Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

November 3, 2021

The Honorable Lloyd Austin
Secretary of the Department of Defense
1300 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We write to you on behalf of Master Sergeant Christopher Raguso, Major Christopher Zanetis, Captain Mark Weber, Major Andreas O'Keeffe, Master Sergeant William Posch, Staff Sergeant Carl Enis, and Technical Sergeant Dashan Briggs at the request of the families of these fallen service members. As Members of Congress, we are entrusted with a responsibility and moral obligation to advocate for our constituents.

The reason we are writing is to highlight the extraordinary and selfless acts of these men who sacrificed their lives in service of the United States of America. We hope that consideration would be given in awarding the Purple Heart to these service members who made the ultimate sacrifice on March 15, 2018 in the helicopter crash of "Jolly 51" of the 46th Expeditionary Rescue Squadron. Seven airmen were aboard the aircraft and sadly all perished.

The incident occurred in the Al-Anbar region of Iraq, when the co-pilot steered left to avoid a tower spotted at the one o'clock position and unknowingly flew into the second of four sets of wires that we later learned were set up as a 'fly trap'. Units from the 46th Squadron regularly ran search and rescue operations as part of Operation Inherent Resolve. They never abandoned their duties, despite the dangers they faced, and the circumstances of the crash demonstrated the constant sacrifices made to our country.

Through testimony presented by members of helicopter Jolly 52, present during the crash, it is to our belief the wires mainly responsible for the crash were constructed by opposing forces. The purpose of their strategic installment was to ground enemy aircraft. These cables provide protection from potential aerial attacks on the Syrian border, and we understand them to date back to the era of Saddam Hussein. Since these enemy-planted wires were the contributing factor to the crash, we believe all members of Jolly 51 are entitled to the Purple Heart.

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The absence of a Purple Heart for the crew members of Jolly 51 was brought to the attention of our offices through the Civilian Aide to the Secretary of the Army, Steve Castleton. Mr. Castleton first notified Congressman Tom Suozzi from New York's Third District to advocate for Jolly 51.

An individual can be awarded the Purple Heart upon being wounded or killed due to any enemy of the American Armed Forces or as the result of an act of any hostile foreign force. It is clear that the anti-aircraft wires responsible for the Jolly 51 crash originate from "hostile foreign forces" and can be designated "an act of any enemy of the American Armed Forces." It is our understanding that enemy-related injuries which have previously justified the award have resulted from enemy-placed mines or traps.

Signing this letter are the Congressional Representatives for the Zanetis family of Indiana's Fifth Congressional District, the Briggs family of New York's First Congressional District, the Raguso family of New York's Third Congressional District, the O'Keeffe family of Florida's Fourteenth Congressional District, the Enis family of Florida's Second Congressional District, the Posch family of Florida's Eighth Congressional District and the Weber family of Texas' Twenty-sixth Congressional District. We respectfully request consideration from the United States Department of Defense in awarding the Purple Heart to the crew members of the Jolly 51. We strongly request that the crew members of Jolly 51 receive honor and acknowledgment for their bravery and commitment to the mission.

With kindest regards, we are

Sincerely,

Thomas R. Suozzi
Member of Congress

Lee Zeldin
Member of Congress

Victoria Spartz
Member of Congress

Michael C. Burgess, M.D.
Member of Congress

Bill Posey
Member of Congress

Neal P. Dunn, M.D.
Member of Congress

Kathy Castor
Member of Congress

Cc: Hon. F. Kendall, SECAF