



**Representative John M. Rogers**

**60<sup>th</sup> House District**

**Sponsor Testimony - House Bill 26**

Chairman Green, Vice Chair McClain, Ranking Member Sheehy and members of the House Transportation and Public Safety Committee. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify today in support of House Bill 26, legislation designating the bridge extending over the Grand River and into Fairport Harbor as the Colonel Donald Blakeslee Bridge and honoring one of our Nation's most decorated World War II flying aces. This legislation is a re-introduction of HB 687, introduced in the latter period of the 132<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly.

Col. Donald James Matthew Blakeslee was born in 1917 in Fairport Harbor, a small town of 3,000 residents nestled along the Grand River and Lake Erie shorelines in my district in Lake County. As a young boy, Blakeslee became interested in flying after attending the Cleveland Air Races. In 1938 Blakeslee joined the Army Air Corps Reserve. In 1939, with the onset of World War II in the European Theater, the United States would remain on the sidelines for another 2 years. Eager to fight for the Allies, Blakeslee joined the Royal Canadian Air Force in 1939 and traveled to England.

While serving with the 401<sup>st</sup> Squadron of the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) during the early stages of the war, Blakeslee would prove himself to be a talented Spitfire pilot and a gifted flight leader, flying a large number of sorties over enemy territory and destroying or damaging multiple enemy aircraft. In August of 1942, Blakeslee became a flying "ace" after a destroying an aircraft during a raid in France. With the creation of the United States Army Air Force in 1942, Blakeslee decided to leave the RCAF and transfer back into an American unit. Before transferring, Blakeslee was presented with the British Distinguished Flying Cross by King George at Buckingham Palace.

Upon his return, Blakeslee was assigned to the Army Air Force's Fourth Fighter Group. Within two years, Blakeslee would be promoted to group commander, where he was responsible for three squadrons, each consisting of 16 P-51 mustangs.

Under Blakeslee's leadership, the Fourth Fighter group quickly become known for their aggressive style proving to be among the most effective fighter groups of the Eighth Fighter Command. In

March of 1944, Col. Blakeslee became first airman to fly over the German capital of Berlin while he and his group escorted a massive formation of B-17 and B-24 bombers on a raid. Then, on April 8, 1944, the Fourth Fighter group set a record for the European theater, shooting down 31 planes in one day. Later in June of that year, Colonel Blakeslee led his fighters on one of their most arduous missions, escorting shuttle-bombers to and from the Russian capital of Moscow, in roughly 7 hours.

By war's end, Blakeslee's Fourth Fighter group was credited with destroying over a thousand German aircraft. Additionally, Col. Blakeslee himself had logged over 1,000 combat flight hours, flying more combat missions against the Luftwaffe than any other American pilot and being credited with 15.5 aerial victories while purportedly attributing other kills to fellow pilots.

Col. Blakeslee, while wearing an American uniform was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross by Dwight D. Eisenhower on the day he flew over Berlin, in addition to earning another subsequent Distinguished Service Cross, 8 Distinguished Flying Crosses, 2 Silver Stars and 8 Air Medals

After the end of the Second World War, Col. Blakeslee would continue to serve our nation in the United States Air Force, leading the 27<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing in the Korean War where his awards included the Legion of Merit, an additional Distinguished Flying Cross and four more Air Medals.

After retiring from the Air Force, he moved to Miami Florida, where he met and married his wife Leola Fryer and together had a daughter, Dawn. While Col. Blakeslee's life ended on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2008, his memory as a veteran, father, and husband, lives on. He and his wife are interred in hallow grounds of Arlington National Cemetery.

I respectfully ask this Committee's help with honoring Col. Blakeslee's legacy by supporting House Bill 26 and the naming of the "Colonel Donald James Matthew Blakeslee Memorial Bridge", which serves as the primary entrance and exit way to Donald's birthplace and boyhood hometown, Fairport Harbor.

Thank you.