

John S. McCain III
Senator
218 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington DC 20510

July 25, 2017

John;

I am writing in regards to an issue that is important to me and many other veterans, especially those of us residing in Southeast Asia. It involves the Bells of San Lorenzo de Martir - - two church bells that were taken from a Catholic church in the Philippines that are now on display at F.E. Warren Air Force Base in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Ironically, President Duterte talked about this just last evening in his State of the Nation Address.

In 1901, during the Philippine American War, there was an engagement in the small town of Balangiga, Eastern Samar between Filipinos fighting for their independence and Company C of the 9th US Infantry. Forty-eight of the 74 soldiers garrisoned there died. It was a major embarrassment for the US Army akin to Custer's defeat at the battle of the Little Big Horn.

After the encounter, the town was burned and the bells taken to prevent Filipinos from melting and converting to weapons. In 1904, the 11th Infantry who had custody of the bells at that time, demobilized to the states keeping two of the bells. These bells then ended up on Fort D.A. Russell in Cheyenne, later to become F.E. Warren. When the 11th was decommissioned in 1915 they sent their colors, battle streamers, records, and important artifacts to Army archives, but not the bells, the bells were unimportant to their history and legacy. They abandoned them in place. Then in 1947 when the Army turned the base over to the Air Force, the Army did not hold any affinity to the bells either, and again, abandoned them in place. Later in 1967, an Air Force Colonel found them and put them on display. Wyoming has no linkage to the bells, not one single Wyoming veteran served in the 9th or 11th or stationed in Balangiga, just by happenstance the 11th ended up there when it was decommissioned and later an air force colonel found them and thought they were neat.

Our local VFW Post 2485, one of the largest in the VFW, submitted a Resolution in support of returning the bells to the Church of San Lorenzo in Balangiga. It was approved by our Philippine District VII comrades and by the Department of Pacific Areas representing over 11,700 veterans in Southeast Asia. While I am disappointed our Resolution was deferred at this week's National Convention in New Orleans, the bells should go home. It is the honorable and right thing to do. As a former USAF officer and POW, I am proud to be part of this initiative to get the Air Force to return the bells. I ask for your personal support, as one POW to another, to help make it right. It is time for the bells to go home.

Last year, our Post successfully secured the return of a similar bell, the San Pedro Bell, also taken from the Philippines in 1901 that had been on display at West Point for over a century. Similarly, Annapolis returned a bell to Japan that I am sure you had seen on more than one occasion when you were a midshipman. That bell had been on display outside Bancroft Hall for over a century. VMI and the cities of Atlanta, Detroit, Deluth and Topeka have done the same returning Japanese temple bells. Harvard returned 18 bells to Russia. The movies "Woman in Gold" and "Monuments Men" also underscore the ethics of protecting and returning private property taken during times of conflict. It is time Warren did the same.

The Bells of San Lorenzo should never have been taken in the first place. It was in violation of General Order 100. Bells are not war booty, they belong in a church to call the faithful to worship. Could you imagine a bell mounted at the Wall? Or at the WWII Memorial in Washington DC?

There is a small, but influential minority of veterans in Cheyenne who think of these bells as their own private property, yet they have no privity to them. They have managed to mislead their congressional delegation who in the 2000 timeframe managed to insert language in the National Defense Authorization Act to preclude return of the bells, albeit based on misinformation. At that time, others like myself were unaware of the issue and no one spoke out. Today, veterans are aware and believe the bells belong in a church, not on a Minuteman Missile Base. We also believe that if we can return bells to enemies we fought in WWII, we surely can forgive and reconcile with Filipinos who we fought with over 115 years ago -- and who will later this year receive the Congressional Gold Medal for their contributions during WWII.

I believe you also have a constituent who has written you in the past, Ms. Jean Wall, daughter of one of the survivors of the attack. She has also fought long and hard to have her father and the others recognized for holding off the attack while leading the withdrawal and saving 22 injured soldiers. She does not object to return of the bells.

In 1998, former Wyoming Governor Stan Hathaway, 1967-1975, himself a decorated WWII veteran, argued against Senator Thomas' initiative to block return of the bells through the language in the NDAA. He was a veteran and he was informed. Unfortunately, others had the ear of Senator Thomas. I have enclosed a copy of Governor Hathaway's letter to Senator Thomas.

I would like to ask for your personal support to defer any continuance of the Wyoming delegation language in the NDAA. While it can be argued the language in the NDAA is moot, and is not relevant as the bells in Cheyenne are not a Memorial but rather a display, there is no need to have to address that consideration. It is far better to allow the language in the NDAA to lapse. Even better, to add language directing the return of the bells, especially given President Duterte's pleading last night. Additional factual information concerning this matter that your staff can review can be found on our Post web site at: www.vfwpost2485.com/BELLS.pdf.

I am also enclosing a recent letter from former Ambassador Frank Wisner to Congresswoman Cheney. I think it important that we veterans, especially those of us who witnessed the evils of war up close and personal, stand-up and be counted to do the right thing. Church bells belong in Churches calling the faithful to worship. They do not memorialize the sacrifices of our troops.

Sincerely,



Spike Nasmyth

PS: This gesture would be extremely well received in the Philippines, coincident with the approval of the Congressional Gold Medal recognizing the sacrifices of the WWII Filipino Veterans, and would go a long way in helping rebalance the recent Philippine rhetorical attacks on the US.

Enclosed:

Gov. Hathaway letter dtd March 3, 1998

Amb. Wisner letter dtd June 16, 2017

Copy To:

U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, Russell Senate Building, Room 228 | Washington, D.C. 20510-6050

Frank G. Wisner

June 16, 2017

Congressman Liz Cheney
U.S. House of Representatives
416 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Cheney, *Liz,*

I have known you for years and I admire you. I also congratulate you on your election to the House of Representatives. I am writing to you today regarding an issue about which I understand you are deeply interested: the Bells of Balangiga. I further understand you may be considering to request an extension of current US law preventing the Bells' return to the Philippines. If that truly is the case, I hope you will reconsider and instead allow the existing moratorium to expire.

As you know, I served as Ambassador to the Philippines when your father was Secretary of Defense and was intimately involved in our base treaty negotiations. I know the country well, both as a diplomat and as someone greatly interested in US-Philippine history. I remain an ardent supporter of a strong US-Philippine relationship, and I believe our currently difficult ties to the new Duterte Administration need to be addressed.

I am deeply persuaded that the US made a profound error by taking the Bells at the turn of the century. The arguments for taking and keeping the Bells have been based on historical inaccuracies. The Bells were not brought to Wyoming by Company C, nor did they serve as signals of the surprise attack at Balangiga. They were shipped to the US from a scrap yard, and are not a part of US Army or Air Force history or heritage. While I understand the issue has long been a cause for members of the Wyoming veteran community, and there are many who feel connected to the Bells, they do not belong on a US Air Force base. Their true home is the belfry of the Church of San Lorenzo de Martir in Balangiga, Eastern Samar.

I'm sure it has occurred to you that the actions of US military forces today in support of Philippine counterinsurgency is an important US national security objective. At the same time, it brings to the minds of many Filipinos actions by American forces so many years ago – the Bells are a part of that legacy. It is especially important that we address this mark on US-Philippine relations as our two countries work to defeat ISIS in Mindanao. I am persuaded the return of the Bells will be widely and positively received by the Philippine government and Philippine public opinion, and strengthen the basis of our military cooperation.

You know my devotion to the US Armed Forces. I believe deeply that those men who fought and died in the Philippines have never been properly honored. It is time to fix that oversight. I would favor a memorial that recognizes the sacrifices they made. You might consider playing a role in this regard.

I would welcome the chance to discuss the Bells with you in more detail. I am prepared to come to Washington, or we could speak by phone if you would like. I can be reached in my New York office at (646) 557-5151.

Sincerely,

Frank G. Wisner
Frank G. Wisner

164 EAST 72ND STREET, APT 2C • NEW YORK, NY • 10021
PHONE: 212-517-2028