

House Votes Travel Aid Bill For Families of Dead POWs

By Ron Shaffer

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The House gave swift approval yesterday to a bill that would authorize the Pentagon to provide funeral travel and living expenses for families attending funerals of American prisoners of war or men once classified as missing in action in Southeast Asia.

The bill now goes to President Nixon, who has not yet given an indication whether he plans to sign it into law.

On Friday, the Senate passed the bill by voice vote without the normal committee study and hearings, and the House followed the same procedure yesterday at the request of Rep. F. Edward Hebert (D-La.), chairman of the House Armed Services Committee.

Cecile Abbott, the Sacramento, Calif., POW widow whose concern about transportation expenses for the families of dead POWs was described in a story in The Washington Post last Friday that touched off the legislation, said yesterday she is "completely amazed; it never crossed my mind that this could happen."

Sen. Robert Dole (R-Kan.) had introduced the legislation, the Funeral Transportation and Living Expense Benefits Act" after reading The Post story. The Defense Department endorsed Dole's legislation in a statement issued Saturday.

Mrs. Abbott had said she found it "inequitable" and "strange" that the government had provided transportation for stateside reunions at military hospitals for the families of 556 former POWs released after the Paris peace accord last year, and had provided transport for more than 500 of these POWs and their guests to a White House reception, but could not provide families

Mrs. Abbott's husband, Navy Capt. John Abbott, was identified by Hanoi as one of the 23 Americans who had died in captivity in North Vietnam. He had been shot down and captured in 1966, but died after seven days in captivity, Hanoi announced when the peace accord was signed Jan. 27, 1973. The 23 bodies were released earlier this month in what some analysts believe is an effort by North Vietnam to encourage U.S. economic aid.

No timetable has been released for burial, pending identification of the remains of the 23 at American bases in Thailand and California.

Mrs. Abbott said her husband had requested burial in Arlington Cemetery, but that her military liaison officer had told her recently that the government could provide only the standard death benefits, which did not include government travel to Arlington for Mrs. Abbott and her 12-year-old son.

"Just because men come

home in a coffin does not make them any less heroes than the ones who came back alive," Mrs. Abbott said in an interview last week. Her concern, she said, was more one of principle than of money.

After The Post article appeared last Friday, her phone did not stop ringing until midday Saturday, Mrs. Abbott said yesterday.

The American Legion in Sacramento offered her two round-trip tickets to Arlington, and "more people than I could count" called up to offer assistance, including a half-dozen offers to stay in Washington area homes.

Several newspapers and national network television correspondents asked her for interviews, but she turned them all down, Mrs. Abbott said yesterday. "It was getting out of hand," she said. "I'm not mad or bitter at the Navy. The Navy has been good to us, especially in the last eight years. Let's just say I was registering my concern."