

Legislative Analysis



MILITARY SPECIAL FORCES SPECIALTY LICENSE PLATE

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House Bill 5066 (Substitute H-1)

Sponsor: Rep. Fulton Sheen

Committee: Transportation

First Analysis (4-27-04)

BRIEF SUMMARY: The bill would amend the Michigan Vehicle Code to allow The bill would amend the Michigan Vehicle Code to allow for a specialty license plate for those who served in the military special forces (Green Berets).

FISCAL IMPACT: The Department of State indicates that the \$5.00 service fee assessed for veterans plates generally covers the marginal costs of issuing the plates, but not the start-up costs of developing the plates and programming department systems. The department reports that in Fiscal Year 2002-03 there were 4,016 veterans license plates issued at a cost of \$23,763. The \$5.00 service fee would have generated approximately \$20,000 to offset those costs. The department indicates that there would be additional costs associated with the development of a new “special forces” license plate. However, the fiscal impact is not readily determinable

THE APPARENT PROBLEM:

Current and former members of the military special forces—commonly known as the Green Berets—are eligible to join the Special Forces Association, a non-profit veterans’ fraternal organization formed in 1964 at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The purpose of the organization is to unite all men who are now, or ever have been, assigned to the United States Army Special Forces, and to perpetuate Special Forces traditions. See [Background Information](#) below.

According to a spokesperson for the Special Forces Association, the members of the organization who register their vehicles in Michigan have requested that the Office of the Secretary of State issue a specialty license plate that is customized to recognize their military services in the special forces.

THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:

House Bill 5006 would amend the Michigan Vehicle Code to allow for a specialty license plate for those who served in the military special forces.

The bill specifies that a person who is a member or former member of the military special forces of this state, another state, or the United States (or a person whose spouse is a member or former member of the military special forces), could make application to the secretary of state for a special forces special registration plate, which would be inscribed with identification numbers and have the words “special forces” inscribed beneath the

registration number. Application for the plate would be on a form prescribed by the secretary of state and would be accompanied by proof of the applicant being a member of the military special forces

Currently under the law, specialty license plates are available for ex-prisoners of war, veterans of World War I, Pearl Harbor survivors, and Purple Heart recipients. Upon application and payment of a \$5 fee (or renewal fee), the secretary of state issues one or more special registration plates, which expire on the birthday of the vehicles' owners. House Bill 5066 would retain these provisions, and extend them to members of the military special forces.

MCL 257.803e

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

To learn more about the Special Forces Association, visit their web site at <http://www.sfahq.org>

Brief history. The Special Forces Command of the United States Army—since the early 1960s often known as the Green Berets—grew out of the Office of Strategic Services, or OSS (the precursor to the Central Intelligence Agency), and several elite forces organized for special operations during World War II. From these guerilla operations came the nucleus of men and techniques that gave birth to the Special Forces in 1952.

Those who advocated formation of the Special Forces were convinced there were areas in the world not susceptible to conventional warfare—most especially Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe—that would make ideal targets for unconventional harassment and guerrilla fighting. Originally, Special Operations were envisioned as a ‘force multiplier: a small number of soldiers who could sow a disproportionately large amount of trouble for the enemy. The Army allocated 2,300 personnel slots for the unit, and assigned it to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The main mission of the first unit was “to infiltrate by land, sea, or air, deep into enemy-occupied territory and organize the resistance/guerrilla potential to conduct Special Forces operations, with emphasis on guerrilla warfare.” Secondary missions included deep-penetration raids, intelligence missions, and counterinsurgency operations.

In April 1956, sixteen Special Forces soldiers became the first sent to the Asia, assigned to work in Thailand, Taiwan, and Vietnam (and following in the footsteps of the long-classified Special Forces who joined the United Nations Partisan Forces, and deployed behind enemy lines in North Korea beginning in 1952).

By 1958, the basic operational unit of Special Forces was known as the 12-man A-detachment, or A-team: two officers, two operations and intelligence sergeants, two weapons sergeants, two communication sergeants, two medics, and two engineers—all trained in unconventional warfare, as well as being cross-trained in each others' specialties, and all speaking at least one foreign language. This composition allowed each detachment to operate in two six-man teams when necessary.

In 1961 President John Kennedy signaled strong support for the Special Forces, following an inspection of troops at Fort Bragg, and his interest sparked the formation of three new Special Forces groups that year. At his urging the Army also authorized the formal adoption of the green beret as the official headgear of all Special Forces “symbolic,” said President Kennedy, “of one of the highest levels of courage and achievement of the United States military.” Today, the terms Special Forces and Green Berets are often used interchangeably.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the number of Special Forces military advisors in Vietnam increased steadily. Their responsibility was “to train South Vietnamese soldiers in counterinsurgency, and organize various native tribes into a credible, anti-communist threat.” Southeast Asia remained the Special Forces primary focus for two decades, and the troops established 254 outposts throughout Vietnam, many of them defended by a single A-tem and hundreds of Vietnamese. By the time the Special Forces were ordered back to Fort Bragg in March 1971, Green Beret soldiers had won 17 medals of honor, one distinguished service medal, 90 distinguished services crosses, 814 silver stars, 13,234 bronze stars, 235 legions of merit, 46 distinguished flying crosses, 232 soldier’s medals, 4,891 air medals, 6,908 army commendation medals, and 2,658 purple hearts.

However, during the same time period, Special Forces training teams were operating in Bolivia, Venezuela, Guatemala, Columbia, and the Dominican Republic. Counterinsurgency forces conducted clandestine operations against guerrilla forces, carrying out some 450 missions between 1965 and 1968, and in 1968, Special Forces were involved in tracking down and capturing the Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara in the wilds of south-central Bolivia.

During the 1970s, the deployment of Special Forces for counterinsurgency work in foreign countries was curtailed, and their leaders adopted a program known as Special Proficiency at Rugged Training and Nation-building, or SPARTAN. Under the aegis of SPARTAN, Special Forces groups worked with Indian tribes in Florida, Arizona, and Montana to build roads, and medical facilities, and provided free medical treatment to impoverished citizens of Hoke and Anson counties in North Carolina.

The counterinsurgency mission of the Special Forces was reinvigorated when Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, and Special Forces troops were once again deployed in Asia and Central America, as well as in Africa, and dozens of countries around the globe. Missions varied from training U.S.-allied armies to defend themselves, to offering humanitarian aid (such as medical care, and construction projects) in remote villages of developing countries on nearly every continent. In addition, during the 1980s, Special Forces were deployed to El Salvador and Honduras, “preventing civil war in neighboring Nicaragua from spreading beyond its borders.” In 1989, Special Forces fought alongside conventional forces in Operation Just Cause, the invasion of Panama.

During the 1990s, Special Forces fought with distinction in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, the Desert Storm commander General H. Norman Schwarzkopf calling them “the eyes and ears of conventional forces” and “the glue that held coalition forces together.” Currently, there is a Special Forces group assigned to each of the five worldwide regional commands of the United State Army, as well as two Army National

Guard groups. Special Forces now serve in Afghanistan, Iraq, and nearly 70 other countries.

Special forces motto: The motto “De Oppresso Liber” is emblazoned on the Special Forces crest, which translates to “Free the Oppressed.”

ARGUMENTS:

For:

There are two reasons policymakers in Michigan should make specialty license plates available to members of the Special Forces of the U. S. Army, more customarily known as the Green Berets. First, our country is at war, and there can be no better time to recognize the courage and selfless dedication of those who, according to committee testimony, currently serve in 70 countries overseas—fulfilling key roles in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as countless other sites of conflict. Second, there is a precedent for specialty license plates that honor our state’s citizens if they served in the armed services, and it is fitting to extend that tradition to also offer a customized plate for members of the Green Berets.

Against:

A spokesperson from the Office of the Secretary of State notes that while a memorial to the courageous members of the special forces is a good idea, the creation of this specialty license plate would depart from the state’s recent history of creating specialty plates in order to commemorate veterans of military conflicts (for example, those who fought the wars in Korea, Viet Nam, or World Wars I and II), or to pay tribute to military veterans, overall. In contrast, the voluntary members of the special forces are a small, elite unit of the U. S. Army, more commonly known as the Green Berets. If a specialty plate is created for a subset of the army, it may well be the case that proposals to create specialty plates for the special forces of the Navy and Marines would follow. Unlike specialty fundraiser plates, each specialty memorial license plate adds costs to the licensing and registration system. A proliferation of the plates will increase total uncovered costs, and the system will become unwieldy and less efficient, as other plate buyers subsidize the initial development and production costs of the new license plates.

POSITIONS:

The Special Forces Association supports the bill. (4-22-04)

The Office of the Secretary of State does not support the bill. (4-22-04)

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