

## House Approves Dustoff Award

Thursday, May 26, 2005

**BY BRETT LIEBERMAN**

*Of Our Washington Bureau*

**WASHINGTON** - Dustoffs -- the helicopter crews who fly into combat zones and rescue their fallen comrades -- may finally get a medal of their own.

The U.S. House of Representatives last night approved a Harrisburg-born effort to force the military to issue a new award, the Combat Medevac Badge, to every pilot or crew member who has served in combat in a medical evacuation helicopter since June 25, 1950.

The measure was part of a defense authorization bill passed by the House on a 390-39 vote.

"Democracy works," said John Travers, one of the Vietnam veterans who approached U.S. Rep. Tim Holden, D-Schuylkill County, with the idea of honoring the helicopter crews.

The Army has opposed awarding a group-specific medal.

"To attempt to identify soldiers in specific categories has an adverse effect on team concept and uniformity of purpose," Lt. Col. Kevin V. Arata, an Army public affairs officer, said previously.

Holden and U.S. Rep. Joseph Pitts, R-West Chester, joined forces to lobby for the legislation after 214 medals made by the Harrisburg group were laid at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial earlier this month to honor those who died.

"These Dustoff crews deserve all the honor we can give them," said Pitts, a Vietnam veteran who secured the support of House Armed Services chairman Duncan Hunter, R-Calif., to include Holden's provision in the measure passed last night.

Kentucky Republican Rep. Geoff Davis, who was an Army helicopter pilot, offered an amendment in the Armed Services Committee on behalf of Holden and Pitts.

"It's a day where justice prevails," Holden said. "These pilots and their crews were heroes. They flew into hot spots under fire and provided medical care."

Dustoff crews, so called because of their radio call sign, flew nearly a half-million missions and evacuated more than 900,000 casualties between 1963 and 1973. A third of Dustoff medics were killed or wounded.

The legislation still must pass the Senate, where U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., has introduced a companion bill, and survive a conference committee as the two chambers resolve

differences.

The idea for the combat medal was born 21/2 years ago in a Harrisburg bar. Travers, a retired Army chief warrant officer and president of the Harrisburg chapter of Vietnam Veterans of America who flew 955 missions in Vietnam, Michael C. McLaughlin, a Marine who served in Vietnam, and other area veterans were irked that the Army refused to recognize the group's sacrifice.

They brought the issue to Harrisburg Mayor Stephen R. Reed, who enlisted Holden's support.

"This is a group of guys in Harrisburg that said it's the right thing to do," Travers said last night.

Now that it's closer to becoming a reality, Travers is flabbergasted.

"It's long overdue that this country recognizes these guys and the Army recognizes them," he said.

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