

VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD OF

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WASHINGTON OFFICE**

FOR THE

**COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONTRACTING OVERSIGHT
UNITED STATES SENATE**

WITH RESPECT TO

Mismanagement of Contracts at Arlington National Cemetery

WASHINGTON, DC

July 27, 2010

Madam Chairwoman, Ranking Member Brown and members of the subcommittee, on behalf of the 2.1 million members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States and our Auxiliaries, thank you for the opportunity to present our views about Arlington National Cemetery (ANC).

What occurred at Arlington is a national disgrace, yet the VFW hopes it will serve as a wakeup call to all government organizations that provide a service to the public.

First and foremost, the respect Arlington National Cemetery has and continues to provide to the families of our fallen is above reproach, but confirmed reports of mismanagement and possibly fraud revealed that not everything below the surface was well. Former Army Secretary Pete Geren and his successor, John McHugh, were correct to call for an investigation into the allegations made in a series of articles by reporter Mark Benjamin of *Salon.com*.

The Army Inspector General (IG), in a report released June 10, 2010, confirmed that those who were entrusted to care for our dead failed in their duties. The ANC superintendent and his deputy were held accountable, but what concerns the VFW is that the number of gravesites identified by the IG as being unmarked or improperly marked could be exponentially higher than the 211 identified. This could bring further anguish to potentially thousands more American families.

Second, the failure at Arlington National Cemetery does not rest solely on the shoulders of the former superintendent and his deputy, both of whom retired earlier this month. The failure was allowed to occur by a hands-off attitude by those more senior in the chain-of-command, who may have regarded their oversight responsibility more as an additional duty than a primary mission. The caustic relationship between the ANC superintendent and his deputy had to be well known to senior Army officers and possibly civilian leaders, because on at least two occasions -- in 1992 and 1997 -- both were written up for not being able to work together, and for "gross mismanagement and failed leadership". The VFW is pleased that Army Secretary McHugh has restructured the entire reporting chain, and is making the necessary changes to return ANC to its revered and trusted status. A lingering concern is how long these conditions at Arlington would have been allowed to exacerbate had it not been for one reporter who doggedly stuck to his story.

Third, the former deputy superintendent was untrained as a contracting officer, yet he served as the point-of-contact for a failed information technology project to computerize ANC's burial records. More than \$5.5 million was spent, yet ANC continues to use 3 x 5-inch index cards in its filing system. Electronic recordkeeping is off-the-shelf technology that has been in existence for close to two decades, so red flares should have been going up long before the *Salon.com* articles first appeared in July 2009. The VFW believes the fault, again, goes back to failed leadership, management and oversight.

Finally, the VFW believes how ANC operates is more important than who operates it, so we would look favorably upon a transfer of mission from the Department of the Army to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). With a fully automated nationwide system of 131 national cemeteries in 39 states and Puerto Rico, the VA's National Cemetery Administration is the recognized expert in the maintenance and operation of national cemeteries, not the United States Army, whose mission is to fight and win our nation's wars.

Should Congress consider a transfer of ANC responsibilities, the VFW would also recommend transferring the Army's other active national cemetery, the Armed Forces Retirement Home-Washington, plus all property, civilian employees, responsibility and funding. We would insist, however, that assigned military units, such as the Army's Old Guard, remain intact in both mission and responsibility to render proper courtesies to those who have the honor of being interred at Arlington.

The transfer of responsibility should only pertain to Arlington National Cemetery and the Armed Forces Retirement Home-Washington, not the U.S. Military Academy at West Point cemetery or those in caretaker status at Army installations that date back to America's Revolutionary War.

This concludes the VFW's testimony. Thank you for the opportunity to present our concerns.

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