

Vietnam vet leads push for Combat Aeromedical Badge

By Steve Liewer, Stars and Stripes

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John Travers is a man on a mission.

No less than the 955 times he flew Army rescue helicopters in Vietnam, Travers today heads a Vietnam Veterans of America chapter in Harrisburg, Pa., and is fighting to force the Army to recognize flight medics.

The effort started 2½ years ago in a barroom conversation among some Pennsylvania vets. It led to hearings in July 2003 before the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee to make flight medics eligible for the Combat Medical Badge, currently awarded to front-line combat medics who come under fire while doing their jobs. According to Army regulations, flight medics may not receive it.

Statistics from Vietnam show how dangerous the job is, Travers said. He said the small medical evacuation community lost more than 250 pilots, crew chiefs and medics in the war — a fatality rate of about 40 percent.

"The kids today are doing the same things we did," he said. "We think this is long past overdue." Opposed by the Army, the legislation died. Lt. Gen. John LeMoyne, then the service's senior personnel officer, testified that flight medics don't deserve the award because they don't face the same kind of risks infantry medics do.

"The primary difference is that the medevac pilot will go home at night or sometime during the day," LeMoyne said. "Your combat medic in the field will not. He will never get a hot shower, he will never get a hot meal, he will never have clean sheets, and he will never go to a club."

This year, Travers' group changed its tactics. It gathered bipartisan support in the House of Representatives for a bill creating a new Combat Aeromedical Badge that could be awarded to all medevac crews that came under fire — back as far as the Korean War.

"Creating this badge is a good compromise," Travers said. "You preserve the CMB for what it stood for, but you recognize these crews."

"These guys deserve an award that's in a class all by itself," said Spc. Benjamin Waugh, 25, who served as a ground medic in Iraq early in the war and now is a flight medic with the 45th Medical Company in Germany. "They've got a big red cross [on their helicopters] and no weapons."

The bill easily passed the House 380-39 last May as an amendment to the annual Defense Authorization Bill, but the Senate hasn't acted on it. A House-Senate conference committee will meet in the next two months to iron out differences.

"We aren't asking for the world," Travers said. "This impacts a lot of people. We've got to get this done."