

BILL ANALYSIS

Senate Research Center

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By: Campbell
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AUTHOR'S / SPONSOR'S STATEMENT OF INTENT

The Texas Legislative Medal of Honor was established to recognize gallant and intrepid service by a member of the state or federal military forces, and United States Army Private Marcelino Serna and United States Coast Guard Seaman Apprentice William Ray Flores proved themselves deserving recipients of this prestigious honor with their heroic actions in the service of their nation.

Born in Mexico, Mr. Serna came to the United States as a young man. When the United States entered World War I in 1917, he enlisted in the United States Army at the age of 20, and after only three weeks of training, he was shipped overseas with the 355th Infantry, 89th Division. When his officers in France learned that he was not a United States citizen, they gave him the opportunity to return home, but Private Serna chose to stay and fight.

A remarkable soldier, Private Serna demonstrated exceptional resourcefulness and courage during an engagement near the French town of St. Mihiel. When 12 members of his unit were gunned down by the enemy, he volunteered to scout the machine gun emplacement on his own. Moving through heavy fire and surviving two rounds that were deflected by his helmet, he tossed four hand grenades into the machine gun nest, killing six of the enemy combatants. He then took the eight survivors captive.

Shortly thereafter, during the Meuse-Argonne campaign, Private Serna volunteered again for a lone scouting mission, wounding a German sniper with a shot from 200 yards and then following the injured man into a trench. Firing and hurling grenades in all directions to make it seem as if he were part of a larger force, he shot three German soldiers immediately, then attacked an enemy dugout, felling 26 more and capturing 24. He single-handedly held the prisoners at gunpoint until other members of his unit arrived.

Private Serna served in combat until the end of the war and was wounded in each leg, and while recovering in a French hospital, he received the Distinguished Service Cross from General John J. Pershing. He also earned the World War I Victory Medal with five stars, the Victory Medal with three campaign bars, the St. Mihiel Medal, the Verdun Medal, and two Purple Hearts, as well as decorations from the governments of France, Italy, and the United Kingdom. He became a United States citizen in 1924 and settled in El Paso, where he resided until his death in 1992; the most decorated Texas veteran of World War I, he won every major military award short of the Congressional Medal of Honor, and petitions have been put forth to grant him that commendation as well.

William Ray Flores was born in Carlsbad, New Mexico, in 1961. He attended Western Hills High School in Benbrook, Texas, and he left school early in order to enlist in the United States Coast Guard at the age of 17. He served aboard the buoy tender *Blackthorn*, and on the night of January 28, 1980, the ship was leaving Tampa, Florida, on route to its home port of Galveston when it collided with a 600-foot tanker, the SS *Capricorn*. The *Blackthorn*'s hull was ripped open along the port side by the *Capricorn*'s anchor, and the vessel began to take on water and roll onto its side.

In the chaos and darkness, Seaman Apprentice Flores and a shipmate found the locker that held the ship's life jackets, and they began throwing jackets to their crewmates already in the water; Seaman Apprentice Flores used his trouser belt to strap the locker open so that more jackets

could float free as the *Blackthorn* sank, and after nearly everyone else had abandoned ship, he stayed aboard and attempted to save those who were still trapped below deck. He lost his life in that effort, along with 22 of his shipmates.

Through his selfless actions, Seaman Apprentice Flores helped save 27 of his shipmates, and in September 2000, he was posthumously awarded the Coast Guard Medal, the service's highest commendation for noncombat heroism. In 2012, the Coast Guard fast response cutter *William Flores* was named in his honor, and on the 40th anniversary of the *Blackthorn*'s accident in January 2020, a life-size statue of Seaman Apprentice Flores was unveiled at a ceremony in St. Petersburg, Florida.

Marcelino Serna and William Flores each demonstrated uncommon courage, initiative, and devotion to their comrades during desperate situations, and it is indeed appropriate that they be honored with the highest military award granted by the state that is proud to call them Texans.

RESOLVED

That the 87th Legislature of the State of Texas hereby direct the governor of the State of Texas to posthumously award the Texas Legislative Medal of Honor to Marcelino Serna in recognition of his valiant efforts during World War I and to William Ray Flores in recognition of his heroism during the sinking of the USCGC *Blackthorn*.