

Statement of Congressman James Langevin on H.R. 2188
Before the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
April 6, 2006

Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Berkley and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for having this important hearing today, and especially for the opportunity to discuss H.R. 2188, a bill that would authorize memorial markers in a national cemetery to commemorate servicemembers buried in an American Battle Monuments Commission cemetery.

As Members of Congress, we all have the great opportunity to hear stories of duty and honor from our constituents. I had such a chance right after Memorial Day in 2004 when I received a letter from Henry Stad, a resident of Rhode Island and a U.S. Air Force Veteran of World War II. Mr. Stad asked that I sponsor a bill that would allow family members of servicemembers that were killed in action and buried overseas to be able to request a burial plaque to be set in a family burial plot in the United States. I was happy to look into this request from a man who gave so much to his country.

Mr. Chairman, as you know, the United States currently has 24 permanent overseas burial grounds that are the final resting place for nearly 125,000 of the brave men and women who died serving our country. These sites are the responsibility of the American Battle Monuments Commission and are a wonderful tribute to those who sacrificed for our nation. However, the Department of Veterans Affairs maintains that because these graves can be visited, there is no need to provide families at home with a memorial marker for their deceased loved ones buried there.

As a result, I introduced a bill that will help families memorialize those who died in service to our country and are buried in cemeteries overseas. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, those servicemembers whose remains are classified as "unavailable for burial" are eligible for government-provided memorial markers or headstones. While this classification includes those whose remains have not been recovered or who were buried at sea, there is one glaring exception to this definition – those who died fighting for freedom abroad and were laid to rest there.

Families are proud of these courageous men and women who answered the call to protect our country and then paid the ultimate price. Unfortunately, for many families, a trip abroad to visit their loved ones is not possible due to finances or old age. A memorial marker is a way to keep the memory of their loved one alive, while also teaching younger generations about sacrifice. We should not deny the families of these courageous men and women the ability to obtain memorial markers when we already do it for so many others. To correct this, my legislation will add overseas burials to the VA's "unavailable for burial" classification and finally let these men and women be memorialized by their families here at home.

Mr. Chairman, in closing, I urge you to help memorialize those that accepted the call to protect our country. Thank you again for this opportunity, and I look forward to working with you in serving our veterans.