

Sacred Mission: Honoring America's Veterans and their Families at VA Cemeteries

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Statement of

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With Respect To

"Sacred Mission: Honoring America's Veterans and their Families at VA Cemeteries"

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Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, and members of the committee, on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and its Auxiliary, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony with regard to burial benefits and ongoing efforts for veterans and their families.

I am honored to have been asked to be a witness for this hearing regarding an agency of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) that I feel is often overlooked yet delivers the highest customer service and quality. It is not often that we are afforded the chance during a congressional hearing to focus more on the positives of VA rather than what needs to be corrected. The National Cemetery Administration (NCA) has consistently rated in the high 90 percentile in every American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) survey since 2015. It most recently achieved a 97 percent rating in 2022, which was the highest score ever

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achieved by any organization rated by ACSI. This is a remarkable and envious achievement in any industry. Aside from being on this panel, I had the honor to serve two terms as a member of the Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials (ACCM) appointed first by Secretary McDonald then again by Secretary Wilkie. This allowed me the opportunity to see firsthand their dedication and professionalism in serving those who seek to be memorialized in our nation's shrines to their service.

As successor to the United States Army Office of the Quartermasters Cemeterial Branch established during the Civil War, the NCA for half a century has had the mission of providing a fitting final resting place for those who served in our nation's military forces and conflicts. More than five million souls have been entrusted to its expert care. This includes decedents from the Revolutionary War to our most recent conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other places around the globe. As some may recall, NCA was also entrusted with the solemn responsibility of interring an Air Force pilot from the Vietnam War, First Lieutenant Michael Blassie, who was thought to be the last Unknown from any conflict. It was handled expertly and with great reverence.

NCA has been a forward-thinking agency given its mission is actually to look backward. By that I mean in remembrance as the lives and careers of hundreds of thousands of soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, Coast Guardsmen, and now Guardians are memorialized not only in acres of beautifully landscaped grounds across the country but in cyberspace as well.

Veterans Legacy Memorial Project

One of the most innovative projects ever established by a federal agency was the Veterans Legacy Memorial Project of which I had the honor to be a subcommittee chairman. Our task was to analyze the best way to memorialize a veteran's service and record that data in a public-facing digital archive. Immediate family members, loved ones, friends, and former service members among others could post memories, pictures, or other media to the profile and thereby complete the story for others to memorialize. One of the greater hurdles was how to handle privacy and interestingly "free speech." Concerns were raised by survivors about the administration of the program. Could estranged family members be allowed to write whatever they want and tarnish honorable service based on their specific points of view? What about a failed marriages and the ire of jilted spouses? NCA leaders and historians had to be sensitive to their duty to preserve any information entered into a profile, no matter how unflattering, inaccurate, or inflammatory, and properly honor veterans whose families chose to participate. Under the direction of Dr. Bryce Carpenter, and after many hours of deliberation, it was decided that much like Facebook or other social media platforms, all commentary would be reviewed for appropriateness and a family member or agent of the veteran would be able to review items that may have been flagged as inappropriate before posting.

The scope of this undertaking was massive as this was a brand-new concept that had been

tried in various private settings but was nothing more than a typical locator tool. There was nothing that established an electronic memorial for loved ones who had served our great nation. Through the efforts of the committee, NCA professional staff, and other agencies, today the Veterans Legacy Memorial (VLM) is the industry standard. Today, there are thousands of veteran stories available online for genealogical purposes, military history research, or just casual searches for those interested in similar subjects.

Veterans Legacy Program

Although this platform is a breakthrough, it is probable that most members of the public do not have a full understanding of what NCA is or what it does. The subject is not often thought about and the services the agency provides are not always easy to discuss. The reality is that death comes for all of us in the end. It is the great equalizer. More often than not, if you ask the average citizen about national cemeteries the first answer that comes to mind is Arlington National Cemetery, which is about as sacred a ground as there is in this country. Many do not know it is administered by the Department of the Army and not NCA. Does this make any of the 155 national cemeteries under NCA purview any less a place of honor or those interred any less deserving of the commemoration of their service? No, it does not. It is incumbent on NCA to help tell these stories, and on us to help in that endeavor. One of the captivating things about cemeteries administered by NCA is that each uniquely reflects the community in which it is located.

NCA stood up the Veterans Legacy Program (VLP) in 2016 as a way to commemorate our nation's veterans and service members, not only by sharing their stories but also by showcasing the care and devotion of those who staff these shrines. This program encourages students and teachers around the country at the university and K-12 levels to discover the rich historical resources found within VA national cemeteries and VA grant-funded cemeteries, and to help tell the story of the good work they do every day while keeping the memory of our loved ones clearly in mind. While on a site visit during meetings of the ACCM in Colorado, members of the committee and the VLP team visited the University of Denver.

Denver was one of the very first universities to receive grant funding from NCA to tell the story not only of the cemetery but of those interred or inurned there. What was clear was the enthusiasm with which the students engaged their subject matter and the involvement that NCA had in making this initial effort a success. It was evident that the participants took pride and ownership not only in their work but also in the veterans whom they had been assigned to research. The library was full of medals, pictures, uniforms, personal accounts of service and the lives lived by these veterans. One student described it as being one of the most fulfilling courses ever experienced, while others spoke of “adopting” the families of those they represented, “their” veterans, and feeling a sense of closeness and accomplishment in what they had achieved.

To date, VLP has funded 35 programs in multiple colleges and universities. These programs have engaged nearly 15,000 students of all levels and produced over 2,500 veteran biographies, 50 documentary videos, and over 100 lesson plans. The VFW commends this effort and is encouraged by its continued expansion.

NCA Scheduling Office

NCA takes its high customer satisfaction rating and the commitment to excellence very seriously. In 2018, I was contacted by one of our employees whose veteran brother had recently passed away in the Pacific Northwest. Her concern was that she could not reach the scheduling office in St. Louis despite considerable effort. She had made numerous calls, only to be placed on hold for lengthy periods of time, eventually having to disconnect due to the requirements of her daily duties. Knowing that I was on the ACCM, and in her heightened emotional state, she asked if there was anything I could do. I contacted the ACCM chairman to alert him to the situation, and he in turn spoke to the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs. After gathering some additional facts and an in-person site visit by the ACCM chairman, it was evident that the issue was systemic but not insurmountable. The committee learned that there were a number of new staff members to include the National Cemetery Scheduling Office director, a backlog of pre-need cases, renovation of the facility, and (like any other VA agency) IT modernization in progress, all while trying to maintain the same level of service. Like any effective organization, recommendations were made, adopted, and implemented to bring the level of service back to what was expected of NCA.

I mention this because it is a fine example of cooperation, collaboration, and teamwork. The advisory committee fulfilled its obligation to the under secretary and VA by recognizing a problem and bringing solutions forward. NCA did its part by listening and acting to correct critical issues that impacted not only meeting the public's needs, but also by considering the morale and productivity of a team extremely proud of what it was accomplishing every day to honor the memory and service of those seeking to be placed in a national cemetery.

Veterans Headstones/Markers

As advocates for veterans benefits across all agencies, the VFW hears from many of its members and will, if necessary, address certain concerns with the appropriate agency. NCA is no different. While we generally do not receive many negative comments about its products and services, it is not immune from criticism or recommendations.

In 2018, a VFW Past National Commander from the state of Wisconsin asked us to address concerns about inscriptions on government-provided headstones in the Southern Wisconsin Veterans Memorial Cemetery. The local VFW funeral honors team provided final honors on a regular basis at this cemetery. As the community of veterans is in actuality very small, they saw headstones on graves of friends and comrades they knew personally or with whom they had served. Many were upset with some inscriptions since they knew empirically that these

veterans had not served directly in a combat theater, yet these headstones seemed to suggest they had. In this example, the headstones were inscribed with “Vietnam.” To the casual observer this would suggest that they had been in country.

These particular veterans had not been deployed to Vietnam but served during that time frame. In no way was anyone belittling anyone’s service. We all served. We all went obediently to where we were told to fulfill whatever duties we had been assigned. The issue is about accuracy, not self-importance. There is a vast and clear distinction between being involved in actual combat versus serving in a time of conflict at a location in support of those operations. We can all agree that those who served in Southeast Asia certainly had very different experiences from those who did not.

History and these veterans themselves informed us that following the conclusion of their service, they did not receive the warmest of homecomings. NCA has invested much in the accurate telling of the service of our nation’s heroes. This policy has been in effect since 2003. Does it not need review and change? There is no dishonor in adding letters for the purpose of accuracy. In my own case, I served in Korea with the U.S. Army from 1994-1995 at Camp Casey. My late father was a Navy veteran who drove a landing craft at the Inchon Landing in 1950. Technically, he and I are veterans of the same war separated by 45 years. Am I authorized to show my service as “Korea” by current policy? The answer is yes. However, my conscience intervenes because my service was completely different from that of my father. When my final chapter is written, I would be fully at ease should my inscription read “Korean Era,” which is a more accurate portrayal.

All of these great services provided by NCA are incumbent upon proper funding to the department and continued support by the authorizing and appropriating committees to ensure success of this critical mission. Although VA does a great job in making the burial process seamless for family members, the truth is that inflation has played a major role in funding.

Impacted by this reality is the grounds upkeep at the 155 national cemeteries as well as 34 soldiers’ lots and monument sites. Materials needed for design and construction of new national cemeteries is another area where inflation has impacted the cost of burials. While most of the attention is focused on the veteran and family members, these behind-the-scenes expenses are crucial in keeping the process seamless. As inflation rises and makes current burial allowances inadequate, the funding to increase allowances is hard to find as NCA must compensate for the increased costs in other areas of its operations.

Other costs include turf renovations to raise the level of presentation to sustain a standard of excellence for visitors and interment experiences. The increase in funding received for inflation did not cover the actual cost increases. Cemeteries are unlike telemedicine where the cost-of-living difference can be fixed with the implementation of remote solutions. Bids are extremely high for construction, landscaping, fertilizer, grants, and janitorial services.

There is very little room to move money around with major expenses such as salary and maintenance, which are among the basic payouts that will always win out over projects. There are roughly 90,000 additional gravesites a year and each one will raise costs for NCA by requiring headstones, markers, more acreage, payroll, and full-time employees. Proper funding to facilitate benefits management for eligible veterans is a crucial step in making sure that veterans and their families who are eligible can rest in peace and pride for their faithful service to this country.

The VFW has and will continue to highlight the need for the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and Veterans Health Administration (VHA) to share data. This should also include NCA data. When VA is informed that a veteran has died, this should trigger communications from VA to the spouse and dependents identified in the VA records. Much of the required information to effectively reach and communicate with survivors already exists in one of VA's many IT systems, though some survivors are still missed. Upgrades required to facilitate information sharing across existing platforms are long overdue. Investments in these critical technology upgrades or moving to a single IT system will take dedicated staff, planning, and funding. These improvements are critical to ensure the efficiency and accuracy of claims processing for veterans and their survivors.

In closing Mr. Chairman, I am proud to have been part of the NCA team as a former member of the advisory committee. It was an honor to work with true professionals such as Ron Waters, Glenn Powers, Dr. Eric Powell, Christine Hamilton, Larry Provost, Les Beavers, Jack Kelly, and far too many others to name who care deeply about their mission every day. NCA may be the "third wheel" in the landscape of benefits, but it is a necessary one. It closes the loop on every veteran's story of service. It seeks to memorialize that service through the products and services it provides. The men and women of NCA are proud of what they do every day as they guide the public through the worst of times, and know that they made a positive difference in someone's life.

This concludes my testimony, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.