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DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**

**BEFORE THE**

**HOUSE VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS  
April 20, 2005**

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, good morning. I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to discuss with you the current activities of the National Cemetery Administration (NCA). I am accompanied by Daniel A. Tucker, Director, Office of Finance and Planning, who is also NCA's Chief Financial Officer, and G. William Jayne, Director, State Cemetery Grants Service.

NCA is one of three mission-driven Administrations within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). NCA and the Veterans Benefits Administration, which is responsible for burial flags and monetary burial benefits, jointly administer the VA's burial and funeral benefits for veterans. We, in NCA, have four statutory missions under title 38, United States Code:

- To provide burial for eligible veterans and their eligible dependents and to maintain those places of burial as national shrines;
- To provide Government-furnished headstones and markers for the graves of eligible veterans worldwide;
- To administer the State Cemetery Grants Program (SCGP), which provides Federal funds up to 100 percent of the development cost for establishing, expanding and improving veterans cemeteries owned and operated by the States; and
- To administer the Presidential Memorial Certificate (PMC) program, which provides the families of honorably discharged, deceased veterans Certificates bearing the signature of the President, to commemorate the veterans' service.

NCA currently maintains more than 2.6 million gravesites at 120 national cemeteries in 39 States and Puerto Rico, as well as 33 soldiers' lots and monument sites. Since 1973, when Congress created a National Cemetery System under the jurisdiction of VA, annual interments in VA national cemeteries have more than doubled from 36,400 to about 93,000 in FY 2004. NCA processed more than 350,000 applications for Government-furnished headstones and markers for the graves of veterans worldwide in FY 2004. In FY 2004, NCA also issued 436,000 Presidential

Memorial Certificates to the families of eligible veterans. Sixty state veterans cemeteries funded under the SCGP are operated in 30 States and Guam.

Two and a half years ago at a hearing before the full Committee, we testified on the results of the reports required by the Veterans Millennium Health Care and Benefits Act of 1999. We stated that the reports were serving as valuable tools for the Department by providing data for use in our planning processes. Since that time, we have been able to take action on our planning goals, particularly in the areas of meeting the burial needs of veterans and in maintaining our national cemeteries as national shrines. I would like to take this opportunity today to describe some of our current initiatives as well as several of our major accomplishments.

### **Meeting the Burial Needs of Veterans**

One of VA's primary missions is to ensure that the burial needs of veterans are met. In support of this mission, VA's goal is to increase service delivery by providing more veterans with reasonable access to a burial option (whether for casketed or cremated remains) in a national or state veterans cemetery within 75 miles of their residence.

Annual veteran deaths are continuing to increase as World War II and Korean War-era veterans advance in age. Based on the 2000 U.S. Census, there were an estimated 626,000 veteran deaths in FY 2000. Annual veteran deaths are projected to peak at 676,000 in 2008. As veteran deaths increase, and as new national cemeteries are opened, NCA projects increases in the number of annual interments from 93,000 in FY 2004 to 115,000 in FY 2010, an increase of 24 percent.

Not only are we working to meet the burial needs of those individuals who served during previous periods of conflict, we are also doing everything we can to accommodate the special needs of family members that have lost a loved one serving overseas in Operation Enduring Freedom or Operation Iraqi Freedom. As of the end of March 2005, 273 active duty members killed in action during these conflicts have been interred in either a national or a state veterans cemetery.

Of the 120 national cemeteries operated by NCA, 60 cemeteries have gravesites available for the first interment of casketed and cremated remains; 22 cemeteries can accommodate the first interment of cremated remains and subsequent family member remains; and the remaining 38 can only provide burial for subsequent family member remains.

Our ability to provide reasonable access to a burial option is a critical measure of the effectiveness of our service delivery to veterans and their families. Currently, 75 percent of all veterans in the Nation reside within a 75-mile radius of a national or state veterans cemetery. NCA has established a performance target to increase the percentage of veterans served to 90 percent by FY 2010. Strategic initiatives are in place to meet this goal to increase the percentage of veterans served with reasonable

access to a burial option in a national or state veterans cemetery within 75 miles of the veteran's place of residence. The key strategies are:

- Establish additional national cemeteries in unserved areas;
- Expand existing national cemeteries to continue to provide service; and
- Establish or expand state veterans cemeteries through the SCGP.

The Future Burial Needs report, completed in 2002, is the most recent demographic study completed to assist the National Cemetery Administration in its long range planning. The report assessed the number of additional cemeteries needed to ensure that 90 percent of veterans live within 75 miles of a national or state veterans cemetery between 2005 and 2020. The report identified 31 areas in the United States with the greatest concentration of veterans whose burial needs will not be served. In June 2003, VA transmitted to Congress revised veteran population estimates, based on 2000 United States Census data, for all locations identified in the report. From these two listings, 11 locations were identified as meeting VA's veteran population threshold of 170,000 for planning new national cemeteries. In five of these locations, the burial needs of veterans will be met by expanding existing national cemeteries in order to continue to provide service or by establishing a state veterans cemetery. The remaining six locations identified by VA as needing a new national cemetery are the same locations identified in Public Law 108-109, the National Cemetery Expansion Act of 2003.

### **Establishing New National Cemeteries**

As required by law, VA is in the process of establishing 11 new national cemeteries. The geographic areas where these new cemeteries will be located were determined from demographic studies of the veteran population and are consistent with current VA policy.

Over the next two years, new national cemeteries will open and begin providing service to veterans in five geographic areas: Atlanta, Georgia; Detroit, Michigan; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Sacramento, California; and South Florida. The establishment of national cemeteries in these areas was in response to statutory provisions in the Veterans Millennium Health Care and Benefits Act. Land has been acquired and construction funds appropriated for each of these five new cemeteries. When opened, these cemeteries will provide service to two million veterans who reside in areas not currently served by a national or state veterans cemetery.

Based on the VA's veteran population threshold for establishing new cemeteries and the locations recommended by the Future Burial Needs report, the National Cemetery Expansion Act of 2003 was enacted in November 2003. This legislation directs VA to establish six additional national cemeteries near Bakersfield, California; Birmingham, Alabama; Columbia/Greenville, South Carolina; Jacksonville, Florida; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Sarasota County, Florida. Funding for site selection in

these six locations is included in the FY 2005 appropriation, and \$41 million has been requested in the FY 2006 President's budget for land acquisition costs.

The development schedule of new national cemeteries generally takes 5 to 7 years. Public Law 108-109 requires VA to set an aggressive timeframe for establishing the six new national cemeteries. NCA's goal is to have "fast track" gravesite sections open in all six new cemeteries by the end of 2009. NCA has begun opening "fast track" gravesite sections in new cemeteries to expedite burial operations rather than waiting for the construction of the entire cemetery to be completed. We have found that the families of veterans truly appreciate this initiative.

### **Expanding and Improving Current National Cemeteries**

NCA will continue to expand, as well as make improvements to, existing national cemeteries by acquiring additional land and completing development projects in order to make additional gravesites or columbaria available for interments. We have several major and minor construction projects underway to expand the life cycle of several national cemeteries so that they can continue to meet the burial needs of veterans in their geographic locations.

We've been implementing various efficiencies in our cemeteries to maximize the amount of burial space we can get at our cemeteries. This includes the use of pre-placed graveliners that are installed at the time of construction. Pre-placed graveliners allow a greater number of gravesites in a section because there is no need for any buffer space between each individual site.

Also, we are constructing a greater number of columbaria for the interment of cremated remains not only as a means for maximizing the number of burials that can be accommodated, but also to be responsive to the demands of veterans and their families for this burial option. The choice of cremation over full-casket burial continues to increase in private as well as national cemeteries across the country. The Cremation Association of North America projects that the national cremation rate will increase from its actual rate of 28 percent in 2002 to 35 percent in 2010 and to 43 percent in 2025. Some States already exceed the projected national average. In 2002, both California and Florida had cremation rates of 48 percent. For fiscal year 2004, NCA's cremation rate was 38 percent of all interments performed and we project this number will increase consistent with the national trend.

### **Providing Grants for State Veterans Cemeteries**

Through the State Cemetery Grants Program, NCA provides funding up to 100 percent of the development costs for state veterans cemetery projects. The SCGP was established by Public Law 95-476 in 1978 to complement VA's network of national cemeteries and the program received permanent authority in 2003, with the enactment of Public Law 108-183. The program assists States in providing gravesites in those areas where VA has no plans to operate and maintain a national cemetery.

The purpose of the grants is to establish, expand or improve veterans cemeteries that are owned and operated by the State. Cemeteries established under the grant program must conform to VA-prescribed standards and guidelines for site selection, planning, construction, appearance and operations. The cemeteries must be operated solely for the interment of service members who die on active duty, veterans, and their spouses, minor children, and disabled adult children.

To date, VA has awarded 140 grants totaling more than \$215 million to establish, expand or improve 62 veterans cemeteries in 32 States plus Guam. Sixty cemeteries in 30 States and Guam are now operational. Two new cemeteries are under construction. There is no limit to the number of veterans cemeteries a State may have under the grant program. Some States, such as Missouri, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Wisconsin, have been pro-active and have opened state veterans cemeteries to coincide with the anticipated closure of a nearby VA national cemetery. In FY 2004, state veterans cemeteries provided for 19,246 burials.

When the SCGP was established, the program could provide grants up to 50 percent of the total cost of the establishment, expansion or improvement of state veterans cemeteries. Under the original law, the value of the land could be counted toward the State's matching share, with certain limitations. The Veterans Benefits Enhancement Act of 1998, Public Law 105-368, went into effect on January 11, 1999. This legislation authorized the Federal Government to pay up to 100 percent of the development cost of establishing, improving or expanding state veterans cemeteries. Under the new 100 percent formula, the value of land is not included as an allowable cost under the grant award. In addition, VA may provide funding for the purchase of equipment needed to operate new state veterans cemeteries at the time the cemetery is first established.

Largely in response to the new legislation, State interest in participating in the SCGP has increased. Since 2001, 17 new state veterans cemeteries have opened in 12 States, including the Idaho Veterans Cemetery in Boise. With the opening of the Idaho Veterans Cemetery, we are pleased to report that there is a national or state veterans cemetery in each State in the Union.

In addition, States have submitted 39 pre-applications totaling an estimated \$150 million that have been approved by VA. These projects include 22 projects to establish new cemeteries. Several would be built near major military installations such as Fort Riley, Kansas; Fort Stewart, Georgia; Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri; and Fort Polk, Louisiana. Others will serve veterans in moderate sized metropolitan areas such as Des Moines, Iowa; Shreveport, Louisiana; and Louisville, Kentucky. Many are in rural areas remote from existing national or state veterans cemeteries, such as Missoula, Montana and Capitan, New Mexico.

## Maintaining National Cemeteries as National Shrines

One of NCA's statutory mandates is to maintain our national cemeteries as national shrines. A national shrine is a place of dignity and memory that declares to the visitor or family member that each veteran who rests within is honored for his or her sacrifice. Visitors should depart feeling that the grounds, the gravesites and the environs of the national cemetery are a beautiful and awe-inspiring tribute to those who gave much to preserve our Nation's freedom and democratic way of life. The commitment of our Nation is to create and maintain these sites as national shrines, transcending the provision of benefits to an individual. As national shrines, VA's cemeteries serve a purpose that continues long after burials have ceased and visits from immediate families and loved ones have ended.

National cemeteries carry expectations of appearance that set them apart from their civilian counterparts. As required by the Veterans Millennium Health Care and Benefits Act, VA contracted for an independent study to identify the repairs needed to ensure a dignified and respectful setting at each national cemetery. The report, National Shrine Commitment, was delivered to Congress in August 2002. This report provided the first independent, system-wide, comprehensive assessment of the condition of VA assets at 119 national cemeteries. It also identified projects needed to repair, alter, or improve existing cemetery elements. The report identified 928 projects at an estimated cost of \$280 million.

Through 2004, \$77 million of these repair costs have been addressed. NCA has completed 89 of the identified projects and work was initiated on 151 additional projects, including several large scale gravesite renovation projects.

NCA is making steady progress and is using a multi-faceted strategy to address cemetery maintenance and repair needs. We are using the information in the National Shrine Commitment report to plan and accomplish the repairs needed at each cemetery in addition to performing normal maintenance operations. We are also using data from NCA's Annual Survey of Satisfaction with National Cemeteries to factor in the viewpoint of veterans and their families when determining project priorities. Project priorities are revalidated on a semi-annual basis within NCA's facilities and construction planning process.

We are addressing long-standing deferred maintenance needs in a variety of ways. Repair and renovation projects to improve the overall appearance of national cemeteries remain a high priority in allocating operational resources. These projects include establishing a healthy stand of turf appropriate for the geographic area, renovating gravesites to ensure a level grade (i.e., there are no sunken graves), and realigning and cleaning headstones and markers. Improvements to cemetery infrastructure, including repairs to buildings, roads, committal shelters, irrigation systems and historic structures, are being addressed through major and minor construction projects. In addition, cemetery staff members are able to complete some of the identified repairs.

NCA has implemented several management initiatives to make the most effective use of existing resources to ensure that national cemeteries are maintained in a manner befitting their status as national shrines. For example, we have established operational standards and a new accountability system for assessing progress toward achieving our performance goals.

In January 2003, NCA issued a comprehensive set of standards for performance in the key cemetery operational areas of Interments, Grounds Maintenance, Headstones and Markers, Equipment Maintenance, and Facilities Maintenance. These standards were developed to provide guidance and direction for maintaining national cemeteries as national shrines. The standards and measures provide quantifiable goals and expectations that are applied at both open and closed national cemeteries. In November 2004, we updated our standards and measures based on input received from NCA managers and field operations staff at a lessons-learned conference held for that purpose.

NCA also established a new program by which the performance of all organizations within NCA can be assessed, monitored, and reported. The Organizational Assessment and Improvement Program uses a creative approach that combines the traditional elements of an inspections program with the proven concepts of organizational excellence. The program is structured after the quality criteria contained in the VA Carey Organizational Excellence program, which is based on the Malcolm Baldrige criteria for performance excellence. The structure assesses organizational leadership, planning, customer focused quality, performance measurement, human resources, and process management to ensure the effective and efficient delivery of benefits and services to our Nation's veterans. The concept incorporates both a focus on operational processes and compliance with internal controls as well as a management program to improve organizational performance. The program is based on a combination of regular self-assessment and periodic site visits by teams of NCA employees to validate business and service delivery results as well as to measure the progress of all national cemeteries in meeting the standards of appearance commensurate with their status as national shrines.

### **Additional NCA Achievements**

NCA will continue to focus on meeting the short and long term burial needs of veterans as well as fulfilling the maintenance needs of our cemeteries. We have undertaken numerous related projects, and I would like to share some additional recent successes and accomplishments with you—

**American Customer Satisfaction Survey.** As part of the 2004 American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) surveys, NCA achieved a customer satisfaction rating of 95 out of a possible 100 points for its national cemeteries. This is the highest score ever achieved by a Federal agency or private organization participating in the ACSI. The ACSI study polled next of kin or other people who had arranged for the

interment of a loved one in a VA national cemetery within the past six months to one year. The ACSI has been a national indicator of customer evaluations of the quality of goods and services available to U.S. residents since 1994. The outstanding results achieved by NCA are a testament to the dedication and hard work of NCA's employees as they serve veterans and their families during difficult and emotional times.

**Timeliness of Marking Graves in National Cemeteries.** The amount of time it takes to mark the grave with a government-furnished headstone or marker after an interment is important to veterans and their family members. The headstone or marker is a lasting memorial that serves as a focal point not only for present-day survivors but also for future generations. In addition, it may bring a sense of closure to the grieving process to see the grave marked. In 2004, 87 percent of graves in national cemeteries were marked within 60 days of interment, a significant improvement over the performance level of 49 percent in 2002.

**Nationwide Gravesite Locator.** In 2004, NCA launched a Web-based (Internet) Nationwide Gravesite Locator (NGL) system. This innovation will make it easier for anyone with Internet access to search for the gravesite locations of deceased family members and friends, and to conduct genealogical research. The nationwide grave locator contains more than three million records of veterans and dependents buried in VA's 120 cemeteries since the Civil War. It also has records of some burials in state veterans cemeteries and burials in Arlington National Cemetery from 1999 to the present. Making burial location information more accessible should bring additional visitors to the honored resting places that VA considers national shrines and historical treasures. The NGL was accessed 1.5 million times in its first year of service.

**NCA Training Center.** In order to ensure a high-performing, well-trained workforce, the National Cemetery Administration Training Center was established in 2004. The Training Center will provide employees with the training necessary to continue to provide high quality service to veterans and their families and to maintain our national cemeteries as national shrines. Initially focused on training cemetery directors and assistant directors, the new facility will eventually expand its classes to train foremen, equipment operators, grounds keepers, cemetery representatives, and other employees. As 11 new national cemeteries become operational, the Training Center will ensure consistency in operations throughout all national cemeteries as well as a high-performing workforce and well-trained staff for key positions. The first class of cemetery director interns graduated in March 2005.

**Memorial Inventory Project.** NCA is partnering with Save Outdoor Sculpture! (SOS!), a non-profit organization that uses volunteers to survey public outdoor sculpture nationwide, to develop the first comprehensive inventory of memorials located in VA national cemeteries as well as the soldiers lots and monument sites that it maintains. Since national cemeteries were established in 1862, they have become the sites of memorials erected to recall distinctive heroics, group burials, and related commemorations. The inventory will help NCA prioritize conservation needs as well as

develop a maintenance plan for all its memorials. As of March 2005, over 850 monuments and memorials were identified. Nearly 400 volunteers participated in this first all-volunteer inventory project. Survey results will be available to the public in a searchable database on NCA's website by the end of 2006 and, later, through the Smithsonian's art inventory database.

**Increased Volunteerism.** NCA works closely with the VA's Voluntary Service Program (VAVS) to increase opportunities for individuals to perform volunteer work at VA national cemeteries. VAVS coordinates with public and private voluntary service programs to match up volunteers with our national cemeteries. Volunteers are an enthusiastic force dedicated to serving veterans. In fiscal year 2004, volunteers provided 364,000 hours of support to our national cemeteries. During the past few years, NCA has developed volunteer opportunities ranging from the provision of military funeral honors to supporting historic preservation needs at our cemeteries.

**Technology and Innovation.** In our search for identifying how best to accomplish our mission, NCA has formalized a Research and Development program to encourage and share innovation throughout our system. Through this program, we have received provisional patents on a Mower/Trimmer that was developed at Calverton National Cemetery and a pivotal casket carrier developed at Rock Island National Cemetery that allows cemetery staff to maneuver caskets easily between headstones. Toro is building prototypes of both innovations, based on our designs, for possible commercial application. Also, we have partnered with the National Park Service to test biological cleaning products on marble headstones. The goal is to find products that effectively clean headstones, and that are user-friendly, environmentally safe, and cost effective.

## **Closing**

Thank you, again, for the opportunity to share with you an overview of NCA's current activities. I look forward to working with the members of this subcommittee to continue to meet the burial needs of our veterans. That concludes my formal remarks. I and my staff would be pleased to answer any questions.