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STATE OF RHODE ISLAND

IN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

JANUARY SESSION, A.D. 2013

H O U S E R E S O L U T I O N

HONORING 2ND LT. ROBERT E. THORPE FOR HIS HEROISM DURING WWII

Introduced By: Representatives Martin, Gallison, Abney, Newberry, and Fox

Date Introduced: May 14, 2013

Referred To: House read and passed

1 WHEREAS, In the words of famed newscaster Tom Brokaw, "When the United States
2 entered World War II, the U.S. government turned to ordinary Americans and asked of them
3 extraordinary service, sacrifice, and heroics"; and

4 WHEREAS, World War II was the most destructive conflict in history. It cost more
5 money, damaged more property, killed more people, and caused more far-reaching changes than
6 any other war in history; and

7 WHEREAS, A resident of Cranston, 2nd Lt. Robert E. Thorpe enlisted in September of
8 1942, shortly after graduating from Cranston High School. He was commissioned on August 30th
9 of 1943, and became a World War II pilot. He had flown 17 missions during his first month in
10 action before being captured when his P-47D Thunderbolt was hit by small arms fire during a
11 strafing run on the Japanese garrison at Wewak on May 27, 1944; and

12 WHEREAS, Managing to survive by using a drifting log to get to shore after ditching his
13 failing plane in the waters off Kairiru Island, New Guinea, 2nd Lt. Thorpe was captured by a
14 Formosan civilian unit and marched across the island to the 27th Japanese Special Naval Base
15 Force, which was under the command of Rear Admiral Shiro Sato; and

16 WHEREAS, The unit commander ordered his senior staff officer, Captain Kiyohisa Noto,
17 to take charge of the prisoner, who in turn instructed Lt. Commander Kaoru Okuma to interrogate
18 2nd Lt. Thorpe; and

19 WHEREAS, Despite the 1929 Geneva Convention agreement, which provided for
20 humane treatment of prisoners of war, atrocities still occurred. Prisoners were instructed to give

1 captors only their name, rank, and military serial number. According to the Geneva Convention
2 agreement, captors were allowed to question prisoners but were not allowed to use force or
3 brutality to extract military information; and

4 WHEREAS, Following Military Law to the letter, 2nd Lt. Thorpe refused to provide his
5 captors with any information beyond his name, rank, and service number. This infuriated Lt.
6 Commander Okuma; and

7 WHEREAS, 2nd Lt. Robert E. Thorpe endured multiple beatings, physical and mental
8 torture, and multiple gun shots, and was finally mutilated and beheaded by his captors. Months
9 later the Providence Journal described the execution of 2nd Lt. Thorpe as “one of the most
10 revolting crimes uncovered by the war crimes investigators.” The article further stated that
11 “Assassins of Local Flyer Now on Trial in Japan”; and

12 WHEREAS, After the war had ended, the five officers involved in the execution of 2nd
13 Lt. Thorpe went on trial on June 22, 1948, in Yokahama, Japan. Four of the officers were
14 sentenced to life in prison while Lt. Commander Okuma was sentenced to hang. Only one of the
15 original sentences received by the five convicted war criminals, Lt. Commander Okuma's
16 execution, was ever carried out; and

17 WHEREAS, In the aftermath of the trial, transcripts describing the horrible truth about
18 the brutalities surrounding the death and the location of the burial site of 2nd Lt. Robert E.
19 Thorpe were sealed and remained secret as Walter Thorpe, his father, began a campaign to have
20 his son's remains returned to Rhode Island; and

21 WHEREAS, Sadly, wars often necessitate the unnatural act of a parent burying their
22 child. Even more heart-wrenching is when a parent cannot carry out or find any peace through
23 this final act of closure and love. Walter and Nora Thorpe, 2nd Lt. Robert E. Thorpe’s parents,
24 died believing that their son's remains were unrecoverable and all records pertaining to the search
25 and recovery of their son were closed; and

26 WHEREAS, Through the Freedom of Information Act in 2007, Ken Dooley, an author,
27 and a close friend of 2nd Lt. Thorpe’s brother, Gill, obtained a record of the court martial.
28 Although the facts brought out during the trial of 2nd Lt. Thorpe’s captors produced descriptive
29 details of where the 2nd Lt. was buried, to this day, his remains lie unclaimed in an unmarked
30 gravesite on Kairiru Island; and

31 WHEREAS, Throughout American history our nation has been propitiously blessed with
32 so many of her citizenry willing to serve their country at moments of great peril. These brave
33 soldiers were and are prepared to risk all and many have made the ultimate sacrifice in order to
34 protect our precious freedoms and liberties; and

1 WHEREAS, The heroism of the World War II generation embodies the personification of
2 what makes our country so glorious. In return for their honorable service, we, as individuals and
3 as a country, have a debt and an obligation to fulfill to the men and women serving in our
4 military. We owe this young man, 2nd Lt. Robert E. Thorpe, who gave so much to his country
5 and received so little in return, our gratitude, our acknowledgement of his sacrifice, and our best
6 efforts to bring him home to his family and his country; now, therefore be it

7 RESOLVED, That this House of Representatives of the State of Rhode Island and
8 Providence Plantations hereby respectfully requests the Governor to honor 2nd Lt. Robert E.
9 Thorpe posthumously with the Rhode Island star and the Rhode Island cross for his extraordinary
10 heroism in the service of our nation during WWII; and be it further

11 RESOLVED, That this House hereby urges the Graves Record Administration to re-
12 investigate and bring the remains of 2nd Lt. Robert E. Thorpe home; and be it further

13 RESOLVED, That the Secretary of State be and hereby is authorized and directed to
14 transmit duly certified copies of this resolution to The Honorable Lincoln Chafee, the Rhode
15 Island Congressional Delegation, Maj. Gen. Kelly K. McKeague, Commander of the
16 Joint/POW/MIA Accounting Command, the Providence Regional Office of the U.S. Department
17 of Veterans Affairs, and Nancy and Gill Thorpe.

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