

SCHUYLKILL HAVEN — The U.S. House of Representatives has passed legislation that would make some military medical personnel eligible for honors.

U.S. Rep. T. Timothy Holden, D-17, recently introduced the Combat Medevac Badge legislation into a defense spending authorization bill, Holden said.

Holden said that, for decades, the military did not make so-called dustoff pilots — those responsible for flying into combat areas to treat wounded soldiers — eligible for official military honors.

Holden recently announced the passage of the legislation at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial near Penn State Schuylkill.

Flanked by John Travers, a former dustoff pilot, and Vietnam War veteran Michael C. McLaughlin, both members of Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 542, Holden called the lack of recognition for dustoff pilots "an injustice" and "a terrible oversight."

More than 25 veterans from AMVETS posts from across Schuylkill County were on hand for the announcement.

The U.S. Army has awarded the Combat Medic Badge to military medical personnel since 1945, but the honor does not apply to personnel not supported by an infantry unit.

The legislation, expected to be approved by the U.S. Senate and President George W. Bush, will make all military medical personnel since June 25, 1950, the day the Korean War started, eligible to receive a Combat Medevac Badge commemorating their efforts in war.

Likely more than 5,000 will become eligible for the honor and Holden said many Combat Medevac Badges will be presented retroactively.

For Travers, a dustoff pilot in 1970 and 1971 in Vietnam, where 214 medical personnel were among the 58,000 U.S. military personnel killed in the war, the announcement is vindication for years of neglect despite his and others' requests for acknowledgment.

"The army was stubborn," Travers said of his denied requests, adding that the lack of recognition felt like "a slap in the face."

Travers said most of the medical personnel in Vietnam were under 20 years of age with just two weeks of training when they started, but "by the time they were done, they were nearly doctors."

Medical personnel, required to be unarmed per the Geneva Convention, also had one of the most deadly jobs in the military, McLaughlin said. He said nearly four out of 10 "dustoff" pilots were killed in duty when they were sent defenselessly into battle zones.

"This is a huge accomplishment," McLaughlin said of the legislation.

Holden downplayed his role in the passage. "We just did the legwork," he said, referring to himself and U.S. Rep. Joseph R. Pitts, R-16, a Chester County Republican, who pushed to have the legislation passed.

"These guys have had their hearts and souls in it for years," Holden said, referring to the veterans in attendance.