

May 25, 2007

WASHINGTON - In observance of Memorial Day, U.S. Rep. Gus Bilirakis (R-FL), member of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, today released the following statement to honor our Nation's fallen heroes.

As Prepared for Delivery

"For more than two centuries, America's brave men and women have risen to the call to defend this great nation and ensure the survival of the ideals on which this great democracy was founded.

"Whether it was the bloody fight for independence from an oppressive British Monarchy, our very own civil war between the Union and Confederacy, battling Nazi Germany on the shores of Normandy, or rooting out the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, many Americans have given the ultimate sacrifice to this great Nation.

"In all, more than one million Americans have died in conflicts, more than 140,000 citizens were taken as prisoners of war, countless have gone missing and millions of veterans - more than 25 million alive today and many more who have since left this earth - have faithfully answered the call to serve in order to preserve the freedom and liberty of the United States.

"Floridians have made a large sacrifice to preserve our nation's freedom. Florida currently has the second largest population of veterans, and the highest percentage of totally disabled veterans, in the United States. With almost 1.8 million veterans now calling Florida home, many in our state either have a family member who has served or is currently serving in the Armed Forces.

"Today we remember all who have died, are still missing, and those who mourn for them.

"It is these Americans who have defined the meaning of patriotism and heroism. They embody the American spirit that, today, has forged a better future for our Nation's children and grandchildren. We must never forget what this band of America's brothers and sisters have given to preserve the freedom that we enjoy.

"It is for these reasons why every year we take this time to honor their historic contribution to the strength and sanctity of America. It is why today, we renew our pledge that their sacrifices will not be in vain. We owe an enormous debt of gratitude for the service of our fallen patriots; a debt which can never fully be repaid. Supreme sacrifices should be remembered with comparable dignity. Memorial Day is such a celebration.

"The Greek word 'mermera' means 'to care, or cherish.' The men and women we honor today cherished their faith in God, their loved ones, the American way of life and their duty. These fallen heroes died in pursuit and protection of those things they cherished. On Memorial Day, it is our turn to demonstrate our sense of

"mermera" to remember how much we cherish their sacrifices.

"Today we gather to remember the true meaning of Memorial Day. We come here to honor our fallen fellow patriots by our presence. We understand that on Memorial Day we reflect on the ideals and values that our soldiers stood for and died defending. We are reminded that they died so that we could live and continue to cherish the things they loved - God, country and family.

"Today, we also remember these Americans who are currently stationed on foreign shores. These soldiers, airmen, sailors and Marines fight on the front lines of the global war on terrorism and to protect America's sovereign shores.

"Thousands of Florida's own active duty, reserve, and National Guard military personnel are working with the fledgling democracies of Iraq and Afghanistan to restore civil order, provide critical humanitarian aid, and preserve freedom. Others are helping to ensure peace on the Korean Peninsula and stabilize volatile regions like the Balkans.

"These brave soldiers remain in our thoughts and prayers. May God bless them on successfully completing their missions, and for their safe, eventual homecoming to their families and loved ones.

"As I leave you this Memorial Day, I ask each of you to remember and hold dear the sweat, blood and tears of our men and women in the Armed Services. Their struggle and sacrifice has allowed us to stand here today. Free."

###