienced extreme health complications or died due to exposure to agent orange.

MR. GAMBLE said to Representative Rauscher, "You're my brother, and I want to welcome you home."

[2:15:46 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GROH commented that he has heard countless testimonies relating to agent orange and said that today's testimony was very moving. He thanked Representative Shaw and Mr. Gamble for their work and courage in bringing light to this issue.

[2:16:48 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SHAW said "welcome home" to Mr. Gamble. He said he considers himself one of the lucky ones, being a survivor. He gave his honors to Mr. Gamble.

[2:17:46 PM](#)

MR. WHITT highlighted the work that Bobby Tyner of the OHMF has done in bringing this issue to light in Alaska and putting this resolution forward.

[2:18:10 PM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 2:18 p.m. to 2:19 p.m.

[2:19:18 PM](#)

CHAIR WRIGHT opened public testimony on HCR 8. After ascertaining that there was no one who wished to testify, he closed public testimony.

[2:19:47 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SHAW moved to report HCR 8 out of committee with individual recommendations and the accompanying fiscal notes. There being no objection, HCR 8 was reported out of the House Special Committee on Military and Veterans' Affairs.

[2:20:10 PM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 2:20 p.m. to 2:21 p.m.

[2:21:56 PM](#)

CHAIR WRIGHT gave his honors to those who served in Vietnam and said Representative Shaw is his role model every day.

MR. GAMBLE said, "It is a big honor for me to have Alaska on board."

[2:23:19 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SHAW thanked Chair Wright for his comments and thanked Mr. Whitt for making the connections with the OHMF and bringing the issue to the attention of the legislature.

[2:23:55 PM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Special Committee on Military and Veterans' Affairs meeting was adjourned at 2:24 p.m.