

VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials

VA



**U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs**

National Cemetery
Administration

**DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)
ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON CEMETERIES AND MEMORIALS**

October 21, 2020–October 22, 2020

Virtual

1:00 pm – 4:30pm

MINUTES

Committee Members Present:

- Joey Strickland, Committee Chairman
- Edward Saunders, Committee Member & Chairman of Access, Outreach, and Choice Subcommittee
- Heather Mitchell Braatz, Committee Member
- JoAnn Fisher, Ed.D., Committee Member
- Marianne A. Trussell, Committee Member
- Kathleen Moakler, Committee Member
- Michael Figlioli, Committee Member
- Donn Weaver, Committee Member
- Michael Dover, Committee Member

Committee Guests:

- Leslie E. Beavers, Former Committee Chairman
- Charmagne Scott, Louisiana Department of Veterans Affairs
- Dustin Guy, Louisiana Department of Veterans Affairs
- Larry Williams, Louisiana Department of Veterans Affairs

Ex-officio Members Present:

- Tom Sole, American Battle Monuments Commission

Ex-officio Members Absent:

- National Park Service Representative
- Army National Military Cemeteries Representative

Office of the VA Secretary Attendees:

- Jelessa M.H. Burney, Program Specialist, VA Advisory Committee Management Office

National Cemetery Administration (NCA) Attendees:

- Randy Reeves, Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs (USMA)
- Tom Howard, NCA Chief of Staff
- Gina Farrisee, Executive Director, Strategy and Analysis
- Melissa Decker, Senior Advisor to the USMA
- Steven Markowski, Speech Writer, USMA
- Gerard Alvira, Executive Assistant, USMA
- Glenn Powers, Deputy Undersecretary, Field Programs and Cemetery Operations
- Lisa Pozzebon, Executive Director, Office of Cemetery Operations
- Marty Fury, Deputy Director, Cemetery Operations
- George Eisenbach, Jr, Director, Veterans Cemetery Grants Program
- George Cannizzaro, Executive Assistant, Field Programs and Cemetery Operations
- Matthew Sullivan, Deputy Under Secretary for Finance and Planning/CFO
- Daniel Devine, Executive Director, Office of Engagement and Memorial Innovations (OEMI)
- Timothy Nosal, Deputy Director, OEMI
- Les' Melnyk, Chief of Partnerships and Outreach, OEMI
- Sara Amy Leach, Senior Historian, OEMI
- Lisa Hollenbeck, Digital Services Specialist, OEMI
- Bryce Carpenter, PhD, Manager, Veterans Legacy Program, OEMI
- James LaPaglia, Manager, Veterans Legacy Memorial, OEMI
- Christine B. Hamilton, Designated Federal Officer, OEMI
- Larry Provost, Alternate Designated Federal Officer, OEMI

Center for Minority Veterans, Office of Tribal Government Relations (OGTR):

- Junita Mullen, Center for Minority Veterans

Public Attendees:

- John Kelly, Veteran
- Mark Belinski, MOAA
- James Earp, Cemetery Director, Idaho Department of Veterans Services
- Gary Dierks, Cemetery Director, Wisconsin Department of Veterans Services
- Heather Salazar, Veterans Policy Analyst, Congressional Research Service

Transcriber:

- Charles Morrison, Neal R. Gross

Wednesday, October 21, 2020

The semi-annual meeting of the VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials was held via teleconference. The session was open to the public. The meeting information and teleconference number was published in the Federal Register announcement.

Opening Remarks and Introductions

Committee Chairman, Colonel Joey Strickland, called the meeting to order at 1:00 p.m. The meeting was opened with a moment of silence for Veterans, Servicemembers, Survivors, family members, and others afflicted by the Coronavirus pandemic.

The Chairman welcomed current members and recognized the following attendees:

General Leslie Beavers, former Chairman, special guest

Ms. Edith Smith, former member, special guest

James Earp, Cemetery Director, Idaho Department of Veterans Services

Ms. Heather Salazar, Veterans Policy Analyst, Congressional Research Service

Mr. Donn Weaver, new committee member

During his opening remarks, Chairman Strickland also outlined the committee's accomplished goals for 2020 as follows:

To research ways to increase the use of burial and memorialization benefits through enhanced outreach materials, social media, and events

To continue to evaluate process improvements at the National Cemetery Scheduling Office, and its impact on scheduling burials and processing preneed eligibility determinations in a timely manner and to receive quarterly status updates from NCA and administrative hearings

To continue as a committee to evaluate the Veterans Legacy Program and Digital Memorialization Project initiatives and to receive quarterly status updates from NCA in administrative meetings

To continue workgroup collaboration as part of the Access, Outreach, and Choice sub-committee in order to submit former recommendations to the full committee at the Spring and Fall 2020 meetings.

After this brief summary, the Chairman introduced the Mr. Randy Reeves, Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs.

Remarks from Randy Reeves, Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, Mr. Randy Reeves:

Mr. Randy Reeves stated that the guidance to NCA team members is to follow the guidance and protocols that are mandated by the Center of Disease control and local government. Mr. Reeves stressed that NCA's priorities during the COVID 19 pandemic is to ensure the safety and protection of cemetery staff, while continuing to take care of families. Committal service and military honors were temporarily suspended between March and June 2020. However, cemeteries remained open with direct interments to ensure dignified burials and services that our Veterans and families deserve. NCA is currently working through the scheduling backlogs for families who deferred the committal services. In NCA launched the "Find a Veteran – Post a Tribute" Veterans Legacy Memorial (VLM) campaign. At the time of the meeting, the online VLM had over 6500 tributes.

VLM is particularly important for families who can attend the memorial service or travel during this time. It also provides an opportunity for families to grieve and honor their Veterans.

NCA Staff are regularly informed about COVID 19 restrictions and information is posted on VA's public website at: <https://www.cem.va.gov/alerts.asp>

At the time of the meeting, NCA currently had 151 national cemeteries. Under Mr. Reeve's leadership, there are now 153 VA national cemeteries. VA Secretary Robert L. Wilkie and Under Secretary Reeves dedicated the following cemeteries: Acadia National Cemetery Dedication (Maine) in August 2020, Cheyenne National Cemetery Dedication (Wyoming) in October 2020, Western New York National Cemetery (Pembroke, NY) in November 2020, Morovis National Cemetery (Puerto Rico) in December 2020.

NCA continues to expand the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program (VCGP) and have established new cemeteries in several states across the country. Additionally, this year NCA has made a significant investment in Operations and Maintenance Funds to the states.

NCA priorities remain consistent to ensure that the "No Veteran ever dies". Through the Rural and Urban Initiative, NCA continues to work to close the gap on the hardest 5% of Veteran requiring access to benefits and services. NCA is currently at 93%, which is very close to the 95% goal.

Under Secretary Reeves introduced the new member, Mr. Donn Weaver.

Remarks from New Member, Donn Weaver:

Mr. Donn A. Weaver has over 50 years of combined service as a Vietnam Era, U.S. Army Veteran, the Department of State as a Foreign Service Officer, and as an independent contractor with several other federal agencies. Mr. Weaver and his wife tragically their son, Army 1 LT Todd W. Weaver, in Afghanistan on September 9, 2010. As Gold Star Parents, their goals were expanded to include honoring their son's legacy. Mr. Weaver currently serves as the Special Projects Chairman of the 500 member Brevard Veterans Memorial Center and Council, representing more than 70,000 Veterans in Brevard County. Today he serves as the Lead for Missing In Action Project (MIAP) in the Brevard County and Space Coast Region. He has been active in several Veterans Service Organizations, support committees; organized three ceremonies at Cape Canaveral National Cemetery in 2018 and 2019; and participated in Wreaths Across America and Memorial Day event at the cemetery.

In the meeting, Mr. Weaver presented information on MIAP. Mr. Weaver explained that many Veterans were Veterans were back wounded in service, later died, and are now missing in action because they are remains are abandoned or missing in America.

MIAP Facts:

Established in 2007 in California

MISSION: To locate, identify, verify, and inter the abandoned cremains of American Veterans and spouses, as well as some children

There are volunteers in all States, but some more active - FL, AZ, WA, CA, ME, MO, VA

2440 Funeral Homes have been contacted (as of 07 Oct per the MIAP website)

22,129 Cremains have been reviewed

5,064 Veterans and Spouses have been identified and verified

4,683 Veterans have been interred

MIAP partners with private organizations, State and Federal Agencies (Including VA/NCA - largest); provides honor and respect to those who served by securing a final resting place among other Fallen Heroes; and is also a federally recognized non-profit Veteran organization

Current Issues:

COVID-19 has impacted research, coordination, and interment of cremains
Thousands of cremains are abandoned
Uneven efforts and inconsistencies in States
Key partnerships are more local than national
Call to Honor Ceremonies - Resume 24 Oct in AZ and 10 Nov in FL
Review of some cases from 2016-19 in One County - Brevard FL

Chairman Strickland asked how the States can get more involved. Dr. Weaver stated that MIAP is a 501(c)(3), non-profit organization. Each state coordinator is located on the website at www.MIAP.us. Coordination can be made on state and regional level. The key is cooperation with all cemetery directors and to work with them closely, as well as working with the funeral homes.

Status Update: Office of Engagement and Memorial Innovations:

Veterans Legacy Program (VLP) – Bryce Carpenter, PhD, Program Manager

Dr. Bryce Carpenter presented on the next steps for the program. The Education Outreach remains the core of the VLP in order to partner with educational institutions to raise the profile of Veterans.

Educational Outreach: Changes in FY20

Texas A&M University

VLP's first Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) program
VLP's first program with an R1 university (first-tier research university)
VLP's first program with a corps of cadets
Developing a Geographical Information System (GIS)-based, interactive digital cemetery, with cadets writing Veteran bios (GIS will complement the online Veterans Legacy Memorial)
Working with San Antonio, Houston, and Alexandria (VA) NCs

Gilder Lehrman Institute, NY

Non-profit focused on American history and history education (largest privately held archive, to include letters written by soldiers)
Letters to be used as professional development for teachers
Five workshops, offered virtually
Cypress Hill, Fort Snelling, Nashville, Dallas-Fort Worth, & Tahoma NCs
University of Hawaii-Manoa
Subcontracted partner of the University of California-Riverside VLP program
National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific

Emphasis on Native Hawaiian Veteran experience

In addition to working with public schools, graduate students from the Departments of History and English will be connecting with K-12 teachers who also work in the Kamehameha Schools, which is a network of private schools that focus on teaching Hawaiian culture and language to children from Native Hawaiian or Polynesian backgrounds. They will publish materials, such as lessons plans

- **University of Denver (3rd year)**
 - There is a very rich, digital presence on campus and with K-12 students, particularly at two high schools close to the University
 - Students research and produce materials on Veterans interred in Fort Logan NC and are encouraged to include Pikes Peake NC into their programming.
- **Black Hills University in Spearfish, SD (4th year)**
 - This is a small, rural, school but they focus on five Veteran cemeteries:
 - The largest - Black Hills NC
 - Two historic cemeteries -Ft. Meade and Hot Springs
 - Two tribal Veteran cemeteries - Pine Ridge and Rosebud Indian Reservations.

GIS (Geographic Information System)

- Standardizing all VLP products to be GIS-enabled
- Can be used in many academic disciplines, i.e. History, English, Language Arts, STEM
- Allows for further development of public-facing digital cemetery experience
- Will allow NCA to create a new user experience for VLM, particularly for those who are unable to visit the gravesites due to COVID 19 or distance. Users will be able to engage with the digital projection of the national cemetery and go to the grave site and then engage with whatever materials about that particular Veteran or service member may have been researched
- Employs GPS data from Cemetery Operations

Roll of Honor was developed by VLP, as an immediate response to the operational challenges posed by the COVID-19 period. When we were still in crisis mode and reacting to the situation with urgency and sensitivity, there was public frustration because they could not engage in public committal services at the cemeteries. NCA wanted to create a memorial experience for those family members who could not use the cemetery as that place of focus at that particular time. The online Roll of Honor included a daily roll of the names of all the Veterans and servicemembers interred in VA national cemeteries. *RoH* provided instant digital memorialization of over 15,000 Veterans when public committal services are not possible. Received 200-500 a day. *RoH* is now on “stand by” and can be implemented in response to any change in operational posture.

Committee Member, Ed Saunders, asked for further clarification between VLP and VLM and asked if NCA partners with the Library of Congress. Dr. Carpenter explained that Veterans Legacy Memorial (VLM) refers to NCA’s web-based digital memorialization platform, where every single Veteran and service member interred in VA National Cemeteries has their own individual web page. It is the largest website in VA, with 3.8 million, interactive web pages and counting. VLM has become one of NCA’s most important ways to engage with the American public around our mission. VLM is led by James LaPaglia. The Veterans Legacy Program (VLP) is led by Dr. Carpenter. VLP is a public engagement initiative that principally uses education outreach, but also engages American communities in that shared discovery and exploration of Veteran and military history in order to memorialize our Veterans. VLP raises the profile of VA cemeteries in the community and awareness of memorial benefits to eligible Veterans, their spouses, and dependents. In response to a question about partnering with the Library of Congress, Dr. Carpenter explained that NCA does collaborate with the Library of Congress often. However, the difference between the programs is that the Library of Congress seeks to capture oral histories given by Veterans while they are still alive. NCA’s Veterans Legacy Program wants to tell the story of the Veterans who are no longer with us.

Tim Nosal, Deputy Director, Office of Engagement and Memorial Innovations (OEMI)

Mr. Nosal provided an overview of OEMI programs, responsibilities and FY20/21 activities.

OEMI Programs/Responsibilities:

- Public Affairs and Outreach
- Media relations
- Social Media
- Outreach
- Advisory Committee
- New Cemetery Dedications
- Digital Services
- Veterans Legacy Memorial (VLM)
- NCA's Website
- Veterans Legacy Program (VLP)
- Educational Outreach
- Innovation – new ways to commemorate the lives of Veterans
- History Program
- Administrative history (Example - COVID Response Oral Histories from NCA Leadership)
- Preservation
- Cemetery Queries (mostly headstone replacement questions)
- NCA Collections
- Interpretation – Waysides and Historical Publications

Forms of Communications:

- Media engagement – assist cemeteries with inquiries from the media
- Face to face at public events (Virtual in the COVID Environment – Example *National Council for Social Studies 2020*)
- Digital
- Website
- Veterans Legacy Memorial
- Social Media
- Rally Point & Veterans Experience Office (VEO) and other VA Programs (Webinars & Podcasts)
- VA and NCA Produced Publications
- Fact sheets, brochures & booklets
- History publications
- NCA Content in Veteran Service Organizations (VSO) and Trade Organization publications
- Veteran News Network in medical centers
- Interpretative Products
- Waysides, Exhibit panels and other products

FY20 Review

- COVID presented multiple communication challenges but also presented opportunities that didn't exist before. Media interest due to COVID ensured NCA messaging was carried in a variety of outlets across the country
- The push to place NCA Content in VSO and Trade Org publications was met with great success - stories on NCA's benefits ran in more than 11 publications with an estimated reach of 3,488,100 readers
- In FY20, NCA participated in 8 VEO Sponsored "Rally Point" Webinars engaging more than One million Veterans, families and caregivers
- Leveraging social media, many of the FY20 Memorial Day ceremonies were livestreamed

via Facebook or another medium. This has set precedent and proof of concept for future ceremonies and events at cemeteries where streaming will work. For example: The ceremony at Culpeper National Cemetery was livestreamed through Facebook and was picked up by a local media service which in turn reaching 32,247 viewers for this ceremony alone.

- NCA continued to develop video products including the *FY19 Top Ten Memorial Day 2020* and VLP video products. These videos are in turn shared with VNN for airing in VA Medical Centers. Provided 26 videos in FY20. Current video products are in production on *NCA's COVID Response, Cooperation with DOD*, and others
- NCA continued to collaborate with Carry the Load (CTL) in their "Memorial Month" Relays. Due to COVID 19, NCA and CTL adapted the 2020 Memorial Day Month, which was a series of coordinated "virtual" relays via social media posts. This effort generated more than 19,000 reactions on Facebook. NCA also collaborated with the Boy Scouts of America to post VLM tributes – future collaboration with BSA is planned for Veterans Day 2020.
- NCA History – Invocation of the Sec. 106 (National Historic Preservation Act) process for Enemy POW Headstones (over 900) and wayside program for Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address. Three of these headstones featured Nazi iconography, specifically a swastika within a German Iron Cross. NCA immediately started the work to remove the Nazi headstones.
- For FY 20 – Completed transfer of 11 Army Cemeteries to NCA (all but one – Ft Lawton in June 2019 - were in FY 20)
- New cemeteries dedicated in FY 20 – LA columbarium, Snake River Canyon, Northwoods, Acadia

FY21 Look Ahead

- Continue the successes of FY20 and build upon what worked such as live streaming events, publications outreach and working closely with VEO and Rally Point
- Begin developing podcasts
- Continue video production
- Further develop the wayside program for cemeteries with Enemy POW's, release the WWII Booklet "America's World War II Burial Program" and develop a booklet on WWII foreign burials in VA's National Cemeteries (Allied and Enemy POW)
- Participate in tradeshows, VSO conventions and professional conferences "virtually" or "in person" where allowed.
- Continue to grow VLP
- Continue to develop VLM
- New cemeteries to dedicate in FY 21 – Cheyenne, Morovis, Western NY, and possibly Cedar City. Committee Member, Heather Mitchell Braatz, commended the OEM team on their progress.

Veterans Legacy Memorial (VLM) - James LaPaglia, VLM Program Manager, Web and Digital Services Officer

Mr. LaPaglia provided the committee with an update on VLM. VLM is a web based digital memorial platform that honors Veterans in NCA cemeteries and extends the memorialization experience. 3.7 Million Veterans have a VLM profile page.

Profile Pages Includes:

- Birth/Death Dates
- Military Service Details
- Cemetery Information
- Headstone/Marker photo(s)
- GIS map and directions

Tributes features -

- Users can leave a remembrance, story, memory, etc.
- Submissions are moderated before posting to pages
- 6,500+ Tributes posted since May 11, 2020
- Especially useful this year due to COVID-19

Future features -

- Ability for users to submit other types of content: photos, documents, biographical information, military timeline and more (Memorial Day 2021)
- Inclusion of other cemeteries: Arlington, other military cemeteries, Park Service cemeteries, American Battle Monuments Commission cemeteries, state/tribal cemeteries, private cemeteries
- Committee Member, Michael Figlioli asked: "How many postings does your team have to review every day prior to these being put on the platform?" Mr. LaPaglia explained that over the Memorial Day weekend, the small team of VLM moderators (and other OEMI staff) will review thousands of posts a day to ensure that the tributes are posted in a timely manner. However, on a regular basis from week to week, the volume of postings isn't not large. NCA anticipates that the volume will increase over Veterans Day, as well.

Marty Fury, Director of Cemetery Operations, Restrictions, Impacts and Lessons Learned:

- Mr. Fury provided an update on the impact of COVID 19 on cemetery operations.
- NCA suspended committal services and military honors between March 23rd and June 8th, resulting in the direct interment of 13,774 casket and 7,006 cremations, totaling 20,780.
- Once full services were restored, cemeteries contacted all the affected families to offer a memorial service and military honors that were not provided at the time of interment.
- 93% of the backlogged memorial service outreach attempts are resolved.
- Many changes in operations during COVID; Must adjust and modify. Example; Wreaths Across America: had to stagger event to be successful.
- COVID will most likely continue into 2021. Lessons learned: EE's must continue safety measures and stay vigilant to protect themselves and continue to serve Veterans and families; Keep safety measures in place; Continual communication has been critical, social media, etc used to provide changing guidance for employees and general public.
- VA National Cemeteries conducted interment operations uninterrupted and remained open for visitation throughout the pandemic.
- In response to the pandemic NCA took action to ensure our ability to continue serving

Veterans and their families while protecting the health and safety of families, visitors, and team members alike.

- Monitored national and local data and trends to inform guidance and decision making.
- Implemented modified procedures and provided up-to-date guidance to maximize the safety, security, and health of families, visitors, and team members.
- Maintained open communications and established a centralized intranet site to maintain VA and NCA operational guidance, health and safety information, and critical communications.
- Utilized staffing flexibilities, such as telework, team rotations, and Weather and Safety Leave, to maintain a healthy, available workforce

Impact on Interment Operations

Beginning in early March, as COVID cases were reported in the U.S. and state/local stay at home orders and restrictions on gathering sizes and travel increased, many families chose to postpone or delay the scheduling interments for their loved ones. This trend continued, particularly for cremation interments, through late May to early June.

Cremation interments dropped dramatically In March

Casketed interments maintained about the same average rate

NCA suspended Committal Services and Military Honors between March 23rd and June 8th*, resulting in the direct interment of **13,774 casket** and **7,006 cremations**, totaling **20,780**.

Once full services were restored, cemeteries contacted all the affected families to offer a memorial service and military honors that were not provided at the time of interment. **93% of the backlogged memorial service outreach attempts are resolved. Of the families contacted:**

- **14.1%** were interested in scheduling a memorial within the next 6 months.
- **26.2%** were not ready to schedule within the next 6 months.
- **26.6%** declined a memorial service.
- **26.1%** were unresponsive after several contact attempts.
- **7%** are pending response after receiving several calls and a letter.
- From June – September, NCA has **conducted 1,699 memorial services** for those families who had a direct interment

Changes to Operation Environment

Admin Offices and **Public Information Centers (PIC)** are closed to the public to avoid indoor interactions with team members and maintain physical distancing; **Committal and memorial services** gathering size limits are in effect at all national; Cemeteries in accordance with CDC guidelines, state and local restrictions, and facility limitations. All family members, attendees, and employees are required to wear **face covering coverings at committal and memorial service** and maintain **physical distancing** among individuals not from the same household. Procedures are in place to **ensure the safe handling** of caskets and urns as well as **enhanced cleaning procedures** throughout the cemeteries. **Volunteer services** are limited to certain activities, such as honor guards and administrative support. All volunteer must follow strict **safety guidelines**. **External Events and Ceremonies** are not being held at this time. NCA sponsored events have been modified (limited in size, not open to public, safety protocols followed) and **shared through social media sites** to allow the community to participate virtually. We are implementing procedures to begin restoring community events, such as gravesite flag placements and Wreaths Across America.

Lessons Learned

Safety First! Safety measures and practices continue to be essential to sustaining mission operations. Without a healthy workforce we cannot serve Veterans and their families.

- Enforcement of safety measures can be challenging when these practices are not widely used within the local community.
- Customer Service in a challenging environment
- Customers have expressed frustrated with the restrictions at the cemetery and in general resulting from COVID, especially as the pandemic has continued for an extended period.
- NCA is balancing service delivery methods and operational procedures with health and safety measures.
- NCA is working to develop procedures to allow community events to be conducted safely at the cemeteries.
- Communication is critical. NCA utilized *Gov Delivery*, social media, and NCA external facing web pages to keep customers, funeral directors, and the general public informed. Frequent internal communications allowed NCA to respond effectively to an ever-changing environment.
- Internal reporting processes were instrumental in understanding the impacts at the cemetery level and for collecting operational and customer information.
- Committee Member, Donn Weaver, commended the cemeteries on their efforts to continue Wreaths Across America during the pandemic. He mentioned that it is a lot of pressure for cemetery directors from the public to conform to the way another cemetery manages the effort. Mr. Fury stated that the instructions to the cemeteries was to coordinate with their Wreaths Across America coordinator and to have a plan to manage volunteers safely, i.e. staggering shifts. The intent is not to tie the cemetery director's hands, but to make sure that they understand to maintain physical distancing between volunteers for safety reasons.

Report on COVID 19 from Committee Members:

Committee Members, Marianne Trussell (Lead), Kathleen Moakler, Michael Figlioli, and Dr. Joann Fisher provided their insight and provoked discussion on the impact of COVID 19 on Survivors, family members, and Veterans in respect to interments in the VA cemeteries.

Mrs. Marianne Trussell, Surviving Spouse, attorney, and Chair for the Support Committee for the Tallahassee National Cemetery, where her husband is interred: Survivors have adjusted to COVID 19 and VA restrictions at the Tallahassee National Cemetery; the June 10, 2020, Directive allowing Honors to be performed helped immensely. Volunteers are eager to be able to return to work. Volunteers help with cemetery maintenance and outreach. The cemetery director and staff are always available and work with VSOs and support committee. Tallahassee NC has about 65 percent casketed interments and 35 inurnments. But in March 2020, nine burials were cancelled because of COVID-19 and were reduced in numbers until June. The June 10th Directive allowed national cemeteries to have Military Honors and to use the committal shelters again greatly helped surviving spouses and families. In July there 53 burials, August – 43 burials, and September – 49 burials. The first COVID-related burial was in June; July – 1 COVID-related burial; and August – 8 COVID-related burials; and September 5 – COVID-related burials. The Tallahassee Cemetery Staff follow all of the directives on handling COVID-related interments.

Mrs. Kathleen Moakler, Military Family Member, Former Government Relations Director for Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS, and a member of Saratoga National Cemetery Support Committee. Concerns in the beginning of the pandemic about schedule changes and diminished attendance have lessened as schedules and attendance have expanded. Families have commended cemetery staff for their support during the COVID-19 crisis. Customer service is important with schedule changes and diminished attendance. Staff support is also important. Mrs. Moakler reached out to several social media groups to ask about survivors' experiences due to the COVID-19 restrictions at cemeteries. The response was favorable, citing the adaptability and kindness NCA staff helping them with rescheduling of services. She also asked employee working on the TAPS Helpline about their experience. The TAPS Hotline helps hundreds of surviving families a month. While they were concerned with rescheduling, reduced visiting hours, and limited family numbers allowed to attend the committal services in the early on, there are fewer concerns once restrictions were lifted and modified. Mrs. Moakler participated in the Memorial Day service at Saratoga NC. The small ceremony was streamed on Facebook to allow more people to participate.

Mr. Michael Figlioli, Veterans and Deputy Director for Veterans Benefits Policy for the Veterans of Foreign Wars: Concerns of the VSO Community –COVID 19 are Scheduling and attendance restrictions; Modified services (Military Honors); and VA benefits processing. At the beginning of COVID 19, there was a lot of questions and uncertainty about scheduling burials and Military Honors. NCA has done a great job in staying informed of the COVID restrictions in their local areas and informing VSOs and the public. Most of the complaints are related to survivors benefits. Almost immediately after the first wave of deaths, VSOs began to hear that families had concerns about how the cause of death was being recorded on death certificates. Many Veterans had passed from respiratory-related illnesses were simply being recorded as pneumonia when the cause may have been related directly to COVID-19. Service-connected death versus a non service-connected death has different monetary benefits for the Veteran's family. Mr. Figlioli explained that for a family with limited cash flow, there is a vast difference between \$796 non-service-connected burial allowance and a service-connected burial allowance in excess of \$2,000. Chairman Strickland reiterated the importance of working with coroners to secure the proper benefits for Veterans, particularly Veterans with service-connected conditions. He provided this example: If a Veteran had COVID-19 and recovered, but then passes away of a service-connected disability, if you don't educate to the coroner, the coroner will state that the Veteran died of COVID-19 on the death certificate. This really impacts the amount of benefits the surviving spouse can receive.

Note: For more information on VA Survivor's Benefits, please refer to www.benefits.va.gov.

Dr. Fisher: Veteran and CEO for Women's Veterans United Committee, Inc.:

COVID 19 has compounded the already complex nature of being women Veterans, with unique needs, circumstances, and responsibilities. It is very important that women Veterans are informed about cemetery restrictions and that communication is done in a relatable, consistent, and sensitive manner. Dr. Fisher's key points were as follows: COVID-19, women are having a great deal of problems because they are not receiving enough information and they don't understand a lot of the information that has been given to them. Women have been hard hit by COVID because of employment, pregnancy, childcare, finances, and spousal abuse. They also are bearing the brunt of maintaining households. Dr. Fisher stated that when she talked to some women about the pandemic, they expressed fear and anxiety about what to do next. She stated that VA has done a good job with providing information on the website and virtual outreach events for Veterans. However, she believes there may be some opportunity to improve the communication, specifically to women Veterans and their spouses about burial eligibility. Dr. Fisher also mentioned that to

ensure information is relayed to women Veterans, VA should continue to use feminine imagery and sensitive language in literature and in oral presentations. Furthermore, she would like to see NCA represented on the VA Center for Women Veterans' monthly call with women Veterans. Dr. Fisher's final point was for NCA to insure that COVID information can be easily found on the website. She cited a difference in how the information is shown on www.va.gov and www.cem.va.gov. She echoed Mr. Figlioli's concern of ensuring that death certificates reflect the accurate cause of death because its potential impact on eligibility for survivor's benefits.

Public/Guest Comments:

Edith Smith, former Committee Member, Gold Star Wives Advocate

Mrs. Smith stated that she enjoyed the presentation and hearing everyone's voices.

Heather Salazar, Congressional Research Service Library of Congressional researcher:

Ms. Salazar thanked the committee for allowing her to listen in. She mentioned that her work portfolio covers all VA disability benefits from Veterans Benefits Administration and the National Cemetery Administration. She stated that the meeting is helpful for her to understand current trends and progress of where things are in NCA as she conducts research for congressional clients and answers various questions.

James Earp, Cemetery Administrator, Idaho State Veterans Cemetery

Mr. Earp represents the Idaho State Veterans Cemetery. Over 10,000 families have utilized their services since 2004. He stated that the information in the meeting was very helpful to him, especially the information from OEMI. However, he expressed his concern about VLM not including state and Tribal cemeteries because families do not consider the state/Tribal as being different from national. He stated that he appreciates that there's a plan to include states/Tribal Veteran cemeteries in the future. But would like to see if there's a timeline -- a sequence of events or milestones that show the integration in which state and tribal Veteran cemeteries will be added to those particular services. Mr. Earp also expressed his concern about Veterans who have a violent past. As a result of that, that are victims of that violence. He asked if there is mechanism in place to protect victims. He further stated that he appreciates the VSOs. Initially during the COVID-19, the Idaho state cemeteries did not have the same resources as national cemeteries. The state directors communicated with peers and one another on the evolving changes and established the protocols for safe practices to maintain operations and ceremonies, such as Memorial Day activities. Mr. Earp mentioned that he wants to ensure that the families who have utilized the services of the state Veteran cemetery aren't missing out on information about MIAP, as well.

Open Discussion

Chairman Strickland acknowledged ex-officio member, Tom Sole of the American Battle Monument Commission. Mr. Sole did not have comments for the committee. The Chairman opened the meeting for further comments.

Committee Member, Heather Mitchell Braatz clarified that VLM has an advanced flagging system to mitigate the posting of improper posts and to aid in the protection of family members or victims of Veterans with a violent past. Mrs. Braatz further stated that surprisingly with the volume of activity, VLM have experienced in the last year, there hasn't been a large amount of problems. She stated that she appreciates Mr. Earp's concern and being mindful of this as NCA moves into this kind of digital memorialization realm. Mr. Earp thanked Mrs. Braatz for the clarification and stated that he was glad to hear that parameters have been established. Committee Member, Mrs.

Marianne Trussell reiterated that this was an initial concern of hers, as well. James LaPlagia announced that NCA is working on a profile lock-down procedure which could mitigate the risk of negative comments. She was initially not a fan of VLM but stated she is now a convert [because of this lock-down feature]. She stated that she respects her husband's legacy and will do anything to protect it.

Committee Member, Chaplain Michael Dover, thanked the Chairman and Committee Members for the opportunity to serve [on the committee]. He stated that it has been an honor and a pleasure to serve with everyone.

Closing Remarks:

Chairman Strickland thanked the committee members and ex-officios. He stated that he appreciated the information and the amount of research that went into the discussions. He also thanked NCA staff and stated that the committee wants to stay engaged with OEMI. The Chairman requested a NCA briefing of the Veterans Legacy Memorial at the next National Association of State Directors and VA briefing at one of the national conferences. He further stated that OEMI is consistent with the Under Secretary's Reeves message: No Veteran Ever Dies.

"We must continue to learn how to operate in a COVID environment for the foreseeable future. And that at both national, state, and tribal levels, it's imperative that we all learn to adapt and be flexible, especially when we have situations in our cemeteries where there's a lot of emotion. Families are upset. They all want to gather around the committal shelter. They want to give a last hug or good-bye and they don't want to hear anything about social distancing. All of those issues are a reality that we deal with every day. So, we just need to be thinking about that. So, thank you, Committee. This concludes our meeting for today. And, I look forward to speaking to everybody tomorrow. God Bless." – Chairman Joey Strickland

Adjourn, Day 1.

Whereupon, the above-entitled meeting was concluded at 5:07 p.m.

VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials Meeting - Day 2 Recap, October 22, 2020

Opening Remarks:

Committee Chairman, Colonel Joey Strickland, called the meeting to order at 1:00 p.m. The meeting was opened with a moment of silence for Veterans, Servicemembers, Survivors, family members, and others afflicted by the Coronavirus pandemic. The Chairman welcomed back the Committee, NCA Leaders, and guests. He also provided a recap of the discussions held the day before, starting with a recap of the remarks from Under Secretary Randy Reeves.

Lisa Pozzebon, Executive Director of Cemetery Operations - Transfer of Eleven Army Cemeteries:

Mrs. Lisa Pozzebon provided an overview of the transfer of the Army Veteran Cemeteries to NCA from the Department of Defense (DOD).

Background

- In 2018, VA and DoD agreed to transfer operation, maintenance, and perpetual care of select military cemeteries currently maintained by the Department of Army (DOA) to the

National Cemetery Administration (NCA). Most were former Army posts, managed remotely. Generally small (approx. 1 acre with no committal shelters).

- This initiative supports Presidential Executive Order No. 13781 (2017), “Comprehensive Plan for Reorganizing the Executive Branch,” and is included in *Delivering Government Solutions in the 21st Century: Reform Plan and Reorganization Recommendations* (2018).

Purpose

- To increase operational efficiency, limit mission overlap, and ensure perpetual maintenance of Army cemeteries to national shrine standards in recognition of the service and sacrifice of those interred therein
- Leverages NCA expertise and capabilities for remote cemeteries
- Increases access to burial options for a wider range of Veterans and eligible family members through application of VA eligibility criteria

Cemetery	Location	Transfer Date	Operational Status	Parent Cemetery
Ft. Lawton Post Cemetery	Seattle, WA	June 14, 2019	Closed	Tahoma National Cemetery
Ft. Missoula Post Cemetery	Missoula, MT	October 16, 2019	Closed	Ft. Logan National Cemetery
Ft. Sheridan National Cemetery	Ft. Sheridan/North Chicago, IL	December 13, 2019	Open – In Ground Cremation Only	Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery
Ft. Douglas Post Cemetery	Salt Lake City, UT	December 20, 2019	Closed	Ft. Logan National Cemetery
Vancouver Barracks National Cemetery	Vancouver, WA	March 6, 2020	Open – In Ground Cremation Only	Willamette National Cemetery
Ft. Stevens National Cemetery	Hammond, OR	September 11, 2020	Open – Caskets and In Ground Cremation	Willamette National Cemetery
Ft. Worden Post Cemetery	Port Townsend, WA	September 11, 2020	Open – In Ground Cremation Only *	Tahoma National Cemetery
Benicia Arsenal Post Cemetery	Benicia, CA	September 11, 2020	Closed	Sacramento Valley National Cemetery
Ft. Devens Post Cemetery	Devens, MA	September 18, 2020	Open – In Ground Cremation Only *	Massachusetts National Cemetery
Ft. McClellan Post Cemetery	Anniston, AL	September 25, 2020	Closed	Alabama National Cemetery
Ft. McClellan Enemy Prisoner of War Cemetery	Anniston, AL	September 25, 2020	Closed	Alabama National Cemetery

Table 1: List of Army Transfer Cemeteries

Mrs. Pozzebon clarified that for the closed cemeteries, NCA is honoring subsequent interments from families who have a loved one previously interred. For the open cemeteries (Fort Sheridan, Vancouver Barracks, Fort Stevens, Fort Worden and Fort Devens), NCA offers in-ground cremation interments only for new interments, with the exception of Fort Stevens.

George Eisenbach, Jr.: Director, Veterans Cemetery Grants Program

Mr. George Eisenbach, Jr, Director, Veterans Cemetery Grant Program (VCGP) provided a status update on the program. On behalf of is team, he thanked the Committee for inviting him. He began by stating that VCGP was established in 1978 to supplement the National Cemeteries by assisting states, territories and tribal governments to establish, expand & improve Veteran cemeteries. In FY2021, there is an approved budget of \$45 Million to improve and expand the program.

- VA provides **100%** of development costs
- More than **\$862** million awarded since 1980
- **117** cemeteries in 48 states, Guam, Saipan, and Puerto Rico
- **4** new cemeteries under construction (Sioux Fall, SD; Blackfoot, ID; Ardmore, OK; Metlakatla, AK
- More than **37,373** interments in FY 2020
- FY21 Priority List consist of **104** projects; valued at **\$285M**
- 14 Projects for award
- 12 Expansion (AR, TX, KS, MO, (2) WI, WY, NV, LA, ND, HI, IL,
1 Establishment (SWMN, 22,200 Vet Pop)
1 Operation and Maintenance (Quincy, IL)

Mr. Eisenbach explained that the Priority List contains 104 projects. The Priority List have priority groups 1 through 4. **Priority Group 1** is for projects 1 through 56 are in Funding Group 1 (\$45Mill), which are fully actionable. This means that those projects have legislation and 10 percent matching funds, which are assured and required for cemeteries to move forward with their architect and engineer teams to start the process.

Priority Group 2 – Cemeteries with depletion of burial options in the less than four years.

Priority Group 3 – New establishments and expansions:

12 expansions; Arkansas, Texas, Kansas, Missouri, Wyoming has two -- Wisconsin has two, Wyoming, Nevada, once again Louisiana, North Dakota, Hawaii and Illinois. There is one establishment project, which is Southwest Minnesota, which will give access and burial options to over 22,000 Veterans and families.

Priority Group 4 - Operations and Maintenance projects; FY21, there is only one operation and maintenance project (raise and realign, headstone cleaning, etc.)

Survey of Customer Satisfaction Results for State and Tribal Cemeteries:

- Percent of Next of Kin that agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with their experience at the cemetery.
 - STVC: 98% NC: 98.2
- Percent of Next of Kin that were somewhat satisfied or very satisfied with the committal service at the cemetery.
 - STVC: 98 NC: 96.2%
- Percent of Next of Kin that agreed or strongly agreed that the Quality of Service at the state or tribal Veterans cemetery compares favorably to the VA National Cemetery.
- STVC: 98.6%

Chairman Strickland pointed out that in Louisiana, there is very little difference between the quality of service that Veterans receive at either the national or the State Veterans cemeteries.

Issues/trends for Native American/Tribal Cemeteries: Biggest issues are on-going operation and maintenance (irrigation issue at Rosebud Sioux) and training. Moving towards a smaller footprint with limited revenue, due to no plot allowance. There was a question about why there is no plot allowance. Note: Glenn Powers, Deputy Under Secretary for Field Programs and Cemetery Operations stated that there isn't a law to give tribes a plot allowance. It is an oversight that requires legislation.

Alaskan Natives - dealing with large distance between villages and poverty and creating a VA portion ("soldier lot") within private cemeteries in these villages.

Matthew Sullivan, Deputy Under Secretary for Finance and Planning: Rural and Urban Burial Initiatives:

Mr. Matt Sullivan provided an update on the Rural and Urban Burial Initiatives. His key points were as follows:

- Update on 13 Rural and Urban Cemeteries currently open or estimated date of opening.
- Land search and acquisition is a big challenge.
- Work with Bureau of Land Management.

National Cemetery	Veterans within 75 mi radius	Additional Veteran Population served	Cemetery Status: Open or Estimated Calendar Year of Opening
Rural			
1. Cedar City NC	13,333	13,333	Fall 2021
2. Cheyenne NC	59,297	15,525	Open
3. Elko NC	3,881	3,881	Pursuing Land, TBD
4. Fargo NC	31,013	26,847	Open
5. Machias NC	19,933	3,051	Open
6. Northwoods NC	37,754	11,895	Open
7. Snake River Canyon NC	15,458	10,617	Open
8. Yellowstone NC	15,922	15,922	Open
Urban			
9. Alameda NC	388,665	---	Targeting construction completion in 2025 (USACE)
10. Chicago NC	471,419	16,811	Pursuing Land, TBD
11. Indianapolis NC	207,307	2,652	Spring 2022
12. St. Albans NC	639,507	----	Targeting construction completion in 2022 (USACE)
13. West LA NC	469,509	----	Open
Totals	2,373,000	120,535	

Table 2: List of Rural and Urban Initiative Cemeteries

Mr. Sullivan stated that six of the eight planned Rural Initiative Cemeteries are open. The two that are not yet open are Cedar City and Elko. At Cedar City, construction is expected to be completed in the Fall of 2021. For Elko, once the land is acquired, NCA will be able to proceed with the design planning and construction. For the Urban Initiative Cemeteries, NCA has opened West Los Angeles; Alameda, Chicago, Indianapolis, and St. Albans are still in progress. Alameda, which is in the Bay Area in California, we had some significant delays there. That's an Army Corps of Engineers project. It is also a multiphase project with an outpatient clinic and a columbaria for the National Cemetery. Due to significant delays with the geotechnical and wetland mitigation, as well as the phasing in with the outpatient clinic construction, NCA doesn't expect that to open until sometime in 2025 or beyond.

Edward Saunders and Heather Mitchell Braatz: Follow-up Report on Hardest Five Percent of Veterans Burial Options

Committee Members, Ed Saunders and Heather Mitchell Braatz provided a follow-up report and white paper on the Hardest Five Percent of Veterans requiring burial options. Their objective was to provide evidence-based recommendations through the ACCM to the VAUSMA. Mr. Saunders began the discussion on the background research and courses of action he and Mrs. Braatz took to conduct their study, which addresses the lack of burial options for Veterans within 75 miles of home. Mr. Saunders explained that some of the background research came from existing reports, such as the '73 Congressional testimonies, GAO reports, the report on the Rural Veterans Burial Initiative, and the 2014 Booz Allen Hamilton study, which specified the wants and preferences of Veterans.

Background

- Past actions (reviewed available funding, existing policies, and federal laws)
- Rules, regulations, and legislation
- Urban initiative (annexation approach)
- VA builds columbaria to reopen closed national cemeteries.
- Columbarium costs rose from \$325 per niche in 2015 to between \$600 & \$1,000 per niche in 2020, not including landscaping
- Discussions with state Veterans directors on Veterans' needs

Courses of Action (Looked at what is allowable and what has been done in the past)

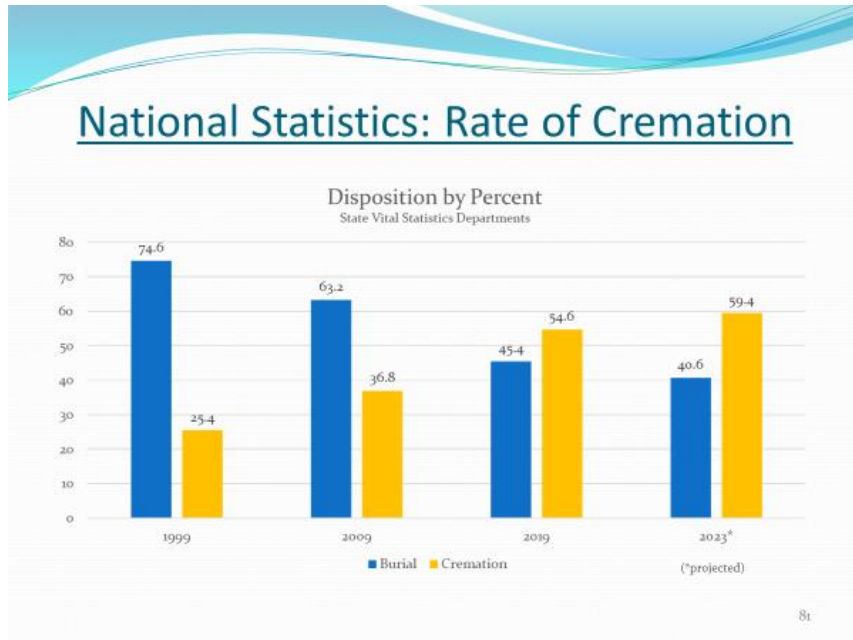
- National Cemetery annexes
- More state Veterans cemeteries
- Veterans burial lots in municipal cemeteries
- Columbaria-only burial sites
- Expand urban initiative in VA properties
- Maintain status quo of Veterans burial benefits

Assumptions

- Veterans know their benefits
- Veterans choose burial in a state, tribal, or a national Veterans cemetery.
- Federal law and NCA budget remain unchanged
- States will partner with the VA on burial options
- National cremation trend increases
- Cremains burials will increase in state, tribal, and national Veterans cemeteries

Cremation Burials

Mrs. Braatz mentioned that in the last 20 years, cremation rates are steadily increasing and now majority option in U.S. for final disposition, due to lower costs, societal preference and religious acceptance. In 2015 the number of people who were cremated exceeded the number of people who were buried in the U.S. Veteran cemeteries, as well as private cemeteries, continue to plan for cremation options and cremation interments. Some churches now offering space for columbaria that was previously unused/landscaping. Mrs. Braatz summarized that expanding options for cremation in national and state cemeteries, as well as for our rural veterans, and considering where columbaria-only placement options, might be applicable and necessary to serve the needs of our rural and hardest five percent of Veterans.



National Statistics: Rate of Cremation

Discussion

- Hardest 5-Percent largely in the West / Midwest
- Cremation is the new norm in U.S. society
- Veterans choices (cremation rates)
- Expand urban initiative to rural VA properties
- Veterans burial lots in municipal cemeteries
- Columbaria-only
- National shrine standards
- Issues of land ownership

Conclusions

- The NCA long-term goals
- Veterans needs evolve and change
- Societal trends
- Cremation the new norm
- Columbaria economy-of-scale
- Burial lots have precedent at municipal level
- Expand burial lots to VA properties not workable
- West and Midwest state Veterans offices support

2019 Recommendations

- Expand the Rural Veterans Burial Initiative emphasizing columbaria.
- Engage State Veterans Departments to use columbaria-only options under the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program.
- Propose legislation at the Congressional level for efficient federal interagency land transfer policies and procedures.

Committee Member, Kathleen Moakler, mentioned that Albany Rural Cemetery is well kept by the staff at Saratoga National Cemetery. She asked how to keep a cemetery up to VA standards and who would take care of the columbarium area or any other area that was designated for Veterans in a private cemetery. Mr. Saunders responded that in his discussions with the state Veterans directors in Montana, the concept was to take a portion of an existing municipal cemetery and have either the federal government or the State take title to that land. The state will have to own the land in order to receive grant monies. Federal law only allows the NCA to give grant monies to states or tribal organizations. He further explained that the state would take, for example, a third of an acre of a municipal cemetery and create a Veterans burial lot. The lot will be operated with monies from the plot allowance and the state will maintain it to an NCA shrine standard.

Chairman Strickland, Recap of Recommendations/New Charges/Next Steps:

Chairman Strickland stressed the importance of coordination between state and federal level. He also requested a presentation on the Veterans Legacy Memorial at the next NASDVA conference. There are ongoing tribal cemetery issues that the Chair would like the committee to continue working on. Also, he would like for NCA to keep the committee informed of ongoing COVID impacts and No formal recommendations were submitted.

Public/Guest Comments:

Mr. James Earp, Idaho DVA Cemetery Director: In addition to the columbarium recommendations presented by Ed Saunders and Heather Braatz, Mr. Earp asked if NCA can also consider expanding columbarium and memorial walls to include scatter gardens. He also mentioned that Idaho's IT services worked on a solution to automatically update the cemetery locator kiosks with national cemetery standards.

Mr. Gary Dierks, Wisconsin DVA Cemetery Director: Mr. Dierks thanked the committee and VA staff for the opportunity to attend the meeting. He stated that it's absolutely essential to our missions of serving Veterans to know what's going on and to have a cross-pollination of ideas and sharing of information.

Ms. Juanita Mullen, Center for Minority Veterans: Ms. Mullen thanked the committee for inviting her to attend the meeting. She stated that indigenous Veterans face a murder rate sometimes higher than the national average. On October 10, 2020, President Trump signed into law the Savannah's Act and the Not Invisible Act. The Center for Minority Veterans and the Office of Tribal Government Relations have been in collaboration with the commissioner of the Administration for Native Americans at Health and Human Services. They are looking at looking data on how many missing and murdered indigenous women were Veterans. Male Veterans are included, as well

Several members thanked the Chair and VA staff for their presentations. Chairman Strickland thanked the committee members and stated that he will miss the departing members. He looks forward to seeing everyone at the Spring meeting, to be held virtually or in Washington, D.C.

Adjournment

Chairman Strickland adjourned the meeting at approximately 4:26pm.



Joey Strickland
Committee Chair

Note: For a copy of the transcription, please contact Christine.hamilton1@va.gov.