

Floor Statement
U.S. Representative Tom Udall (NM-03)
February 7, 2008
Introduction of legislation to award the Congressional Gold Medal

Madam Speaker,

I rise today to proudly introduce legislation to award the Congressional Medal of Honor to some of the most valiant and courageous soldiers who have ever fought for our nation – the troops who battled and were prisoners of war at Bataan during World War II.

Nearly seven decades ago, the United States responded to the attacks on Pearl Harbor by declaring war – and more than five thousand miles away in the Philippines, thousands of American soldiers, many of whom were from my state of New Mexico, found themselves on the frontline of this global fight. For four months, in the face of overwhelming odds and without ready supplies or reinforcements, these troops fought and died for their nation. Their efforts not only provided the U.S. with much needed stories of heroism during a dire, dark time of the war, their sacrifice also substantively provided much needed time for U.S. and Allied commanders to regroup, plan, and prepare for the Pacific battle. Without these troops delaying the momentum of the enemy, the U.S. might not have fully recovered from the Pearl Harbor attack until much later.

After months of fighting and with his men starving and sick, on April 9, 1942, the commander of the troops at Bataan reluctantly surrendered. Shortly thereafter, nearly 12,000 American troops and 67,000 Filipino troops were forced to march through tropical heat and without food or water for days on end in what became known as the Bataan Death March. Many died during this time, and those who survived were subject to three years of mistreatment, malnutrition, sickness and captivity before being rescued and released near the end of the war.

For the state of New Mexico, this chapter of World War II is particularly near to our hearts. New Mexico's 200th and 515th Coast Artillery units served with significant honor during the battle of Bataan, earning the distinction of being the "first to fire" on the enemy on December 8, 1941. Many of the Americans captured and held as prisoners of war were from New Mexico, and of the 1,800 who left home to fight, half did not return. Further, nearly a third of those did return home after their tortuous three years of captivity died within a year, most often due to complications from health issues directly attributed to their time in the POW camps.

The 200th and 515th also are notable because they largely consisted of Hispanic soldiers, a group that at the time was often subject to discrimination in the military due simply to their ethnicity. Despite these barriers, they fought without hesitation, noting that they were as American as any other soldier who wore the uniform. They came from every corner of the state, from Farmington to Alamogordo, from Deming to Raton, and from Clovis to Gallup.

Many years ago, my father Stewart Udall wrote a book called *Majestic Journey* chronicling the early explorations of North American in the sixteenth century. He described the vision, the individualism, and the pioneering spirit of early Hispanic explorers, and I believe that like these explorers, the actions of the Bataan prisoners of war “resonate through the annals of our history, and the imprint they left on our culture is both permanent and profound. They will add a special luster to our national story.”

Every year, thousands of people participate in the Bataan Memorial Death March at White Sand Missile Range in southern New Mexico. The 26.2 mile march not only marks the historical significance of the event, but reminds us of how many in New Mexico underwent the ordeals at Bataan. In Albuquerque, stone columns rise from the ground at the Bataan Memorial Park, each of them bearing both the names of those who returned from Bataan and those who did not. In Santa Fe, the Military Museum bears the name of Bataan, reminding all who enter of the costs of war and the sacrifice made by our soldiers. And all across the country are similar memorials, keeping alive the memory of those who went through years of suffering at Bataan.

I want to thank the New Mexico Hispanic Cultural Preservation League for their help on this legislation. Also, General Leo Marquez, General Edward Baca, General Melvyn Montano, General Gene Chavez, General Kenny Montoya, and New Mexico Department of Veterans Services Secretary John Garcia for their continued insistence that we honor the Bataan veterans.

Madam Speaker, we must never forget the sacrifice of our soldiers, particularly during times of war. We are reminded daily of the hardships and danger faced by the men and women currently fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq. Like the soldiers of Bataan, these brave troops fight for patriotism, for duty, and for country. I hope my colleagues will join me to honor the sacrifice of the soldiers at Bataan by awarding them the Congressional Gold Medal.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.