

# United States Senate

December 7, 2020

The Honorable Ryan D. McCarthy  
Secretary of the Army  
101 Army Pentagon  
Washington, D.C. 20310-0101

Dear Secretary McCarthy:

I am writing to request that you issue a prisoner-of-war medal to Mr. Ronald J. Dolecki, U.S. Army (Ret.). In 1965, Mr. Dolecki was an enlisted Army soldier serving with the Ethiopia-U.S. Mapping Mission, headquartered in Addis Ababa, when he was taken hostage by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF).

I believe that the award of this medal is warranted under 10 USC 1128(a)(3), which authorizes the award of the medal to any person who, while serving in any capacity with the armed forces, was taken prisoner and held captive while “serving with friendly forces engaged in an armed conflict against an opposing armed force in which the United States is not a belligerent party.”<sup>1</sup> I believe that Mr. Dolecki also meets the standard of 10 USC 1128(b), which allows the relevant service secretary to award the medal to such an individual in circumstances “comparable to those circumstances under which persons have generally been held captive by enemy armed forces during periods of armed conflict.”<sup>2</sup>

In 1965, Ronald Dolecki was an active duty enlisted soldier assigned to the 64th Topographic Engineer Battalion of the Corps of Engineers. He deployed to Ethiopia with the U.S. Army Map Service as part of the Ethiopian-United States Mapping Mission. On July 12, 1965, while on a routine classification mission, Dolecki was captured by armed members of the ELF, as were his Army pilot and Ethiopian interpreter. Their ELF captors accused the team of being spies and threatened to shoot them if they did not do as they were told. They were marched for 12 days into Sudan, a distance of 150 miles. Mr. Dolecki escaped and was repatriated on July 25, 1965, when he was flown to the hospital at Kagnew Station in Asmara.<sup>3</sup>

Mr. Dolecki’s mission was authorized under a defense installation treaty between the United States and the Ethiopian Government dated May 22, 1953<sup>4</sup> and an aerial photography and

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<sup>1</sup> 10 USC 1128(a)(3)

<sup>2</sup> 10 USC 1128(b)

<sup>3</sup> Pitts, Jonathan, “Half a century ago, a U.S. army soldier escaped armed captors in Africa. He’s still seeking the recognition many say he’s due,” The Baltimore Sun, November 11, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> “Utilization of Defense Installations Within Empire of Ethiopia, Agreement between the United States of American and Ethiopia,” May 22, 1953, 5 UST 749.

mapping agreement dated January 25, 1963.<sup>5</sup> The 1953 defense installation treaty gave the U.S. military free and unrestricted access to, movement through, and egress from Ethiopia. It authorized Dolecki's team to fly U.S. Government aircraft over and use airfields in Ethiopia. Its terms would apply to the mapping survey conducted by Dolecki's team and authorized Ethiopian security forces to accompany U.S. forces outside of installations. The mapping agreement of 1963 provided for U.S. military technicians to train Ethiopian personnel. The agreement specifically tasked the Ethiopian government with providing a security force to protect U.S. installations and U.S. personnel engaged in field activities. Dolecki recalls that the Ethiopian Army often provided protection for U.S. troops while on missions in dangerous areas.<sup>6</sup>

During the years at issue, the U.S. and Ethiopia had a mutually supportive relationship. U.S. military assistance to Ethiopia was critical to Ethiopia's conflict with the ELF. Likewise, Ethiopian cooperation was crucial for the United States' use of Kagnew Station, a key Cold War listening post. The United States provided significant military assistance to the Ethiopian Army to support the country's defense needs against the ELF insurgency.<sup>7</sup> At the time of Mr. Dolecki's capture, the strategic relationship was deepening. In June 1964, the State Department conveyed to the Ethiopian government that it would expedite some key military assistance items, including ammunition, accelerate training assistance, provide advisers to the Ethiopian defense ministry, and proceed with planning to transfer an additional F5 jet squadron. In July 1964, the Joint Chiefs of Staff concluded a review that determined that "a substantial and prompt increase in U.S. political, economic and military assistance to Ethiopia" was justified by the importance of Ethiopia to U.S. interests.<sup>8</sup> In March 1965, only four months prior to Dolecki's captivity, the State Department's Director of the Office of Northern African Affairs discussed an Ethiopian request for more security assistance, stemming in part from the "Eritrean dissidence."<sup>9</sup>

It is clear that at the time of Mr. Dolecki's capture, the Ethiopian National Defence Forces constituted a "friendly force" and the Eritrean Liberation Front as "an opposing armed force," and that senior decision makers in the U.S. government understood them as such. When considering Mr. Dolecki's capture in light of these facts, it is clear that his mission in Ethiopia meets the standard of 10 USC 1128(a)(3). In addition, a reasonable person would conclude that the circumstances of Mr. Dolecki's capture were "comparable to those circumstances under which persons have generally been held captive by enemy armed forces during periods of armed conflict,"<sup>10</sup> and therefore eligible for the prisoner-of-war medal under the broader language of 10 USC 1128(b). I urge you to exercise your authority to issue the prisoner-of-war medal to Mr. Dolecki.

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<sup>5</sup> "Agreement Between the Government of the United States of America and the Imperial Ethiopian Government Concerning Aerial Photography and Mapping Within the Empire of Ethiopia." United States Treaties and Other International Agreements, Volume 14, Issue 1, p. 152-155.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Dolecki, "From High School to Africa Via the U.S. Army," 24.

<sup>7</sup> "Foreign Military Assistance," Library of Congress, [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/etsave/et\\_05\\_03.html](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/etsave/et_05_03.html)

<sup>8</sup> "Memorandum From the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense McNamara," July 11, 1964, JCSM-591-64, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v24/d295>

<sup>9</sup> "Action Memorandum From the Director of the Office of Northern African Affairs (Newsom) to the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs (Williams)," March 15, 1965, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v24/d301>

<sup>10</sup> 10 USC 1128(b)

I have enclosed with this letter a detailed memorandum on Mr. Dolecki's case prepared by Dr. Dwight Mears, U.S. Army (Ret.), formerly an assistant professor of history at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, who has provided research into the circumstances of Mr. Dolecki's service, captivity, and eligibility for the the prisoner-of-war medal.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Chris Van Hollen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Chris" being the most prominent.

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Chris Van Hollen  
United States Senator