



Combat Action Recognition and Evaluation for Remotely Piloted Aircraft Crews (CARE for RPA Crews) Act

Introduced by Reps. Susie Lee (D-NV) and Austin Scott (R-GA)

Background:

Remotely Piloted [Drone] Aircraft (RPA) are unmanned aircraft systems operated by trained crews from ground control stations, typically consisting of a pilot, sensor operator, and supporting intelligence and communications personnel. Unlike fully autonomous systems, RPAs rely on continuous human control and oversight, enabled by secure data links and satellite communications. They perform a wide range of missions central to modern military operations, including intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); precision strike; close air support; electronic warfare; and communications relay. Their ability to loiter for extended periods, operate in contested or high-risk environments, and provide real-time data to commanders makes them a critical tool for achieving situational awareness and decision advantage while reducing risk to manned aircraft and personnel.

This bill creates a formal status identifier for remotely piloted aircraft (RPA) crew members who conduct combat operations. Although these personnel regularly support combat missions, often at high operational tempo installations such as Nevada's Creech Air Force Base, they currently lack any official combat-status marker in their records because they operate from the United States rather than deployed combat zones.

The absence of this identifier has meaningful consequences. When RPA crew members change career fields or leave military service, they frequently face barriers to accessing appropriate mental health support. Without documentation acknowledging their exposure to combat operations, they may struggle to qualify for needed care, either while still serving or later through the Department of Veterans Affairs. Establishing a status identifier would recognize their combat role and ensure timely access to mental health resources.

This bill serves as a companion to the Senate version (S. 2218) introduced by Senators Jacky Rosen (D-NV) and Kevin Cramer (R-ND).

The Senate's version of the FY26 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) (Section 524) contained language requiring the Department of Defense (DoD), in consultation with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), to establish a status identifier or equivalent recognition to denote the combat participation of remotely piloted aircraft crew members who conduct operations in direct support of combat missions. While this language was removed in conference, the [Joint Explanatory Statement](#) directed DoD to brief Congress by June 1, 2026, on its plan to establish such a status identifier and communicate it to the VA.

What This Bill Does:

The CARE Act ensures that RPA crew members receive appropriate recognition for their combat contributions and, critically, the mental health and transition support provided to other combat-exposed service members. The bill aligns policy with the real operational demands placed on RPA personnel and corrects a long-standing gap in documentation and support.

For more information or to cosponsor this bill, please contact:

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