

Honoring Heroes: Memorializing our Nation's Veterans

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Statement Of
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Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs

With Respect To:

“Honoring Heroes: Memorializing our Nation’s Veterans”

WASHINGTON, DC

Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Etsy and members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and its Auxiliary, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the important issue of how our nation memorializes our veterans.

The Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) mission to provide veterans a final resting place worthy of their sacrifice to our nation is a top priority for the VFW. While the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) and the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC) generally do a good job, there are always ways to improve the delivery of memorial benefits to veterans. As such, our focus concerns staffing and IT issues, our support for the Veterans Legacy Project (VLP) and ABMC's efforts at several locations, our concerns with VA's call center for burials, and the VFW's position on Arlington National Cemetery (ANC) and the Mare Island Naval Cemetery.

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VFW Post 605 in Paris, France, reports that the ABMC efforts to care for cemeteries and monuments have resulted in some of the most emotionally moving experiences a visitor could have. Efforts by ABMC to establish visitor centers will allow visitors to properly honor and remember those who are buried in the cemeteries. These centers will also allow for better use of staff so that they can focus on other management aspects of their jobs. The VFW supports ABMC's efforts to establish and refurbish visitor centers.

The ABMC management of Clark Cemetery in the Republic of the Philippines is another success story that the VFW is proud to report. VFW Post 2485 in Angeles City, the Philippines worked from 1994 until 2013 to maintain the cemetery and conduct burials after the closure of Clark Air Force Base. VFW Post 2485 notes that the repairs and maintenance of the cemetery are superior and burials continue in a way that allows Americans to be buried there with honor.

The VFW is very supportive of NCA's Veterans Legacy Project. VLP will allow for the use of technology so that every grave in a VA-managed cemetery can be seen and a biography about each veteran can be read. Updates on each veteran can be provided to ensure the profile is as accurate as possible and truly reflects the life of the veteran. The VFW understands the desire of families to ensure that any edits are correct and appropriate, and we support NCA's inclusion of the families in the development of these biographies and in review of future updates. Modern technology will allow VLP to be viewed through a mobile application and online enabling future generations to learn about the sacrifices made by generations who came before them.

Survivors are generally satisfied with services provided by NCA. However, the VFW has learned that the call center for all VA-managed burials has become overwhelmed due to staffing issues. A surviving spouse of a veteran reported she was told it would be at least six weeks before a burial could be processed. This is unacceptable. The VFW calls for a review to ensure proper staffing is in place so that burials can be scheduled in a timely manner.

Arlington National Cemetery is a national shrine and continues to be a highly active cemetery. The VFW understands recent efforts by the Department of the Army to evaluate ways to ensure Arlington remains an active cemetery for future service members killed in action and Medal of Honor recipients. While the VFW cannot support many of the options being considered to extend the life of Arlington National Cemetery, there are several options to ensure the longevity of this national shrine without severely limiting eligibility. After many meetings with top officials within the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Department of the Army, as well as surveys and roundtables conducted by ANC, the VFW supports restricting eligibility to veterans who served 24 months of active-duty service. This does not include those killed in action or the dependents of active-duty service members with more than 24 months of service, who must continue to be eligible. Enacting this eligibility restriction would make the in-ground interment policy at ANC commensurate

with that of cemeteries within VA's National Cemetery Administration and would reduce workload at ANC by approximately 200 burials per year.

While the VFW acknowledges that restricting eligibility to those killed in action or to Medal of Honor recipients would ensure that ANC remains open in perpetuity, the VFW has an obligation to advocate for and preserve the integrity of the option best suited to do the most good for the most number of veterans. Restricting eligibility to a very small category of veterans is not feasible if the true goal is to provide those who deserve to be laid to rest in America's most hallowed grounds the ability to do so, specifically those who are already making end-of-life plans based on their current eligibility.

To the VFW, it is imperative that the way forward includes the acquisition of additional space in some form or another, as land is a finite resource, especially in the Washington, D.C., metro area. This is why the VFW fully supports the proposed southern expansion, which would add an additional 37 to 40 acres to the cemetery and provide approximately 40,000-60,000 new gravesites. When combined with the proposed 24-month eligibility restriction, the life of the ANC would be extended through 2074.

As previously stated, there is no easy answer in terms of what happens after 2074 given the current land shortage in the area. However, there is one property in the area that may offer a solution -- the Armed Forces Retirement Home. For the past decade, VFW members have donated time and manpower to assist the residents of the Armed Forces Retirement Home by helping to maintain the property through various service projects. Every year we go out and we see unused space. We see a golf course that is struggling to remain open. We read articles in the local press concerning proposals to develop up to 80 acres of excess space on the property for commercial use, but have seen such requests go unnoticed.

The cemetery at the Armed Forces Retirement Home is arguably one of the most historic and oldest cemeteries in this country, aside from ANC. From 1861 to 1864, the cemetery accepted thousands of soldiers' remains from the Union states, which quickly filled the grounds to capacity. An 1874 report on the cemetery chronicled more than 5,600 interments, including 278 unknown, 125 Confederate prisoners of war, and 117 civilian relatives of the deceased and employees of the retirement home. In 1883, more than nine additional acres were added to the grounds, bringing the cemetery's total size to nearly sixteen acres. Additionally, the cemetery is the final resting place of 21 Medal of Honor recipients. Given that the southern expansion would reclaim 40 acres at ANC which would provide an additional 40,000-60,000 gravesites, then it follows that reclaiming the 80 acres of surplus land at the Armed Forces Retirement Home would give us an additional 80,000-120,000 gravesites, which would push us well beyond 2074. The VFW considers reclamation to be a viable option.

Another option is additional support for state cemeteries. Expansion of current cemeteries in the Capitol region and construction of new cemeteries is an option the VFW supports. For

example, Virginia operates state veteran cemeteries and is in the process of adding a new cemetery in the northern portion of the state. Actions like this will help solve the problem of needed space for burials.

The VFW strongly supports passage of H.R. 5588, legislation that would transfer the Mare Island Naval Cemetery to NCA for management. The U.S. Navy used this cemetery as the final resting place of more than 800 veterans. Concern that non-veterans had been buried there has been raised as a possible reason to prevent NCA from managing the cemetery. The VFW feels that the Navy made the decision to bury those people there, that the decision should be respected, and that this is not a reason to oppose the legislation. This cemetery is in disrepair and the VFW will never support allowing the final resting place of veterans to be forgotten.

The lasting legacy of those who have served our country is on display in cemeteries and is a testament to the cost of freedom. While our nation remembers the service of veterans who are no longer with us on Memorial Day, NCA and ABMC ensure that a daily reminder withstands the test of time.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I am prepared to take any questions you or the subcommittee members may have.