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SANTA FE -- It was a long time coming and the battle isn't over. But the first step toward recognizing Bataan war veterans with a Congressional Gold Medal has been taken.

Last week, Rep. Tom Udall introduced legislation in Congress to collectively bestow Bataan Death March veterans with the Congressional Gold Medal. The next step is to get as many co-sponsors as possible and to obtain letters of support from veterans organizations to Rep. Udall.

Of the 12,000 American troops in the Philippines at the start of World War II, 1,800 of them were members of the New Mexico National Guard. They were sent to stop Japan's march aimed at taking the Pacific all the way to Australia.

Unfortunately the U.S. military wasn't able to mobilize in time to stop Japan's rapid advance down the Pacific. Supplies and reinforcements promised to Gen. Douglas Mac Arthur never arrived. American troops were left to fight with antiquated World War I weapons, ammunition and supplies.

New Mexico's troops made up the 200th Coast Artillery. During the four months they held off the Japanese advance, they downed 86 enemy aircraft with equipment that constantly fell apart.

Fortunately nearly all these men were from rural areas of New Mexico. They had grown up figuring out how to repair machines and anything else that broke down.

They endured lack of supplies, malnutrition, malaria and starvation to foil the Japanese timetable for reaching Australia before we and our allies could complete our mobilization effort.

The Japanese advance finally was stopped just short of Australia at New Guinea and Guadalcanal but not before the Philippines were overrun.

In the final months of their holdout, the 200th, which was undermanned as a regiment, was split in two and the 515th Coast Artillery regiment was created to help defend Manila. The 200th remained on the Bataan Peninsula.

As the Japanese continued their advance, all American troops were consolidated onto the Bataan peninsula, with the New Mexico Guard forming the line of defense through which they passed.

The squeeze was on as Japanese troops pushed deeper into the peninsula. Eventually U.S. commanders saw that no resources were left to continue the fight and no reinforcements would arrive.

On April 9, 1942, the troops were surrendered. The men of the New Mexico Guard let their displeasure with the decision be known. They wanted to fight to the death.

Following their capture the troops were forced to endure a torturous 65-mile, five-day march in tropical heat without food or water. Thousands perished along the way and those who survived were held as prisoners of war in squalid encampments for almost three years.

Only 900 of the 1,800 New Mexicans who shipped out to the Philippines over four years earlier returned at the war's end. Almost a third of them died within a year.

The New Mexico Guard had a proud history in World War II. It was the first to fire on the December 8, 1941 Japanese attack. It was named the best anti-aircraft regiment in the U.S. Army. And it lost more men per capita than any other state in World War II.

The New Mexico Hispanic Cultural Preservation League initiated the effort to recognize the Bataan veterans with a Congressional Gold Medal. It was joined by New Mexico's senior military officers, Generals Leo Montoya, Edward Baca, Melvyn Montano, Gene Chavez and Kenny Montoya, along with state Veterans Affairs Secretary John Garcia.

"The League is dedicated to correcting omissions of valor and honor in historical records which have tended to overlook the role of Hispanics in American history," said President emeritus Conchita Lucero. The 200th and 515th Coast Artillery units were largely composed of Hispanic soldiers.

Under Udall's bill, a collective medal would be awarded all American soldiers involved. It would be housed at the Smithsonian institution in Washington and available for ceremonies and events commemorating the march.

You can help by sending letters of support to our congressional delegation.

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